

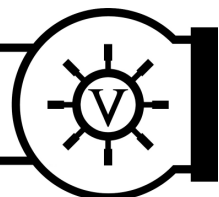
The Moonstone Cup

Cyanide

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PONY FICTION VAULT



Power. It surged beneath Twilight Sparkle's hooves and through the air around her. The massive, rolling storm clouds beneath her raged with barely-contained fury. She could feel it in her hooves and in her horn, coursing through her skeleton. Her delicate-looking wings, filmy things of gossamer and morning dew, were limned in blue light. The taste of metal was on her tongue.

A dragon stood before her on the cloud bank, silhouetted against the moonlight. It was an ancient, scarred beast the size of a mountain. The monster dwarfed Twilight: the pony could have fit comfortably between its teeth. It bore the marks of battle all over its body, millennia of scar tissue. It reared up and drew in a deep breath; the gout of dragonfire the creature was preparing to unleash could have leveled a forest.

Its breath died away. Its one good eye opened wide in shock as Twilight, with no help from the dragon, burst into flame.

• • •

FIVE DAYS EARLIER

“Princess Luna! How nice to see you!”

Dusk was falling across the small town of Ponyville. Twilight Sparkle was outside the sprawling tree that served both as her home and as Ponyville's library, extinguishing the candle that served to let ponies know whether the library was open or not. She had been preparing to go find some dinner when a familiar purple mist welled up before her. It coalesced into the imposing, dark form of Luna, Princess of the Night and one half of Equestria's ruling diarchy.

“Good evening, Twilight Sparkle!” Luna's booming voice reverberated off the buildings around her deafeningly before she caught herself, bringing a hoof to her mouth. “We mean... good evening, Twilight Sparkle. It is good to see you, as well. Pray tell, where are you going?”

“Uh...” Twilight responded dully, shaking her head slightly and nickering as she recovered from Luna's careless lapse into the ‘Royal Canterlot voice’. “I was just heading to the cafe to get something to eat. You'd be welcome to join me, princess!”

“Then I shall do so!” Smiling broadly, Luna gestured away from the library. “I require a meal as well, and there is only so much I can take from the royal kitchens. I have not yet become re-accustomed to the rich food my sister prefers.”

Twilight smiled brightly as the two ponies began walking toward the Ponyville square. “So, what brings you to Ponyville this evening? Just visiting?”

“The reason for my visit is partly social,” said Luna, her eyes twinkling mischievously. “But I should say I am here on state business.”

“What sort of business?” asked Twilight, her curiosity piqued.

“Tomorrow, by postal mail, you shall receive a formal invitation from the royal court to come to Canterlot,” Luna said, lowering her head and dropping her voice to not be overheard. “You have been selected to participate in this year’s Moonstone Cup tournament.”

Twilight stopped dead as if the princess had struck her between the eyes with a 2x4. “Me? What? But I’m not...”

“A powerful magician? If you are not, then who can claim to be?”

“I... But... Princess, how? Why?” the purple unicorn stammered. “That’s a contest for experienced wizards! I’m not even finished with my education yet.”

Luna stopped as well, looking at her smaller friend evenly. “Neither am I, nor is my sister. What true student of magic is ever through with their studies? But you are skilled, and you have a sponsor, Twilight Sparkle. And the awards committee agreed that you were more than qualified to compete at your age level.”

Twilight sat down heavily. A sponsor? “Princess Celestia?”

Luna shook her head, smiling. “No. My sister is head of the committee. She is not eligible to nominate or sponsor any entrant.”

“Then who?”

“I think,” the princess said, tentatively, “that only Discord knows the true extent of your power better than I. I was imprisoned well before the first such tournament, but when my sister informed me of it I could think of no one more deserving of a place than you.”

Twilight blinked. “I... don’t know what to say. Thank you, princess!”

“You are very welcome!” Luna said, brightly. “Now come, I desire a daffodil sandwich!”

• • •

The next day, Twilight, Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy and Spike were clustered in a circle on the floor the Ponyville library, while Pinkie Pie bounced around, cheering.

“Woohoo! Twilight’s the best unicorn ever!” Pinkie Pie shouted as she bounced carelessly near, around and over the other ponies. “We’re going to Canterlot and Twilight’s going to win the trophy because our friend is the best unicorn ever!”

“Well, thank you, Pinkie,” Twilight said archly. In front of her, in the middle of the group and somehow, miraculously, unharmed by Pinkie Pie’s leaping around, was the promised letter. It was written in an elaborate script on gold-woven paper and stamped with Princess Celestia’s royal seal and the smaller wax seal of the Moonstone Cup awards committee.

*Ms. Twilight Sparkle
Ponyville*

In recognition of your contributions to the furtherance of the magickal arts, and in further recognition of your extraordinary service to Equestria and to the world, you are hereby invited to compete in the 374th biannual Moonstone Cup tournament. You have been placed in the young adult bracket according to your sponsorship. Please RSVP with confirmation of your participation in the tournament, as well as the number of guests you will be bringing.

*Cordially,
Princess Celestia of Equestria
Najstariot of Ormsreich
Hadalsnan al-Dhi’b*

Applejack, resting on her haunches across from Twilight, whistled and pushed her hat back. “That’s really somethin’ there, Twi,” Applejack said. “How hard is it to get into this here tournament?”

“Some unicorns spend their whole lives waiting to be invited,” responded Rarity, who was lounging next to Applejack. Rarity delicately brushed back her purple mane with a

small burst of power from her own horn. “Not me, of course. That sort of thing is well outside of my oeuvre.”

“This is so exciting.” For Fluttershy, this was tantamount to Pinkie’s screaming and bouncing off the walls. “Do you think you’ll win, Twilight?”

“Win? I don’t want to get ahead of myself. No one in the young adult bracket has won the cup in over a century. I’ll be competing with magicians from all over the world, and not just unicorns, either.” Twilight fidgeted. “I just hope I place well in my bracket, I don’t want to disappoint the princesses.”

“Disappoint the princesses? Please, Twilight!” Spike snorted. “You’re the most powerful unicorn in Ponyville, maybe in all of Equestria! Remember the Ursa?”

Twilight giggled. “Well, there is th—”

Twilight was cut off by a projectile roar and the sound of shattering glass. All eyes jerked up as a blur of color smashed through one of the library’s round upper windows and crunched sickeningly against the opposite bookcase, sending a torrent of hardbound books careening down in a heap on top of the unidentified flying object. A moment later, Rainbow Dash poked her head out from under the pile, an open book draped over her head. “Hi guys,” she said amicably, apparently none the worse for wear for her sudden and violent entry. “I got here as soon as I could. What’s up?”

“Rainbow!” Twilight shouted, clambering to her feet and walking over to the heap. “I just got finished sorting this entire section! Now I’ll have to go through several hundred technical manuals all over again!”

“You mean I will,” muttered Spike, under his breath.

Rainbow Dash stood, pushing the books off of her and blushing slightly. “Um... Sorry, Twilight,” she said, abashed. “I guess I still need to work on landing from a high-speed approach. So, what’d you inv—”

A pink blur flew through the air into the pile of books and they were knocked away, leaving Rainbow Dash on her back and Pinkie Pie standing on top of her. “We’re going to Canterlot, Rainbow Dash! We’re going to Canterlot and Twilight’s going to win the best magician trophy ever because she’s the best magician ever!”

“Huh?”

Twilight read the letter again, and with a little help from Applejack explaining the import of the tournament and restraining Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash was soon caught up.

“Whoa, that’s so cool, Twilight!” came Rainbow’s decision on the subject, after brief consideration. “I can’t wait to go and see you show those other unicorns who’s boss!” She engaged in some brief but vigorous air-boxing to underscore the point.

“Thanks, Rainbow,” Twilight giggled. “But it’s not that kind of tournament.”

“It’s not?”

“Well... Not all of it, anyway.”

• • •

The next day, Twilight and her friends gathered outside the Ponyville library.

“So, Twi, they sendin’ a carriage for us or somethin’?” Applejack asked.

Twilight responded with a smile and a shake of her head. “It’s a magic tournament, remember? We’ll go by magic!” Her horn glowed brightly, and before anyone else could say anything, the group was enveloped in shimmering purple light, and vanished.

Twilight's group materialized near the road outside Canterlot. It was dark, and the ponies looked around, momentarily confused, until Spike pointed up at the sky. "Twilight, look!"

Twilight followed Spike's request and looked up, gaping. "Oh, wow," she gasped. "This is incredible!"

A huge mass of nearly black clouds hung heavily over Canterlot, and the few scattered rays of sun were further obscured by the swirling mass of beings flying above the castle town. Pegasi, gryphons, huge birds, even a pair of enormous dragons filled the sky, some sweeping down toward the town and castle, some away, flying up over the rim of the cloud mass for some unknown purpose.

"Surely, Twilight, you've been in Canterlot for the competition before, you must have seen this in years past." Rarity adjusted her saddlebags daintily as she spoke. "Though I will admit that it is quite the sight."

Twilight shook her head. "I've never seen it like this before. The Moonstone Cup is important, but it's usually a much lower-key event than this. I wonder what's going on this year?"

"Guess we'll find out, sugarcube," Applejack said with a grin as she began walking toward the road. "But we'd better get goin' otherwise you're not gonna find out much o' anythin'."

There was a general chorus of agreement, and Spike jumped up on Twilight's back as the ponies joined the procession of traffic toward the castle town.

• • •

Normally the area around Canterlot, beyond the drawbridge that led into the castle town proper, was quiet and pleasant, a green meadow bounded by rolling hills, beautiful old growth forests and the cliff face into which Canterlot itself was actually built. Today, however, the familiar meadows were practically buried: an entire town had grown up overnight. A colorful sprawl of tents, covered wagons, yurts and every other kind of portable housing blanketed the landscape in every direction. In the center of it all, an orderly column of small groups filed across the drawbridge and through the gates into Canterlot itself under an enormous banner reading "WELCOME COMPETITORS".

Applejack drew another long breath as the ponies stepped off the road to take in the sprawl. “Wish you’d’a told me about this beforehand, Twi,” she slowly drawled. “I’d’a brought my apple cart.”

“I don’t know why it’s like this! The Moonstone Cup has never drawn crowds like this!” Twilight’s already frazzled nerves were wearing thin. Were all of these people going to be watching her compete? “I don’t know what could possibly be happening this year to be this kind of a draw!”

“You didn’t hear?” A harsh, gravelly but vaguely feminine voice spoke up from nearby. One of the gryphons from a nearby camp had wandered over toward the ponies. She was tall, much taller even than Gilda had been, and easily twice any of the ponies’ height at the shoulder, with a smooth, golden coat and black and tan feathers on her head and wings. “They say the bearer of the Element of Magic is competing this year!”

Spike opened his mouth to speak and was tackled to the ground by Pinkie Pie, who was making entirely unsubtle silencing gestures. Twilight just giggled nervously, her eyelid twitching. “Oh, they do? Say that? Really?”

“Yeah! Twilight Sparkle!” The gryphon went on, oblivious to Twilight’s nervousness and Pinkie’s Pinkieness. “She’s an alicorn sorceress from Manehattan. Purple, kinda like you.” The large gryphon leaned her head down and lowered her voice, conspiratorially. “Rumor going around the aeries is that she’s actually another sister of Celestia and Luna and the Manehattan story is just a cover. You really didn’t know about this?”

Twilight shook her head slowly. “No, no, I really didn’t. It’s very interesting. Um...” Twilight’s eye twitched again. “It’s very nice to meet you...?”

“Oh!” The gryphon stood up straight, extending a talon that could have engulfed Twilight’s whole head. “I’m Gianna. You?”

“Um...” Twilight giggled nervously again, tail twitching as she extended a shaky hoof. “I’m, uh, T-Twilight Sparkle. Hi.”

Gianna narrowed her eyes, and spoke when no punchline appeared to be forthcoming. “What, seriously?”

“Yep. Twilight Sparkle. Bearer of the Element of Magic. That’s me.” Twilight gestured vaguely in the direction of the other ponies. “There are my friends, the other Elements of Harmony.”

Gianna looked at Twilight, then at Pinkie Pie who was extracting her hoof from Spike's mouth, then over at the other ponies. Rainbow Dash was waving with a smug grin on her face. Applejack tipped her hat. Rarity was a tableau of studied indifference. Fluttershy was not in evidence except for a small tuft of pink mane sticking out from behind Applejack's legs. Gianna looked again at the group, thought for a moment, and came to a decision.

"Whoa."

Twilight tittered again, her head tilting at an odd angle, and she silently wished she could trade places with Fluttershy.

"It's really something to meet you," Gianna said, a bit more breathlessly than earlier. "Hey, uh, if you haven't registered yet you probably want to head inside." Her voice dropped again. "If you stay around here, you're gonna get mobbed."

"You heard the lady!" shouted Pinkie Pie as she grabbed Twilight's rear hooves and began dragging her away toward the castle.

Gianna shook her head as she watched the group of ponies retreat toward the drawbridge, then turned and sauntered back toward the other gryphons.

"Hey, guys, you'll never believe who I just ran into!"

• • •

The group approached the Canterlot gates. Like each group ahead of them they were stopped and challenged by the royal guards. Twilight produced the letter of invitation, which floated over to one of the guards.

"Twilight Sparkle. And six guests."

The guard glanced over the letter and the pikes were withdrawn. The group walked across the bridge and stepped into the bustling castle town of Canterlot.

Canterlot's white and gold buildings normally shone in the sunlight but were only slightly less incredible in the dingy overcast. Traffic in the streets was slightly heavier than usual, but with only the competitors and the competitors' guests invited into the town proper it wasn't the same awesome crush that was seen outside.

The white stone street led a short distance to a public square with a raised pedestal, which was normally adorned with a solid gold statue of Celestia. Today the statue was missing, replaced with a large sign bearing a long list of the competitors, starting times and brackets, as well as a short program of events for the coming days. A number of unicorns and other creatures were clustered around, looking for their own names and chattering back and forth. As the group approached little bits and snatches of conversation could be heard.

“...defeated an Ursa Major!”

“...think she’ll really be here...”

“...Celestia’s daughter...”

“...y mom said half the stallions in Canterlot...”

Twilight cringed as more and more it became evident that she—or whatever bizarre caricature of her rumors had painted—was the topic du jour. She timidly looked for an opening in the crowd where she’d be able to fit in, but a Fluttershy-worthy “pardon me” or two was not cutting it to break through the animated throng.

Rainbow Dash sighed and lofted up above the group, flying forward to look at the sign more closely.

“Rainbow!” Twilight called after her friend, worriedly.

Rainbow Dash ignored the call, perusing the sign quickly. “Hey, Twilight, I found your name!” she shouted above the noisy chatter. She then looked back at the sign, rereading something. “Whoa! And guess who else I found here!”

All conversation ceased. Twilight suddenly felt the pressure of Celestia only knew how many pairs of eyes on her.

Pinkie’s Pinkie Sense had nothing on Gianna’s fortune-telling ability.

“It’s her!”

“Can I get your autog...”

“...not an alicorn! So how did...”

“...ery pretty unicorn...”

“...really defeat an Ursa?!”

Fluttershy squeaked and curled into a small ball as the mob descended on Twilight and her friends. Leaning up from his position on Twilight’s back, Spike attempted his most threatening, draconic snarls but succeeded only in adding the occasional “He’s so cute!” to the general barrage. Rainbow hovered uselessly overhead as Applejack and Rarity closed in nearer to Twilight and the small pile of Fluttershy on the ground. Pinkie Pie vanished into the crowd and out of Twilight’s view.

“Please, one at a time, one at a time!” Twilight shouted, eyes tightly shut, horn glowing in preparation to make a quick escape. It didn’t seem to do any good or even slow the tide of yelling.

“...eally from Manehattan?”

“...obviously nepotism...”

“...ow did you stop Nightmare M...”

“...ou like stallions, or...”

“I brought help! I brought help!”

The last shout, Pinkie Pie’s shrill voice, cut sharply through the din. The group mobbing Twilight began to pull back slightly and the cacophony of voices dulled to a nervous murmur. Twilight opened her eyes slowly, and let the glow fade from her horn. On the opposite side of the now muted crowd she saw Pinkie jumping up and down and yelling next to the imposing, brilliantly white form of Princess Celestia.

“Princess!” Twilight said, smiling shakily. “Oh, thank you so much.”

Celestia smiled and looked over the group. The crowd that had been mobbing Twilight looked up in trepidation while Twilight Sparkle and her friends carefully extricated themselves and walked over to the princess.

“It’s good to see you, Twilight,” said Princess Celestia, amusement evident in her voice. “I’m glad you could make it. And I see,” she spoke up, turning to face the erstwhile mob, “that some of the other competitors and their guests have been introducing themselves.”

The group looked much less imposing when they were no longer pressing in on Twilight. Fifteen or twenty unicorns, a handful of gryphons and what appeared to be a washed and rather better-dressed diamond dog made up the entire group. Most of the conversation had gone away but for some vaguely dissatisfied-sounding muttering.

“I am sure Twilight and her friends would be more than happy to answer any questions you may have,” the princess continued. “But for now I’m sure they would like to get registered and settled in before the opening ceremony. You all should do the same.”

The muttering reasserted itself momentarily before the knot of ponies and others split off into groups and went away from the sign. Others, seeing that there was room again, began approaching the sign to find themselves while Princess Celestia led the seven friends away from the square and toward the registration tent outside the great ballroom.

The Grand Ballroom of Canterlot had been nicely restored since the previous year's disastrous Grand Galloping Gala. The decorative pillars had been repaired, the polished white floors showed no sign of the damage a stampede of clawed animals had caused, and the broken stained glass in the windows had all been replaced. The only thing missing was the statue of Princess Celestia; in its place was a new statue, one depicting Celestia holding up the sun and Luna holding up the moon. The ballroom itself was already full as Twilight and her friends entered. Ponies, gryphons, and others clustered around the myriad group tables laid out across the floor. Some milled around, others were nibbling at the buffet at the back of the room, but most sat with their groups, talking.

Twilight led her friends toward an empty table with an elegantly engraved name card reading 'Twilight Sparkle and Group'. Rarity looked around appraisingly; the general tone was slightly dressed up, but not ostentatiously so. She drew a stylish-but-understated purple and white scarf from her saddlebags and looped it around her neck, drawing an arch look from Applejack.

"What?" Rarity asked, guilelessly. "A lady should always be prepared."

"I think it looks very nice, Rarity," Fluttershy offered, softly.

"Well, thank you," came the magnanimous response. "At least somepony here recognizes the value of looking their best."

"Applejack always looks her best!" Pinkie piped up, standing up in her chair.

"Well, thank you, sugarcube—"

"Because she always looks the same! Right, Applejack? Just like me! I always look the same so I always look my best, too!"

"Thank you, Pinkie," the farmpony said flatly.

Pinkie sat back down, cheerfully. "You're welcome!"

"She is right, you know, Applejack," Rarity said as she absently inspected her front hooves for cracks. "You could try varying your wardrobe a bit. If nothing else, you could certainly use a new hat."

Applejack, fuming, pushed her stetson back on her forehead. “There ain’t nothin’ wrong with my hat! ‘Sides, you already made me another hat to go with that dress you made me for the Gala.”

“You can’t wear that hat!” Rarity exclaimed, beginning to fume herself. “That hat is formal attire to be worn with the outfit for which it was designed to the proper sort of events!”

“There ain’t nothin’ wrong with my hat!”

“Yes, there is!”

“Stop arguing!”

The shout drew some very indignant looks from nearby tables and some shocked ones from everyone else at the table. Fluttershy, realizing what she had just done, curled her hooves underneath her and hid her face behind her mass of pink mane. The table lapsed into an awkward silence for a moment before Rainbow Dash, who had been staring off into space, realised the discussion of scarves and fashion and looking one’s best had died the death it so richly deserved. She leaned into the table, excitedly. “Oh! Right, so I never got to tell you all who else I saw on the list of competitors next to Twilight!”

Twilight’s eyes went wide and she suddenly ducked down low in her seat. “Trixie!”

Rainbow Dash blinked in confusion. “What? Yeah, how’d you know, Twilight?”

Twilight hushed at Rainbow Dash and spoke in a whisper. “No, Rainbow, it’s Trixie! She’s right over there!” Twilight gestured with her hoof at a table a few yards away, through a break in the crowd created when one of the adjacent ponies decided it would be best to turn his back to the loud table next to him.

The table in question only had two chairs, one of which held a familiar, bored-looking unicorn. She was wearing a new cape different in design than the one she had lost in Ponyville with a matching hat sitting in front of her on the table. Different clothes or not, however, the crescent moon and magic wand cutie mark on her flank did not belong to anypony but The Great and Powerful Trixie. As Twilight watched, Trixie said something inaudible and made an offhoof gesture at her companion, a vacant-looking tan-and-brown earth pony stallion. He got up and headed toward the buffet table, leaving Trixie alone.

Rarity turned to look the direction Twilight was pointing then quickly turned back to the table, a hoof raised to hide her face. “Ugh, it is her,” Rarity said in much the same tone she might have used if she were talking about a swarm of Parasprites. “What’s she doing here? And dressed like that? Orange and green on purple, really.”

“Well, she’s probably in the tournament. Why else would she be here?” Applejack said with a shrug. “Her friend there ain’t competin’, that’s for sure.”

Spike snorted. “Who cares? Twilight’ll wipe the floor with her just like last time! Twilight can beat any unicorn with one hoof tied behind her back!” A sideways look from Rarity later, and Spike started sputtering. “I mean, at magic! Just magic! She’s not half as beautiful, talented, charming...”

Twilight glared at the baby dragon over the tabletop. “Thanks a lot, Spike.”

Spike looked between Rarity and Twilight and promptly bit down on his claw, silencing himself before he could dig a deeper hole. A friendly and comforting pat from Fluttershy did nothing to alleviate his embarrassment.

Groaning, Twilight sat up a little straighter, just enough to rest her head on the table. “How much longer until the ceremony starts?”

“Little while yet, sugarcube.”

Another groan.

Across the table, Pinkie Pie suddenly stopped working on a ship-in-a-bottle and sat up straight. “I know what would cheer you up, Twilight!” she said, determination in her relentlessly cheerful voice.

Twilight pulled her gaze away from Trixie’s back to look at the sugar-rushing earth pony. “Pinkie, I don’t think the table’s big enough to throw a party.”

Pinkie Pie squared off her hooves for a moment as if measuring the space out by eye. “You’re probably right. But I was going to ask if you wanted to play a game!” Pinkie reached under the table, and when her hooves came back they were carrying a folding chess set. “Ta da!”

Sitting up straight, Twilight stared across the table in bewilderment. “Pinkie, since when do you play chess?”

“I play it all the time with Gummy!”

Applejack grimaced and gestured across at the momentarily-forgotten Trixie. “You got any eight-player games there, Pinkie? Cause I think we’ve got company.”

The entire table turned to look and saw Trixie glaring daggers right back. She got up and marched over toward the Ponyville table, leaving her friend alone with his thoughts.

“Oh, horseapples.”

Stalking up to the table, Trixie threw her mane back dramatically. “Well, well, well, look who we have here.” She sneered. “Those country bumpkins from Ponyville! Have you come to gaze in awe as the Great and Powerful Trixie wins the Moonstone Cup?” She narrowed her eyes and scowled at Twilight, who was still slumped far down in her seat. “Or is Celestia’s favorite student planning on making a spectacle of herself trying to show up Trixie again?”

In a blur of color, Rainbow Dash was out of her seat and hovering over the table, glaring down at Trixie. “Hey, Twilight’s ten times the magician you are! Which of you got her dock handed to her by that Ursa, huh?”

“Rainbow Dash, language!” Fluttershy looked around furtively at the neighboring tables; the Table of Harmony was now awash in a sea of grumbling and indignant glares.

Twilight rubbed the bridge of her muzzle and sat up a little straighter, her ears twitching oddly. “Now, Trixie, I’m sure we’ll both do our best and compete fairly. I’m glad to see you made it here too.”

With a contemptuous snort, the belligerent blue unicorn reared for a moment, her front hooves kicking. “Talk all you want, Twilight Sparkle, but Trixie has been training! You may have defeated an Ursa Minor but you might as well drop out of this competition now because you won’t beat Trixie a second time!” She settled back down, flipped her mane back again, and spoke a bit airily. “This is a competition for wizards, not librarians.” She turned, swishing her tail contemptuously at the table as she walked back over to her oblivious companion.

“Why, that little... Come back here, you—” Rainbow Dash prepare to race after her and then squawked awkwardly as she was yanked back into her seat by her tail.

“Sit down, sugarcube. She ain’t worth it.”

The table once again lapsed into an awkward silence. Rainbow Dash had her front legs crossed petulantly as she fumed. Fluttershy was curled up on her legs again, while Rarity was looking away, trying her hardest to look as though she didn't know any of these crazy ponies. Pinkie Pie was hard at work on a crossword puzzle that she was discussing softly with Spike, and Twilight Sparkle had her head resting on the table, front hooves crossed over her muzzle.

A hush went through the ballroom and Twilight sat up again. Three beings were stepping up on the dais. First, the radiant form of Princess Celestia. She was accompanied by her usual retinue of barded guard-ponies who took up silent vigil to the rear of the dais.

Following closely behind Celestia was a wizened, hunched being stooped over on two legs, all grey and white fur with streaks of faded brown, draped in a purple dyed robe. It had piercing grey eyes and an elongated muzzle full of sharp, canine teeth that were nonetheless worn with age. Even from halfway across the ballroom Twilight felt as though this creature could see right through her. It was followed by two younger, stronger attendants that looked recognizably similar to diamond dogs but with black and brown fur speckled with white spots. They carefully lifted the robe away from the elder creature as it stepped on to the dais and took their own place to the rear, notably standing away from Celestia's guards.

Finally, the third being took the dais by itself with no guards or attendants. It appeared for all the world like an earth pony, as tall and strong as Celestia, all sleek lines and powerful muscle, vaguely feminine in an androgynous way. She had a bright green coat and a mane that faded from white to bright orange to red and finally to black at the tips. Her eyes were jade green and slitted vertically like a snake's or a...

Spike hissed, inhaling through his teeth. "Oh, wow, it's her," he said, barely audibly. Twilight could have sworn she saw him grow a bit taller out of the corner of her eye. This was Najstariot, then, the reclusive dragon queen.

The old, furred creature was to be the first speaker. It stepped its way to the front of the dais. "Good day." The wizened canine's voice was rough, scarred with age and harshly accented. Although the ancient creature spoke softly, its voice carried across the ballroom as if amplified. "And welcome. It is great honor to be here for three hundred forty-seventh Moonstone Cup. My name Hadalsnan al-Dhi'b, king of Ghilan, leader of ghuls. For more than thirty generation my people and pony people and dragon people," al-Dhi'b said, his hands moving in broad gestures, pointing first at himself and then at Celestia and Najstariot, respectively, "come together to share knowledge and to compete in this place for honor of our homeland."

Al-Dhi'b continued speaking, regaling the thoroughly excited crowd with the wonders of ghul society. To hear the old creature tell it ghuls had invented everything from the wheel to matter transmutation. Twilight was astonished to find, as the speech/harangue went on, that even she was growing bored with the extended—and largely fabricated—'history lesson'.

A loud snore came from Rainbow Dash, followed by a yelp as Applejack kicked her under the table.

"...face responsibility as warders of earth with dignity and pride..."

"Hey, everypony," Pinkie whispered, looking pensively at the crossword puzzle clutched in her hooves. "What's a six-letter word for 'giant fire-breathing lizard'?"

"...in friendship with dragon people, pony people, others..."

Resting her muzzle on her left hoof Twilight wondered if this is how other ponies felt when she lectured them.

"...meaning of tournament. Thank you again and welcome to Moonstone Cup."

Twilight shook herself out of her reverie and joined the politely restrained applause as Hadalsnan al-Dhi'b stepped back to the rear of the dais. Next, the dragon queen stepped forward, daintily; she walked with a grace and lightness that Fluttershy would have been hard-pressed to match.

"Good day, friends of all races," she began. Her voice could not have been more different than al-Dhi'b's. She was clear, mellifluous, with a hint of a deep thrum that lent a pleasant depth to her speech. Six words and everyone was awake and focused on the dais. "Welcome again to Canterlot and to the Moonstone Cup tournament. I trust everyone is full of energy and ready to give their all after my compatriot's fascinating and, dare I say, timeless speech?" A few chuckles ran through the crowd. "I will not keep you. As I'm sure you all know, I am Najstariot, empress of Ormsreich, and this will be my first time judging this tournament directly rather than sending a representative in... oh, goodness, so many years." She smiled fetchingly. "I do hope I wear my age well. It has been a pleasure to meet you all, and now I turn you over to our wonderful host, my dear friend Princess Celestia." The sound of clapping and stomping was riotous.

"She's amazing," Spike breathed as Najstariot concluded her extremely brief oratory.

The dragon queen stepped back gracefully and Princess Celestia stepped forward. “Hello, everyone,” Celestia started in her usual understated, winsome fashion. “For those of you who don’t know, I am Celestia, princess of Equestria, and I will be the third to welcome you to this year’s Moonstone Cup. This tournament is a tradition going back over seven hundred years to the early days of co-operation between ponies, dragons and ghuls. This year’s tournament is an extremely special one as it comes in the wake of two very important events: my sister, Princess Luna’s, cleansing of Nightmare Moon and return to Equestria, and the rediscovery of the Elements of Harmony.”

Twilight sank into her seat again as Celestia gave a quick overview of the events of the past two years or so, in particular the ponies’ battles with Nightmare Moon and Discord. To hear her tell it they might as well have happened one right after another, and in retrospect it felt that way.

Celestia went on to talk briefly about the tournament, having mercifully avoided naming any particular ponies in relation to the Elements of Harmony. There would be three phases; first, full bracket basic testing. The age brackets would be separated and sent to fields outside the Canterlot walls to demonstrate basic skills en masse: power, accuracy of effect, fine manipulation, and some basic skills testing in transmutation, teleportation, object enchantment, banishing, summoning and personal augmentation. Twilight’s ears pricked up at the last two; she had fairly well-rounded knowledge in the other areas but she had never tried summoning spells. Personal augmentation spells, as well, frequently felt like a waste compared to casting a Come-To-Life spell and letting something else do the heavy lifting. She’d be flying blind. Twilight squeaked softly and drew a concerned look from Fluttershy.

The second day was going to be direct “combat” with brackets made up of the top ten percent of each group from day one. Magic duels only, the wizards themselves would be in no danger. This also eliminated the major physical advantage many of the non-pony competitors, in particular the dragons and gryphons, would have.

The third day would again be a short series of duels with the top two from each of the four age brackets from the previous day moving on to the semifinal rounds. This was usually where the less experienced competitors from the young adult bracket were knocked out of the running for the Moonstone Cup itself, but the gold medallion for the top competitor in the young adult bracket was almost as prestigious as the cup itself. Twilight had her eyes set there rather than on the almost certainly unattainable Cup. By and large, the grand prize ended up in the hands of the top competitor in either the Experienced or Sage brackets, all wizards over the age of a hundred with some of the most ancient Sages well over a thousand years old. The final day was reserved for the

final match, and Twilight was more looking forward to seeing the magicians that succeeded in getting there than expecting to reach the finals herself.

Celestia wrapped up quickly as a buzz started going through the crowd; the reality of the situation, that the competitors would soon be lining up to begin the marathon to the Cup, was like electricity. “The first trials will be beginning tomorrow afternoon. Please everyone, relax, enjoy the buffet provided, and welcome once again to this year’s Moonstone Cup.”

• • •

The library of Canterlot had once been a second home to Twilight. It was one of the largest libraries in the world, maybe the largest, and was designed in the same style as much of Canterlot, all white marble columns and huge, open spaces with equally huge windows. As much as Twilight loved her library in Ponyville, the entire collection could have fit in a corner of the Canterlot library without even getting in the way. There was something to be said for having the collected wisdom of millennia at your hooves.

While Twilight’s friends had gone into the city to relax after the opening ceremony, Twilight herself had gone to the library for the afternoon. She had spent the time working her way through the library’s vast collection of magical texts and treatises, reading up on past Moonstone Cup tournaments and trying to fill in gaps in her knowledge as best she could. The afternoon wore on as so many did for Twilight, lost in books.

She looked up from a fascinating analysis of elemental summoning to see the last rays of sunlight fading through the library’s huge windows. Twilight sat back with a yawn and stretched then giggled slightly as her stomach rumbled loudly.

“Hungry?” piped up a familiar voice. Twilight turned and smiled brightly as she saw Princess Celestia standing next to her.

“Oh, Princess!” Twilight’s stomach rumbled again and she blushed in embarrassment. “Uh... A little, yes.”

Celestia smiled at her young student. “Well, dinner should be ready soon at the castle. Chef is preparing a lovely parsnip bourguignon for this evening and I’ve asked him to expect seven additional seats. After dinner, my sister and I can show you the quarters we’ve arranged for you and your friends. However, there is something I’d like to ask of you first.”

Twilight looked up at Celestia, worried. “Is there something wrong, princess?”

“No, Twilight,” the day monarch said with a smile. “But there’s someone who has asked to meet you, and I think you’ll find this worth your while. If you’d rather go straight to the castle, of course, I’ll send you to your friends and convey your apologies.”

“Oh! No, that’s alright, princess,” Twilight said, her hunger and lassitude slightly abated by simply talking with her beloved teacher. “If you think it’s important I’m more than happy to go. Who wants to meet me?”

“A friend of mine from long ago,” came the reply. “Hadalsnan al-Dhi’b, the third organizer of this tournament. You saw him earlier at the opening ceremony.”

Hadalsnan al-Dhi’b. The ghul king. Twilight’s head swam. “O-of course, princess.”

• • •

That evening, the sitting room of the library was nearly empty and silence greeted Celestia and Twilight Sparkle as they walked in through the archway. A single, hunched figure was sitting in a chair near a large fireplace. Celestia walked over to him, Twilight in tow.

“Greetings, Your Majesty,” Celestia said, quietly.

Al-Dhi’b was old, older even than he had seemed during the earlier ceremony, grey through his muzzle and even on his paws. He turned his head ponderously and looked up at Celestia with a smile. “Pony Empress,” he said, warmth in his raspy voice.

“Please, Hadalsnan, just Celestia. Princess, if you must.”

Al-Dhi’b chuckled roughly as he rose to his feet. “Father always call you Empress. He remember days before Nightmare Moon.”

Celestia bowed her head. “He was a good man. Even if our people weren’t close until it was too late, he helped rebuild after Discord and Nightmare Moon. I’ll never forget that.”

“Good friend to pony princess, yes,” the old ghul replied. “You good friend to him. He tell me. Always, he say, always help from Empress, and always be help to Empress. I tell young prince same thing. I make him learn Equestrian, too.” He beamed. “My Equestrian, not so good. His Equestrian very good, he talk to Celestia way she deserve.”

“Now,” Al-Dhi’b said, turning to face Twilight with a craggy smile. “I meet hero pony, who save Luna, who defeat Discord. You Twilight Sparkle?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” came Twilight’s choked response.

“You, your friends, do great service to world, not just to pony people.” The withered creature leaned down in a bow and grinned in an oddly impish fashion. “Maybe I forgive you and other hero ponies for not paying attention at ceremony.”

Twilight blushed. “I’m sorry about that, Your Majesty. I was trying to pay attention.”

“So why not?”

“Well,” the young unicorn said, uncomfortably. “I don’t think everything you were saying was factually accurate, to begin with...”

Al-Dhi’b glared haughtily, his grey eyes boring holes in Twilight’s. He drew up to his full height with the sound of cracking joints. When not hunched over, he was impressively tall, his eyes level with the tip of Celestia’s horn. “I tell story of my people!” the old ruler thundered as he towered over Twilight. “Tell history! Ghuls once equal of any race in world! Once, all earth answer to ghuls! My father, earth his, just like sun and moon belong to pony princesses! He speak to earth, tell dirt to grow food, tell rocks to make gems! This fact! Ponies, dragons, gryphons, zebras, all owe debt to ghuls!”

“And you are still a proud and strong people,” Celestia said softly.

The wizened old ghul deflated, the fierce gleam in his eyes fading. “No. Proud, not strong. Blood runs thin. Fewer pups every year. Earth no longer answers my people, just few sorcerers left. Some already lost, become...” He paused, grimacing. “Become animals. Stealing, eating filth, digging in dirt for gems that not speak. Call themselves diamond dogs.” He sighed, slumping back down in his seat. He faced the fire, looking away from the two ponies. “Maybe two, maybe three hundred years, no ghuls left. Not much longer, no diamond dogs left. Young prince, last leader of our people.”

Twilight looked stricken. The thought of a noble, ancient people reduced to the degradation of the diamond dogs and then to simply disappear... She had known, abstractly, that some ponies had been working with the ghuls to improve rainfall and soil quality in their lands and help fertility rates, but the idea that they were headed for extinction cut deeply. There was nothing like it in her experience. “Princess,” she breathed. “Isn’t there anything we can do to help?”

Princess Celestia turned her head to look at al-Dhi'b sorrowfully and said nothing. The old creature laughed, a raspy, dusty sound. "Silly young pony!" He said, harshly but without malice. "You think we never try? You think pony people, dragon people do nothing to help ghuls? My father, ruler before me, he see it coming. He ask for help from gryphon allies. He open formal negotiations and trade with Ormsreich and Equestria hundreds of years ago, gain trust, gain more friends and help. No use. Ghuls still dying. Hundreds of years, greatest minds working together. Ghuls still dying." He shook his shaggy head slowly. "No. Time for ghuls to go. Earth ponies, earth answer to them, now. More power in earth pony hooves than ever in ghul paws."

He took a deep breath and blinked away dampness forming in his ancient, grey eyes. "Time to move aside. World belong to younger races now. I tell story of my people so that pony people, dragon people, gryphon people all remember, we were here." He smiled thinly. "Good to meet you, Twilight Sparkle. You remember. You tell story when ghuls gone. You tell ponies who move to empty lands. You hero, people listen. You tell them, we were here."

Twilight blinked back tears that were threatening to run down her face. "It was good to meet you too, Your Majesty. I will."

"Come, Twilight," Celestia said, softly. "You should get some rest."

The testing grounds for the young adult magicians had been established near Canterlot, beyond the major spectator camps. The area itself was a large, flat field that had been staked out with fence posts and marked off with chalk in a long series of rows. On the side of the field facing the castle and tent city was a long, covered set of bleachers. In front of the bleachers was a large raised platform with a set of ramps leading up and a lectern toward the front. The bleachers were already full of spectators as the competitors began to walk in and line up, one to each chalked out row, each of which had a name card with a competitor's name resting in the soft, tended grass.

Twilight slowly walked along with a thinning group of competitors, looking at each card until she found one labeled "Twilight Sparkle". She split off from the group and took her position and was rewarded with a glare from the familiar pony to her left. The competitors had been sorted alphabetically, and so Twilight Sparkle was, naturally, right next to Trixie. Why couldn't any of the other participants have a name starting with Ts or Tu?

"Hi again, Trixie," Twilight said with a forced smile and equally forced cheerfulness. "It sure is a..." She looked up at the dense cloud cover before continuing, lamely, "Nice day for a magic competition."

Trixie's glare could have melted steel. "I am already sick of running into you, Twilight Sparkle," she snarled. "But Trixie certainly won't have to deal with you for much longer. You'll be out and heading back to Ponyville by tomorrow morning at the latest."

Straightening up, Twilight looked back at Trixie, sternly. "I think I have a very good chance of placing quite well in this tournament, thank you very much."

Eyes widening in anger, Trixie reared for a moment then came down heavily on her front hooves. "Placing quite well?! That's it?! That's what you're here for? What kind of a unicorn are you?" She nearly shouted, "You don't deserve to be here with Trixie!"

Twilight was taken aback by Trixie's violent reaction but didn't have a chance to respond as a booming voice came from the direction of the stands, pounding into Twilight's head. "Everyone!" The familiar voice reverberated across the field and Twilight turned to see that the raised platform and lectern were now occupied with the unmistakable green-and-red form of Najstarriot, the dragon queen. "Welcome to the first day of the Moonstone Cup tournament!" A round of applause went up from the spectators while

many of the competitors shuffled in place, some excited, some nervous, some—like Trixie—impatient to get on with the tests.

“This first day of competition, you will demonstrate the extent of your skills as magicians. You will have no opponents but yourselves and many of you will discover, as so many have for hundreds of years, that you are your own most powerful opponent. Your power, knowledge and creativity will be put to the test and the best among you will go on to the next day of competition.”

The shapeshifted dragon went on to talk about the first round of competition, a simple test of control and versatility using a number of small projectiles which had been set out at the end of each row next to a small target. Most of the competitors found this test of telekinesis relatively painless and Twilight was no exception. She launched her projectiles with deadly accuracy at the center of the target, some lobbed in gentle arcs, others fired like sling bullets. After a short time the cluster of marks on Twilight’s target was one of the smallest and tightest of the entire field. Most of the other competitors had done quite well as well, and with a thunderous call from Najstariot the round was ended. Each of the competitors placed their projectiles back at the end of the row.

The next two rounds required little more exertion from Twilight. First, transmutation. The projectiles were named as transmutation targets. Twilight thought of Spike with a smile, and her horn glowed brightly. A matching glow surrounded the projectiles and with a pop they transformed into a set of baby dragon-sized formal attire, a top hat, dinner jacket, a pair of tiny polished Oxfords and a diamond-tipped cane. She let out a long breath and her smile brightened as she thought she heard Spike’s cheering voice from somewhere behind her.

Transmutation was also the first point at which the true range of Twilight’s competition was made real to her. Trixie’s spell transformed her objects into a swarm of brightly colored butterflies. Twilight saw the azure unicorn smirking out of the corner of her eye while she cast her eye across the other results. There were plants, animals, birds, household items. One of the aspiring young wizards roughly halfway down the field had even transformed her objects into a bronze statue of an oddly familiar-looking gryphon. The field was awash in color and movement.

Twilight was rudely knocked to attention by the sound of Najstariot’s unfathomably powerful voice announcing the end of the round. At the same time, the various transmuted objects all lost their magic and transformed back into the objects they started as. The unicorn felt a twinge of disappointment that she wouldn’t be able to give the suit to Spike.

Next, teleportation. Twilight dove into this trial with all four hooves. She effortlessly ping-ponged down the length of her row, vanishing and reappearing, first on the ground, then in the air, sometimes seeming to be almost in two places at once. After a minute of this Twilight returned to the end of her row on the field. She sat and took a deep, satisfied breath, glancing idly around at the other competitors' attempts as she waited for her balance to return. Nothing she saw could compare to the acrobatic routine she had just accomplished. If she did this well with the rest of the competition she'd be at the top of the starting rankings tomorrow for sure!

After each competitor finished their short teleportation routine Najstariot stepped up to the raised platform again. "Competitors!" The dragon queen's voice seemed to echo from every surface, reverberating in Twilight's skull which was still spinning from her exertions in the previous round. "In this round, you will demonstrate your abilities with object enchantment. You will each be provided with a simple target for your spells. All types of enchantment are allowed, but please keep in mind principles of good sportsmanship and do not use any spells that would directly affect or harm your fellow competitors or any spectators." The clarion voice silenced as a pair of royal Canterlot guards began walking down the long row of young mages, placing a single white bean in front of each.

With a muted grumble, Twilight realized that her plan for this round, to simply use her mind-bending Want-It-Need-It spell that had proven so powerful in Ponyville, was not going to be acceptable. She mentally kicked herself for not thinking that such a spectacularly dangerous spell would have no place around this many ponies. What to do... A basic Come-To-Life spell would do little to a single pinto bean, and creating a Mérenxican Jumping Bean was not going to win this tournament.

Looking around furtively, Twilight saw other competitors casting a bewildering array of spells on their beans. Some had cast simple Glow spells, making their beans into light sources. Not impressive, although the quality of the light these beans shed was unassailable. Others had used Come-To-Life spells and sent their beans rolling, hopping, and in one case dancing across the field. Next to her, Trixie was weaving something meticulous around the bean, slowly wrapping it in a web of thin threads of azure energy. Twilight could not begin to discern what her would-be rival was trying to do but it was bound to be ostentatious.

She turned her head, looking into the stands, trying to see if she could see her friends. You'd think, she told herself, that a rainbow-maned cyan pegasus and a white unicorn with a bright purple mane would be easy to spot, but she could see no sign of Rainbow or Rarity let alone any of the others...

Rarity. Of course. Twilight grinned and began focusing on the bean. She had never tried putting a detection spell on an object before, but it seemed like it should essentially be a reversed Want-It-Need-It spell combined with a detection spell for whatever one happened to be looking for. Thanks to Rarity, Twilight Sparkle already had a detection spell that she'd had to piece apart and reconstruct in her head: Rarity's Gem-Finding spell. Her horn glowed with a guttering purple light as she began to weave the composite spell around the bean.

And then the sky exploded.

A roar came from the spectators as Twilight desperately tried to hang on to the somewhat tricky spell she was weaving. She glanced around quickly, trying to find out what was so fascinating and had nearly blinded her.

The sky was filled with glowing trails, as if left by a swarm of particularly artistic fireflies. The trails spelled out a single word in elaborate cursive writing: "TRIXIE". Trixie's bean was screaming through the sky impossibly fast, trailing a blindingly bright blue afterimage that it traced over and over, leaving the showpony's name burned across the overcast sky and everypony's retinas.

Twilight was committed to her own spell and so she turned back, sweat beading on her sides. A gem-detection bean wouldn't impress anyone after Trixie's showy—and, Twilight had to admit, technically impressive—stunt, but maybe with some slight modification the basic idea could be salvaged. She carefully broke some of the strands of power she had woven around the bean, building new patterns inspired by what was going on above her. She poured as much power as she could into her violet-wreathed bean and then released her hold.

For a moment nothing happened, and then with a slight pop the bean was gone. There was a ping sound next to her and Trixie stumbled slightly as Twilight's bean ricocheted sharply off the emerald clasp of Trixie's cloak.

"Oh, really, Twilight Sparkle," Trixie spat, contemptuously. "That's just pathetic, even for—" She stopped awkwardly as the gem at her throat began to glow a brilliant, clear green.

Another ping and a gasp from nearby, and another unicorn competitor who was wearing a tiara found the largest stone in it beginning to glow brightly. Another and another, and soon a whole chorus of crystalline tones rose from the spectator stands as the bean found the largest concentration of stones and began skipping from gemstone to gemstone,

infusing them each with a small amount of magic, just enough to power a simple Glow spell.

Twilight sat down, panting, a spark or two spitting from her horn as she took an available moment while the dragon queen appraised. Judging by the applause from the stands it was clear that the spectators had their two favorites of that round, though real evaluation and scoring would be up to Najstariot alone. She noted that Trixie seemed to not even be winded. How could she exert herself like that and not be entirely exhausted?

As for the dragon queen, she looked across the field at the various beans, up at the glowing sign in the sky and across the spectators' stands at the shimmering gems, many of which were already beginning to fade. She stepped forward on the raised platform again, apparently satisfied with what she saw. Her clarion voice called forth again, battering at Twilight's senses. "A wonderful performance from all of our competitors!" she boomed. As Najstariot spoke, all of the enchanted beans simply stopped. The sky faded, beans fell to earth, a few vines shriveled and died back.

She paused and the competitors watched as their beans returned to them, rolling across the ground to stop at their feet. "This next round should be short and will test your skill at banishment and dispelling. Simply remove the enchantment I have placed on your bean. You will be gauged on the speed, precision and overall execution of your banishment."

With that, the row of white beans began glowing a threatening red and floated into the air. They pulsed softly in unison, as if they were connected to some monstrous heart. Twilight was relieved at having a simple test; perhaps this was intended as a low-power test to give the competitors a chance to rest. She leaned down and tapped her bean with the tip of her horn. It simply stopped. It stopped glowing, floating or doing anything other than being a perfectly ordinary bean, and fell to the ground with a dull plop. Twilight sat down to wait for the next round and took a quick look around.

All around her, her fellow competitors were struggling with their beans. The red glow was wrapping threateningly around horns and beaks, throwing sparks as it fought strenuously against the various attempts to banish the animating force within. Twilight blinked in confusion and looked over her shoulder at the stands and the judge behind her. Najstariot was staring back at Twilight, shock etched deeply across her normally flawlessly sculpted face. Twilight quickly looked forward again, perturbed.

Twilight's attention was drawn back to Trixie next to her as her ersatz rival was the second to cleanse her bean. It was not the clean banishment Twilight had used. Trixie's

horn glowed malefically, the tendrils that reached out from the bean now held fast by Trixie's own threads of energy. With a cry, Trixie ripped the animating force from the bean. Breathing heavily for the first time, Trixie absorbed the energy from the bean, the slowly fading red glow looking like drying bloodstains on her horn. At the moment the bean was 'dispelled', even from her safe distance Twilight could feel the power from Trixie's horn rake across her mind with a promise of oblivion. Trixie hadn't dispelled or banished the magic on the bean. She had quite literally killed it. Twilight suddenly felt sick and very, very alone.

Twilight slumped to the ground, trying to ignore the unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach as she thought about the next round. Summoning was never something Twilight had practiced extensively. She was skilled at teleportation, both moving herself and moving other people and things, and that solved most problems that asked for summoning. Unfortunately, the problem here was to demonstrate one's facility at summoning specifically. In principle, summoning was not drastically different than teleportation except that the target was not located on the physical plane, which complicated things somewhat.

Once the banishments were complete, Najstariot announced the next round to the exhausted competitors. Twilight stood up, still wracking her brain for an effective summon spell. She looked to her left at a loud snort from Trixie who was pawing the ground aggressively. Trixie was already gathering power around her horn when she noticed Twilight looking at her.

With a smirk, Trixie narrowed her eyes at Twilight. "Oh, yes, please, Twilight Sparkle. This is the part Trixie has been waiting for. Watch in amazement!"

While the other competitors were beginning the laborious process of working up a summoning spell, Trixie was already deep into hers, blue energy beginning to gather in a sphere in front of her. Twilight turned her attention back to her own spell with a grimace. What should she summon? What could she summon? Some calm part of her mind chuckled and suggested it should be something that wouldn't scare Fluttershy, which would narrow the field somewhat.

Thinking about her timid friend suddenly made it all come together for Twilight. Fluttershy and Applejack would both approve of something that she had the raw material for all around. The grass under her feet, the nearby woods, even her discarded bean from the last two tests would serve as a summoning focus for a plant elemental. Twilight grinned and began focusing energy into the bean again, using it as the central focus to build the plant elemental's body around. The bean skin cracked and split as shoots came

out, growing and forming ersatz limbs while small fragments of grass and wood bound together to form a tail and head.

A small part of Twilight's mind that wasn't deep into the summoning spell idly noted a sharp crack and a whiff of ozone next to her. She paid it no heed and continued the laborious process of drawing the alien being into the plant "body" she had prepared. The plant elemental grew and grew. From a body barely larger than a bean it grew to be slightly smaller than Twilight Sparkle, a perfect pony made of grass and tangled wood. The plant creature regarded Twilight with a silent curiosity. It then turned its head slowly to face toward Trixie's row on the field when a sharp shriek came. Twilight swiveled her head as well, in alarm.

Facing Trixie was Trixie! The two ponies were physically identical, the same color, the same cutie mark. One was dressed in the purple and orange costume Trixie had worn the entire competition while the other wore no clothes.

"What... Where am I?! Who are you?!" The doppel-Trixie was clearly terrified, looking around at the magicians near her and especially at her mirror image. She then spied Twilight who was staring, dumbfounded, and relief washed over her face.

"Twilight, love! Oh, thank Celestia! What's going on here?! Who is this?!"

Twilight nearly swallowed her tongue. "I... What?" she managed to choke out.

Heedless of Twilight's discomfort, the duplicate Trixie ran over to stand uncomfortably close to her. "Twilight, Trixie wants to know what's going on! Who is this other pony who looks like me?"

"I... What?"

Trixie stalked up to the edge of her row, angrily glaring at Twilight. "What did you do to Trixie's spell?!" she screamed. "Couldn't beat the Great and Powerful Trixie so you decided to cheat? Is that it?!"

Twilight shook her head and recovered her senses enough to edge away from the extra Trixie. "I didn't do anything to your spell!" she protested. "Maybe—"

The Trixie standing next to Twilight interrupted, haughtily. "The Great and Powerful Trixie?! Trixie hasn't called herself that since before Trixie returned to Ponyville!" She paused and then scowled angrily, moving closer again to Twilight, possessively. "You impostor! Are you trying to steal Twilight from Trixie with this pathetic disguise?!"

Trixie's eyes grew wide and a slight blush came to her cheeks. "S-steal Twilight?! Just what are you insinuating about Trixie?!"

The argument grew more heated as the two Trixies batted verbal barbs back and forth. Twilight was unable to get a word in edgewise around the volleys of "Trixie this" and "Trixie that". She continued to shy away from the Trixie that was laying claim to her personal space, and then looked up as a shadow fell across the trio.

Najstariot stood nearby, towering over the three ponies, still unnoticed by any but Twilight. "Enough!" her voice boomed, deafeningly, and the two bickering Trixies stopped. They both looked up at the dragon queen, stunned.

"**Nam-tar ud huc kalam-ma ri-a,**" said the plant elemental, evenly.

• • •

After the competition, an exhausted Twilight dragged herself toward the stands to meet her friends. The unsettling doppel-Trixie that was fixated on Twilight had been sent back to wherever she came from and Trixie had ignored Twilight for the rest of the trial. The physical augmentation round ultimately turned out to be both one of the simplest and the most difficult; Twilight used the spell she had found to give Rarity wings. She had very nearly passed out doing it, but it had worked and she was still wearing the limp and lifeless butterfly wings when the competition broke for the day. She found her friends waiting for her to the side of the wooden bleachers, and was promptly tackled to the ground by Pinkie Pie.

"Twilight, you did so great! We were watching the whole time! That thing you did making all the gems light up was so pretty!"

Twilight smiled wanly. "Thanks, Pinkie. Could you maybe let me up?"

Pinkie moved away and offered Twilight a helping hoof to her feet. "Sorry, Twilight. It was just so exciting to watch! I thought magic contests would be boring contests where ponies read books at each other but it wasn't like that at all!"

"You did do wonderfully, Twilight," said Rarity, warmly. "There were lots of good magicians in the tournament but everyone could plainly see that you stood out from the rest. Especially from that... Trixie. And those wings look at least as smashing on you as they did on me."

“Well, thanks, Rarity. I just hope I don’t run into Trixie again,” Twilight sighed. “Her summon was kind of upsetting for both of us.”

“Sugar, if’n you do, I’m sure you’ll give her exactly what she deserves,” Applejack said with a grin.

“Twilight, you rock,” Fluttershy offered, quietly, to a general chorus of agreement.

“Thanks, everypony,” Twilight replied, some of the tiredness leaving her smile. “We should probably head back to the castle. I’m exhausted.”

A strong, familiar and welcome voice spoke up. “Then spare your hooves, Twilight Sparkle,” Princess Luna said kindly as she materialized next to the group. “I have come to convey thee to the castle. As thy sponsor,” she said with a wink, “it is my privilege and prerogative to offer you and your guests lodging and hospitality for the entire tournament. My sister also sends her regards.”

Relief washed over Twilight’s face. A meal and a warm, comfortable bed sounded just perfect, early in the evening thought it might been. “Thank you so much, princess.”

Sleeping in the same room as Pinkie and Applejack more or less precluded the possibility of sleeping late, so the morning came far too early for Twilight. Even having gone to sleep immediately after Celestia brought her to the castle, she felt as though she had barely slept at all, and was certainly not ready to face a day of duels.

The room Luna and Celestia had put the friends up in looked as though it had been guard quarters or barracks at some point in the past. The polished white stone of the walls and floors was colorfully decorated, with multicolored garlands and beautiful tapestries on the walls and warm, woven rugs on the floor keeping sensitive hooves away from cold stone. Two long rows of beds were lined up against the walls, and a cheerful fireplace crackled at the far end of the room.

“Mornin’, Twi,” came a familiar drawl from across the room. As far as Twilight could tell, Applejack was already wide awake and was sitting stretched-out across her bed, her hat still hung over a post at the headboard. The orange farm pony grinned over at Twilight. “Ready to go show some o’ them other magicians what real magic looks like?”

With a groan, Twilight shoved her head under her pillow. “It’s too early,” she said, muffled by her mattress and pillow. “This must be what Spike always feels like in the morning.”

A third, hyperactive and sugary voice piped up from the bed next to Applejack. “It’s not too early!” Pinkie said, also sounding up and raring to go. “I’m always up this early! Mr. Cake says, ‘Early to bed and early to rise’... Um... I don’t remember how the rest of it goes but it ends with ice cream.”

“Ice cream? Pinkie, I don’t think that saying has—”

“Twilight!” Pinkie interrupted, speaking in a stage whisper that was somehow even louder than her normal voice. “You should keep it down, we don’t want to be rude meanie-ponies and wake everyone else up!”

Twilight groaned again and extricated her head from her pillow, then looked at the other beds. On the other side of the room, next to Pinkie and Applejack, Rainbow Dash was lying sprawled across her bed, dead to the world. To Twilight’s right, Rarity was curled up daintily under the covers, while in the next bed Fluttershy chewed on her mane in her sleep. The only sign of Spike was a small round lump buried under the covers on the bed to Twilight’s left.

“C’mon,” Applejack said softly as she got up. She flipped her hat onto her head before walking to the far end of the room and settling down on the rug next to the fireplace, away from the sleepers. Pinkie bounced out of bed and over to join Applejack, and after a moment Twilight dragged herself from her bed to join her two friends.

“Anyway, Twilight, what I was saying is that me and the Cakes are up this early most days!” Pinkie spoke as she warmed her front hooves by the fire. “We have to get up early to start the baking for the day at Sugarcube Corner!”

“You mean ‘the Cakes and I’, right, Pinkie?” Twilight asked, stifling a yawn.

“What?”

“You said ‘me and the Cakes’,” said Twilight, primly. “But you meant to say ‘the Cakes and I’.”

Pinkie blinked in confusion. “But, Twilight, I work at Sugarcube Corner, not you! You work at the library, remember?”

“I don’t think that’s quite what she meant, darlin’,” Applejack drawled.

Pinkie giggled at her friends. “But the Cakes don’t work at the library, either, sillies! Twilight, you mean you and Spike. Oh!” Pinkie Pie’s eyes lit up. “Maybe we should trade some time! Spike could help out at Sugarcube Corner and I could come help at the library!”

‘Skeptical’ was insufficient to describe the look that crossed Twilight Sparkle’s face. “You want to help out at the library?”

“Sure! ’Cause then we could take a break and go to Sugarcube Corner!”

Just then, a bright yellow pegasus ambled up to the three friends, awkwardly attempting to pull a few strands of pink mane from her mouth as she walked. “Good morning, every...” She made a spitting sound as she extricated the last of her mane. “...one.”

“Fluttershy!” Twilight greeted her friend exuberantly, grateful for the opportunity to escape the Pinkie Pie conversational vortex. “Good morning! Sleep well?”

“Oh, yes, I slept fine, thank you,” came Fluttershy’s typically soft response. “It was so nice of the princesses to let us stay here.”

“It was. I always liked this part of the castle,” Twilight said, stretching out over the rug on her side, keeping her delicate wings away from the fire. “And it makes me feel better that we can all stay together.”

Fluttershy nodded, ruffling her feathers. “Oh, me too. It’s so fun having everyone together like this. And I’m glad we can support you, Twilight. You did so well yesterday, it would be a shame if you were all alone worrying about the results.”

“Darn tootin’!” Applejack agreed vehemently, drawing a smile from Twilight and a small squeak from Fluttershy. “Speakin’ of,” she continued, “we should go get some breakfast and see if we can’t find out about them results. See who Twi’s gonna be facin’ first.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for the others?” Pinkie asked. “Or maybe we should wake them up!” She began drawing in a deep breath.

“Pinkie!” Twilight hissed, leaving Pinkie with puffed out cheeks and a quizzical look. “Let them sleep. I know Spike won’t be up for another hour, and even if I did make it to the ladder matches, the first match won’t be for hours. There’s plenty of time.”

“And Rarity and Rainbow Dash both sleep late any day they don’t have to be up early for work,” Fluttershy added.

Pinkie Pie let out her breath with a gasp. “Oh, okay!”

The four friends quietly exited the room, Twilight leading the way down the familiar halls of Canterlot castle. “It’s been so long since I’ve been down the back ways of the castle like this,” she said, cheerfully. “You know, many of these rooms,” she gestured at adjoining doors, “have been mainly unoccupied for years, like the quarters Luna put us up in. They’re old military barracks...”

She carried on with her history lesson as the group walked down the corridors, Fluttershy hanging on her every word. Applejack followed disinterestedly while Pinkie Pie played with a paddleball set, and soon the group exited the castle through a side entrance.

“...brings us up to the year 480. Oh, and here we are!” Twilight said cheerfully as the group walked out onto the castle grounds. “So, breakfast!”

• • •

Canterlot had no shortage of good places to eat, and so Twilight decided to visit one of her favorite cafes from when she lived in the castle town, a small, quiet place near the castle with...

“—the best daffodil and daisy sandwich ever!” Pinkie exclaimed as she devoured the aforementioned meal in a single bite. “Thank you, Twilight!” The four friends were sitting at a table under an awning outside the cafe, enjoying a chance to eat and relax before the day’s events.

Fluttershy nibbled at her dandelion salad more daintily. “Yes, thank you for bringing us here. It’s all very tasty.” She smiled brightly at Twilight and sipped her tea.

Twilight was also smiling brightly and was about to respond when she noticed two young unicorn fillies on the sidewalk whispering at each other and pointing toward her in just about the least subtle way imaginable. They were each wearing some tasteful, understated jewelry and one had a thin shawl draped across her withers. Obvious locals, Twilight deduced.

“Can I help you?”

The two fillies jumped at having been caught out, and they looked at each other before advancing timidly. “Like, you’re Twilight Sparkle, right?” the first asked, nervously.

“Yes,” Twilight responded, slowly. Applejack glared suspiciously at the two fillies across the table.

“Oh, cool!” the young unicorn exclaimed, relief washing over her. “We weren’t sure it was really you.”

The two promptly shrieked, causing Fluttershy to vanish under the table, and began bombarding Twilight.

“You were so awesome yesterday!”

“How did you make those wings?”

“Are you seriously Celestia’s personal student?”

“Did Discord really turn you into a newt?”

“What are you gonna do when you win the cup?”

“How did you beat Nightmare Moon?”

The two fillies looked at each other, then looked back at Twilight and shouted in unison.

“Is it true about you and Princess Luna?!”

The barrage was interrupted by Applejack slamming her hoof down on the table. “Now just hold on there a minute! What in tarnation is all this about?”

With a wince, Twilight set her hoof on top of Applejack’s. “Easy there, AJ.” She then looked over at the two young unicorns. “Please, girls, one question at a time?”

One pawed awkwardly at the ground. “Sorry, Ms. Sparkle,” she said, in a small voice. “You were just really cool yesterday and you’re this big hero...”

“Yeah!” her friend piped up. “Like, there’s all these rumors going around? About how you beat Nightmare Moon and Discord? And, like, totally exterminated a dragon that was going to burn Canterlot to the ground?”

Pinkie Pie blinked. “An extermination mission? Twilight, when did we do that?”

With a sigh, Twilight held up a hoof, holding off any more of the young fillies’—and Pinkie’s—ramblings. “Girls, first off, a lot of those rumors aren’t true. I didn’t do anything about the dragon, and it certainly wasn’t going to burn Canterlot to the ground. He was just snoring lots of smoke.” She looked around for a moment, then under the table at Fluttershy, who smiled sheepishly and climbed back into her chair. “Fluttershy convinced him that he needed to sleep somewhere else.”

“Um, it wasn’t much. Really. I just asked nicely...” Fluttershy mumbled, trailing off into an inaudible squeak.

“And as for Discord and Nightmare Moon,” Twilight went on, “I didn’t beat them by myself at all. If it weren’t for my friends standing with me, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything. It wasn’t me that beat them, it was the power of friendship!”

The two fillies looked at Twilight, not in disappointment, exactly, but certainly confusion. “So,” one of the fillies asked, quietly. “Do you think you’ll beat Shahnaz this morning?”

“Shahnaz?” Twilight asked, blankly.

“Like, yeah? Your first opponent today? It’s on the schedules and everything!” the other said in surprise.

“I don’t know, I’ll do my best.” Twilight smiled weakly. “It was very nice to meet you girls, um...”

The filly brightened up suddenly. “Oh, yeah, like, I’m Fizzy, and this is Galaxy.”

Galaxy nodded. “It was nice to meet you too, Ms. Sparkle.”

The two young fillies walked away, whispering quietly to each other. Just as the ponies were beginning to tuck back into their breakfasts, a pair of shrieks broke the silence from down the street.

“Oh my gosh we just met Twilight Sparkle!”

Applejack shook her head while Twilight gently laid hers down on the table. Fluttershy squeaked and snapped her wings in tightly.

“Oh, I remember!” said Pinkie Pie suddenly. “That was after the time we tried to make waffles in the bounce house!”

• • •

The ponies finished their meals hurriedly, breakfast largely forgotten after learning that Twilight’s first match had been posted. They left some bits on the table and headed back toward the square near the gates, where the schedules were posted.

Pinkie Pie bounced excitedly down the stone sidewalk. “Twilight, I knew it! I knew you did great! And you did great!”

Above her, Fluttershy fluttered along, beaming. “This is so exciting! Do you know anything about your opponent?”

Twilight Sparkle shook her head as she hurried along, as well. “I don’t know who this ‘Shahnaz’ is, but it sounds like a ghul’s name. Other than that, I have no idea. Anyway, I’m trying to keep my hooves on the ground. My opponent could be just as good a magician as I am.”

With a snort, Applejack looked over her shoulder at her friend. “Twi, you ain’t had your hooves on the ground since we left the cafe.”

Twilight was flying along, about a foot above the ground, her butterfly wings beating furiously. She smiled awkwardly.

“Well, okay. Maybe I am a little excited.”

• • •

About two hours later, Twilight found herself standing once again on the grass of the competition field. Since the previous day, the enormous field had been partitioned into a number of smaller fields with covered bleachers on either side. The chalk rows had been swept away, replaced with a simple line across the center, dividing the rectangular field into two squarish halves. Twilight knew that in the adjacent fields, other wizards were getting ready to compete as well, but she was more concerned with what was happening on this field.

Twilight stood down at the far end of one half of the field, and she could see to her right a private box down in front, toward the middle. Princess Luna and her friends were there, all of whom—Luna included—were already cheering for her. Pinkie had gotten a giant foam hand from somewhere and was waving it wildly. Twilight smiled gratefully and waved back.

At the other end of the field, her opponent. Shahnaz was a ghul, about Twilight’s age, with striking and well-tended brown and black fur. He wore a tasteful purple vest and a large ruby pendant around his neck. While Twilight was nervously looking for her friends and assessing her opponent, Shahnaz sat cross-legged on the ground, eyes closed, a large number of gems of various colors and sizes arranged around him. Twilight could see some sort of arcane significance in the gems, but she could not immediately discern their purpose.

A hush fell over the crowd as, directly between the two competitors, a burst of green energy flashed and faded, leaving behind the familiar green-and-red form of Najstariot. She smiled winningly at the crowds and bowed her head gracefully in the direction of Princess Luna, who returned the gesture, stiffly and formally.

“Good morning, and welcome to the first round of duels in the young adult brackets!” The shapeshifted dragon’s voice boomed, much like the Royal Canterlot Voice that Luna had—largely—broken herself of the habit of using. “On this field, we have two highly placed competitors! To my left, Shahnaz, recently graduated from Ifrit Academy and widely considered to be the most promising young wizard in his class. He placed very well in yesterday’s trials and we expect great things from him here and in the future.” She

turned and faced the young ghul, who had risen to his feet and stood with his paws clasped behind his back. “We are honored by your presence, sir.”

The young ghul bowed, and replied, though Twilight couldn’t hear what he said. A polite round of applause and cheers went through the crowd, with a small contingent of ghuls in the boxes at the far end of the bleachers to Twilight’s left cheering a bit more vigorously. Twilight clapped her hooves politely.

“To my right,” Najstariot turned again, this time facing Twilight. “Twilight Sparkle, student to Princess Celestia herself, bearer of the Element of Magic, recent hero and defender of Equestria. She placed first in yesterday’s trials for her bracket.” Her eyes narrowed and she smiled thinly as she stared directly at Twilight. “We will be watching you closely as well, Twilight Sparkle.”

The ad hoc stadium exploded in cheering and applause, including, causing Twilight to flush with embarrassment, from her opponent. Roars of approval, applause, stomping, various cheers, and, Twilight noted with a blush, even a voice yelling “Marry me!” She wished she could crawl under a rock and hide.

Najstariot walked to the right, stopping to the side in front of Luna’s private box. “Competitors!” she roared. “Come to the center!”

Shahnaz stepped from his circle of stones and walked toward the center line, and Twilight did the same, her ear twitching.

The ghul spoke first. “Good morning, Twilight Sparkle,” he said. His voice was unlike Al-Dhi’b’s, smooth, with an educated Trottingham accent and just a faint, exotic trace of Ghulic underneath. “I am honored to be competing with the savior of the world.” He extended a paw.

Twilight swallowed and raised a hoof, timidly. “Um... Good morning. Nice to meet you, too, but I’m really not...”

Shahnaz smiled, carefully keeping his pointy, canine teeth covered. “You are too modest. The rumors don’t do you or the service you and your friends have done for us all justice. I hope to learn much from you today.”

Shaking his paw, awkwardly, Twilight tried and failed to smile in a way that didn’t look like a rictus. “I... I... Good luck to you too,” she stammered.

The two opponents returned to the opposite sides of the field, and Najstariot stepped back to the center, this time facing the other bleachers. "Competition will begin on my mark. Competitors may use any spells at their disposal, but may not physically injure their opponent. The objective is to exhaust your opponent; when a competitor yields or can no longer cast, their opponent shall be declared the victor. If either competitor should refuse to compete, they shall be considered to be exhausted. If either competitor should cross the center line into their opponent's territory, they will forfeit the match. In addition," the dragon queen said, pointedly turning to face Twilight. "If I feel either competitor is not using their full ability, I reserve the right to declare the match forfeit."

What did she mean by that, Twilight wondered? And why was Najstariot looking at her? She was certainly going to compete to her full ability, but she had been doing that since the beginning...

The dragon queen stepped back from the center of the field, and her booming voice called out, "Begin!"

Time seemed to slow for Twilight as, from across the field, beams of blue energy lanced from a pair of large sapphires in the circle around Shahnaz. An instinct that Twilight didn't even know she had caused her to fly straight up, away from the beams. She could feel them pass by, sweeping slowly up after her, not physically cold but enervating even at a distance. Spells to simply drain Twilight's energy, they would end the match before it had even begun.

Twilight retaliated, swooping up, then around toward the center line of the field in a graceful arc, her horn glowing purple as she approached. One of the sapphires glowed a matching purple and spun, its beam swinging around toward Shahnaz. The beams died as the ghul dropped the spell. Twilight dropped to the ground on all four hooves, using her telekinesis to wrestle the gem around, keeping Shahnaz from reestablishing his spell.

Instead of fighting Twilight's telekinesis, however, the gem at Shahnaz's throat glowed and a large ruby next to him thrummed with energy. Twilight could feel the ground rumble at her feet. She flew up, dropping the sapphire, just as a huge root tore its way free from the ground, snapping up in an attempt to entangle Twilight. The root thrashed around, trying to wrap around the flying unicorn's feet.

Swooping away, Twilight came in on another arc, lowering her horn and flying directly at the thick root. She tore across the root with her horn and swept down to the ground as the root, afflicted with Twilight's powerful banishment, fell heavily to earth.

Shahnaz's gems began glowing in quick succession. A telekinetic push here, a small, localized earthquake there, even an increase in gravity that kept Twilight from flying away. The purple unicorn batted each spell away, dispelling them and shielding herself. Ultimately, none of Shahnaz's spells had managed to even rustle her mane.

Twilight panted, swallowing hard after dispelling the gravity increase, and then she understood the trap she had wandered into. Shahnaz wasn't trying to hurt her, that was against the rules. Other than the Drain spell, his spells, on their own, would shake her up but not much worse. However, while he was using simple earth magic that he could cast easily, Twilight was using Shield spells and Banishments, and those were draining. She was flying around, too, to evade his ground attacks, and that was just as tiring. He was letting her exhaust herself.

Twilight relaxed as the large ruby thrummed once again, and this time a stone hand reached from the ground and grabbed her. The hand shook her unnervingly, and Twilight carefully kept calm instead of dispelling the hand in a panic. Instead, she shakily gathered her thoughts, and cast something she knew very well and could cast easily at the hand itself: a Come-To-Life spell.

The hand suddenly opened, dropping Twilight, and she grinned as she shook the dust from her mane. Her hypothesis had been correct: the spell that Shahnaz was using through the ruby focus was a form of object enchantment, and most object enchantments didn't work on things that were already living, animated things, like, for example, the subject of a Come-To-Life spell. The giant stone hand tore itself free from the ground, landing on its fingers as if it were some sort of giant spider, and began scuttling over toward Shahnaz.

In a panic, the ghul quickly reorganized a few gems and began channeling energy through them. A powerful gust of wind blew the gems away from him before he was able to ignite them. Shahnaz bolted away from the spot he had been sitting as the giant hand-thing stomped up to him, and the ghul began running away from it. The gem on his neck started to glow as he began to cast what Twilight recognized as a Banishment spell. She was confused by this, much as she had been at the trials the previous day; why did other magicians seem to find banishing so difficult?

Shahnaz succeeded in his Banishment spell, and, with a sound like a wall collapsing, the stone hand dissolved into rubble. The ghul, breathing heavily, loped back to his gems, his pendant glowing as the gems rearranged themselves back into a circle. Twilight reached out with her telekinesis but was rebuffed, the gems ringing in a crystal tone as she failed

to get her hold on any of them. She flew back, quickly, putting as much room as possible between her and Shahnaz.

All of a sudden, the ground beneath Twilight exploded with life, the grass beneath her growing almost instantly into a morass of long grass stalks, much taller than her, a living picket. She swooped up and forward to the front edge of her side of the field as the enervating blue beams came after her again.

A blue door, with frame, suddenly appeared in front of Shahnaz and his gems, blocking his sight of Twilight and the beams of the blue gems. Twilight laughed; she had used the silly door-summoning spell mostly to make a point when Spike was obstinately insisting she do something, but she'd never thought it had any practical use before. There was a beat, then the door opened from the "inside" and the beams traced back out.

It was too late. The beams were still searching where Twilight had been, not where she was. In the short moment the door had been shut, the unicorn had flown up and to the side, near the bleachers, and prepared a spell. A meandering row of musical notes swept out from Twilight's horn and right through the open door. Shahnaz was unprepared for this; the magical music seeped easily in through his ears and into his mind. He yawned and sat back on his rump, fighting unsuccessfully to stay awake. After a wavering moment, he lay down with a loud snore, the blue beams dying away and the grass on Twilight's side of the field returning to normal. Twilight settled back down to the ground.

Najstariot looked over the field with an unreadable expression, then walked out to the center. "Well done," she said to the unicorn, in a soft, neutral voice. She turned to face the crowd and announced, like a crack of thunder, "The match is over, and Twilight Sparkle is the victor!"

The applause and cheering raged as Twilight Sparkle left the field with her opponent, Shahnaz, the ghul geomancer, still asleep in his circle of gems. She walked around the bleachers to meet her friends and Princess Luna, who were among the first to leave their seats, exiting the princess' private box to the rear.

Twilight smiled brightly, her face flushed and mane still somewhat disheveled as her friends all rushed to meet her. She found herself surrounded by ponies, with a baby dragon hugging around her neck tightly.

“Yeah, Twilight, that was awesome!” Spike crowed, his short arms not quite reaching all the way around his older friend. “I mean, that was amazing! You just shoved him around the whole time, he never had a chance!”

“That was sweet!” agreed Rainbow Dash exuberantly. A chorus of similar sentiments was raised by her friends; even Fluttershy only stopped jumping up and down and screaming when she noticed everypony looking at her.

Beaming, Twilight used her magic to gently flip Spike up onto her back. “Thanks, everypony!” she said, smiling ear to ear. “It wasn't as easy as you all make it sound but I think I handled it pretty well.”

Princess Luna ruffled her wings dramatically, and she, too, smiled. “‘Pretty well’, indeed, Twilight Sparkle! You are doing my sister and I quite proud with your masterful performance these two days. I daresay that the age-group medal is already all but yours.”

If possible, Twilight smiled even wider at Luna's words. “Thank you, princess! I still have to win two more matches for that, and...” She trailed off.

Everyone looked at her expectantly. “Yes, and what?” Rarity finally asked. “Out with it, dear!”

“And I feel very good about my chances!” Twilight finally said, with an excited squeak at the end for good measure.

Another chorus of cheers from the group of friends and a loud “Huzzah!” from Luna drew curious looks as the other spectators began to file out. Twilight could see ponies and other beings pointing at her and hear more whispering, along with not infrequent cheers from total strangers, but, at least for the moment, she was not concerned with what anyone was saying.

Applejack looked at the beaming unicorn pony. “So, Twi, you got some time before you find out who your next match is with. Anything you wanna do between now and then?”

“Well,” Twilight said, as she began to feel the exertion of the match catch up with her. “I am kind of thirsty.”

Luna’s horn glowed brightly and a purple mist began to well up. “Let us go have a civilized cup of tea, then, away from here!” And between one blink and the next, the group was gone.

• • •

Luna’s quarters, around the rear of Canterlot’s throne room, were well-appointed with benches, cushions, rugs and any number of other comforts for the princess to receive guests. When the purple mist that had swept the group from the competition grounds back to the castle faded, the group found themselves already set on relaxing, overstuffed cushions. Luna appeared on her bed, her legs folded up underneath her, and with a small effort of magic, a set of teacups and saucers appeared on trays for each of the ponies.

“I trust this will be all to your liking,” the princess of the night said, daintily levitating her cup before her. “It is a chamomile and spearmint blend my sister enjoys. I have found it quite relaxing and refreshing.”

Twilight blinked, her brain still catching up with being teleported so suddenly, but the smell of the hot tea snapped her back to reality. “Oh, thank you, princess!” she responded, before levitating her own cup and taking a sip. It was delicious, and relaxing and refreshing, as promised. Twilight could already feel the strain of the match melting away.

“It’s a very nice blend,” came Fluttershy’s gentle voice, after the yellow pegasus took a sip herself. “Where do you get your chamomile? It seems more fragrant than the flowers that grow near Ponyville.”

Luna took another sip before setting her cup down on the saucer. “I believe my sister’s chef has her chamomile flowers imported from Trottingham. It is a different variety than that which grows near Canterlot and Ponyville.” She sighed. “It is wonderful, but I do miss the chamomile that grew near the old castle. It was a different plant and I do not believe it exists anymore.” She looked wistful for a moment, then shrugged her wings. “No matter. Twilight Sparkle, I must confess, I have an ulterior motive for bringing you here.”

Curious and apprehensive looks were the order of the day, except from Pinkie Pie, who was preoccupied with pouring an entire bag of sugar into her tea. Rainbow Dash, who had been eyeing her teacup suspiciously, spoke up. “Does this have anything to do with that rumor I’ve been hearing about you and Twilight? Cause there’s nothing wrong with that, but...”

“Rainbow!” Twilight snapped.

Luna looked between the two ponies in confusion. “What rumor are you referring to?”

A slight red tinge arose beneath Rainbow Dash’s cheeks. “Well, y’know, the one where you’re—”

Rarity cleared her throat noisily, mercifully cutting Rainbow Dash off. “Perhaps, Rainbow Dash, we should let the princess speak in her own time? Hmm? Hmm?” She punctuated the second ‘hmm’ with a glare that put Fluttershy’s stare to shame.

This time, anyway, no one could accuse Rainbow of being slow on the uptake. “Ohhh... Yeah. Sorry. Go ahead, princess.”

Luna ruffled her wings and shook her head. “I am afraid, Twilight Sparkle, that I have done you a grave disservice in sponsoring you for this tournament.”

Curiosity turned to confusion and worry on Twilight’s part. “What do you mean?”

Luna sighed again, settling into her bed, tea forgotten. “I am sure by now you have noticed the dragon queen’s interest in you.”

Twilight nodded. “I don’t think she likes me very much.”

“It is not your fault, and it is not you she dislikes. Not truly, at any rate.” Luna started to look faraway as she spoke, and an icy tone entered her voice. Spike shivered and walked over to sit next to Twilight. “We have never gotten on with our royal cousin, the queen of Ormsreich. The Lady of Air and Fire had little use for the cold and darkness we brought each night, and believed,” she said and closed her eyes, sadly, “that we were planning to usurp our sister’s throne. She was among the first to warn our sister of our betrayal, some years before we styled ourself Nightmare Moon, but our royal cousin’s warnings were ignored until it was too late.”

Luna opened her eyes, lowering her head. “You may have returned me to myself, Twilight Sparkle, but Najstariot does not trust me or believe that I have changed. She

could not gainsay my sponsorship of you, but she was suspicious even before your invitation was sent, and after your display of power at the trials, I believe she thinks that you are not competing fairly.”

Twilight blinked and opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off by Applejack throwing her hat to the floor, angrily. “Consarn it!” she yelled. “Y’all were on the outs a thousand years ago and so she accuses my friend o’ cheatin’?! Just who does she think she is?!”

“The queen of all dragons, dear Applejack,” Luna replied, gently.

“I don’t care if she’s Tirek in a dragon costume!” the infuriated farm pony retorted. “Can’t nopony accuse one o’ my friends o’ cheatin’ and get away with it!”

Eyes suddenly glowing fiercely, Princess Luna leaned up, resting her weight on her front knees, and her voice went cold once again. “We would ask that you not use that name within these walls again. We know it was nothing more than a slip of the tongue and so we shall overlook it, this time.”

Applejack blanched, and sat back down on her cushion, all of the wind suddenly gone from her sails. “Um... I’m powerful sorry, princess. I didn’t know there was somethin’ wrong with, uh, that name.”

“He was a vile creature,” Luna said, venom dripping from her words. “Evil and vicious. After a thousand years, how is it that that thing is still remembered?!” The princess glared at Applejack, the glow in Luna’s eyes cowing her even further. The other ponies shrank back.

Twilight wracked her brain in confusion during the ensuing pregnant pause. Wasn’t Tirek just an old pony tale? Parents would tell foals to eat their alfalfa or Tirek would steal them away to his cavern. Carrot Top had even dressed up as him for Nightmare Night. Was he real? Did Luna know him?

“Hey, I’m sure Applejack didn’t mean anything by it,” Rainbow Dash spoke up, interrupting Twilight’s train of thought. “I mean, isn’t T—” She stopped as Luna turned to look at her through narrowed eyes.

“Rainbow, it’s okay,” Twilight said, hurriedly. “AJ, I’m not cheating, so I have nothing to worry about. Anyway,” she continued, archly. “Didn’t you accuse Rainbow Dash of cheating during the Running of the Leaves? Weren’t you both cheating?”

“Hey, yeah, that’s right!” Rainbow Dash looked at Applejack, pointedly.

Applejack mumbled something into her hat and lapsed silent.

The glow in Luna's eyes faded and she settled back down on her bed, but she was clearly shaken. "I hope that you are right, Twilight Sparkle," she said slowly, bringing her attention back to matters of the present. "But did you not think that it was unusual to have one of the tournament organizers overseeing one of the first matches in the youngest age bracket of the competition? There were nearly twenty other matches under way at the same time. Do you think the dragon queen personally oversaw each?"

Twilight looked up at Luna, momentarily at a loss for words.

"She has 'offered' to oversee each of your matches." Luna looked back at Twilight pointedly. "She intends to monitor you for the entire tournament. My sister informs me that the ghul king has, in his own turn, 'offered' you some respite from Najstariot's gaze, on the pretext that any match you should have with a dragon should be proctored by a neutral party."

Rarity spoke up, standing up from her cushion. "Princess, if I may, but this is outrageous! Twilight is our friend, not a token to be passed around for political reasons!"

Luna looked back, evenly. "She is a hero, dear Rarity, as are all of you. It has ever been the fate of heroes to be used as pawns in political games. Unfortunately, my sister and I have little power to prevent it in this case without damaging relations with the dragons. Again," she turned back to Twilight, "I apologize for my error in dragging you into the midst of this."

Twilight sat up straight, with a smile. "No apologies necessary, princess! Whatever the dragon queen thinks of me, I'll do my best for the rest of the tournament. I won't let her trip me up!"

A matching smile was Luna's response. "Then there is nothing more to worry about! Now, may I offer to warm anypony's cup?"

• • •

A half hour of tea and small talk later, the group of eight found themselves materializing at the tournament grounds again. The grounds had once again been rearranged; a number of unicorn and pegasus ponies were just hauling away the last of the excess seating, leaving only two of the small arenas. Twilight and Luna walked toward a posted sign near the bleachers in the center labelled "Next Matches" in an unnecessarily elaborate script. The rest of the group followed closely, warding off curious passers-by.

The hand-written list detailed the remaining matches in the young adult bracket. It was short: only eight of the young adult competitors from the previous day's trial had gone on to the duels, and so there were only two matches listed. To the right, the overwrought sign declared, Trixie would be facing somepony named Harah. So, Trixie had made it to the duels and won her first. Twilight remembered this potentially important information with only a slight grimace. To the left, the sign read, Twilight Sparkle would be facing Gianna. Why did she know that name?

"Hey, Twilight, isn't that the gryphon from the other day?" Spike said brightly, having wandered over to read the sign. "I didn't know she was competing."

"Oh, of course! Thank you, Spike!" Twilight replied. She reached over and ruffled his dermal plates. "What would I do without you?"

With a grin and a shrug, Spike said, "I dunno. Probably forget stuff and get lost all the time."

Luna looked over at her friend, mildly. "You have met this pony?"

Twilight grinned and stuck out her tongue at Spike before turning to Luna. "She's not a pony, she's a gryphon. We all ran into her on the road outside Canterlot just after we arrived from Ponyville on Friday. She seemed very nice and gave me a heads-up on some of the rumors going around about me."

Luna stretched her wings broadly. "What rumors would those be? I have heard tell of many."

"Well," Twilight began. "What she told me was that everypony thought I was some kind of alicorn sorceress from Manehattan, and that some ponies were even saying I was actually a princess like you and Princess Celestia..."

A loud laugh came from Luna, while Spike muffled a smaller one. "I do not doubt that these things are being said! A pony of worth attracts these sorts of exaggerations."

Twilight looked around uncomfortably. There was once again a growing crowd of ponies clustering near Twilight and Luna, whispering back and forth. She shook her head in confusion, and spoke, maybe a bit louder than necessary. "I don't understand. Why don't ponies just find out the facts instead of making up wild stories?"

“I am afraid I do not know, Twilight Sparkle,” was Luna’s apologetic reply. “I, myself, have been the subject of such tales. There always seems to be an urge to portray anypony that carries great responsibility and that one has great expectations of as larger than life.”

The air was split by a loud boom, and a handful of helium balloons and streamers suddenly flew past Luna, Twilight and Spike. The trio turned just in time for another burst from Pinkie Pie’s inexplicable Party Cannon; the pink pony had already set up an ad hoc dance floor, blasted decorations across the grass near Twilight’s friends, and was in the process of setting up her turntable.

“Alright, everypony... Let’s party!” Pinkie shrieked as the music started up, and she began leading a growing, snaking conga line near the turntable. First Twilight’s other friends, and then nearby ponies began joining in the sudden party.

Twilight gaped, and then scowled. “Pinkie, what are you doing?!”

From the head of the conga line, Pinkie winked at Twilight, and then went back to dancing. Twilight began to growl, and then looked around again.

The growing knot of rubbernecking ponies near her and Luna had vanished, some into Pinkie’s conga line, others joining the party in small groups, still others just staring in awe and confusion. The growing crowd was dancing, bouncing balloons, laughing and generally enjoying themselves. At least temporarily, the awe over Twilight had been forgotten, thank to Pinkie and her artillery piece.

With a small smile, Luna leaned over to Twilight. “The Element of Laughter, as I recall?”

Twilight giggled. “Yes.”

“You should find your place in the arena, I think. Pinkie Pie’s distraction will not serve to keep them occupied for very long, given that the matches are scheduled to start a short time from now.”

Spike leapt up to wrap his arms around Twilight’s neck, again. “Good luck, Twilight!”

“Thanks, Spike.” Twilight let the small dragon down to the ground, and turned toward the arena, head and wings held high.

• • •

“To my left, Gianna!” The dragon queen stood at the center line of the arena, between unicorn and gryphon, her stentorian voice easily drowning out the roar of the excited crowd stomping and cheering in the bleachers. “Daughter of chieftain Gamall of the Mount Grundle aerie and widely considered to be the finest gryphon summoner of her generation! She acquitted herself admirably in the trials and her first match this morning was a decisive victory. Good luck to you, Gianna!” Najstariot then made a horrible, grating shriek and bowed her head toward Gianna, and was answered with a matching shriek from the gryphon.

Najstariot turned her head toward Twilight. “To my right, Twilight Sparkle! Bearer of the Element of Magic, she recently saved Equestria and the world from the depredations of the chaos spirit Discord! She placed first in the trials, and her first match today was an inspiring example of quick thinking and versatility under pressure! Good luck to you, Twilight Sparkle!” She bowed her head toward Twilight with a neutral expression, and Twilight returned the gesture, silently grateful for the lack of a gryphon shout directed at her.

“Competitors, to the center!”

Twilight and Gianna approached each other, both smiling broadly.

“Nice to see you again, Twilight.” Gianna began, in her gruff voice. “Didn’t really expect to make it this far!”

Twilight giggled and offered a hoof. “I know what you mean. I didn’t realize you were actually in the tournament, but I think I saw your statue during the trial the other day!”

Taking the much smaller unicorn’s hoof in talon, Gianna gently shook with a chuckle. “You saw that, huh? At least someone remembers it, everyone else has just been talking about the amazing stunts you and Trixie pulled.”

Setting her hooves back on the ground, Twilight looked away slightly in embarrassment. “Well, I am pretty proud of the gem-seeking bean.”

“That was so good!” Gianna gushed. “I wish I’d come up with something like that!”

An impatient voice shook the arena. “Competitors!”

“I think that’s us,” Gianna said, raising a talon in a lazy salute, before she turned and began walking back to her end of the field. “Good luck!”

“You too!” Twilight called out. Her horn glowed, and in a burst of magic she was at her own end of the field.

“Begin!”

Here goes nothing, Twilight thought, as a purple glow fading to a frigid blue formed around her horn.

Shahnaz’s starting strategy had been sensible and effective; it had very nearly put Twilight out within seconds of beginning their match, and would have been even more effective if he had been using fairly instantaneous unicorn magic. A similar glow to that surrounding Twilight’s horn engulfed Gianna, and she stumbled for a moment before a panicked screech raised a roaring vortex of fire around her, breaking Twilight’s line of sight.

It didn’t matter. The Drain spell had hit, if only for a moment, and the stolen energy was like lightning through Twilight’s horn. Ha! This was incredible! She spiraled into the air rapidly, wings buzzing like an insect. This must be what Rainbow Dash felt like all the time! A rainbow arced from Twilight’s horn as she rocketed higher and higher, laughing madly. She reached the height of her climb, and an unsteady arc of blazing purple energy lanced from her horn, striking the edge of the huge mass of clouds that hung heavily over Canterlot and the competition grounds. One of the small clouds opened as if it were a balloon that had been popped. It emptied a short but torrential downpour over the makeshift stadium, flooding Gianna’s vortex.

Twilight was unstoppable! She laughed again, launching herself toward the ground. Maybe she could do a Sonic Rainboom! That would certainly surprise everyone! Her sudden rainstorm had worked, flooding the field and turning the grass to mud, as well as drowning Gianna’s fire. The gryphon was battered from the side as Twilight struck at her with telekinetic “attacks”, slaps, really. She didn’t want to hurt her! It was against the rules, and anyway, she liked the gryphon, even if she was screaming at her! She hoped they could be friends! Great friends! Gianna could move to Ponyville and Twilight could introduce her to everyone! Maybe she could work in Clouds—

Twilight’s train of thought was disrupted as she was grabbed and ponyhandled by something. It was invisible, insubstantial, but definitely there. She could feel strong hands grabbing at her, legs battering her wings, trying to flip her over in midair. It was like a giant, invisible Spike trying to hug her! How fun! She laughed again, and her horn blazed. There was the sound of rushing wind as whatever was grabbing at her was torn

apart by the banishment. Ha! Sorry, invisible Spike! Now, there was something important...

The ground was wet and cold as Twilight landed heavily, on her side. The icy mud shocked her back to her senses, the last of the drained energy bleeding away into the wet ground. Twilight staggered to her hooves, her muscles sore from exerting herself so suddenly and excessively under the influence of the stolen energy. She winced at a piercing squawk from Gianna. A wave of mud bore down on Twilight, which she repelled with her telekinesis. She tried to look around the splash, to see where Gianna was, but the mud kept with her and she kept having to push it back.

Wait, what kind of mud follows you?

The “splash” of mud looked at Twilight through the aura of her telekinesis with dull, brown eyes. It began thrashing, throwing small globs of mud everywhere. Twilight was already filthy from her landing, her entire left side covered in mud and drenched, and the mud monster was making sure the right matched. Twilight flung the creature away, back toward Gianna’s side of the arena.

Alright, stay on the offensive, Twilight, she thought to herself. She splashed a wave of mud toward Gianna by cutting her telekinesis across the ground like a huge knife. A shriek from the gryphon, and the mud was pushed back, leaving the wave to splash harmlessly around her. With a grin, Twilight powered her horn again, and there was a similar glow from the ground on Gianna’s side of the arena, around the gryphon herself. The muddy ground emitted painful cracking noises as Twilight forcibly expelled the water from the mud, leaving only dry dirt. Dry dirt with three of the gryphon’s mismatched extremities stuck in it.

Gianna shrieked in frustration and yanked at her trapped talon and paws painfully, shrieking stinging telekinetic strikes at Twilight. The unicorn jumped back, not wanting to risk going airborne while Gianna was lashing at her like that, and raised her Drain spell again. The gryphon began to glow, and then grinned, before making a noise that sounded like an eagle fighting with Opalescence.

Twilight staggered and retched, her spell dropping as she fell heavily onto her cannons, in the mud. Whatever she had absorbed, it wasn’t Gianna’s energy. It was enervating. Sour. Bad. Wrong in a way that Twilight could only compare to Discord’s influence. She wanted to throw up this horrible thing she’d just swallowed. Twilight blinked, blearily, and could clearly see a black miasma surrounding Gianna. A shield? What kind of shield

was this? The unicorn stumbled trying to get to her feet, and was knocked back to her knees by another telekinetic shriek.

There was a loud crunching sound and a pained squawk from Gianna's side of the arena, and the gryphon rose into the air, lumps of dirt falling from her freed talon. She hung in the air, screaming and shrieking, building some big spell. The horrible sounds jarred Twilight, grated against her in ways she didn't know sound could. She was so tired. She just wanted this to be over. Maybe she could apologize to Gianna for unintentionally hurting her feet, and then they could all go to Pony Joe's and laugh about it over a doughnut.

The abused earth began to split, and a shocked hush fell over the crowd. Twilight blinked again, staggering to her feet, her wings uselessly twitching as the battered pony tried to see what was so impressive.

She felt like vomiting again. There were ponies tearing themselves from the ground, or things that used to be ponies. Bundles of dry, dusty bones, perhaps ten or so, buried for Celestia only knew how long. Earth ponies, unicorns, even a pegasus missing the bones of its left wing. Angry red light burned in the sockets of their discolored skulls as they rose to Gianna's command, the gryphon still screaming in her native tongue.

The energy in the air felt the same as the bad magic Twilight had absorbed. That's what it was. Gianna had surrounded herself with... Twilight staggered to her hooves, furiously, and lashed at Gianna with a strike that took the distracted gryphon like a slap across her face. The gryphon stopped shrieking and the skeletons started advancing. The summoner grinned at Twilight cockily, tilting her front talons in the air as if she were a marionetteer.

Think, Twilight! Thinkthinkthinkthink! A Come-To-Life spell was not going to help, since that was effectively what Gianna had cast, just a very... sick one. She could banish them all but she was already winded and drained from her second attempt at Draining Gianna, and most likely she'd collapse when she was done. Twilight was at a loss as the skeletons advanced. She had no experience with the dead. Like most ponies, she had generally hoped never to have to deal with them. Some ponies in the past had occasionally used Memory spells to "channel" spirits of loved ones, but that was... not really done anymore, and hadn't been for centuries.

Memory spell. A Memory spell! That was it! Twilight hoped she was right as she advanced to the edge of her side of the arena, splashing through the mud and bracing her

hooves, her horn glowing brightly. If this worked, she could banish all ten of them without breaking any more of a sweat.

The first skeleton reached her, a large earth pony with a partially caved-in ribcage. Twilight jabbed with her glowing horn, connecting with the skeleton's skull. The skeleton collapsed to the ground, inert, and Gianna squawked in surprise, shaking her head as if she'd been struck. She swept her talons around in a great circle, and the skeletons moved, attempting to surround Twilight.

Yes! That worked! The skeletons had been dead for so long that they weren't really "ponies" anymore. Gianna hadn't really raised the dead, just put some animating magic into what amounted to old rocks. Twilight's Memory spell had "reminded" the skeleton that it was part of the ground, and it simply gave up, letting the Come-To-Life spell dissipate on its own, without needing to banish it at all. Twilight leapt back again, fluttering her tired wings to give her extra lift, and then rushed at the skeletons as they attempted to surround her.

The unicorn's glowing horn tore through each skeleton, and Twilight could feel little bursts of energy recoiling at Gianna as each skeleton in turn rejected her control and collapsed. The gryphon withstood four painful shocks before she dropped her spell, letting the rest of the skeletons collapse where they were. She flew back, shrieking in frustration and panting.

Twilight bared her teeth and her horn started to glow. Her eyes were unevenly dilated and flitted furtively at beings around the arena. Gianna, who had desecrated the remains of the ponies. Najstariot, the dragon queen, who simply stood there and allowed this travesty to go on. Luna, who had dragged her into this tournament. She turned to look at her opponent again, ears twitching spastically.

Gianna flew forward, slowly, trying to figure out what Twilight Sparkle was doing. She attempted to shriek another telekinetic attack to disrupt whatever big spell the unicorn was apparently attempting to cast. Her shriek turned into a surprised hiccuping sound as a huge gust of wind caught her wings from behind, bowling her over in midair and sending her flailing and sliding roughly across the mud. She quickly climbed to her feet... And saw Twilight standing next to her, looking up at the mud-covered gryphon.

Twilight spoke up, smugly, from her position in the mud on her side of the arena, where Gianna had landed. "And I think you'll find that I just won the match."

Indeed, a moment later, a disbelieving Najstariot bellowed, "The match is over! Twilight Sparkle wins by territory default!" Cheers erupted from the crowd.

Gianna tried to laugh, but it came out more of a disappointed cough. "I guess you did." She smiled lopsidedly. "You're as good as everyone says. It was fun."

Twilight couldn't believe how cavalier Gianna was being. The ground was littered with old bones, many damaged and broken, evidence of the gryphon summoner's crimes. There were even a few small bone chips clinging to the mud in Twilight's mane. "Fun? Fun? You desecrated all of these remains and played these poor, pathetic ponies as puppets, and you call that fun?! Even... Even Discord didn't stoop to anything like this!"

Gianna looked like she'd been slapped, and took a few steps back, looking over at Najstariot helplessly. The dragon queen merely watched with a somewhat curious expression. "Jeez, Twilight, what's your problem?" She sounded hurt by Twilight's attack. "I mean, I thought I was being respectful!"

Confusion replaced some of the anger on Twilight's face. Not all, not even most, but some. "Respectful? How is digging up the dead respectful?!"

"I asked your ancestors to borrow their strength!"

It was Twilight's turn to look as if she'd been slapped, and she sat down heavily, in the mud. "Asked my ancestors...?"

"It's a sign of great respect among gryphons! We'd only ever raise our opponent's ancestors if we thought they were really strong!" The large gryphon blinked down at Twilight. "You didn't know?"

Twilight looked around in mute shock at the bones littering the destroyed ground. Some of them were broken where she'd crushed them underhoof, others bore marks from her horn. "No, I didn't."

"Wow. I'm sorry, I guess," the gryphon said, her voice even scratchier than usual. "I guess I thought you knew..." she said, trailing off for a moment. "I dunno, everything."

"I'm sorry, I have to leave," Twilight said, softly. The filthy pony turned, running away from the arena, back toward Canterlot.

The barracks in the ground level of Canterlot Castle hadn't seen their intended use in centuries, instead being intermittently pressed into service as guest quarters. The old shared shower facilities had been updated to a more comfortable standard, with raised stone platforms equipped with wash tubs and shower fixtures set in place of the open-head showers the room had originally been equipped with. A trail of muddy hoof prints led from the wooden doorway to one of those wash tubs and the downcast pony sitting in it.

Twilight sat in the warm, increasingly cloudy water, glumly scrubbing herself with a large dandy brush. The bottom of the wash basin was already strewn with bits of crushed grass, grit and a few small bone fragments. Twilight was listlessly pushing the last of these around with her hoof, watching ancient flecks of dirt and mud come away in the water.

Gianna did this to impress and flatter me, Twilight thought. She looked at a coin-sized fragment, the largest that had been caught in her mane. Even through the murk, Twilight could make out the ridged, porous surface. This used to be somepony, and Gianna turned it into a puppet, and all for Twilight's benefit.

Gianna wasn't the only who was treating Twilight as if she were something special. Shahnaz had acted like he was taking lessons from her. Al-Dhi'b wanted her, personally, to keep the memory of his people alive. Najstariot seemed to think she was somehow a threat. Everywhere she went, there were ponies watching her, talking about her. Even Princess Luna had thought she was strong enough to take part in this competition in the first place. It was as if everypony had gone crazy, except for her friends. In the end, however, Twilight had run away from everyone, including them.

Twilight stood, grey water swirling around her knees, and she stepped out of the washtub. A quick telekinetic tug and the stopper came loose, sending the dirty water swirling down the retrofitted drain. Twilight set the stopper down on the raised stone floor, next to the tub. The water drained quickly, leaving only the grit and sediment that had settled out. A moment later, the bone fragments levitated out of the drained tub and set down next to the stopper. With another small effort of telekinesis, Twilight turned the showerhead back on. She began mechanically cleaning the bottom of the basin with the dandy brush, sending the sediment left behind in the tub down after the grey water.

She restored the stopper once the tub was clean and carefully stepped back up into the tub, letting the shower run to refill. Her third bath, and finally the water wasn't

immediately turning into mud. She settled down into the rising water, wings twitching under the shower, her mane and tail floating lazily on the surface. She resumed scrubbing herself.

Many minutes later, Twilight started as an unexpected knock came at the wooden door at the far end of the washroom. “Um, hello?” she said, with a bit of trepidation.

The voice through the door was muffled, but clear. “Twilight, may I come in?”

Twilight smiled wanly at the familiar and welcome voice. “Oh, princess! Yes, please, come in.”

The door creaked open and Princess Celestia stepped into long washroom, ducking slightly to get her horn in under the door frame. She made her way over to Twilight’s tub, smiling. “You did extraordinarily well in today’s matches, Twilight. You should be very proud.”

Twilight sighed. “Thank you, princess,” she said, listlessly. “I don’t feel proud, just a bit sick. Is it true about gryphons and—” Twilight paused. “Dead things?”

“You mean, is it true that they raise the dead as a sign of respect?”

Sinking a bit deeper into the water, Twilight nodded.

“It is,” Celestia said, kindly. “It’s a very old tradition with gryphons. There haven’t been any real wars between the aeries in centuries, but when they hold their war games it’s considered a serious insult if the summoners on the attacking side don’t raise skeletons to fight. I once mediated a dispute between two of the gryphon kings over exactly that.”

Twilight splashed water onto her back with her wings. “I should apologize to Gianna for getting so upset with her.”

“I wouldn’t worry, Twilight.” Celestia smiled. “If I had to guess, she’s probably asking her teacher why you were so upset and having pony customs explained to her.” Her smile turning to a conspiratorial smirk, Princess Celestia leaned down. “But that’s not really what you wanted to ask, is it?”

Twilight fidgeted in the cooling water, then sighed again. “Princess, there’s history between your sister and the dragon queen, isn’t there?”

Celestia nodded. “How much did Luna tell you?”

Twilight's towel floated up from the stone shelf as she carefully stepped out of the tub. She began wringing water from her mane and tail as she described to Celestia the short conversation she, Luna and her friends had had between matches earlier that day. She carefully omitted the mention of Tirek and Luna's violent response.

"And that's it. But I think there's a lot more to it than Princess Luna was letting on," Twilight said, draping the damp towel over the side of the tub.

Celestia's horn glowed and the door to the washroom opened. "Twilight, walk with me," she said, softly.

Twilight fetched her saddlebags, carefully putting them on around her wings, and quickly deposited the recovered bone fragments in them. "Alright, Princess," she said, sounding somewhat cheerful for the first time that evening. "Where are we going?"

"The sculpture garden."

• • •

In the rising moonlight, the statues in Canterlot's sculpture garden cast long shadows. The light painted everything in shades of black, grey and bone-white. With nopony else there, the only sounds beside Twilight and Celestia's hooves on the cobbles were the occasional caw of a raven and the skittering feet of mice and squirrels, night-time bandits fleeing the two intruding ponies.

The two walked on, past silent, eyeless ponies keeping watch over the still-barren site that formerly held the Canterlot hedge maze. Twilight and Celestia both gave a cracked pedestal bearing the worn legend "Draconequus" a wide berth. Deeper into the sculpture garden they walked, off the well-maintained paths. Many of the statues they passed were older, bearing the scars of age and damage that Twilight couldn't begin to identify in the dim light. Statues dedicated to virtues gave way to memorial pillars and monuments to ancient heroes. Unfamiliar, rough-hewn ponies stood around Twilight, some standing at attention, others rearing, many wielding weapons that one wouldn't find outside a museum.

The path the two ponies walked ended abruptly, in a tall, thorny hedge overlooked by a pair of rampant, powerful-looking bronze unicorns. Celestia's horn glowed, and the hedge parted as if hinged, opening into another part of the sculpture garden that Twilight had never seen before. The grass was brown and overgrown here, as if only tended irregularly. Instead of statuary, there were neat, even rows of small stone plaques

set into the ground, interspersed with larger stone markers bearing names Twilight had never heard of. A graveyard.

Twilight swallowed involuntarily, breaking the funerary silence. “Princess, what are we doing here?”

“Come, Twilight. I’d like to introduce you to someone.”

Twilight lowered her head, anxiously, and walked closely behind the princess as the two threaded their way through the small cemetery. They stopped toward the far corner of the graveyard, next to a small plaque set away from the rest of the monuments, bearing no markings but an archaic-sounding name.

“This is the grave of my sister’s student, Rubedo.” Celestia began, without preamble. “She was training him in magic and alchemy before she became Nightmare Moon. He started training when he was a little older than you did.”

“I didn’t know Princess Luna had a student,” said Twilight, slowly.

“He was about the same age you are now,” Celestia continued, “when my sister fell to madness. Rubedo was entirely loyal to her, and so he was the first pony to join her.”

Twilight blinked, looking up at Celestia in surprise. “The first? There were more?”

“Yes, Twilight,” the princess responded. “Nightmare Moon’s power was not as great when Luna first turned into her. Instead of taking over by herself, she raised an army and drove me and the ponies that remained loyal to me out of the old castle.”

“But why would anypony want to fight for somepony who wants to bring eternal night?” Twilight protested. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

Celestia shrugged her wings expansively. “She offered power. Earth ponies especially sided with her when she promised to make them into pegasi or unicorns if they joined her army.”

“Sh-she could do that?” Twilight asked in shock.

“She still can. You’ve seen her charioteers.”

Twilight blinked and sat down heavily, in the grass.

Celestia folded her wings again and continued. “Rubedo helped her develop the magical techniques to do so, but his first major experiment was on himself. He gave himself two horns and a set of arms like an ape.”

Twilight blinked, then stood back up, quickly. “Wait, princess! That sounds like—” Twilight paused and looked around, before lowering her voice and continuing. “That sounds like Tirek!”

“That’s the name he took when my sister adopted the name Nightmare Moon,” Celestia said as Twilight stared, dumbfounded. “He was a monster. He and Nightmare Moon had their soldiers capture ponies for him to experiment on. Eventually, Nightmare Moon used the same methods to transform herself.”

“Into the Nightmare Moon that we met during the Summer Sun Celebration,” Twilight said, finishing the princess’ thought.

“Yes, Twilight. After that,” Celestia said, and then paused, inhaling deeply. “They got worse. Their armies started destroying everything in their path. Tirek poisoned hundreds of thousands of acres around the old castle and created the Everfree Forest. He sent a huge army to level the city of Canterlot and we paid a heavy price to defend it. Eventually, it was the dragons that brought him down and helped me banish my sister.”

“The dragons?”

Celestia lay down, her legs folded under her so that she could be eye-level with Twilight. “Nightmare Moon’s soldiers started killing dragons for parts for Tirek’s experiments, so Najstariot recalled all of the dragons she could to Ormsreich and led over a thousand in an attack on the old castle. They destroyed it and captured the Elements of Harmony, but many dragons were killed and Najstariot was horribly wounded in combat with Tirek himself. She lost an eye and one of her wings was crippled.”

Twilight swallowed hard. “So, you banished Nightmare Moon for a thousand years. What happened to Tirek?”

The princess reached out with a hoof and tapped on the nondescript marker. “Najstariot killed him. He’s buried here.” She turned to look at her young student. “The dragon queen is distrustful of my sister, but she’s deathly afraid of you.”

“Because she’s worried that I’m going to be the next Rubedo?”

“Exactly,” Celestia replied, gently. “I’m sorry, Twilight. I didn’t know about Najstariot’s feelings until after the qualifying trials.”

Twilight looked around at the simple, forgotten graveyard. Who were all these ponies?

“I think I’d like to go inside now, princess.”

Twilight collapsed in her bed after Celestia returned her to the quarters she and her friends had been given. Her friends had questions, but they went unanswered as Twilight lapsed into blissful unconsciousness.

The next morning, Twilight awoke to the morning sun streaming in the window and Pinkie Pie's smiling face inches from hers.

"Morning!" Pinkie said, grinning. "I brought you breakfast!"

Twilight started as she shook the night's sleep from her head. "Pinkie!" she said, sleepily. "I... What?"

She looked down. A small tray was sitting over her, on the bed. Toast, poached eggs and an apple sat on the tray next to a steaming cup of tea.

"You went to bed without any dinner, silly!" Pinkie continued, cheerfully. "So we all thought you'd be hungry!"

Twilight looked around again as she blinked the sand from her eyes. All of her friends were already awake, sitting on the other beds. Pinkie's outburst had drawn attention, and the others were looking at Twilight with a mixture of smiles and concerned looks.

"Mornin', Twi!" Applejack said, walking over. "How you feelin'?"

Twilight pushed her mane back as she sat up, rolling awkwardly to keep from crushing her wings. "Oh, morning, AJ," she said, slowly. "Better than yesterday, thanks." The apple levitated from the tray to Twilight's mouth, and she took a big bite.

Fluttershy trotted up to the opposite side of the bed. "You were very upset last night, Twilight," she said, softly. "Is everything alright?"

Twilight sighed and set the apple back down. "I don't know. I took a walk with Princess Celestia last night and I think I know what's going on, at least. And, hey!" she said, somewhat brightly. "I won, didn't I? If I win one more match, I'll make it into the semi-finals!"

"Oh, well, that's good," Fluttershy said. "And I'm sure you'll be able to beat Trixie. You've done it before, after all."

Twilight's stomach flopped, and she sighed again. "I'm facing Trixie?"

"Oh yeah!" Rainbow Dash called out from behind Applejack. "You're gonna kick her dock right off the mountain!"

Twilight giggled awkwardly, then furrowed her brow. "Mountain?"

• • •

Scant hours later, Twilight emerged into the sunlight after climbing the cave pathway up to the plateau arena. The plateau above Canterlot was a broad, perfectly flat granite expanse, brilliantly lit from the east by the morning sun. It was obviously not a natural structure; a crenelated wall carved from the stone of the mountain guarded the expanse on three sides. The fourth side was bounded by broad, massive stone stands with a single gap in the center leading to the stairs into the mountain. Twilight took all this in as she stepped out of the gap, after her eyes had adjusted to the blinding sunlight.

The stands were already full of ponies as Twilight walked out. She turned to the left, walking to the far end of the plateau, doing her best to ignore the cheers that erupted as she took the field. The arena was much larger than the competition space at ground level had been.

Suddenly, there was a crack and a burst of smoke from the far end of the arena. A muted gasp arose from the crowd as the smoke cleared, revealing Trixie, her mane and cape flowing dramatically in a wind that blew only for her. She turned to the stone stands and bowed elaborately for the crowd.

"Good morning, my enthusiastic admirers!" Trixie projected in her practiced stage voice. "Once again, it is I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, here to take my next big step on the road to the Moonstone Cup!" She turned and looked at Twilight, her arrogant expression still readable even at the distance between the two ponies. "Or perhaps Trixie is just stepping over a speed bump."

Some scattered applause arose, but the crowd was largely quiet. Twilight looked up at the audience to see a sea of unsure faces.

A familiar voice piped up after a moment of this tension. "Boo!" called out Rainbow Dash, the technicolor pegasus rising up above the crowd. "Twilight's gonna mop the floor with you!"

Rainbow Dash's outburst opened the floodgates, and a din arose from the crowd. A few scattered cheers were heard here and there, but the sound of jeers and catcalls were deafening.

Trixie turned and looked up into the unfriendly crowd. "I am the Great and Powerful Trixie! Stop that!"

Trixie's protest only seemed to strengthen the crowd. The small cheers for Trixie died away, replaced with an even louder chorus of boos.

Looking up into the crowd, Twilight was unsure what to do. She waved a hoof, trying to get her friends' attention. She couldn't tell if she was noticed or not, but a new voice joined the cacophony.

"Twilight! Twilight! Twilight!" Twilight recognized Spike's voice rising from the crowd, the little dragon barely audible over the roar. The cacophony died down slightly as if the crowd were weight the relative merits of the two approaches, then more voices started joining the chant. Soon, most of the crowd was chanting Twilight's name. Trixie stamped her feet angrily at the far end of the arena, and she shouted, but her voice was lost under the chant.

There was a sudden, blinding flash from the center of the plateau, which faded quickly, leaving behind Najstariot, her mane fluttering in the slight breeze. The crowd quieted down somewhat, the chant of Twilight's name breaking up as the dragon queen took the field. Beyond Najstariot, Twilight could see Trixie angrily pawing at the stone of the arena.

"Attention!" called out the dragon queen. "Welcome to the third day of the Moonstone Cup tournament! This will be the final match in the Young Adult competition bracket. The winner of this match will receive the Mimic Memorial Medallion awarded to the best young competitor, as well as advance to the semi-final rounds."

Twilight inhaled deeply, her heart racing. The last Mimic Medallion winner had also been from Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, and she hoped she could make her mentor equally proud today.

Najstariot continued, turning to face Twilight, her face blank and unreadable. "To my right, the famous Twilight Sparkle! Her service to Equestria and to the world is well-known by all. Originally hailing from here in Canterlot, she now lives in Ponyville, with the other bearers of the Elements of Harmony. She has won two decisive victories

through a broad and versatile magical talent.” The dragon queen smiled mirthlessly at Twilight. “Good luck to you, Twilight Sparkle! We look forward to seeing your performance this morning.”

Twilight’s ear twitched, but she otherwise stayed stony in the face of the oblique jab. She watched as Najstariot then turned to face Trixie.

“To my left, Trixie! Originally from Hoofington, she has made quite a name for herself across Equestria as a traveling entertainer, and is known as ‘The Great and Powerful’. She has acquitted herself quite admirably in her age bracket; her specialties are light and force manipulation and her use of them in this tournament has been more than impressive. Good luck to you, Trixie!”

Trixie threw her mane back with a grin, and once again drew up a breeze to flutter her mane and cape dramatically. She sneered across the arena as Najstariot stepped to the side, near the stands.

“Competitors, to the center!”

Twilight channeled through her horn and vanished, teleporting to the center. She blinked as she found herself face-to-face with Trixie, who had done the same.

“So, Twilight Sparkle, we meet again,” Trixie said, airily. “Trixie has been looking forward to this chance since she found out you were going to be in the tournament.”

Twilight scowled and roughly hoofed a strand of hair away from her face. “Trixie,” she said, matter-of-factly. “I’m going to beat you.”

Trixie took an unsure step back, before narrowing her eyes and smirking. “Oh, really?” she asked, forcefully. “Well, Trixie is definitely looking forward to this, then. Show me what you can really do.” With a burst of energy, she then vanished, reappearing at the far end of the arena.

Twilight teleported back to her end of the arena, dark and angry thoughts clouding her mind. She felt both tired and full of nervous energy; she wanted to put an end to this quickly, win or lose. Trixie had been attacking Twilight, one way or another, since they first ran into each other at the opening ceremony, and part of Twilight was looking forward to putting her rival in her place.

Najstariot’s voice roared forth. “Begin!”

Before Twilight could react to the stentorian voice, she was blinded by a brilliant flash of blue light. She squeezed her eyes shut, reflexively. Spots danced in the darkness before her as she was battered by telekinetic strikes. Twilight grimaced as she channeled power through her horn, and the strikes stopped, replaced with slapping sounds in the darkness.

Twilight opened her eyes. The world was dimmed and tinted purple through her semi-opaque shield bubble. She saw two more dulled blue flashes against the shield before Trixie stopped her telekinetic strikes. Twilight watched as the distant, obscured unicorn shape she assumed to be Trixie began walking sideways slowly.

The view in front of Twilight blazed into full brightness and color as she dropped the shield. Her horn glowed, and a purple miasma surrounded Trixie's left rear hoof. Trixie stumbled as Twilight yanked on her opponent's hoof. Twilight lofted into the air with her wings as she wrenched left and right on Trixie's hoof. Trixie shouted, and a blue barrier appeared around the distant unicorn, breaking Twilight's telekinetic hold.

Alright, Twilight, time to get serious, she thought. Twilight's horn glowed, and, with the grating sound of grinding rock, large stone spikes erupted around Trixie, boxing her in. Trixie's shield fell, and Twilight could hear Trixie shouting imprecations. Twilight grinned and began to prepare a stronger binding spell.

There was another roar, and Twilight dropped her spell in shock as the stone spikes in front of Trixie were blown outward. They flew across the arena and pulverized themselves to gravel against the battlements. Trixie stepped forward, her entire body surrounded in blue energy.

Twilight felt a chill pass through her body a moment before she felt a huge weight settle onto her wings. She flailed awkwardly, her horn glowing as she slowed her fall to the ground. As she landed, she looked behind her.

Her own shadow was sitting on her back, pressing down on her wings. It seemed to weigh nothing, and yet was applying a great force to her delicate butterfly wings. She heard a roar, and a shield barrier appear in front of Twilight in time to intercept a second shadow, this one wearing a silhouette of Trixie's hat and cape.

The world seemed to freeze for Twilight. She couldn't move or control her magic. The crowd stopped moving, as did Trixie. As she attempted to figure out what was happening, the world dimmed in front of her.

Everything went black. There was no light, no sound. Twilight couldn't even channel magic into her horn. She began to panic as she realized that her horn wasn't there, nor was the rest of her body. She was simply a consciousness, floating in the void.

So, Twilight Sparkle, do you enjoy being cut off from everyone and everything? Trixie's spiteful voice filled Twilight's mind. She didn't hear the voice so much as it imposed itself on her.

Maybe I'll just leave you like this. Maybe Trixie will take your Element of Harmony and you can stay here, in the dark.

What was this? Twilight had never heard of magic that could take a pony out of their body completely.

Well, that's just because you don't know everything after all.

Twilight started. Trixie could hear her thoughts?

Of course, Trixie can hear your thoughts! Trixie's voice was triumphant. *The Great and Powerful Trixie can do anything!*

Oh, of course, Twilight thought. *A Telepathy spell.*

Wait, you've heard—

The world came back to Twilight in a flash of light as Twilight simply terminated the connection with Trixie. Twilight had never experienced a Telepathy spell but she understood the principle. It simply set up a connection between the minds of two participants and allowed their minds to converse. Trixie had been isolated in the darkness just as Twilight had been; it was nothing but psychological manipulation.

Twilight scowled, and a powerful wind whipped up, cutting across the plateau and blowing Trixie's hat off. A blue aura appeared around the hat as Trixie desperately caught it in midair.

While she was distracted, Twilight's horn glowed brightly. The ground around Trixie glowed and Trixie fell heavily to the ground. *Shahnaz's Gravity spell was fairly straightforward,* Twilight thought. *Let's see what else I can do with it.*

Trixie writhed helplessly, attempting to rise to her hooves, and she lashed at Twilight with telekinetic strikes. Twilight jerked as she was slapped. She grinned, and her horn's

glow brightened for a moment. The ground around Trixie seemed to shimmer, and, with a shriek, the blue unicorn launched herself high into the air. Twilight lofted into the air, her telekinesis reaching out to grab Trixie as she dropped the Gravity spell.

Trixie continued to shriek, lashing at Twilight with telekinetic strikes as they both lowered to the ground. Twilight groaned slightly and raised her shield again. Apparently bruises were not considered sufficient injury for a forfeit, because the strikes that were lashing against her shield had gotten pretty vicious.

The strikes stopped, and Twilight lowered her shield, watching Trixie carefully. Trixie was standing stock still, her horn glowing brightly. Twilight watched closely, turning her head slowly to see what Trixie was doing. Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight saw something move, and she spun to look as something yellow-white and insubstantial lashed at her and tried to wrap around her.

Twilight tried to grab at whatever the thing was with her telekinesis, but it was like getting hold of air. Nevertheless, the ribbon of light wrapped around her legs and pulled, and she fell roughly on her side. More and more of the sunbeam ropes flew at Twilight. She raised a clear shield, but the sunbeams flew clear through it, wrapping Twilight more and more tightly. She felt her breath shorten as the 'ropes' wrapped around her chest.

Desperately, Twilight lashed at Trixie with her telekinesis. Trixie stumbled, the glow around her horn fading, but Twilight's bonds held fast.

Wrapped up like one of Applejack's cattle, Twilight thought as she started to feel lightheaded. *By sunlight.*

Sunlight. Blue spots exploded through Twilight's head and she struggled to channel power through her horn. She strained in effort, sparks shooting from her horn, and suddenly Twilight's opaque shield erupted, dulling the incoming sunlight. The bonds vanished and Twilight collapsed, gasping.

Twilight stumbled to her feet, angrily. More telekinetic strikes lashed at her shield, but she ignored them. The world seemed to dim further as the shield grew thicker. There was a rumble, as if from far away, as Twilight began to channel another spell she learned from a recent opponent.

Trixie's side of the arena exploded in a shower of gravel, much of it going over the battlements, some spattering on a quickly-summoned green energy barrier protecting

the spectators. When the dust cleared, seven huge stone ponies stood, towering over a series of gaping wounds in the stone of the plateau.

Twilight could feel Trixie's energy lashing against her golems, tearing furrows from the stone with force that would have easily killed Twilight if Trixie had used the same energy against her. No matter. The stone ponies advanced to surround Trixie.

Twilight could barely see out of her shield, and so she dispelled it. The color and brightness came back just as the first of the stone golems collapsed into a pile of rock. The backlash to Twilight was strong; Trixie had banished it with the same lethal magic she had used against the bean, and it felt like Twilight had been kicked by a mule.

Twilight bared her teeth, her eyes glowing white, and even as the remaining stone ponies pressed in around Trixie, the shards of rock from the fallen one began to float into the air. The fallen golem started to knit itself back together, strands of purple energy lashing the rocks.

Another banishment, and another. Twilight collapsed to her front knees, the light fading from her eyes, and she began to retch. Her horn glowed weakly, and the remaining golems collapsed into rubble. She struggled back to her feet, her eyes watering with the strain.

Twilight teetered unevenly, looking at the rubble and dusty air across the field. As she watched, Trixie stumbled drunkenly through the haze, her coat grey with dust, her hat missing and cape torn.

"Twilight Sparkle!" Trixie called from across the field as she wearily picked her way between the deep furrows in the ground. "Trixie is going to—"

Trixie's horn glowed briefly, guttering and spitting blue sparks, before the glow faded and Trixie pitched sideways, falling into one of the stone furrows, toward a bottom strewn with shards and jagged rocks. The world seemed to go once again into slow motion as Twilight reached out with her telekinesis. Trixie's fall stopped, the limp unicorn floating over the possibly deadly drop in a purple bubble. Twilight carefully levitated Trixie to some flat ground and set her down.

Silence prevailed for a moment before Najstariot stepped forward across the gravel-strewn ground. She looked at Trixie's inert form, then turned to look at Twilight. Seconds passed as the two stared at each other before the dragon queen turned to walk back to the stairs away from the plateau. Her voice called out, audibly but not with the

thundering loudness to which Twilight had become accustomed, “Twilight Sparkle wins.”

“Trixie? Trixie, are you alright?”

I opened my eyes and there she was. Again.

Twilight Sparkle had been the bane of my existence for nearly a year, ever since I made the stupid mistake of taking my show to a backwards nowhere town like Ponyville. I tried and tried to get my show back together, but everywhere I went, that story about my humiliation got there first. I only went to Ponyville because it was near Canterlot in the first place. It was only supposed to be a short stop to make a few bits and get a good night's sleep before I presented myself for the princesses!

Four months. It took me four months before I managed to get another decent show together. It's not as though a travelling magic show pays extremely well anyway, so I couldn't really afford to be out of work that long. Let's just say that I can no longer say that odd jobs are beneath me. What can I say, a girl needs to eat.

In any event, I finally managed to get my career off the ground again, and that's when the insomnia started. Every single night, I'd lie awake. I'd just see Twilight Sparkle's smug face in front of me, laughing. That's when I found time to study and really start improving my raw magical power. Sleep was getting better. By the time I got my invitation to the Moonstone Cup tournament, I was feeling much better and was sleeping three or four hours a night instead of being up for days on end and then crashing.

Opening my eyes to see Twilight Sparkle's face was a new experience, but not a very welcome one. I didn't need her fake concern. She had what she wanted, after all. She had the Mimic Medallion, not me. She was moving on to the semi-finals, not me. It wouldn't have stung so badly if she hadn't felt the need to embarrass me during the qualifying rounds. As it was, it was obvious that she'd made a fool out of me and even the adjudicators were judging me harshly for it.

“Trixie?” she asked again. She reached out a hoof and patted my cheek, and that's when I kicked her.

It hurt. A lot. I must have pulled something jumping between her stupid golems, because my leg felt torn up inside. I got a certain satisfaction from seeing Twilight Sparkle with a hoofprint on her shoulder, though. She shrieked and jumped back.

I dragged myself to my feet and tried to stay off my injured foreleg. “Trixie is just fine!” I said. At least, that’s what I tried to say. It came out more like a mumble. I was just so tired.

“Trixie,” she said, still wearing that infuriating look of mock concern. “You don’t look fine.”

Fine. She wanted to play this game, I could play. So I let her have it.

“Just buck off!” I yelled. It hurt my throat, but I didn’t care. Twilight Sparkle looked shocked, playing her little miss goody-four-shoes act to the hilt. “Trixie doesn’t need your help! You ruined Trixie’s life! Trixie lost all of her possessions in your little manure-hole town because of you and your friends! I finally got back on my hooves, and here you are to take it all away again!”

I didn’t mean to start crying, it just sort of happened. She was taken aback, and then she put on her concerned face again.

“Trixie knows all about you!” Crying or not, she was going to get a well-deserved piece of my mind. “Sucking up to the princesses, scamming invitations to the Grand Galloping Gala! You even got given a pet dragon!”

“Wait,” she tried to interrupt me, suddenly acting affronted. “Spike is not a—”

“Shut up!” I cut her off. “It is Trixie’s turn to—”

• • •

I woke up later. Blacking out wasn’t a particularly unfamiliar experience, but waking up in an actual bed was. I sat up, blinking to try to get my sight back.

“Um... Trixie?”

It certainly wasn’t Twilight Sparkle’s voice, so things were already looking up. A yellow-and-pink blur slowly resolved itself into a slender pegasus. She was one of Twilight Sparkle’s friends, Butterfly or something.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” she said, softly. Even as bleary as I was, it was obvious she was relieved. Twilight Sparkle had probably set her to watch me while I slept. I tried to reach out to push her away, but my leg felt stiff. I looked down at it; my forearm was wrapped in a thick pressure bandage.

The pegasus saw me looking at my leg, and she smiled. “Twilight said you were favoring your leg. It looks like you pulled something when you kicked her.”

I didn’t really need all these horseapples. I rolled over to look away, keeping the weight off my leg. “Trixie is just fine. Just tell Trixie where the exit is.”

“Are you sure?” Butterfly asked, in that wispy, little voice. “Once Twilight is back from her match, we can—”

I threw back the covers. I was not about to wait for Twilight to come back from her match.

The room was a long one with a fireplace at the far end, lined with beds on either side. This must have been where Twilight and her friends were staying while in Canterlot. The only thing I really cared about, however, was the door, which was just across the room. I climbed out of bed and hobbled over to the door. It was a bit of a strain, but I was able to at least use my magic to open the door.

I stepped out into the hallway. The halls looked like every other building in Canterlot, white stone, and I wasn’t sure which way to go.

“Um... I can show you the way out, if you’d like.”

Butterfly again. At least she was actually offering some help I could use. “Alright,” I said, sounding bored.

She trotted off down the hallway, and I turned to follow. She was blessedly quiet, so there was nothing to do but watch the pony in front of me. She kept her wings tucked in firmly and trotted like an earth pony. Strange for a pegasus, doubly strange for one with a flying cutie mark. Her tail was long and dragged on the ground behind her.

“So,” I asked, finally. “You’re one of Twilight Sparkle’s friends?”

The pegasus continued walking and didn’t look, but she ruffled her wings slightly. “Oh, yes. I’m Fluttershy. It’s very nice to meet you.”

We both lapsed silent again, and I walked along behind Fluttershy until we reached a door at the end of a hallway.

“Here you go,” she said, quietly. “Where are you headed?”

“Trixie’s cart is outside the city. I suppose I’ll be heading away from Canterlot again.”

“What about your friend?”

Oh, right, him. I threw my mane back. “Hopscotch is certain to be waiting at Trixie’s cart for her to return.” Assuming that he hadn’t wandered off after another mare that caught his eye.

I opened the door and stepped out. It was night, so it took me a moment to realize where we were. I hadn’t really been expecting to step outside the castle. I shouldn’t have been surprised, though. At least Fluttershy seemed nice.

After I got my bearings, I limped my way toward the gate. The streets were still full of ponies, so it wasn’t too late, even though the moon was out. I tried to stay inconspicuous; it helped that I was missing my hat and cape. Again.

The steps down into the mountain from the plateau were wide and flat, well-suited to accommodate a number of ponies walking abreast. Ahead of Twilight, down in the cave, she could hear chattering voices, references to her and Trixie occasionally echoing up the stone hallway. Twilight, herself, was grateful to be walking with five of her friends, instead of having to deal with questions and cheering.

“You sure you’re alright, Twi?” Applejack asked. She was walking closely to Twilight, protectively. “That was a real good kick you took.”

Twilight rolled her shoulder uncomfortably. After the match, Twilight had walked over to check on Trixie and been rewarded by Trixie yelling at her and kicking her in the shoulder before she lapsed back into unconsciousness. The hoofprint still throbbed and Twilight expected to end up with a bruise. “I’m fine, AJ,” she said. “I’m more worried about Trixie.”

Applejack and Rainbow Dash both made dismissive noises. Pinkie Pie, bouncing along at the rear of the group, piped up cheerfully. “She’ll be alright, Twilight! Fluttershy and Princess Luna will get her all fixed up! Besides, it’s not your fault!”

“What do you mean?” Twilight asked.

“It’s against the rules to hurt someone, right? If it was your fault, you’d have broken the rules and gotten in trouble! But you didn’t, so it can’t be your fault!”

Twilight didn’t answer. She wasn’t so sure. Trixie’s injury was just another thing gnawing at her. Maybe Trixie had been hurt when she fell, or maybe Najstariot just hadn’t noticed. She continued walking and not speaking.

The group continued down into the bowels of the mountain. The cave was wide and well-lit, but still seemed claustrophobic to Twilight. The echoing walls amplified the fading chatter of the ponies ahead, and Twilight tried desperately to tune them out.

“Twilight, dear, are you alright?” Rarity asked in concern. “You’re grinding your teeth.”

Twilight blinked and looked over at Rarity, who was walking apace with her. “I’m... fine, thanks,” Twilight said, unconvincingly. She was more than not fine. Twilight could practically taste the anger she’d be carrying since the match with Trixie had started, and it was only slowly fading.

Further down the winding stairs they continued, the chatter ahead vanishing as the other ponies exited the cave. Twilight sighed in relief.

“So, Twilight,” Rainbow Dash asked, slowly. “Got any plan for your next match?”

Twilight winced inwardly. “No, not really, Rainbow,” she said, dully. “I’ve just been making things up as I go along.”

“Aw, jeez,” Rainbow said, in a pained voice. She walked faster, catching up to Twilight and walking beside her, opposite Rarity. “Twilight, you’re telling me you’ve been winging it this whole time?”

Twilight ground her teeth again, then turned her head slightly to look at Rainbow out of the corner of her eye. “I’m doing just fine, Rainbow,” she said, caustically. “I read up about the tournament before I started. The best competitors always adapt to their competition and think on their feet.”

Rainbow’s eyes narrowed, and she moved up closer to Twilight. “You’re not doing just fine,” Rainbow snapped. “Trixie nearly took you down out there.”

Twilight stopped on the stairs, turning to glare at Rainbow Dash. “I beat her, didn’t I?” Twilight asked angrily, her ears twitching.

“Yeah, you beat her, alright,” came the retort. “So that’s what you’re gonna do? More miraculous last-minute comebacks?”

Stepping between Twilight and Rainbow Dash, Spike looked up at the two ponies. “Um, guys, come on, you don’t need to fight—”

“Stay out of this, Spike!” Twilight shouted. The little dragon blanched and scurried away, behind Rarity.

“Oh, yeah, now you’re yelling at Spike, too?” Rainbow Dash snarled, floating up a few inches above the stairs.

“Twilight, that’s not very—”

“Not now, Pinkie!” Rainbow Dash yelled.

“Rainbow? Twilight?” Applejack drawled, mildly.

The two ponies turned to look at her, and barked in unison. "What?"

"Both o' you, sit down an' shut up."

Rainbow and Twilight were both taken aback. Twilight sat down on her haunches, practically automatically, while Rainbow dropped back down to the steps and rested against the wall of the cave, glaring at Twilight sullenly. Applejack looked down at the duo through lidded eyes.

"Twilight, Rainbow Dash is right. You need a plan or you're not gonna get past the semis." Twilight frowned and sank down, abashed. Rainbow smirked at her, smugly.

"Rainbow," Applejack continued. Rainbow Dash's smirk vanished instantly. "You need to lay off Twilight. She's had a hard couple o' days and you've never been in a magic competition before. How long's the Best Young Flyer competition?"

"Um, about half a day," Rainbow mumbled.

"Right. And Twilight's got another day o' this 'fore she finishes, assuming she passes the semis this afternoon." Applejack continued while Twilight stared at her hooves, quietly. "Come on, both o' you. We're all friends, right?"

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash said, after a moment's silence. "Sorry, Twilight."

Twilight looked up, first at Applejack's neutral face and then at Rainbow's mirthless smile. She grimaced, then put on an unconvincing smile herself, her anger fading into the background noise of stress and anxiety. "Thanks, Rainbow. Sorry for yelling at you. I know you're just trying to help."

Spike sighed in relief and Twilight turned to look at him with a smile. "Thanks, AJ," he said.

Rarity smiled up at Applejack. "Very eloquent."

"Well, thank you both."

"Hey, I got it!" Rainbow Dash cried, suddenly jumping to her hooves. "Twilight, you've got hours before your next match. Let's go get you prepped and relaxed."

Twilight climbed to her hooves and looked at Rainbow Dash in confusion. "What do you mean?"

“AJ,” Rainbow said. “Take Pinkie and Rarity and go make sure Trixie hasn’t killed Fluttershy. Or vice-versa. Twilight, Spike and I are going to the big library downtown.”

• • •

“Okay, this is boring.”

The Canterlot library was much less sepulchral during the day, with ponies and coming and going and the librarians working on the stacks. Twilight had isolated herself in a stack of books in the reference section. Spike, with Rainbow’s help, continued to fetch more, and the piles were starting to be suspiciously architectural. “Shh!” Twilight hissed, not wanting to be interrupted.

The trio had passed the square on the way to the library, stopping just long enough to learn the name of Twilight’s next opponent, Zlatan. Some cursory research had revealed that he was a dragon mage, young in dragon terms but still nearly a hundred years old. Zlatan was distinguished enough that he was published in a number of books, and Twilight was doing her best to chew her way through his writings as quickly as possible.

Twilight glanced up momentarily from one of Zlatan’s earlier works, a treatise on ‘localized dimensional manipulation’. She looked up at Rainbow Dash, who was hovering above her heap of books, looking out the overhead windows longingly.

“You know, Rainbow,” she called out, her voice low but audible. “They have a young adult section you could go look at.”

Rainbow drifted down, rolling her eyes. “I’m not *that* bored.”

Twilight shrugged, then looked over her shoulder where Spike was setting down another stack of books. “Is that everything?” she asked.

Spike wiped his brow with the back of his claw, panting. “Yep, that’s all the numbers you gave me.” He looked at the pile of books, appraisingly. “The librarians are gonna be furious, Twilight.”

Twilight giggled. “We’ll put them back before we leave.”

Twilight dove back into her book, tuning out Rainbow and Spike. After reading through a number of Zlatan’s works, Twilight had to be impressed. After some early work on summoning theory, Zlatan had begun working in the somewhat dangerous area of magical field theory. Recently, in the last thirty years, he’d begun applying the fairly new

idea that the world was not special and could be manipulated in the same way alternate dimensions and higher planes could be.

The records of his previous three appearances at the Moonstone Cup were the first things Twilight had read. Out of three, he had advanced to the finals twice, but had never won the Cup. His favored strategy seemed to be to alter the physical nature of his opponent's half of the field to deprive them of their magic entirely. Twilight had shuddered when she read that.

An hour, then two passed with Twilight poring over Zlatan's papers, responses to his papers, experimental verification of his work and every other relevant scrap she could find. He had a reasonably well-received sociological article on magical mass psychology and his hypotheses about the nature of a society without magic. There were a number of articles in ecological journals from unicorn researchers using his work as a basis to develop the unsettling idea of 'peak magic', that there was a limited amount of magical energy in the world and it was being exhausted. Twilight would have to remember to ask the princesses about that.

Most important, however, was strategy. This would all be wasted—albeit enjoyably wasted—time if it didn't add up to a strategy for fighting him.

His spells were big, and slow-casting, Twilight had gleaned. The Cup competitors that had beat him had done it largely by pressing their attacks and not letting him use any of his more drastic dimensional spells. Twilight was not a combat magician, however, and didn't think simply hammering him with summons and telekinetic strikes would do it; he was unlikely to even feel the latter unless Twilight hit him hard enough that she risked injuring him.

Her Drain spell had been remarkably effective against Gianna, and Twilight wondered what it would be like to siphon the energy from a dragon. That would be a good strategy, she thought. Use smaller spells to begin with and hit him with a Drain as he prepared one of his big dimensional spells, then expend the energy...

How?

Twilight fumbled with her books as she wracked her brain for a followup. Come on, Twilight, you can do this! It'll be easy, this time, you won't even have to think of something on the fly. You just need something that can counter some of the most powerful magic spells you've ever seen. Twilight grimaced as if she'd just bit into a lemon.

Of course, there was everything in front of her laying out the principles and details behind Zlatan's dimension-warping spells. And Draining a dragon would provide more than enough power to fuel them, even if he blocked the drain quickly.

Twilight grinned and closed the book, then looked over her shoulder. Spike and Rainbow Dash were deeply absorbed in a large-format comic book. "Guys!" Twilight called out. The two jumped, and Spike closed the comic, guiltily.

"Come on, help me clean this up. I need to get to my match!"

“Yeah!” Spike crowed as he looked down on Canterlot. “I am Sir Spike, Pegasus Rider!”

Twilight scowled slightly, then began giggling. Spike was mounted on her back as she and Rainbow Dash spiraled up above the Canterlot library. Twilight could feel his claws tangled in her mane as the little dragon called out. One day he’d be able to fly on his own, but that was years away, and Twilight was glad to be able to give him this experience while she was equipped to do so.

“Careful, Spike,” Rainbow Dash said, mischievously. “You don’t wanna fall, do you?”

“Ow!” Twilight yelped as Spike’s grip tightened sharply. “Rainbow!”

Rainbow Dash just laughed and banked, swooping toward the drawbridge leading out of Canterlot. “Come on! You’re out in the field, right?”

“Yes, at the dragon grounds,” Twilight replied. She flapped her wings and fell in below Rainbow Dash, staying out of the pegasus’ wake. “It’s down to the east, past the tent city.”

The trio traced a graceful arc, staying well away from the other aerial traffic as they flew. The pegasi and occasional gryphons they saw paid them the same favor, although Twilight thought she saw an odd look or two cast her way.

“Say, Twilight,” Rainbow Dash called out, glancing down at an angle at her friend. “I’ve been wanting to ask, how do you like flying so far?”

Twilight’s face broke out in a wide grin. “It’s great!” she said, loudly. “I can see why you like this so much. It sure is tiring, though.”

Slowing, Rainbow banked and flew in a little more closely to Twilight. “You okay? Do we need to land and walk the rest of the way?”

Twilight’s grin grew a bit predatory. “No, I want to be as tired as possible for this.”

Rainbow blinked and shook her head, banking away. “You’re so weird.”

“Yeah, that’s what I keep telling her,” Spike said.

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The dragon grounds were nearly twice the size of the area Twilight had competed with Gianna on, and the land itself was scarred and torn up, with only a few patches of green grass still standing. There were large stands on either side of the grounds, and they were full to capacity. Twilight could see Luna and nearly all of her friends sitting in the center, toward the front. She was confused as to why Fluttershy was missing. Was she still tending to Trixie?

Across the field stood a huge monster. Zlatan, Twilight's opponent. He was as enormous as the dragons Twilight had encountered near Ponyville, but other than that he couldn't have been more different. His scales were gold and shone brightly in the sun. His wings were folded in at his side, but Twilight could tell that unfolded they would span nearly the entire width of the field. He carried himself proudly, wisdom sparkling in his green eyes. The other dragons Twilight had seen were animals. Zlatan was a force of nature.

The ground in the center of the field split and a geyser of brilliant energy erupted from it, drawing gasps from the crowd. Twilight averted her eyes from the blinding light, shielding herself with a foreleg. When the light faded, it left behind a bipedal figure draped in regal robes and carrying a gnarled staff. Twilight immediately recognized Hadalsnan al-Dhi'b, the ancient ghul king.

"Friends!" Al-Dhi'b bellowed, his cracked voice carrying strongly across the field. "Welcome to semi-final round of Moonstone Cup tournament!" He raised his arms and staff dramatically, turning slowly to look over the field as cheers erupted from the spectators.

"Winner of this round," he continued, lowering his arms, "go on to last match of tournament. After this, only one other match like it for next two years!" His voice rose at the end into a stentorian cry, further riling up the cheering crowd.

The dulled gem set into the gnarled end of Al-Dhi'b's staff glowed, and smaller geysers of energy erupted around the ghul king. For a moment, at least, Hadalsnan al-Dhi'b set aside his age and frailty, and Twilight saw a glimpse of what the old warlord might have been like in less peaceful days. The field was obviously where he belonged.

"Now, I introduce you to competitors," he roared. Al-Dhi'b swept his staff melodramatically, pointing it at Twilight. "Twilight Sparkle! Hero pony of Equestria! She need no introduction! Friends, families alive and well because of her! She defeat Nightmare Moon and Discord! Not for thousand years has world seen equal!"

Twilight swallowed hard. Najstariot's introductions had been melodramatic, but this was something different. She smiled weakly and waved a shaky hoof at the crowd.

Without pause, Al-Dhi'b turned on his heel to face the opposite bleachers. He spun his staff in the air and ended with it pointing at the enormous dragon occupying the side of the field opposite Twilight. "Zlatan! Dragon wizard of renown! Finest of Ormsreich and three-time Moonstone Cup competitor! He wield primal power over nature of world itself!"

Twilight watched as Zlatan spread his massive wings, casting a broad shadow across the field. The dragon turned his head slowly, nodding silently at the crowd on both sides, before facing forward again.

Al-Dhi'b walked to the side of the field, taking up position in front of the bleachers opposite Twilight's friends. "Competitors!" the aging king bellowed. "Come to center!"

Twilight teleported to the center of the blasted field, while Zlatan folded his wings, the mighty dragon striding ponderously across the ground.

Up close, Zlatan's head alone dwarfed Twilight. She had been mistaken; the golden-scaled dragon was even larger than either of the dragons near Ponyville had been. Twilight had never seen a living thing so huge. She tried to keep from shaking as two brilliantly green eyes bore into her.

"So," Zlatan began. His voice was low, and rumbled like distant thunder. "You are Twilight Sparkle, greatest magician among the ponies."

"Um." Twilight swallowed hard. "I'm the bearer of the Element of Magic, but I don't think I'm the greatest magician..." She trailed off, awkwardly, wings twitching.

Zlatan tilted his massive head. He blinked his inner eyelid at Twilight from one eye, then nodded, slowly. "Pardon me. Humility is not a trait of my people. I do not often see it to recognize it. Nevertheless, you are Twilight Sparkle. You are the bearer of the Element of Magic. You are the caregiver and friend of the lost hatchling. You are the future of this world. It is an honor to face you here."

Twilight's mind swam and she stumbled slightly on the uneven 'ground'. So many questions flashed through her mind before she settled on choking out, "What do you know about Spike?"

“Hmm. ‘Spike’. Yes.” The dragon looked off into the gradually reddening sky, as if lost in thought. “So, he has a name. Fitting. I should like to speak with you again after this match.”

“Alright,” Twilight said, unable to keep a quaver from her voice.

Zlatan unceremoniously lofted up into the air. His massive wings created a powerful wind that Twilight had to brace herself against. He turned in the air and flew the distance back to the far end of the field, barely a hop, skip and jump for the monstrous reptile.

After Twilight teleported back to her end of the field, Al-Dhi’b raised his walking staff dramatically, then brought the end down with a dull thud. “Begin!”

Zlatan roared, a piercing, primal sound. Before Twilight could cast a single spell, she felt her feet go out from underneath her. She slid forward uncontrollably, as if the ground were greased ice. Beating her wings furiously, she rose into the air just in time to avoid sliding into Zlatan’s territory and losing that way. Looking down, she saw the ground on her side of the field glowing a gentle gold.

Twilight’s horn glowed, and no less than two dozen pony golems, each as large as those she had summoned against Trixie, seemed to tear their way from the ground and charge at Zlatan. Twilight didn’t feel up to actually summoning that many golems, but an illusion would do just as well.

The dragon roared and unleashed his breath, scouring the false images with magical fire, but the phantasms continued advancing. Twilight knew she only had a moment before the illusion was exposed, but a moment was all she needed. She swept back toward the ground, sending herself sliding away from Zlatan’s side of the field. Her horn glowed again and she dipped her head toward the golden glow, which shattered as if made of ethereal glass.

Turning, Twilight had just enough time to dodge to the side as a ball of energy flew toward her. The illusory ponies were at Zlatan’s feet, now, the dragon ignoring them as if they were nothing. Which, of course, they were.

Twilight grinned as she ducked another energy ball. Her horn glowed again, and the ball suddenly veered off course, whirling around Twilight and flying back toward Zlatan. The ball collided with a hastily-summoned shield in front of the dragon. Where the ball struck, for a moment there appeared a hole in the shield, a window showing someplace

else, someplace dark. Twilight didn't get a good look, but it seemed as though there was something moving in the darkness.

Whatever those balls were, Twilight did not want to be hit with one. She began hammering the shield with vicious telekinetic strikes. Assuming her plan worked, energy would not be a premium for her, so she could use brute force to keep the dragon on the defensive and wear him down until the time was right to spring her trap.

Zlatan's shield suddenly turned perfectly reflective, and Twilight stopped her strikes, walking sideways warily. She saw her reflection do the same. Experimentally, she lashed at it the shield with a light telekinetic strike, and was rewarded by being hit in the face by her own magic. Well, that didn't work, she thought, shaking off the light hit. Let's see if I can dispel it.

She rose into the air and swept up to see the extent of the shield, which seemed to arc completely over Zlatan's side of the field. From her elevated vantage, she could also see that it was well past the center line, and she'd never be able to touch it with her horn.

Looking down, Twilight spotted a loose clod of dirt, and she experimentally lofted it, with just a little telekinetic force, in a gentle arc toward the shield. The clod passed cleanly through the shield, and softly thudded on the ground on the other side. Perfect.

With a grin, Twilight advanced closely to the center line, her horn glowing brightly. The ground exposed between the center line of the dueling grounds and the leading edge of the shield seemed to swell. The air grew palpably drier as the ground absorbed water, gradually turning into mud that seeped under the shield. Twilight kept up her campaign, her lips growing parched as her spell ripped the moisture from the air and forced it into the ground.

Now, Twilight thought, *to find out if mud can conduct magic*. She set down next to the center line and dipped her horn into the mud. There was an odd hiss of pressure being released, followed almost immediately by a loud boom as the water was forced back out of the mud. The magic shield, in contact with the enchanted mud, shattered just as gallons of water burst across the field. Twilight shook her again-soaked mane as she stepped back from a surprised-looking dragon with a golden glow surrounding his claws.

Of course, Twilight thought. He was using the shield to protect himself while he prepared his magic-nullifying spell. She inhaled deeply. *Now or never*. Twilight's horn glowed brightly, and a similar glow began to creep over the surface of Zlatan's scales.

Lights exploded behind Twilight's eyes, and she fell heavily to the ground. Words in a language she didn't know and yet could understand perfectly danced through her consciousness. The world froze and twisted before her eyes. She saw the blasted arena and the bleachers to either side as if from above. She smelled blood and meat. The scorched terrain was her territory, now, the dragon just an intruder.

Go ubijat. Kill him.

Twilight gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, blinking away tears. She had handled Gianna's energy, she could handle Zlatan's. She could feel little sparks spitting from her horn and around her hooves as she staggered to her feet. She opened her eyes, and once again the world was as it should have been.

Zlatan's head was shaking back and forth, ponderously, as he shook off the effects of the Drain spell. His concentration was broken and Twilight could immediately tell he was weakened. He even smelled weak, wounded. Like prey.

Go unishti. Sega. Destroy him. Now.

Twilight's head swam. Her body felt light, and she lifted herself from the ground, patterns of magical force weaving themselves around her horn. It was all she could do to focus on the task at hand. *Focus on the equations, Twilight,* she told herself. *You're a unicorn, and you're just following the plan.*

Zlatan roared, and a stinging telekinetic strike ripped across Twilight's back. The pain registered deep in her mind, lost somewhere in the storm of fire and destruction that Twilight was desperately trying to channel. She could hear the dragon chanting a litany of some sort. Words and names jumbled in Twilight's mind, the song twisting inside her around the stolen energy. *He's just trying to distract me,* Twilight told herself. She could taste blood on her tongue. *My scales are strong, they'll protect me. Just one more moment.*

She suddenly felt weight on her ankles dragging her back the ground, her wings flapping furiously against it to no avail. Reality swam in front of her again, but this time she could tell that it wasn't the dragon's energy, but the culmination of his spell. Colors washed out around her, the normally bright Equestrian palette becoming a drab brown and gray accented with occasional muted splashes. Twilight could feel a tug at her horn, as if something was trying to pull the magic out of her. This must be it, the magic-nullifying spell. Only one more second.

The last connection was made, and Twilight channeled more energy than she had ever thought possible into a single spell. Her eyes snapped open, solid white fields, and a silent wave of purple and white energy rolled across the field.

The world came back to Twilight. The sounds of the crowd, the colors of the world. There was no more fire inside her, no more smell of burning meat in her nostrils. She stumbled and blinked, looking to see if her spell had succeeded.

The opposing field was a brown and black waste with a few patches of sickly green grass, much as hers had been for a moment. The enormous dragon was changed. His beautiful golden scales were sharper and ridged, their color faded to a murky yellow-green. His head was more angular, his neck and tail both longer. Both massive wings had turned into heavy, membranous things with every bone and joint showing in stark relief against the taut skin, and they lay uselessly in the dirt. Gnarled, filthy claws tore at the ground while brown, stained teeth snapped angrily at the air. Sinuous muscle action shifted scarred scales in a nauseating way, and thick red and blue veins pulsed hideously under the off-white skin of the beast's underside.

The crowd was gasping in horror. Zlatan had turned into a monster the like of which most ponies had never seen. Twilight herself cringed at what she had wrought.

The dragon stopped snapping at the air and looked down at Twilight across the shimmering divide between the twisted reality in which he stood and the land of the living and the sane. Through the barrier, two faint words floated, though Zlatan looked like he was screaming. "I yield."

Twilight's horn glowed for the slightest fraction of a second, and color washed over the field. Zlatan was instantly returned to the beautiful, noble creature he had been. The dragon slowly lowered himself to the ground, gasping and twitching involuntarily, and rested his massive head in the dirt. Once more, he spoke, though now he could be heard across the entire field.

"I yield," he rasped. "I have been bested."

A hush fell over the crowd as Al-Dhi'b moved for the first time since the match had started. He walked purposefully to the center of the field, the hem of his cloak growing dirty with standing water and mud. He looked at Zlatan, who looked back, evenly.

"You are unhurt?" Al-Dhi'b asked. "That look horrible. I could see clear to claim that as injury fault."

Twilight's head started swimming again. She couldn't lose, not like this.

"No," Zlatan said, tersely. "But thank you, Your Majesty."

Satisfied, Al-Dhi'b turned. He smiled broadly at Twilight before raising his arms again. "Twilight Sparkle winner!" he roared, and the crowd roared back.

The watching crowd surged from the stands, coming toward Twilight like a wave. Nothing about the match had been as unsettling as the aftermath was seeming. Cheers, questions and a million statements of adoration filled the air.

Suddenly, Twilight heard Rainbow Dash's voice rise up above the cacophony. "Alright, alright! Make way! Princess of the Night and a bunch of big, famous heroes comin' through! Outta the way!" Normally, Twilight might have chided Rainbow for this, but at that moment all she felt was relief as the crowd split, letting her friends through.

Twilight's friends cheered and nuzzled her, and Spike jumped up, wrapping his arms around her neck in a big hug. Twilight smiled at the attention, isolated from the crowd of strangers as she was by her friends. Luna spread her wings imperiously and the crowd fell even further back, giving the small knot of ponies more room.

Another voice spoke up, and the entire crowd fell into a nervous hush. Even Pinkie stopped in midsentence as Zlatan loomed over the ponies and spoke. "Twilight Sparkle," he boomed. "I would speak with you, if you please."

Twilight looked up at Luna, who nodded silently. "Um... Yes, of course," she said, nervously. The crowd parted as she stepped away from her friends and toward the dragon.

"So," she said, attempting to sound casual and failing miserably. "Good match?"

Zlatan grinned, showing rows of sharp teeth. "Oh, yes. All I had hoped for and more. However," he continued. "You asked about your friend, 'Spike'. Yes, we know of the lost hatchling." At the last, Zlatan turned his head, looking across the field to where Spike was standing. Twilight looked over her shoulder. Spike quickly grew terrified as he realized Zlatan was looking at him.

"Do not be afraid, young brother," Zlatan said, his voice oddly softening. "You are of the blood of the zmej, and we are on neutral ground. There is no safer place for you in all the world."

Spike looked up at Twilight, who nodded. “It’s okay, Spike,” she said, and the little dragon approached.

The two dragons looked at each other silently for a long moment. “Hi,” Spike finally said. “I’m Spike.”

“I am Zlatan,” came the kind response. “Your mistress seemed to want to know more about you. Do you?”

Spike’s response was immediate and breathless. “Oh, yeah.”

I'd grown used to Canterlot in the last few days, but frankly I was not sorry to be leaving. I was humiliated and beaten and I was not going to impress anyone in this town for a long time to come. I was glad, for once, that nopony recognized or challenged me on my out of the city.

It was dark, but the tent city around Canterlot was alive as anything. There were parties, and music. I walked past a pride of gryphons having strength contests. They were probably drunk, given their yelling and general behavior. I've never liked alcohol, but I've never particularly liked gryphons, either, so there's that.

I really could have done without the noise. I just wanted to get back to my cart and get moving. There were even odds that I'd be leaving without Hopscotch, but he was, in the end, just eye candy. I was sure I could find a better assistant with even the slightest effort.

Turning off the road, I walked down into the colorful havoc. I had left my cart on the other side of a large canvas tent that belonged to some zebra dignitary. I had backed up on the tent in hopes that I could use it as a simple backdrop in case I needed to put on a performance, but I'd been far too busy to even think about that. I found the zebra encampment and rounded the large tent.

My cart was missing. Shallow furrows in the ground showed where it had been dragged off toward the road. That rat Hopscotch had stolen my cart! I was almost as surprised as I was angry; he hadn't often displayed the sort of initiative or ability to string two thoughts together it would require to backstab somepony like that.

I admit it, I lay down on the grass and started to cry. That was twice in one day, so good job, there. But, really, wouldn't you? This was the final insult. After everything I'd gone through, I had lost all of my possessions again! I should really have learned not to trust ponies and I was paying for my stupidity.

"Pardon me, miss, are you alright? You seem to be in quite a plight."

I looked up. There was a zebra standing there. One of them must have heard me crying and come around to investigate. I sniffed and stood up, wiping my tears with my uninjured leg. "No," I said, trying to regain my composure. "I'm fine."

"Well," the zebra said. "In that case, could you go further afield? You're interrupting our master's meal."

No sympathy for Trixie, as usual. I looked at him haughtily and flicked at him with my tail as I turned to walk away. Served him right.

But now where was I going to go? I had no place to sleep, no bits and no real way to earn any more without my cart. I did, however, know some ponies who might be convinced to give me a place to stay for the night. I looked down at my bandaged leg and sighed, before I started heading back toward the castle.

I had my invitation letter out before I reached the drawbridge, and the guards let me pass without question. I trudged down the street, favoring my injured leg, which was starting to hurt again. I heard a lot of inane chatter as I passed groups of ponies, the usual sorts of nonsense average ponies talk about. On my way past the bakery, however, I overheard a conversation about the most recent matches. Evidently, the big story was that Twilight Sparkle had bested Zlatan.

Ugh. After she beat me, I was really looking forward to Zlatan beating her. I didn't think she had it in her to bring him down, given what I'd read about his standard strategies. I thought for sure that he'd deprive her of her magic, and that would be that. I, of course, had a strategy worked out after the first day, not that it mattered anymore.

I approached the castle and the guards came out to meet me. I suppose I wasn't at my best, what with an injured leg and the fur on my face matted with tears. I hoped they'd take some pity on me.

"Um, Trixie is here to see..." What was her name again? "Fluttershy. She's staying with Twilight Sparkle and her entourage."

"One moment," one of the barded unicorns said tersely, before he turned and walked into the castle.

The other stood there, watching me closely. I tried my most winning smile, but his expression didn't change. I tried to think of something witty to say, but he didn't look likely to respond in any case, so I flipped my mane at him and snorted indignantly. His scowl seemed to deepen, so I counted that as a victory.

The other guard returned, and he gestured toward the castle with his poleaxe. "Come with me," he said, then turned. I grinned at the other guard and then followed the first. Instead of heading in the main entrance, he walked around the side, toward the small servants' entrance I'd used earlier that day. The door swung open and we headed inside.

After a short walk through the corridors, we came again to the door to the room Twilight and her friends were staying in. The guard turned sharply on his hooves and walked away, leaving me alone in the hallway. I sighed, deeply. I didn't really want to go asking any of these ponies for favors, but I didn't feel like I had much of a choice. I rapped a hoof against the heavy wooden door.

The door swung open. "Yes? Who is it?" a singsong voice called out. The door opened to reveal a white unicorn with a purple mane. Her face fell when she saw me. "Oh, it's you," she said, with a sneer. "What do you want?"

"Who is it?" I heard Twilight Sparkle call out from inside.

The white unicorn turned to look inside. "It's Trixie," she said, pronouncing my name as if it were some exotic form of gum disease.

Suddenly, instead of one pony, I was facing six. I recognized Twilight Sparkle, of course, and Fluttershy. The others were Twilight's friends, whose names I couldn't remember.

"Hi!" the pink one said, exuberantly. "I'm Pinkie Pie! You probably don't remember me, because we never met! Well, we did kinda meet at the ceremony." She stopped and looked thoughtful.

"Trixie," Twilight said. She looked confused and worried, and I confess that I really, really wanted to kick her in the face. "What are you doing here?"

I swallowed my pride. I'd been getting used to doing that. "Trixie's cart was stolen," I said. "I was hoping I could stay here for tonight." I trailed off at the end and the last words came out a mumble. Alright, so maybe I wasn't exactly used to swallowing my pride.

"Trixie, that's terrible!" Twilight said. Celestia, she was infuriating. Nevertheless, in short order I was inside with a hot cup of tea and a yellow pegasus inspecting my bandages.

"You shouldn't have been walking on this," Fluttershy said, quietly. "I'll need to put new bandages on."

Other than Fluttershy, who seemed genuinely concerned, and Twilight Sparkle none of the others seemed terribly thrilled to have me there. The orange one and the cyan pegasus had dragged Pinkie Pie off to a corner. Celestia only knew what they were telling her about me, but I could see her glaring at me and biting her lip, so whatever it was, it

wasn't good. The snobbish white unicorn was sitting on her bed, pointedly looking away from me.

"So," I said after a minute of Twilight and I looking at each other and Fluttershy working on my bandages. "Where's your dragon?"

Twilight smiled. "Oh, Spike's having a long conversation with Zlatan. After I won, he asked if Spike wanted to know more about himself and his people! Princess Luna accompanied him and promised to bring him back when he was ready."

I bristled at that. More rewards for Twilight Sparkle. Now she had Princess Luna running errands for her! I bit back an acidic response. Suddenly, my vision was filled with an angry pink earth pony.

"Hey!" Pinkie said, her face about an inch from mine. "Applejack and Rainbow Dash told me how mean you were being when you were in Ponyville! And I saw you at the ceremony the other day! You weren't being nice at all! Now apologize!"

I wasn't really sure how to respond to this. Twilight and Fluttershy seemed taken aback as well. What else could I do? "Trixie's sorry?" I said, shrugging. Pinkie Pie narrowed her eyes at me, and then grinned brightly and bounced away.

"It's okay, everypony, she apologized!"

This was going to be a long night.

Twilight woke with a start, the taste of copper on her tongue. She reached a bleary hoof to her mouth, eyes still closed, and wiped a wet smear from her lips. Her eyes blinked open slowly in the dim light to see a streak of blood staining the hair of her fetlock.

Sitting up, Twilight looked around. Her friends were all still asleep, the first dawn rays of Celestia's sun staining the walls of the old guard quarters orange. Trixie was curled up under a blanket in front of the fireplace, while Spike and the other ponies lay in their beds.

Twilight rolled over with a soft groan. Her head hurt, as did her mouth. A feeling of fading dread danced at the edge of her memory; whatever she had been dreaming, it hadn't been pleasant. She kicked the blankets away and dropped heavily to the floor. Slowly, she shuffled her way to the door.

She stepped out into the hallway. A short walk down the darkened hall, she stepped into the long washroom. She pushed the door closed behind her with a shaky hoof and ignited one of the torches on the wall with a small effort of magic. Once there was light, Twilight investigated herself in the mirror. The blood on her mouth was just a small smear. She leaned closer and opened her mouth, tilting her head to get a better look. Her gums were bleeding slightly. Her teeth hurt, so she had probably been grinding her teeth all night.

Leaning down into the basin in front of her, Twilight sipped a small amount of water. She swished and spat the bloody water down the drain. She splashed a small amount of water on her face, as well, which helped clear her head slightly. She turned and exited the washroom.

"Mornin', hon," a voice drawled from a short distance down the hallway. Twilight looked toward the entrance to the quarters she shared with her friends to see Applejack leaning against the wall.

"Oh, AJ," Twilight said, stifling a yawn. "I hope I didn't wake you when I got up."

"Nah, 's alright, Twi, I needed to get up anyhow." Applejack smiled at Twilight, then furrowed her brow in concern. "You feelin' alright?"

Twilight sighed and walked up next to Applejack. "I don't know," she said as she ran a hoof through her slightly tangled mane. "I think I had a bad dream last night."

“You wanna tell me about it, sugarcube?”

“I don’t really remember any of it,” Twilight said, with a shrug. “I just woke up feeling like I’d been grinding my teeth all night.”

Applejack nodded sympathetically. “It’s been a rough few days for you, Twi. Truth is, I’ve never been in a competition this tough. I think you’re handlin’ it real well.”

Twilight smiled wanly. “Thanks, AJ. It’s not just the competition, though.”

“Y’ mean Trixie?” Applejack asked.

“Trixie’s part of it,” Twilight replied. “The dragon queen hates me, everypony wants to treat me like some kind of celebrity, the princesses have been putting all sorts of extra—” Twilight paused, then sighed. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be complaining like this.”

Applejack nodded again and smiled. “S alright, hon, everypony’s gotta get a load off now and again. And it ain’t all bad, right?” she asked. “What about Spike? I ain’t never seen him as happy as he was last night.”

Twilight smiled back. “He and Zlatan had a long talk. I didn’t understand it all, but you heard what he was saying.”

“Yup. One thing I didn’t understand, he said he got himself a new name?”

“Well,” Twilight said, relaxing and slipping unconsciously into an academic tone. “From what I understand, dragons have two names, their birth name and their personal name. An older dragon is supposed to grant a personal name to a younger dragon when they come of age, and by custom they can’t amass a hoard until they receive one. Zlatan granted Spike his personal name last night. By dragon tradition, that makes him an adult.”

Applejack laughed. “Well, shoot, Twi, you know what that means, right? Little Spike got his cutie mark.”

Twilight giggled. “I thought the same thing. I don’t know if we should tell Spike that, though.”

“Maybe not,” Applejack said, grinning. “But we can figure that out later. Important thing is, seems like you’re feelin’ better.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Twilight said, smiling back.

“C’mon, let’s go see if anypony else is up yet.”

• • •

A short while later, Twilight and her friends, their ranks swollen by one sullen blue unicorn, clustered around the fireplace in the old guard quarters.

“—and that’s why I’m here.” Trixie concluded a short explanation of her misfortune. After Fluttershy had bandaged her up, Trixie had left to return to her cart. Unfortunately, it and her friend were both missing. She had found her way back to the castle and the only ponies she knew in town. An argument had ensued and so she hadn’t had much of an opportunity to explain herself the previous night. Twilight nodded sympathetically.

“Sounds like y’all had a run o’ bad luck,” Applejack said.

Trixie sniffed and gingerly crossed her bandaged forearm over her other leg. “Yes, well, Trixie just needed a place to stay last night and she didn’t have any bits. Don’t worry, she’s sure to be out of your manes again after today.”

“Aw, come on, don’t be like that,” Rainbow said. “We can see about getting another bed down here. We’ll be staying at least one more day for Twilight’s award ceremony anyway.”

Twilight and Trixie both glared balefully at Rainbow Dash.

“...What?”

“Trixie does not need your pity,” she said, sneering.

“No, but Trixie does need a place to stay!” Rainbow Dash shot back, rising up from the floor. “Unless Trixie would rather sleep on the ground outside!”

“Easy, Rainbow,” Twilight said. “Trixie, I know we’ve had our differences, but, really, we want to help.”

Trixie scowled. After a moment, her horn glowed. Her saddlebags opened a blue notebook floated out, dropping unceremoniously in front of Twilight. “There,” she said,

looking away, at the fireplace. “Trixie’s notes, so you can save yourself a trip to the library. You’ll be up against Amarok.”

“How do you know that?” Twilight asked, blinking at the blue notebook in confusion.

“Because he’s in the tournament this year,” Trixie said, airily. She looked over at Twilight with a sour expression. “Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of him.”

Twilight shrugged. “I read about him when I was reading through historical records of previous tournaments. He has a solid winning record, as I recall.”

“Yes,” Trixie said, acidly. “You could say that.”

Twilight looked at Trixie uncertainly, then smiled. “Well, thank you, Trixie. Um... Are you hungry at all?” she asked, brightly. “I was thinking we could all go to Pony Joe’s for breakfast.”

There were general noises of agreement all around, and Pinkie was already halfway out the door when Trixie spoke up. “Trixie will—” She stopped and took a deep breath. “I think I’ll stay here and get some more sleep, if it’s all the same. I’m not hungry, and my leg still hurts.”

“Oh, I told you,” Fluttershy said, agitated. “You shouldn’t have been walking on that. You all go, I’ll stay h—”

“No, Trixie will be fine by herself,” Trixie said, sharply.

“C’mon, Fluttershy,” Applejack said. “Let her get some rest on ‘er own.”

• • •

Pony Joe’s was practically deserted, with only a few ponies sitting in small groups, talking and enjoying their snacks. The bell on the door jingled, and Twilight and her friends walked into the bakery.

Joe looked up from the glass counter, a wipe rag floating telekinetically next to him. “Twilight Sparkle!” Joe smiled. “I was hopin’ you’d drop in to see me while you were in town.”

Twilight smiled back as the group walked up to the counter. “Morning, Joe,” she said cheerily. “What’s the special today?”

“Well, I made a big batch of fancy crullers this morning. How’s that sound?”

“A round of crullers sounds great!”

“You got it,” Joe said, and a large tray floated up from under the counter with a pile of the aforementioned pastries. “And a large coffee, double cream, no sugar, right?”

Twilight giggled. “You still remember?”

“Course! And your friends?”

There was a flurry of drink orders, and in short order seven steaming cups found their way on to a second serving tray. Twilight deposited a small pile of bits on the counter and proceeded to levitate the two serving trays over to the table.

“So, Twilight, are you going to look at Trixie’s notebook?” Fluttershy asked as she sipped delicately at her tea.

In response, Twilight levitated the blue notebook from her saddlebags and deposited it on the table. It was a slightly worn spiral-bound notebook with a large number of pages already torn out. Spike, doughnut in claw, leaned up to look over the edge of the table at the notebook as Twilight flipped it open.

“Trixie sure took a lot of notes,” Twilight said. She sipped at her coffee as she telekinetically flipped through page after page of tiny, scribbly writing. “It looks like she did research on almost everyone who made it past the trials.”

“I’ll bet the section on you is huge!” Spike said, in between bites of doughnut. This drew a chorus of chuckles and noises of agreement from around the table.

Twilight shook her head. “No, Spike. Actually,” she said, in slight confusion, “I can’t find anything on me in here.” She flipped a few more pages, then stopped. “Aha!” she said, triumphantly. “Here we are, Amarok.”

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense, darling,” Rarity said, with a smile.

Leaning in slightly, Twilight began to scan the notes. “So,” she began, after a moment. “Amarok is the leader of a tribe of—” Twilight trailed off for a moment and swallowed hard before she resumed. “—a tribe of giant wolves from the far north. Ponies first encountered his people in the pale-pony period when a clan of earth ponies was—” Twilight trailed off again with a deep breath, silently reading a few more lines down.

What Twilight read was unnerving. The earth ponies that had encountered Amarak's people were wiped out and eaten by the enormous wolves. That had led to years of strife between the earth ponies and the wolves, as well as straining relations with the other pony tribes. The wolves reportedly had powerful magicians counted among their number, including their leader, who matched the modern descriptions of Amarak.

Which would make him even older than the princesses.

"Twilight, what's wrong?" Fluttershy piped up, softly. "You look so pale."

Twilight took a long drink from her coffee and shook her head. "It's fine, Fluttershy. Anyway, he's very old and very powerful. He claims all of the frozen land to the north as his kingdom. Supposedly, he can even control Windigos."

A shudder went through the group as Twilight continued. "He participates in the tournament occasionally as a diplomatic exercise. He's won all nine times he's participated. He's a master of every known form of magic, and every time he appears he seems to be up to date on everything that's been developed since the last tournament." Twilight looked up, her stomach twisting. "I don't see how I can possibly beat him."

"Well, what was Trixie's strategy?" Rainbow asked.

"There's nothing here on strategy," Twilight said as she flipped to the next page, skimming the notes. "Just a list of the spells he used in each competition. There's no rhyme or reason to any of this. It really is like he knows every spell that's ever been devised. I think Trixie was as lost as I am."

"Come on, Twilight, he's still not more powerful than you," Spike said, gesturing broadly with his half-eaten doughnut. "You can cast any spell, too. You've been doing it for the entire tournament."

"Spike's right, Twilight!" Pinkie Pie spoke up, loudly. "It doesn't matter how old or powerful or big or mean or sharp-toothed he is!" She jumped up on the table, pointing a hoof dramatically at the ceiling. "You beat a gryphon, and a diamond dog, and a whole dragon! And an Ursa Minor! And Discord and Nightmare Moon except we can't help you so those don't count. But still!"

"Pinkie, dear, would you please get off the table?" Rarity said, sounding strained as she levitated her teacup away from the menace of pink hooves.

Pinkie jumped back down to the floor. “Kay. But still! Twilight, you’re amazing! I’ll bet you beat this wolf-thingy with one hoof tied behind your back! Oh, but don’t do that.”

“Thanks, Pinkie,” Twilight said, with a small, lopsided smile. “But I still don’t know what I’m going to do here. I’m not seeing any patterns in the spells he uses and no particular weaknesses. Trying to Drain him might be a mistake, because according to Trixie’s notes a unicorn named Comet Trail tried that and knocked himself out about 20 tournaments ago. That means he’ll be fighting at full strength and all I can do is try to get him to wear himself down. I won’t be able to use Zlatan’s reality altering spells without extra energy, either.”

“Hm,” Applejack said, looking thoughtful.

Twilight glanced over at her. “What is it, AJ?”

“Well,” Applejack said, slowly. “Y’ can’t drain him, but maybe you can drain somepony else. You been usin’ them wings this whole tournament, so preparin’ must be allowed.”

Twilight nodded, looking at Applejack seriously. “It is. You mean I should Drain somepony before the match so I go in with extra energy? Who?”

“Shoot, I’ll volunteer. Jes’ leave me enough to get to my seat and Luna can take me back to the castle later.”

“Hey, yeah,” Rainbow said, brightly. “Me too! I’m full of energy!”

“What? Rainbow, Applejack, I can’t do that!”

“Afraid you’re gonna hurt us?” Rainbow asked, smirking.

“Well, no, but—”

“Yes, exactly, Twilight, ‘no buts.’” Rarity said firmly, cutting Twilight off. “I will also volunteer.”

“Oh, boy, we get to help Twilight after all!” Pinkie said.

“I’d be glad to help you, Twilight,” Fluttershy piped up from behind her hair.

“But...” Twilight stammered, looking between her friends. “I’m really not sure this is a good idea.”

“Twi, we ain’t gonna let ya buck all them trees yourself,” Applejack said, grinning. “What about you, Spike? You in?”

Spike, his face stuffed full of doughnut, looked helplessly at Applejack, then at Twilight. He shrugged and nodded.

“I—” Twilight started, then smiled broadly. “Thank you, everypony!”

Drinks and doughnuts vanished in short order, and soon came time for the group to leave for the competition. Twilight levitated the trays over to the counter as the rest of her friends exited, the door jingling. She turned to follow them out.

“Hey, Twilight,” Joe called from the counter.

Twilight stopped and looked over her shoulder at the baker. “Yes, Joe?”

Joe grinned. “Knock ‘em dead, kid.”

Twilight smiled back. “Thanks. I’ll do my best,” she said, and closed the door behind her.

• • •

The final match was once again scheduled at the dragon grounds. The formerly scarred earth had been tilled under and tamped flat, leaving a firm dirt surface. The stands were already nearly full as Twilight and her friends approached the competition grounds, and even more ponies, gryphons and ghuls were milling about nearby, vying for the best vantage they could find at ground level.

Twilight took a deep breath as she looked over the grounds. Her opponent was nowhere to be seen. The dragon queen, on the other hand, was already standing in the center of the field. She turned her head and glared sternly as Twilight looked at her, and Twilight quickly turned back toward her friends.

“Are you all sure about this?” she asked.

“Of course we are, Twilight,” Rarity replied. “Just like we were the last four times you asked.”

“Yeah, come on, Twilight,” Spike said, enthusiastically. “This’ll be great! Just, uh, try not to knock me out.”

“What about you, Twilight?” Fluttershy asked. “Do you think you’ll be able to use this much energy?”

Twilight took another deep breath and looked at her friends again. “Only one way to find out.”

Twilight’s horn glowed, and a faint violet glow spread across her six friends.

*My friends don't like my parties I don't need no help from nopony I want to be alone
Twilight doesn't love me anymore you're going to love me don't leave me I'm the one who's
supposed to win.*

Twilight felt like her head was going to split in two. Her mind was filled with noise, words, pictures, symbols she didn’t understand. Energy coursed through her body. She wanted to run, to fly, to scream and laugh and cry all at once. She could distantly hear somepony singing about cupcakes.

“Twilight, why are you singing my song?” Pinkie asked her.

But it's my song!

No... Twilight Sparkle. I’m Twilight Sparkle. I’m a unicorn. I’m Celestia’s student *and winner of the Best Young*—

“No!” she shouted. Twilight’s eyes snapped open, her pupils unevenly dilated. Her friends were before her. Applejack stood unsteadily, while the rest were sitting or lying down. Spike was propped heavily against Rarity’s side, while Rarity half-heartedly pushed at him with a hoof.

“But... You were,” Pinkie said, weakly. Her hair was flat and limp, and her head was resting on her front hooves. “Did it work?”

“Yes! Yes, it worked!” Twilight shouted. She laughed strangely as sparks spat from her horn. She raised a hoof to her eyes, looking at it closely. *Shouldn't that be-* “Dude, that’s creepy,” she said.

“Whatever you have done,” a loud, stern voice spoke up from behind her. “I hope your friends agreed to it before you did it.”

“We did,” Twilight and Pinkie said, in unison.

Is that Princess Luna? It must be. I wonder if she's angry with Twilight, Twilight thought.

Luna walked around beside Twilight, looking down at her. “Twilight Sparkle, I do not approve of this. It is not safe for a unicorn to channel so much energy for more than a few seconds.” She leaned down. “Regardless, good luck. You have already made my sister and I so proud.”

“Thank you, Princess,” Twilight said, wings and ears twitching spasmodically. “Good luck, Twilight!”

Luna shook her head, and with a burst of energy she and Twilight’s friends vanished.

• • •

“Competitors!” Najstariot called out. “Come to the center!”

Amarok prowled slowly at the edge of his territory, faintly glowing red eyes watching Twilight. The wolf was huge, easily twice as large as any pony. He was obviously intelligent—incomprehensibly so, if Trixie’s notes were to be believed—but carried himself like a predator in a way Twilight had never seen from another sentient creature. A discordant chorus inside her head screamed that she should run away, she should stand and fight it out, she should fly up away from his teeth or lull him with flattery. She gulped and stumbled slowly toward the center of the field, watery eyes locked with Amarok’s.

“Come closer,” the wolf shouted, an amused note in his growled voice. “I can barely smell you over there!”

Twilight narrowed her eyes and teleported, bringing herself face to face with the wolf. She looked up at him defiantly. “You mean like this?” Rainbow Dash asked, in Twilight’s voice.

Amarok fell back on his haunches, his expression falling sharply. After a moment, a barking laugh came from his maw. “Brave, this one,” he said. “I’ve never been startled by a pony before.”

Twilight stood up straight, swelling her chest. She shook her head quickly, trying to get her bearings. “Yes, well, we are both powerful magicians or we wouldn’t be here. I am quite confident in my ability to stand up to you,” she said quickly, trying to drown out the voices attempting to speak through her.

The wolf's grin returned, and he leaned in closer, eyes glowing brightly. "No, you aren't," he growled. "You're afraid. You stink of it. You know that my people used to hunt yours, don't you?"

Twilight squeaked, her wings snapping up and together involuntarily.

"You know who I am and how old I am," Amarak hissed between his sharp teeth. "I've tasted pony meat before. Maybe I will again."

Sparks spat from Twilight's horn as she struggled to keep her anger and fear in check. *He ain't got no right!* "You—" Twilight started as her knees began to wobble. *No!* "How long has it been?" she finally asked, flatly.

Amarok's grin faded and he narrowed his eyes at Twilight, then he sat back down, barking out a long laugh. "Not since before Discord!" He smiled, a genuine smile rather than the mirthless, predatory grin he had been wearing. "I wouldn't be able to bring myself to anymore. You're brave, Twilight Sparkle. Not a coward or a fool." His smile grew vicious again. "And that's you, not the spirits you've borrowed. Maybe the other things the wind tells me about you are also true." The wolf unceremoniously vanished and reappeared, standing, at the far end of the field.

Twilight blinked and watched the massive wolf for a moment. She, too, then teleported away from the center, to the far end of her side of the field.

"Competitors!" roared Najstariot.

"Begin!"

Amarok howled, his eyes pulsing brilliant red as bolts of white energy arced from an outstretched paw. Twilight spun in midair, the energy bolts bending around her, crackling as they traveled along the surface of a powerful distortion field.

Twilight flew back and forth, up and down, dodging the energy bolts and answering with telekinetic slaps. Ghostly images of rainbows and cyan feathers danced against the oppressively cloudy sky. She giggled unsteadily as she watched herself effortlessly performing aerobatic stunts, holding up a powerful shield and lashing out with telekinetic strikes all at once.

Her horn glowed. Sparks spat from it, her hooves and even her mouth as the ground underneath Amarok glowed. The wolf flipped and was tossed into the air. He spun nauseatingly before his eyes glowed brightly again and Twilight's gravity spell failed. He snarled and reached out a paw, a long arc striking at Twilight through her shield.

With a shriek, Twilight felt herself dragged to the ground. Her wings sagged heavily as she landed and sank into muck. She splashed around, slicing her now heavy, metallic wings against the fen and sending up huge arcs of swamp water. *I didn't have metal wings before*, she thought, deliriously. *Oh, my, this swamp is so messy.*

A shriek, accompanied with a burst of green energy, tore its way from Twilight's throat as long, stiff vines ripped themselves from the ground on both sides of the field. The vines lifted Twilight out of the muck while also lashing viciously around Amarok's legs. "Yeah, we got him, Twilight!" Twilight shouted, exuberantly. She tried to lift into the air, but the stiff metal appendages twisting painfully at her spine stubbornly refused to move. With another shriek, more energy washed out from her horn over the metallic appendages. Her back felt painfully hot as the wings returned to their diaphanous appearance.

The wolf roared, and a wave of cold washed over the field. Twilight breathed a thin stream of green fire over the frost forming in front of her, but it seemed to do nothing against Amarok's spell. The vines froze solid and shattered under Twilight's weight, dropping her onto the rough, frozen swamp water. She stumbled to her feet just in time to raise a flickering shield in front of her, more of Amarok's energy bolts splashing harmlessly against it.

She lofted back into the air. Her horn glowed orange, sparks of myriad other colors spitting from her hooves, and a grove of apple trees seemed to simply appear across the

entire field. She dropped back to the frozen earth, hiding within the illusory forest. She coughed and spat, something dark and unhealthy-looking spattering on the ice.

A mocking laugh sounded from beyond the illusion. "I can still smell you, Twilight Sparkle!" *Oh, no, Twilight!* Twilight thought. *It's okay*, she told herself, smugly, and her horn glowed again. A smelly miasma arose around her, the stench of pony sweat and fear exuding from every square inch of the icy field. She squeezed her watering eyes shut and wavered unsteadily on her hooves, then began laughing madly.

"What is this?" Amarak's voice called out. For the first time, the wolf sounded unsure.

Heavy, rainbow-striped waves of telekinetic force began arcing from Twilight's horn across the field in random directions. A painful roar sounded, telling Twilight that her attack was successful. She lifted back into the air, doing a triumphant aerial flip, then fell back down into the illusion, dizzily.

"Oh dear, I think I'm going to be ill," she said, thickly, her head spinning. "No, you're not!" she protested.

Another roar arose from beyond the illusion. There was a crackle, and then white threads of energy ripped across the field, cutting the illusory trees apart. They dissipated into nothingness, leaving a shaky Twilight staring across at an enraged wolf. She yelped softly and her wings snapped together, bile rising in her throat.

Across the field, Amarak grinned. His paw reached out and a barrage of energy bolts arced forth. Twilight shakily raised her shield again, grimacing as the bolts struck. *Oh no!* a chorus of voices called out in her head. Her horn glowed brightly, and she responded with a salvo of her own, through the shield. Purple energy bolts, ephemeral apples, ghostly cupcakes and other things Twilight couldn't immediately identify assaulted the wolf, who hurriedly raised his own shield to counter. Twilight's body was aching all over, and she blinked to clear her watery vision.

When she opened her eyes again, the field was silent. Amarak was gone, as was the crowd in the stands. The sky was still and cloudless. There was no wind, no sound of insects or birds. Twilight stood unsteadily facing her friends, who stood in a neat semi-circle before her.

"What's going on?" Twilight asked.

Twilight, we need to talk, Applejack said.

You're not feeling well, are you? Fluttershy asked, softly.

Twilight looked down at her pitted hooves. She felt sore all over, even injured, right down to the bone. Her horn was very hot and felt like it was developing cracks. She was sweating and her mouth tasted like acid.

“What’s wrong with me?”

Pinkie jumped up on her rear hooves, waving her forelegs rapidly in a panic. *Twilight, Twilight! Luna was right, this was really dangerous! You're hurting yourself and that big meanie-pants wolf is going to win! And you'll end up in the hospital!* She dropped back to all fours, suddenly looking uncharacteristically serious. *I don't want you to end up in the hospital.*

“Wh-what do I do?” Twilight asked. “I can’t give up now!”

That's easy, Twilight, Rainbow Dash said, grinning cockily. *Just use up all the extra energy. That's what's hurting you right now.*

Twilight stepped back, falling down on her rump. “But... But if I do that, you’ll be gone. I need your help, everypony!”

Rarity stepped forward, leaning down with a small smile. *But we aren't here, dear heart.*

“Of course you are!” Twilight protested.

Uh-uh, sorry, Twilight, Spike said. *We're just psychological manifestations of the energy you absorbed.*

Yeah! Rainbow Dash said. *We're mental constructs. There's only traces of us in all the energy you're holding in. Your mind is filling the gaps in and making us seem real. I mean, come on,* she continued, grinning lopsidedly, *would I ever actually say something like that?*

Twilight frowned and looked down. “No, I guess not,” she said. “I guess that means I really am all alone.”

Now, Twi, you know that ain't true, Applejack said, gesturing broadly to the side. *We're right there in the stands, rootin' for ya.*

Glancing over at the empty stands, Twilight saw her friends suddenly appear, statues, frozen like the rest of the world. Twilight could tell they were rooting as much as they could. Luna stood sternly over them, one wing outstretched over the semi-conscious group, her eyes boring into Twilight as if she could will the unicorn to victory. Pinkie somehow found the strength to hold one hoof aloft, supporting a giant foam finger, while Rainbow and Applejack had their hooves raised together, supporting each other. Rarity and Fluttershy both wore small smiles and were clearly watching closely. Even Spike, who had curled up into a small ball and gone to sleep, had one claw outstretched with a raised thumb.

And we believe in you, Twilight. Fluttershy walked up and gently pressed her muzzle against the wounded unicorn's neck.

We gave you our strength because we're your friends and we love you, darling, Rarity said. *The only way you could be all alone is if you refused to use it.*

"But I am using it!" Twilight protested.

The world seemed to shift around Twilight. Nothing that she could see changed, but it was as if everything became muted, darker. As if the quality of the sun's light was somehow strained. Twilight watched in confusion as her friends—the ones that were just in her head, she reminded herself—shook their heads sadly.

Taking a step forward, Applejack looked at Twilight sternly. *That's a lie, Twi. You've been lyin' this whole time.*

Lying? What did she mean by that?

Rainbow lifted into the air, looking down at Twilight. There was nothing particularly odd about the pegasus' expression, but to Twilight she seemed to be leveling a dire accusation before she had even spoken. *Why are you trying to lose, Twilight?* Rainbow Dash asked, sharply.

Twilight dropped to the ground, sitting down heavily. "I'm not, everypony!" she protested. "I've been doing my best!"

The comforting pressure of Fluttershy's muzzle disappeared from Twilight's neck. *You're not, Twilight,* Fluttershy softly said into Twilight's ear. *You know you're not.*

Come on, Twilight, Spike said. Unlike the other ponies, his expression was not accusatory or sad, just disappointed in a way that cut Twilight deeply. *When are you gonna stop playing around?*

Twilight's expression grew angry. "I'm not playing around!" she shouted, stamping a hoof.

Then why, Rarity said, walking slowly around Twilight, *haven't you used your real strength for this entire tournament?*

Why didn't ya prepare proper? Applejack asked, her question trailing smoothly from Rarity's. *Rainbow had to practically drag y'all to the library 'fore the semis.*

Even Trixie did extensive research on her opponents. The other ponies had stopped speaking and were watching Twilight silently. The voice she heard now was her own. It was loud and pervasive, as if it came from everywhere. *We've been copying spells. We kept ourselves from sleeping last night. We panicked instead of coming up with a plan for this match with Amarak. Why are we letting everypony else tell us what we need to do to win when we already know?*

All of the pain in Twilight's body flooded back over her, and she whimpered. Her limbs were all on fire and her head felt like it was going to explode. Oh, Celestia, it hurt.

What did the princess tell us when she took us under her wing?

The day of the Sonic Rainboom. The day of the test to enter the School for Gifted Unicorns. Nightmare Moon, Discord, the hydra, the dragons, even the tournament, nothing had ever frightened her as much as her magic going out of control that day. Until the princess appeared and reversed the effects, all Twilight could see from inside the ball of wild energy was her family and her future being taken from her. And it was all her fault.

Shakily, Twilight spoke, her voice quivering in agony. "She... She said I needed to learn to tame my power."

The voice changed again. It was no longer Twilight, or any of her friends, and yet it was all of them at once. *We've tamed it. Stop hurting yourself by trying to keep it reined in so tightly.*

"But I could really hurt somepony!"

You're hurting us right now! Forget the spells, Twilight. We've never needed them!

“Nopony can use magic without casting spells!”

We've never bothered to tell the princess that we learned to use telekinesis without any spell at all.

Twilight swallowed hard. That much was true enough. “It's... It's just telekinesis! Everypony—”

-has to cast a spell to use it. The voice was accusatory now. Except for us. Do you really think the princess doesn't know? We've never needed spells to use magic. The princess taught us to use spells to teach us control. We've learned it.

Twilight felt a familiar weight on her head, behind her horn. She knew without needing to verify that it would be a golden tiara, the symbol of the Element of Magic.

Use your magic—

“—the way the princesses use theirs,” Twilight muttered.

Lights and patterns danced behind Twilight's eyes. Hundreds of intricately-woven spells flashed through her mind. Beautiful. Intricate. Perfect. And all unnecessary. Twilight felt the pressure in her head ease.

Twilight stood again. Silence continued to reign as the world filled itself back in. Clouds, birds, the crowd in the stands, even Amarak, all gradually appeared as if they were being painted. “So what do I do?” Twilight asked the air.

Rainbow flew up, hovering over the frozen form of Amarak. *One big move and we can put this guy down for the count!* she said.

“But he's so strong,” Twilight said, protesting. “He's countered everything I've thrown at him, and I'm running out of counters for his attacks.”

So try something new! Pinkie said, exuberantly. *There's nothing more fun than a surprise! But it has to be a big surprise!*

“Something new?”

Y'all can do it, Twi. Applejack walked over to the wolf, looking him up and down. *Show him somethin' ain't nopony ever seen before.*

“Alright,” Twilight said. “Let’s do this.”

With a loud crack, the world came to life again. The specters of Twilight’s friends were gone, as was her tiara. The roar of the crowd filled Twilight’s ears. She screamed as searing arcs of energy flashed from her horn. The light streaming from her horn blinded her, and she squeezed her eyes shut as all of the borrowed energy streamed out, across the field.

The crowd roar died away into a confused mixture of gasps and shouting. The crackle of Amarak’s spells against Twilight’s shield died down. Twilight opened her eyes.

All 14 of them.

Instead of one unicorn, now seven stood arrayed in a row across the field. Twilight could see herself—all of her selves!—out of the corners of her eyes. It should have been confusing, but wasn’t.

The first Twilight was a cyan unicorn with a rainbow-striped mane. The second, an orange blonde. There was a yellow one, a white one, a pink one. Strangest of all was a purple-and green colt. They all had manes styled like Twilight’s, and all bore Twilight’s cutie mark. At the center of them all stood Twilight herself, strong, proud and neither feeling nor showing the pain that had been crippling her just a moment before.

Seven horns glowed brilliantly, and chaos reigned.

At the speed of thought, the seven ponies passed instructions back and forth. An illusory storm was summoned here while a parasprite swarm came from nowhere to bedevil Amarak there. The pink Twilight turned Amarak’s side of the field to cake frosting while the orange one effortlessly raised shields to block the wolf’s attacks. Water washed across the field, vanishing at the edge, drenching the wolf and bowling him over into the sticky sugar.

The wolf howled as he was battered from all sides by attacks. Every shield he raised was dispelled, every counter reflected back on him. Long seconds passed as the wolf was worn down under Twilight’s power. Twilight could see the bright red in his eyes dulling.

Let's finish this, she thought, and vicious grins appeared on the faces of all seven ponies. Seven powerful waves of energy exploded outward from seven horns, bathing the field in color.

After a moment, Twilight blinked a single pair of eyes. Her head was once again clear. She lofted up above the ground and fluttered sideways along the edge of her territory slowly, gauging what she had wrought on Amarok's.

The wolf's territory seemed to Twilight to be folded back on itself. Instead of the terrain and sky beyond, looking past Amarok Twilight could see herself. As she drifted right it was as if she was seeing the wolf from the left side. Amarok, himself, seemed confused and terrified. He looked as if he was trying to move, to gauge his location, but movement was proving futile. When he attempted to walk forward, he receded. A jump up brought him down into the surface of the ground and then back out again, frightened but seemingly none the worse for wear. Light bent itself in strange ways, making the entire far side of the competition field hard for Twilight to even look at.

"Twilight Sparkle!" the wolf roared. "Where are you? What did you do? I can't see or smell anyone anymore! Is this an illusion?!" He snapped angrily at the air.

Twilight experimentally snapped a telekinetic strike at the wolf. He howled as he was struck, raising his paw up to and through his side. From where Twilight stood, it looked as though he were twisted like a pretzel.

Amarok lashed out at random, little bolts of energy surging from his paws. Instead of following straight lines, they curved and warped, eventually disappearing at a 'vanishing point' somewhat above the wolf's head.

Twilight lashed at him with another telekinetic strike, drawing another yelp from the wolf. Twilight grinned, then cringed. Suddenly, everything hurt once again, and worse than before. Her muscles cramped. Her bones felt like they were on fire. Her hooves and horn felt raw, like damaged teeth. She painfully lowered herself to the ground.

Twilight could only watch as Amarok stopped his futile gnashing and stumbling about. Instead, the wolf's eyes glowed blindingly, brighter and brighter. He howled, and it turned into a scream as the distorted space in front of Twilight was filled with blinding red light. She shielded her eyes with one leg that screamed in agony as she moved it.

When the blinding light and ear-splitting scream faded, space before Twilight was back to normal. Amarok stood unsteadily, the light in his eyes faded to two pinpricks. He stumbled forward, kicking the shattered foliage out of the way.

“Very impressive, Twilight Sparkle,” he said, raspily. “You really are everything I’ve heard. Your princesses should be proud. But now...” He trailed off, raising a paw.

Twilight gritted her teeth and tried to raise a shield. A few sparks shot from her horn, then searing pain ripped through her head. She winced and waited for Amarok’s decisive strike to come. Instead, she heard a loud, pained bark.

Opening her eyes, Twilight saw Amarok lying on the ground, holding his paw up in pain. A few faint sparks dripped from his claws, but he, too, was at his limit. The glow was gone from his eyes, leaving only two unsettling empty spaces on either side of his white-furred muzzle.

Twilight coughed weakly. She curled her legs underneath her, ignoring the stabbing pains this produced. Her eyes watered as she watched Najstariot look between her and Amarok.

“I am,” Najstariot began slowly, a flat tone to her voice, “prepared to declare a draw and require a rematch.”

Sorry, everypony, Twilight thought, sadly. *I can’t beat him. Maybe I should just forfeit. I can’t take a rematch.* Tears began to soak Twilight’s face. She’d fought so hard and done so well, and she knew she should be more than proud of her performance. She’d fought Amarok to a standstill! No one else had ever even done that much to the wolf ruler. Even so, all she could feel was bitter disappointment at letting her friends down. She struck lightly at the ground in front of the wolf. She heard a weak cough and spitting in response as she closed her eyes and lay her head on the frozen muck.

Forfeit it was, then. “Y-Your M—” Twilight began, but was interrupted by a roar from the crowd. She looked up in confusion and saw Najstariot staring down at her, her reptilian eyes wide open in shock. Beyond the dumbstruck dragon queen, Twilight saw Amarok, his muzzle covered in specks of dirt, staring down at a small gouge in the ground before him.

A small gouge that Twilight had dug with her telekinetic strike. Twilight had just used her magic, which meant that Amarok was the first to no longer be able to cast.

The tournament was over. She had won.

A weak, coughing laugh came from the exhausted wolf, which Twilight could barely hear over the din of the crowd's cheers. Twilight watched as Najstariot slowly paced over to her, terror plain in the shapeshifted dragon's eyes.

"You," Najstariot hissed. "You've—"

"Well?" a weak voice interrupted from the opposite side of the field, in between wheezing laughs. Twilight and Najstariot both looked over at the filthy wolf, who had rolled over on his side. "Go on," he said, haltingly. "She won!"

Najstariot turned sharply, her expression smoothing over as she turned to face the crowd. "Friends!" she called out, her voice loud and confident once again. "The winner, and champion of this year's Moonstone Cup tournament... Twilight Sparkle!"

“C’mon, Fluttershy,” Applejack said. “Let her get some rest on ‘er own.”

It wasn’t that I wasn’t hungry. Far from it. In fact, I was starving, but I wasn’t going to let Twilight Sparkle have the satisfaction of helping out poor, helpless charity case Trixie any more than she already had. I watched them leave, then reached back into my saddlebags. They were lighter one notebook, which made checking for any stray bits easier.

First, scrap paper, which went straight into the fire. Twilight Sparkle didn’t need my notes on her and I didn’t want her to have them anyway, so I was glad that I’d already taken them out of my notebook. Bits of dried out flower petals and stems, remnants of forgotten snacks, also went straight into the fire. A rancid acorn, into the fire as well.

I sighed. I really wished that acorn had been fresh.

Finally, at the bottom of my bag, I triumphantly drew out a single bit. Not much, but it would get me an apple or some carrots, at least. I levitated my saddlebags back on, got up and headed out to find some food.

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It didn’t take long to find a store selling some nice-looking fruit. As expected, I ended up with a nice big apple. Food acquired, I then had to decide what to do with the rest of the day. My first thought was to go back to the castle and really take that nap that I had lied about earlier. My leg still hurt, although thanks to Fluttershy it was already feeling much better, and some more rest could only have helped. Instead, curiosity got the better of me. Maybe that idiot had wandered off by accident and my cart was back. It was a long shot, but it couldn’t hurt to check, and it was a way to kill time, so I turned to once again walk out of Canterlot and toward the tent city.

The streets were busy this time of day. I thought I had seen some ponies looking as if they recognized me, but I didn’t particularly want to encourage that, given my state, so I just kept walking. The apple was good and gone too quickly, but I was already in a better mood by the time I reached the square near the bridge out of Canterlot, where the matches were posted. This was the last day of the tournament, and so only one match was posted.

Naturally, I had been right about Twilight Sparkle’s competitor. Amarok had been the odds-on favorite to win the entire tournament. As she was no doubt finding out, I hadn’t

managed to come up with a credible plan to beat the wolf-king. I wasn't about to admit it, of course, but I had been fairly certain that he was going to beat me in any event. Losing to Amarok wouldn't have been quite the embarrassment that losing to Twilight Sparkle had been. She may have been from a respectable Canterlot family, and she may have been bearer of the Element of Magic, and she may have been Princess Celestia's personal student, but in the end she was just a librarian. Amarok, at least, would have been an opponent worth losing to.

While I was thinking, I had already crossed the bridge out of the city. Suddenly, walking back to the empty space where my cart was didn't seem like such a great idea. It was just gone, and I didn't think I was going to be able to deal with subjecting myself to that very well. He may not have been the smartest pony, but I had genuinely liked Hopscotch. It really hurt that he had just been...

"You alright, miss? Are you crying?" someone asked. I ignored him and kept walking. I should have headed back to the castle, but instead I found myself wandering away from the road, toward the competition grounds where the finals were being held. I couldn't tell you why. I suppose I just wanted to take my mind of everything that had happened.

As I approached the dragon grounds, I saw a small knot of ponies standing around near the field. As soon as I got close enough to make them out distinctly, it was obvious that it was Twilight Sparkle and her friends. I stopped. I couldn't exactly see what was going on until Twilight cast some sort of spell over her friends, who all promptly collapsed. What in Equestria was she doing?

A moment later, Princess Luna appeared. She leaned down to Twilight, and then she and Twilight's friends disappeared. Once the other ponies were gone, I could tell Twilight was brimming with energy. She had Drained five ponies and a baby dragon? Was she trying to kill herself?

I just shook my head and teleported to the opposite side of the bleachers, where she and her friends wouldn't be able to see me. I climbed up on the bleachers and found an empty spot toward the rear.

As expected, Twilight Sparkle was on the field, opposite Amarok. The wolf was even bigger than I had expected. Even from as far back as I was, he was intimidating.

The pre-match was very strange. Twilight Sparkle was obviously inexperienced at using Drain spells. Naturally, I never used them, and seeing Twilight acting mildly schizophrenic made me think I had made the right choice all along. She was nearly

glowing with power, however. I'd never seen anything like it from a unicorn. It was more than a little unsettling.

Najstariot made her announcements. I was more interested in what Amarok and Twilight Sparkle were saying to each other. It looked like Amarok was doing the expected posturing. I couldn't quite make out what Twilight was doing but it was certainly theatrical, teleporting practically into the wolf's mouth and then snapping her wings together sharply. She even made Amarok fall back on his haunches. I had to admit, I was impressed. It was much more showmanship than I'd ever seen out of her.

The match began, and I really don't know what to say about it. They were trading blow-for-blow with telekinetic strikes. Twilight Sparkle was using some form of shield spell I had never seen before and flying around attacking at the same time. She kept up the theatrics, too, doing little aerobatic stunts in the air. Where did all of this come from? Maybe Drain spells did have their advantages if they could help stuffy little Twilight Sparkle put on a show like this.

The bigger spells started coming out, then, with Amarok being tossed around by a Gravity spell while Twilight had her wings transformed into big metal slabs with some extremely nasty shapeshifting spell. Even as she was dragged to the ground, Amarok turned Twilight's side of the field into mud. *Well, I thought, this is where Twilight loses.*

Except, strangely, it wasn't. She somehow found the strength to use those big metal sheets attached to her back like a pair of giant knives, cutting through the muck. I really couldn't keep track of what was happening anymore, it was all moving too fast. In the next moments, somehow the entire field was covered with tangled vines and then frozen. Twilight's wings turned back to normal and she flew back into the air, and I felt extremely jealous. How had she managed to create such durable temporary wings? On the fly and after a long and tiring qualifying round, too!

Next, a huge stand of illusory trees appeared. I grumbled, and I wasn't the only one. Field-wide illusions like this were very effective at blocking one's opponent's view, but they also blocked the view for the crowd. We could see occasional flashes of light from inside the 'forest' and hear shouts, but that was it. After a while, a web of white energy appeared and the illusory forest seemed to disappear in pieces. I'd never seen a Dispel like that before, but it was certainly effective.

The two went back to lobbing energy bolts back and forth. Twilight was still throbbing with energy and it was even bleeding through her hooves, creating a strange purple aura on the frozen ground around her. The two traded a last pair of blows, and then all of a

sudden there was a blast of light from Twilight's horn that seemed to wash over her side of the field.

I don't quite know how to describe what was left when the light faded. There were seven ponies standing there. Twilight had somehow cloned herself, or created replicas of her friends, or... something. As fast as things had been moving before, it turned into havoc then. Amarok was being batted around like a rag doll. His side of the field changed several times. He was beaten around with telekinetic strikes, gravity effects and who knows what else.

I can't explain what happened after that. The match didn't last much longer. The clones disappeared, and at the same time Amarok's side of the field went black. Completely, utterly black. A few moments later, there was yet a third explosion, and the blackness disappeared.

They both collapsed. It was incredible. Twilight Sparkle had somehow fought Amarok—Amarok with nine Cup victories, no losses and no draws, Amarok the ruler of the north, Amarok who saw himself as a peer of Princess Celestia—to a standstill. I couldn't believe it. I was still trying to comprehend what I had seen during the match, what Twilight had done. How did she have that much power? Even having Drained her friends, it was impossible. And yet, here I was, seeing exactly that. She hadn't lost.

And then she won. After all that, she still had enough strength to throw dirt in Amarok's eye with her telekinesis. She won. Twilight Sparkle won. I had seen it all happen. No tricks. No lies. I didn't know where she had learned those spells or gained that kind of ability, but she had beaten possibly the most powerful magician in the world, other than the princesses themselves. It all made the Ursa Minor seem kind of petty.

There was cheering and applause and ponies flooding on to the field. I just sat there. I wasn't sure I could move. Everything just felt numb.

"Excuse me, miss, are you alright?" a voice asked.

"Fine," I said, staring down at the bleachers. A golden horseshoe at the end of a long white leg came into view, and I looked up at Princess Celestia.

She smiled at me. I think I just stared back. "You must be Trixie. It's good to finally meet you. Your matches earlier were very impressive."

"Thank you," I managed to say.

“Would you like to walk with me?” she asked. Her smile could have lit up the sky. “I’ve heard you’ve had a run of bad luck and I was wondering if there wasn’t some way to help.”

Somehow, I stumbled to standing and followed the princess down to the ground and away from what I had just witnessed.

The next moments passed in a confused blur for Twilight. The noise of the crowd was deafening. One moment she was staring at Najstariot's leg, the next her view was blocked by a horde of cheering fans. Twilight snapped her wings together and drew in even more tightly on herself, shaking as hooves, talons and paws thundered around her. Nothing was making much sense, but Twilight clung desperately to the last strands that remained of her rational mind. The match was over. She had won.

A strangely familiar gryphon appeared from nowhere, towering over much of the rest of the crowd. The gryphon asked Twilight something, clearly a question, but the exhausted unicorn couldn't make sense of the words. A loud squawk pierced Twilight's ears like a hot needle, after which the crowd seemed to calm slightly, drawing back.

"My friends," she mumbled into the ground. "Where are my friends?"

A long shadow fell across Twilight, and the crowd noise died away to a murmur. "We thank thee, Lady Gianna," the shadow said, in a passable impression of Princess Luna's voice. "Your friends are waiting for you in the stands, still, Twilight Sparkle," the shadow continued, kindly. "We should repair to the castle with all haste."

"Thank you," Twilight mumbled as she curled into an even smaller ball. She lowered her head to the ground, the still-frigid dirt alleviating some of the throbbing pain. Twilight heard a few more words pass between the gryphon and the voice that might have been the princess', and then everything went dark.

Twilight blinked as a soft, warm light washed over her. The half-frozen ground was gone, replaced with a soft bed and pillow. The crowd noise, too, had vanished, and all Twilight could hear was the soft crackle of a fire and the snores of sleeping ponies. As her eyes adjusted to the softer light, familiar stone walls and two rows of beds revealed themselves. She was back in the room at the castle she was sharing with her friends. She turned her head, grimacing at the painful effort, to see Princess Luna standing over her.

"How are you feeling?" Luna asked, gently.

Twilight hurt. Both her mind and her body had been punished well beyond anything she had ever experienced before. Every part of her felt bruised and beaten. Her forehead and horn were uncomfortably hot while her ears and hooves felt frigid. She pulled her legs in tightly and shivered.

"M fine, princess," she lied.

Luna frowned. "You do not seem 'fine' to me, Twilight Sparkle," she said.

Twilight shivered again. "Just a bit cold," she mumbled. "Horn hurts."

A soft glow surrounded Luna's horn, and she leaned down to gently touch Twilight's side with the tip. Twilight shivered, partly from the cold, partly from apprehension, then hissed softly as gentle warmth flooded through her. The pains dulled, as did the cold feeling in her extremities. The painful heat in Twilight's head and horn faded as well. She nickered softly as sore muscles unwound and the throbbing in her head abated.

"That should allow you to rest," Luna said.

"Thank you, princess," Twilight said, absently, sleep already beginning to overtake her. She watched through one half-closed eye as Luna smiled and turned to exit the room.

"Princess?" Twilight asked as her eyes closed completely.

"Yes?"

"Did I do alright? Are you proud of me?"

A third voice spoke up in the darkness, warm and familiar. "You did wonderfully, Twilight. We are both so proud of you."

Twilight smiled gently as she was swallowed up by sleep.

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"Twilight?" a voice said.

Twilight groaned. "Go away, Spike," she said, petulantly, swinging a hoof absently in the direction of the voice. Instead of brushing a flexible dermal plate, however, Twilight's hoof collided with something soft and hairy, drawing a small squeal in response. Blinking her eyes open, Twilight saw Fluttershy standing next to her, rubbing her shoulder.

Twilight sat up sharply. "Oh, Fluttershy, I'm so sorry!" she said, suddenly awake.

The demure little pegasus smiled weakly from behind her mane. "It's alright, Twilight," she said, even as she shied back a step. "You were tossing and turning. How are you feeling?"

Twilight leaned up, gracelessly shoving her mane back with one hoof. She was still sore, but more the sort of soreness that comes after strenuous exercise, rather than feeling as though she had been beaten within an inch of her life. “Better, thanks,” she said.

Fluttering her wings and stretching her forelegs, Twilight looked around. Everypony else was apparently already awake. Pinkie was somehow playing cat’s cradle with Spike, cheerfully oblivious to the little dragon’s unnerved expression. Rarity and Applejack were sitting on AJ’s bed, softly discussing something that seemed to revolve around Applejack’s hat. Rainbow Dash was lying on her front on her bed, quietly reading a paperback novel that lay open in front of her. Finally, Twilight saw Trixie once again lying in front of the fireplace, quietly looking into the flames and away from everypony else.

Leaning over, Twilight asked Fluttershy in a whisper, “Trixie’s still here?”

“Oh, um, no. Well, not exactly,” Fluttershy replied, whispering as well. “Actually, I woke up when Princess Celestia brought her back. She went to watch your match after all.”

“But what’s she doing back here?”

“Well,” the pegasus said, raising a hoof to her mouth. “She said that the princess was arranging a new cart for her but she needed to stay here for another—”

“You know, Trixie can hear you both,” an acerbic voice spoke up from near the fireplace. Everything stopped as all eyes turned to Trixie, who still had her back turned to everypony else. Fluttershy squeaked in embarrassment.

“Oh, Trixie,” Twilight said, abashed. “I’m sorry, we were just—”

“Yes, yes, you were just. I know. Everypony is just.” Trixie glared over her shoulder. The expression on her face was not one of anger, but rather of exhaustion and resignation. “Trixie is tired of ponies being just. If you have something to say to Trixie, say it.”

Twilight just looked at the blue unicorn for a moment. She felt her earlier anger rising again, and grimaced as the blood pounding in her ears made her headache start to return. She bit back a nasty comment and tried to keep her face neutral. Trixie watched her with a hard expression. “Well, I just wanted to say thank you!” Twilight finally said, in what she hoped was a pleasant tone.

The tension in Trixie's face eased, leaving her staring blankly at Twilight. She opened her mouth to say something, and then closed it again. Finally, she turned to look back at the fire, silently.

With a small frown, Twilight leaned over the bed to her saddlebags, which were tossed carelessly on the floor next to her. The dull throb in her horn reminded Twilight to be sparing with her magic, so instead she stepped down to the floor, carefully. She flipped the bag open with her hoof and reached in to grasp Trixie's notebook awkwardly in her teeth.

She trotted up next to Trixie, book held in her teeth. Twilight attempted to say something around the book, then dropped it to the floor. Trixie turned her head to look, first at the book and then at Twilight.

"Thank you, Trixie," Twilight repeated, softly.

Trixie looked down at the book again, then turned away. "You're welcome," she finally said, into the fireplace. "I'm glad somepony got some use out of it."

"Not just for the book," Twilight said. She gingerly lay down on the rug in front of the fireplace, and Trixie shifted over to give her room. "Thank you for trusting us when you needed help."

Trixie's expression grew sour again. "It's not like I had much of a choice. If that idiot hadn't stolen my cart, Trixie would already be on her way away from here."

Twilight could feel the throb building behind her forehead again. "So," she said, willing herself to continue speaking pleasantly, "you'll be here for today anyway. And Fluttershy said you needed to stay off that leg. Would you like to join us for lunch before the award ceremony?"

A cloud passed over Trixie's face and she looked as if she was going to begin yelling. Twilight felt all of her abused muscles start to go taut. After a moment of silence, however, the blue unicorn seemed to sag and she simply lay back down, resting her muzzle on her front hooves. "Fine," she said quietly, then went silent.

Twilight, too, lapsed into silence, and the two unicorns lay on the rug, both looking into the fireplace. The flames danced in front of Twilight. They reminded her of the flames that had danced in her mind after she had touched Zlatan's power, and to a lesser extent Spike's. There was power here, too, in the hypnotic flames. It tickled her horn. It was nothing like anything she had felt before, but maybe that was because she had been

getting more practice at drawing on other sources of power the past few days. She could almost reach out and touch it...

“Twilight!” a worried voice shouted, cutting through the darkness. Twilight blinked, her eyes watering from the pounding headache, and a yellow blur in front of her resolved itself into Fluttershy’s worried face, looking at her through a long, black tube. As Twilight’s vision cleared, the dark tunnel broke up and faded, and she saw her other friends all looking at her with concern. Even Trixie seemed worried, though she had moved to the other side of the room to give Twilight’s friends room.

“What happened?” Twilight asked, thickly.

“You just fell over on your side,” Fluttershy said, her wings twitching in agitation.

Twilight clambered to her hooves, dizzily. Her headache was already abating. Spike, the pegasi and the earth ponies all seemed somewhat relieved. Rarity, however, seeing that Twilight was alright, let her look of concern change to one of mild anger.

“Twilight Sparkle, what in Equestria was that?” she asked, sharply.

“What was what, sugarcube?” Applejack asked, perplexed.

Rarity looked over at Applejack, then back at Twilight with an accusatory look. “She just tried to use her magic. For something quite large, too.” She looked over her shoulder. “You felt it too, Trixie, did you not?”

Trixie nodded back, with a mild expression.

“Well, Twilight? Would you mind sharing what was important enough to knock yourself for a loop like that?”

Twilight blinked. She had just been watching the fire, hadn’t she? “I didn’t do anything!” she protested.

Rarity sat down, her expression hardening. “Twilight Sparkle,” she said, her voice quiet and brittle. “Just because I am not a... a very powerful magician like you and Trixie, don’t think you can treat me like an idiot.”

Blinking, Twilight leaned back, raising a hoof in protest. “Rarity, I’m not treating you like an idiot! Really, I didn’t do anything! I was just watching the fire, and...” And what? There had been something there, in the fire. “I don’t know what happened.”

Trixie snorted and walked back over to sit down next to the fire. Rarity simply shook her head, her expression returning to one of concern. "Twilight, please be careful. These last few days have been very taxing for you and I am just worried that you are going to hurt yourself. We all are." Twilight watched a chorus of quiet nods come from their friends.

After a moment, Twilight nodded, with a small smile. "I will, Rarity, I promise." Her smile grew a bit broader. "Besides, Amarak was the last match. There's nothing left but the awards ceremony this evening!"

Somehow, miraculously, the tension in the room finally eased after this. Conversations resumed and the tension behind Twilight's eyes finally eased. Even Trixie was eventually immersed in a low conversation with Rarity that Twilight couldn't quite make out, but seemed to be hat-related. Twilight walked back over to her bed, quietly, and sank back down into the mattress. She was still feeling worn out from earlier, but maybe before they headed out for lunch it wouldn't hurt to take a short...

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"...turnover? Come on, Twilight, wake up!"

Blinking, Twilight sat up. She was still groggy, but felt much better than she had earlier. Spike was standing next to the bed, holding a small paper bag. "We brought you back some lunch," the little dragon said, offering the bag up.

Twilight reached up to rub her eyes. The shadows on the wall had moved significantly. How long had she been out for? Her friends were still milling about, getting settled back down in the shared room.

"What time is it?" Twilight asked, groggily.

"Just after four," Spike said as he hopped up on the bed to sit next to Twilight. "We tried to wake you up to go with us but you were out cold."

With a giggle, Twilight reached out to ruffle Spike's plates. "Well, now you know how it feels."

Spike grinned and set the bag down. "Yeah, yeah."

Fluttershy came up next to the bed, behind Spike. "Are you going to be alright for the award ceremony, Twilight?" she asked, softly.

With a quick nod, Twilight leaned down to nose the bag open. “Mmhmm!” she mumbled, around a large apple turnover. “Mm fimming m—Mmph.” Twilight bit off a big piece and dropped the turnover back in the bag. “I’m feeling much better now, thank you,” she said thickly as she chewed. “It’s in about an hour, right?”

“Yep!” an exuberant voice exclaimed, as Pinkie bounced over to Twilight. “This is so exciting! I told you you were the best unicorn ever, Twilight! And you are! And you’re gonna get an award that says so!”

“That is *not* what the Cup says,” Trixie said from across the room, with a snort.

“Oh. Well, it should!” Pinkie looked thoughtful, then gasped. “I know! We’ll have a ‘Best Unicorn Ever’ party when we get back to Ponyville!”

“But what about your other unicorn friends, Pinkie?” Rarity said, pointedly.

Pinkie screwed up her face for a moment, then grinned broadly. “Then we’ll have lots of guests of honor! Because really all of my unicorn friends are the best unicorns ever!” A moment later, Rarity, Twilight and Trixie found themselves swept into an impromptu group hug by the syrupy earth pony.

“Trixie... can’t breathe...”

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Later, a small procession exited the castle by the service entrance. The award ceremony was being held at the grand ballroom, and could be seen easily from where they stood. Twilight grinned broadly, and the group began walking to join the line to enter. Soon, with smart salutes from the guards, they stepped inside.

The grand ballroom was once again appointed as it had been for the opening ceremony, rows of tables with cardboard place cards. Many of the tables were already occupied, and as they entered Twilight could see many ponies and other creatures she recognized. Gianna, dressed in a few pieces of ceremonial armor that seemed entirely out of place, had a table with a small entourage of gryphons. Another table had a creature that looked very like Zlatan, but diminutive, barely larger than a pony. Off to the side, near one of the windows and away from all of the tables, Amarak sat up, red eyes watching the entire room sharply.

After a moment, Rarity called out that she had found their table. Twilight and the rest joined her, finding a large table with eight places and a neatly lettered place card reading

“Twilight Sparkle and Group, Trixie and Group”. Trixie groaned and rolled her eyes, but nevertheless found a spot like the rest of the group.

Looking around from the table, Twilight saw more beings she recognized. Here, Shahnaz was speaking to a female ghul in a silk shawl. There, a unicorn roughly Twilight’s age that had been near her during the trials sat with her parents, talking and laughing.

A giddy feeling began to creep up the back of Twilight’s neck. In just a few minutes, she would be receiving an award that just five days ago would have seemed completely out of reach. She had competed with and bested some of the most powerful magicians in the world. After this evening, in comparison even the celebrity she already ‘enjoyed’ would be nothing at all.

Just for a moment, at this time and in this place, that seemed okay. Twilight found herself grinning hugely.

“T-T-Twilight! Twilight!” Pinkie’s keening voice cut through Twilight reverie, and the unicorn looked over at her friend, alarmed.

Pinkie was leaning heavily on the table as her legs wobbled underneath her. “M-my knees! My knees! They’re super-duper pinchy!” Everyone but Trixie became immediately alarmed. Trixie opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. All of Twilight’s friends looked quietly past the purple unicorn, notwithstanding Pinkie’s epileptic shaking, as a long shadow fell across the table. Twilight turned.

Standing over the table, fiery mane flowing in a nonexistent wind, stood Najstariot in her imposing pony form.

“Y-Your Majesty,” Twilight stammered.

“I would like to speak with you after this ceremony is over, Twilight Sparkle,” said the dragon queen, emerald eyes drilling into Twilight’s.

“Alone.”

I walked with Princess Celestia for quite some time. She asked how things had been going during the tournament. I tried to put the best face on it, but what was I supposed to do? I'd lost without even placing, my cart had been stolen and I hurt my leg. It was not my finest hour. She just nodded quietly and asked what I recognized as a few leading questions, but I answered them anyway. I guess it felt good to tell somepony what had happened, and I was still a bit dazed after watching Twilight Sparkle's last match.

"So, you must be hungry," she said. "It sounds like you haven't eaten in days."

Well, that was hardly true. I had an apple. "I've eaten," I said, which was technically accurate. "I wouldn't... mind a snack, though."

Celestia looked amused and I got the idea that she'd seen right through me. "I thought about sending some fruit down to the room you all are staying in last night when you came to the palace," she said. "But it seemed like you might take that as an imposition."

I was a bit surprised. "Wait, you knew I was there?"

She laughed, a pleasant, tinkling sound. "Of course. I know everything that goes on in the palace. I thought it was very kind of Fluttershy to tend to your injury, and of Twilight and her friends to put you up."

I nodded, quietly. It really was. I couldn't attribute any bad intent to Fluttershy and after what I'd seen I wasn't sure Twilight Sparkle would even bother being passive-aggressive. Maybe she really was sincere. That almost seemed worse.

"Let's go back to the palace," she said. "We'll get a snack and I'll see what can be arranged for a new cart for you."

My mouth kind of fell open. A whole new cart? I was about to say something when the familiar feeling of teleportation came over me. The next moment, Princess Celestia and I were standing in the royal kitchen at Canterlot. Unicorn servants dressed in white were shuffling around, moving around dishes, folding tablecloths and who knows what else.

"Hello?" she called out. "Medium?"

"Busy, gimme a minute!" a rough, Manhattan-accented voice called from the kitchen. I thought for a moment that whoever it was mustn't have recognized Princess Celestia's voice, then he shouted again. "Kay, Celestia, whaddya want?"

Celestia shouted back. “Snacks for two hungry ponies!”

I heard some muttering, and a short moment later one of the unicorn servants brought two small bowls full of delicious-smelling salad out of the kitchen, courtesy of the mysterious ‘Medium’. They were set down on a table near us and we began eating. Rather, the Princess began eating. I sort of pushed my salad around a bit, although I had a few bites and it was very good even though I didn’t usually like fennel.

“I found Medium Raw at a little Prancian restaurant in Manehattan,” she said between bites. “He really is an amazing chef.” She smiled a bit impishly. “And I like his attitude.”

I didn’t know what to make of this, really, so I just had another bite of salad. It’s frustrating to be so hungry and have your stomach knotted up. Instead of eating, I looked around the kitchen. The servants had magically found things to do away from where we were sitting. I supposed that the princess often held unofficial personal meetings here.

“So,” she said after she finished her bowl of salad, “I think I mentioned something about locating a new cart for you?”

I nodded quietly. I’d already been homeless once and that was quite enough for me, but I didn’t want to seem desperate.

She smiled. “I think that can be arranged, Trixie,” she said kindly. “Although in exchange, I was wondering if you could do something for me?”

Oh, yes, of course. Here it came. It was almost reassuring, in a way. I took another bite of salad and waited for the inevitable demands.

“Twilight Sparkle told me a little about your show in Ponyville, and I’ve heard about some of your other performances,” she began. Great. Was she going to tell me to retire from being a traveling entertainer, or go apologize to all the ponies I’d upset?

My worry must have shown, because she gave me that impish grin again. “They sounded wonderfully entertaining, and so I wanted to ask if you would perform at this year’s Summer Sun Celebration, here in Canterlot.”

And there it went. Of all the things I had been expecting, that was not one of them.

“Excuse me?” I coughed around a piece of rocket. This was good news, right? Actually, it was great news. So why was my stomach knotting back up? “You want Trixie to perform at the Summer Sun Celebration? Are you serious?”

“Absolutely!” she said. Her smile softened as she continued. “Although you may want to hold back on humiliating your audience this time. I’d suggest finding some confederates.”

“I... Trixie thinks she can do that,” I said slowly.

“Wonderful!” Princess Celestia said, looking entirely pleased. “Well, that’s settled. Unfortunately, I don’t think I’ll be able to arrange your new cart until tomorrow. Would you mind staying with Twilight and her friends for one more night?” She glanced down at my mostly-intact salad in an obvious way. “In any case, Medium is arranging some very nice dishes for dinner at the award ceremony this evening. It would be a shame if you missed it.”

I wasn’t sure. Did I want to stay with Twilight Sparkle and her friends again? Not especially. On the other hand, it wouldn’t hurt if Fluttershy took another look at my leg. I also wasn’t really sure about asking Princess Celestia for a private room or the bits to rent one. She was already offering plenty.

The Great and Powerful Trixie might well have asked for a private room on top of everything in exchange for a performance commitment another time, but this was Princess Celestia, not the mayor of some half-docked town in the middle of nowhere. I also wasn’t exactly feeling very great and powerful anyway.

“That’s fine,” I said. “Thank you.” I think I even meant it.

The award ceremony was just as formal an affair as the opening ceremony had been. A string quartet played what Twilight recognized as a Lapwing piece, the Stalliongrad-born pegasus composer being a favorite of Princess Celestia's. Unicorn waiters in suit and tie roamed the floor, taking drink orders and offering a choice of meals.

"No hay fries?" Rainbow Dash asked, in a pained voice.

The waiter's tone remained impressively even as he repeated himself for the third time. "No ma'am, the choices for this evening are gobi masala and hong shao qiezi."

Leaning over the table, Rainbow narrowed her eyes. "I don't know what those are," she said slowly, in a tone that suggested that what she really wanted to say was, "I challenge you to a race around the world."

Twilight sighed and gestured at the waiter. "Pardon my friend. She'll have the gobi masala."

"Very good, ma'am."

"Hey, wait—" Rainbow began, but the waiter seemed entirely ready to move on. She groaned and leaned over to Twilight as the waiter finally collected the rest of the group's orders. "So what did you order me?" she asked suspiciously.

With a giggle, Twilight leaned over and replied. "It's cauliflower in a tasty sauce. You'll like it."

"Oh!" Rainbow sat back, smiling in relief. "Okay, yeah, I like cauliflower. Why didn't he just say so?"

"Well," Twilight said, keeping her voice low as the waiter finished taking orders and walked off to the next table. "They're both pretty well known dishes, so it really just comes down to whether you're in the mood for Marwari food or Qilinese—"

Shaking her head and gesturing broadly with her forehooves, Rainbow cut Twilight off. "Wait, hold on. I eat Qilinese takeout all the time and I've never heard of either of those."

"That, Rainbow Dash," Rarity said off-hoofedly as she watched the string quartet, "is because there is no good Qilinese food to be found in Ponyville. Or Cloudsdale either, I

would imagine.” She turned and looked at Rainbow Dash mildly. “Let me guess, almond-fried turnip and chop suey?”

“Heck yeah!” Rainbow replied enthusiastically. “Oh, and fried dumplings.”

Rarity rolled her eyes and gestured dramatically with her left forehoof. “Counsel rests.”

Applejack chuckled. “Shoot, Rainbow, even I had Marwari food before.”

Sulkily, Rainbow Dash sat down on her haunches and crossed her forelegs. Twilight giggled, then quickly stifled herself after a wry look from Spike. The little dragon gestured quietly to the side. Twilight turned to look in the direction he had pointed to see Trixie standing somewhat away from the table. She looked lost.

“Trixie?” Twilight asked tentatively. “What about you? What kind of food do you like?”

The blue unicorn started at her name, and turned to edge closer to the table. “Food?” she asked. “Oh, um... I ordered the eggplant. I haven’t had good Qilinese food in quite a while.”

“Are there any other kinds of food you like?” Fluttershy asked with a small smile.

“Oh, well,” Trixie said, pushing her mane back and regaining her bearings. “Trixie has had the opportunity to eat at some of the finest restaurants in Equestria, and...” She trailed off and looked at the others standing around the table. Twilight watched as Trixie deflated once again.

“Actually,” she said, her voice once again losing its crisp lilt. “I really just like nice fresh grass.” She paused, looking a bit downcast. “Alfalfa cubes travel well so they’re mostly what I eat when I’m on the road. Any fresh food is a treat.”

Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie both made elaborate faces, and looks of sympathy appeared on the rest of the group.

“Alfalfa cubes? Eww!” Pinkie said. “Those are gross! You should try taking a few bags of concentrate pellets instead, they’re waaaaaay tastier. I mean, I’d rather have cupcakes or even hay but cupcakes go stale pretty fast and you’d need somepony to help you haul hay bales since they’d take up your whole cart otherwise and...”

Twilight tuned out Pinkie’s rambling as across the room the dais was approached by the trio behind the Moonstone Cup tournament. Their retinues took up position behind the

dais, and Twilight watched them speaking softly amongst themselves. A sidelong glance from Princess Celestia that Twilight was obviously meant to notice told Twilight all she needed to know about the subject of the conversation. She grimaced and brought her attention back to the table.

“...and little dried fish!”

Noises of disgust came from the rest of the table and Twilight grimaced again.

“What?” Pinkie asked. “They’re what gryphons used to use as field rations for their war expeditions!”

Trixie glared at Pinkie and spoke through clenched teeth. “Trixie is not a gryphon.”

“I know that, silly! But if you were, you totally could eat little dried fish.”

“Well,” Rarity spoke up sharply. Twilight looked over to see that Rarity’s white had gained a decidedly greenish tinge. “That is all very fascinating, Pinkie, and you have certainly helped me retain my girlish figure because I no longer have any appetite.”

“Well, shoot, I’ll have yours too, then. Wouldn’t want good vittles to go to waste.”

Rarity glared at Applejack, who simply grinned back.

“Honestly, do you two ever stop flirting?” Trixie fired off, archly. All eyes turned on Trixie, and for a moment silence reigned. That moment ended when Rainbow Dash collapsed in gales of laughter. Soon Pinkie began laughing as well, and then Twilight gave in. Even Fluttershy gave a small, embarrassed titter. Applejack and Rarity each made unimpressed noises and looked away from each other. Spike simply looked stricken.

“Oh man! You guys!” Rainbow said haltingly between laughs and gulps of air. “That’s so perfect! Oh! You should see yourselves!” She went non-verbal again for a moment before continuing. “So... So, when’s the wedding?” Rainbow once again collapsed in a fit of laughter, her head vanishing below the edge of the table.

Rarity made a single acidic remark.

The table went silent again at the comment, an utterly mortified Rainbow Dash sticking her head back up over the edge of the table.

“Is... Is that bad?” Fluttershy asked quietly, a red tinge rising on her cheeks.

Rainbow Dash sputtered at the small grins her other friends were hiding behind their hooves. “That’s... That’s not even... You can’t say that!”

“I dunno, Rainbow,” Applejack said, doing her best to hold back her own laughter. “I think she’s got you pegged there.”

Spike leaned over to Twilight, a perplexed look on his face. “Her hoof?” he whispered. “I don’t get it.”

• • •

The award ceremony itself was a dignified affair. Celestia led off with a short speech about the importance of magic in the world, to which Twilight paid rapt attention in spite of having heard much of it many times before. After she spoke, two of her guardponies levitated a series of small black velvet boxes to the dais, setting them down toward the front. Celestia gracefully stepped from the front of the dais as al-Dhi’b stepped up.

“Zlatan! Ludilo!” the old king boomed. “Step forward!”

The small dragon-like being that Twilight had thought looked like Zlatan stepped from his table and walked toward the dais. *Of course*, she thought, *he shrank himself to fit inside*. On the other side of the room a second dragon, a diminutive green creature that looked like a decrepit version of Spike, walked to the dais and took up position next to Zlatan.

One of the velvet boxes floated up from the dais in front of al-Dhi’b and the lid opened to reveal two shiny, yellow-white medallions. Al-Dhi’b reached inside and withdrew the two medallions. Zlatan and Ludilo bowed their heads, and Twilight watched as al-Dhi’b reverently looped the ribbons over the two dragons’ necks.

“I present third place winners!” Al-Dhi’b thundered as the pair of dragons turned to face the crowd. “Well done, you both! Prize purse of two thousand bits also yours.” They bowed their heads and polite but sincere applause came from the crowd. Twilight clapped her hooves together as well; if Ludilo was as strong as Zlatan, they both deserved significant respect.

After the applause faded the two returned to their tables. Twilight looked over to the side of the room where she had seen Amarok. The huge wolf sat on his haunches, idly scratching himself with a hindpaw. He pivoted his head slightly and grinned toothily

across the room at Twilight. She smiled back a bit uncertainly, then turned her attention back to the dais.

“Amarok! Step forward!”

The wolf sauntered up to the dais as a second box levitated before al-Dhi’b. Some muttered words that Twilight couldn’t hear passed between the two canine rulers, then the box opened and al-Dhi’b reached in and withdrew another shiny medallion, this one made of some greyish metal. Amarok sat up straight and a glow surrounded the medallion, which floated over and looped itself around his neck.

“Second place winner! Well done, King Amarok! Prize purse of five thousand bits also yours.”

A brief burst of applause was cut off by loud laughter from the wolf. Twilight blinked as Amarok grinned over at her again. “I’ve been waiting for this!” he shouted, mirthfully. “It’s about time.” A second short and unsure spate of applause mixed with nervous laughter sounded as Amarok resumed his spot at the side of the ballroom.

A thrill of excitement ran up Twilight’s spine. This was it. All of her friends—even Trixie!—were watching her expectantly, and she smiled nervously back.

“Twilight Sparkle! Step forward!”

Twilight’s knees felt like they had turned to jelly as she stepped away from the table and approached the dais. The look of approval and overwhelming pride on Princess Celestia’s face would have been reward enough, and even the masked scowl worn by Najstariot was not enough to dampen Twilight’s spirits.

She watched as the last of the velvet boxes floated into the air. It opened, revealing a small gold medallion with an inset cluster of rubies in the shape of a parrot. Around the outside of the medallion Twilight could make out the medallion’s famous inscription, ‘Scientia, aere perennius’.

“First,” al-Dhi’b bellowed, “award for winner of young adult bracket. Mimic Medallion established after hundred and fiftieth tournament by pony wizard Mimic to inspire young magicians. For first time ever medallion go to winner of tournament!”

The applause was a thunderous roar as al-Dhi’b carefully slid the ribbon over Twilight’s neck. Twilight felt herself flush with pride as the weight settled around her shoulders.

“Now... Friends, we present... Moonstone Cup!”

The space before Twilight’s eyes seemed to split, a shimmering gap appearing between her and the dais, and she stepped back. The rent in space distorted, gaining depth and definition, and with a flash coalesced into the shape of the coveted Cup itself. Gasps and soft applause came from the crowd as the Cup appeared, floating in midair.

The Moonstone Cup was an elaborate affair. The trophy itself was a golden bowl on a thick stem, elaborate runes etched all over every surface. The ‘base’, such as it was, was a tall ziggurat-like pillar of golden rings, each larger than the last. Each ring had names etched on it; Twilight recognized many of the names as the winners of the previous tournaments. On the smallest ring at the very top the names were barely recognizable, etched in an ancient hand and in an alphabet that was centuries out of date. The bottom ring had the most recent names on it. Altogether, the entire trophy was somewhat taller than Twilight herself, and it shone as if it had been polished for hours.

Twilight watched, eyes wide, as next to the name of the previous year’s winner a green glow rose on the surface of the bottom ring. She glanced up at the sound of a keening wail from Najstariot, whose eyes glowed the same green. After a moment, with a small flash a simple inscription was added to the litany of names on the Cup.

’Twilight Sparkle’.

Deafening applause rose. Even over the din Twilight could hear Pinkie and Rainbow Dash crowing, and she turned to look at her friends. Her smile grew as she looked over to see that Princess Luna had joined their table. A loud “Huzzah!” was added to the general cacophony.

Twilight felt breath on her neck and she turned her head to see the Princess’ beaming face next to hers.

“Well done, Twilight.”

• • •

An hour passed, then another. Twilight enjoyed a delicious meal in the company of good friends. Even Trixie was congratulatory, more so after she had devoured her plate of red-cooked eggplant.

After eating, Twilight walked the floor, congratulating her fellow winners and greeting people she had met during the tournament. Gianna and Shahnaz were both eager to say

hello, the former apologetic, the latter wanting to know what books she had written. She was approached by a number of unicorns who wanted to know if she was taking on students. One small unicorn filly very earnestly asked if she was a princess and was disappointed when she said no.

Eventually, as dinners were winding down and some had started to leave, she found herself shadowing Princess Celestia, who was making her own rounds. She had not forgotten Najstariot's ominous greeting and was grateful that the princess was nearby.

Particularly when the green and red 'pony' appeared, seemingly from nowhere, next to the duo.

"Twilight Sparkle," she said, flatly. "As I said earlier, I would like to speak with you in private."

"I—" Twilight began, but was quickly cut off as Celestia spoke up, evenly.

"Of course, cousin," Celestia said, winningly. "However, would you be so kind as to accompany me and my student to my quarters first?"

A dark look passed over Najstariot's face. "What are you doing?" she hissed, under her breath.

"We will speak about this in private," Celestia responded in an identical and slightly clipped tone. "Your majesty." In a louder voice, she said, "I think my sister should join us as well."

Twilight could see anger simmering behind Najstariot's eyes, but the dragon queen smiled. "Of course, cousin," she said in a saccharine tone. "Princess Luna?" she boomed. "Would you join us?"

A moment later, Luna walked up, having excused herself from a conversation with a knot of gryphons. "Cousin," she said evenly, bowing her head to Najstariot.

"Cousin," came the response. Najstariot's voice fairly dripped venom, and Luna narrowed her eyes.

"Everypony," Princess Celestia said loudly. "I apologize, but we must excuse ourselves for a moment. Please feel free to avail yourselves of our hospitality in the meantime. We will rejoin you as soon as possible."

Celestia's horn glowed. There was a flash of light, and when Twilight's vision cleared she saw that the four were standing in Celestia's private chambers.

"Alright, Celestia," Najstariot said, sharply. "What do you want?"

Celestia turned on Najstariot and Twilight saw an unfamiliar expression on her face: Anger. Her eyes were narrowed and her lips set into a thin little frown. "Najstariot, how dare you demand anything of my student?"

The other three in the room were taken aback. Twilight edged away from Najstariot and toward Celestia, who extended a protective wing over the unicorn.

"I have been patient, cousin," Celestia said, softly. "I have given you the latitude that is your right, both as my counterpart and as an official of this tournament. I have stood back and let you officiate as you saw fit because I trust Twilight Sparkle. You've abused my hospitality and I overlooked that because I want to keep the peace between our people. The tournament is over, Najstariot. You're now a foreign dignitary in my country. If you have something to say to Twilight, you can say it here."

"I—" Najstariot began. She paused and calmed herself, the anger washing out of her expression. "I apologize, Your Majesty," she said in a syrupy tone. "But I would prefer if I could speak to Twilight Sparkle at my embassy."

"Well, that won't be possible."

Breathing deeply, Twilight looked up at Princess Celestia. "Wait, princess. I should go. I want to get all of this cleared up."

Celestia looked back with a small, tired smile. "Are you sure, Twilight? You don't have to. I can accompany you, if you'd like."

"Prithee, wait," Luna said. Twilight and Celestia both looked over at the lunar princess. "I should like to accompany you, Twilight Sparkle. I, too, have things I should like to clear up with our royal cousin."

A moment passed, then Celestia looked over at Najstariot with a smile. "Would that be acceptable, cousin?"

• • •

The moon hung fat in the sky, casting silvery light over the mass of clouds that hung over Canterlot. Twilight blinked as her vision cleared, taking in the vast cloudscape illuminated in silvery reflections. Some of the clouds at the very edge of the cloud mass had been sculpted into small buildings but the vast majority of the expanse was a barren, greyish plain. Twilight could feel a tingle beneath her hooves, crawling up into her skeleton, and her horn throbbed. It was similar to what she had felt in the fire, but a thousand times *more*. Power. Vast amounts of power.

“Welcome to my embassy,” Najstariot said. She paced slowly away from the edge of the cloud mass where the trio had appeared.

Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight saw Luna lift slightly into the air. “Very well, Your Majesty!” she boomed, directing the full force of the ‘Royal Canterlot voice’ at the transformed dragon. “What do you wish to say t—”

Najstariot spun in place and shrieked, a blast of green energy ripping from her mouth and washing over Luna. Twilight felt a slimy sensation crawl over her skin from the dragon queen’s magic. The flash of light faded and Twilight gasped; a bubble of shimmering green energy now surrounded Luna. The alicorn within was clearly enraged, her shouting inaudible through the shield, her magic simply sloughing off the inside of the sphere.

“Princess!” Twilight cried out. She looked back at Najstariot fearfully.

“That should give us a few minutes to speak without interruption,” the dragon queen said evenly. She walked back over to Twilight, looming over the smaller unicorn. “Now then: Who are you?”

“W-what?”

“Who are you?” Najstariot asked again, her tone level.

Gritting her teeth, Twilight braced her hooves against the clouds. “What did you do to Princess Luna?” she demanded.

“A shield of my own design. It proved insufficient,” Najstariot said, hissing, “to hold her completely the last time. But it lasted a precious few minutes. Now answer my question.” Her inner eyelids blinked rapidly as she stared at Twilight.

“I’m... I’m just Twilight Sparkle!” Twilight replied, desperation in her voice. “I’m Princess Celestia’s student and I bear the Element of Magic! That’s it!”

“No!” Najstariot roared. Her skin rippled strangely, her hair taking on an appearance of scales and then reverting. “Who are you? Truthfully! Are you Nightmare Moon, reborn as this little unicorn?” she demanded. She leaned down into Twilight’s face. “Are you just Luna’s puppet? Or perhaps you have Discord’s power within you? Perhaps you’re the one using her.” Her tongue flicked nervously. “Tell me. Now.”

“None of those things are true!” Twilight retorted. She looked over at Luna, who had quit shouting and was battering at a single point of the shield with sharp lances of magical energy. *Maybe I can teleport away and get the Princess*, she thought. Her horn glowed for a moment, spitting sparks, then a sharp pain shot through her head.

Angrily, Najstariot reared. “Not until you answer my question, hatchling!”

“You’re wrong!” Twilight shouted, angrily.

The anger washed away from Najstariot’s face, leaving a neutral mask, nearly lifeless. “We’ll see,” she said, flatly.

Twilight once again felt the oily sensation of Najstariot’s power wash through her. The ersatz earth pony’s skin began to ripple once again, her mane freezing in place and beginning to change in shape. She slowly walked away from Twilight.

Twilight watched as the ‘pony’ started to grow rapidly. Muscles bulged freakishly outward, joints twisted and reset themselves at impossible angles. Najstariot’s swishing tail lengthened, the strands weaving themselves together into a single limb, thick and strong. And she continued to grow. The transformation was rapid and unlike anything Twilight had ever seen. When it was over, she was confronted with a sight that defied comprehension.

There, before her on the cloud bank, stood Najstariot in all her millennia-old glory. The ancient dragon queen was enormous: not enormous in the way some of the other dragons Twilight had met were enormous, but enormous in the way a mountain or a city was. A single talon on the impossibly huge creature’s front claw was larger than Twilight’s library. Something deep inside Twilight insisted that what she was seeing was landscape and could not possibly be alive.

Looking up, Twilight took in the dragon. She was a horrific sight. Many of her scales were broken or missing; she had massive gems embedded between them and in the empty spaces, or sometimes plate metal that looked as though it had been haphazardly fused to the ragged edges of broken scales. Wherever her skin showed through it was

crisscrossed with scar tissue. She bore scorch marks in a hundred places, had rents in her scales in a hundred more.

Even further up Twilight could see Najstariot's infamously injured wing. It was clearly crippled, the elbow joint fused into an ugly, bony mass, a massive sheet of scar tissue growing around it down into previously torn areas of the wing. It was obvious that the dragon queen couldn't open her wing and hadn't been able to in a long time; the tip of the wing was growing into her side, deformed scales engulfing it.

Finally, Twilight saw Najstariot's head. Her sinuous neck was just as damaged as the rest of her body, and at the end of it was an atrocity. Instead of the sharp, angular head Twilight had seen on other dragons, Najstariot's was a hideous rounded mass. The entire left side was grown over by deformed and damaged scales and scar tissue. Her eye wasn't even damaged, it was just gone, the eye socket itself 'healed' over. The right side bore signs of injury like the rest of her but was much closer to a recognizable face, one dominated by a massive emerald green eye that glared at Twilight angrily.

"Look!" the dragon queen boomed. "Look at what your princess and her last favorite did to me!" Her angry roar echoed in the distance.

"I... It's... She's changed, Your Majesty!" Twilight shouted up at the monster.

The massive head descended toward Twilight, whose stomach lurched as the air around her grew fetid with the monster's reeking breath. "Has she?" Najstariot asked softly, only barely louder than the boom of the 'Royal Canterlot voice'. "I think not. No pony has the power I've seen these last few days. Look at you." The mouth that dominated Twilight's entire field of vision curled in a sneer. "From the first trials you've been throwing your power in my face. That wing spell should have worn off by now, but I can see that even now it has several hours left. You've performed impossible feats. The power you've exhibited could only come from a bare few beings in this world. Gods!"

Twilight found herself gazing up into an eye that dwarfed Sugarcube Corner.

"You defeated Nightmare Moon," Najstariot said. "Bare months later, Discord returned and you defeated him too. You and your friends. Strange timing, wouldn't you say?"

"It... We only succeeded because of the Elements of Harmony!" Twilight shouted back.

"A god's weapons!" Najstariot roared, deafeningly. "Well," she said, her voice lowering again. "Show me, then. Show me how an ordinary unicorn uses this power." She reared

back, raising her head to its full extension, far into the sky above Twilight. “Defend yourself!”

“Please, stop!”

“Do it!” Najstariot thundered.

“I can’t!”

The dragon queen’s eye shimmered as she looked down at Twilight. “Do it or you’ll die,” she hissed, and then rattled deep in her throat. Twilight watched in terror as the great beast’s chest expanded impossibly, a dull glow from behind her rib cage showing the enormity of the flame she was drawing in.

Twilight, think! Her eyes watered as she attempted to raise a shield, pain ripping through her horn. She didn’t have enough power. At her best she didn’t think she’d be able to raise a shield that could protect her from what was coming without help. Even the thought of attempting to drain Najstariot sent a shudder of pain through her. What could she do?

A tingle in her hooves reminded her. The clouds.

Each cloud in the enormous bank had the potential of an entire storm within it. The weather squads had brought hundreds of these clouds together to create Najstariot’s embassy, and Twilight could feel the power within each one surging beneath her hooves.

She closed her eyes, feeling the power beneath her. The energy in the clouds was unlike anything she had ever experienced. There was no mind, no will, just power. Pure. Relentless. Perfect. Gritting her teeth, Twilight reached out and touched the storm.

• • •

The sun hung fat and red in the sky, a livid bruise against a sickly purple background studded with faint, anemic stars. Next to it floated the moon, a matte grey disk decorated with its own ancient wounds. The two great rulers of the sky shed angry light, bathing the horrors below in crimson and white.

Luna and Celestia floated just beyond the edge of a great mass of clouds. Celestia had shed her ceremonial barding in favor of a suit of white and gold plate barding that had not been removed from its display stand for anything more than cleaning in centuries. It was a heavy suit made of articulated plates, designed to turn aside blades and arrows and

enchanted to protect against the most brutal war magic. All that could be seen behind the solid metal champron that covered Celestia's head were two magenta eyes burning with rage.

Next to her was Luna. She, too, had abandoned her simple ceremonial garb. Instead, she wore a suit of bright blue barding that was much less covering than Celestia's plate, but all the more imposing for its history. Nightmare Moon's war armor was no less menacing on Luna than it had been on her twisted alter-ego, the enchanted steel conforming perfectly to her smaller body. Luna's eyes were cold, her face set in a grim, warlike mask.

Before the two sisters stood Najstariot, the cyclopean dragon staring down at them with undisguised malice. Just beyond her enormous claws was a gulf in the cloud mass where the clouds had been burnt away in a single, cataclysmic gout of dragon fire. A gout that had also consumed a solitary unicorn. Somewhere far below, a short rain of ash was falling, a silent testament to the final, sad fate of Twilight Sparkle.

• • •

Another vision. The scene was the same, a sickly sky dominated by the sun and moon, together. The alicorn sisters once again hovered in their barding, just beyond the edge of the enormous mass of dark clouds that had hung above Canterlot of late.

Instead of a dragon, however, a figure wreathed in flame was before them, floating a few feet above the clouds. A gap was behind the figure, a huge rent in the clouds where the impossibly massive and heavy body of the late dragon queen had plummeted through it. The magic that had made the enormous creature capable of standing on clouds had failed on her death, and Najstariot's corpse had fallen to earth. The massive body had crashed down directly into Canterlot, crushing the castle of the sisters and most of the city and its inhabitants under its lifeless bulk.

The flame-wreathed figure watched the sisters impassively. It had the rough shape of a unicorn floating with its back legs below it. A huge column of flame erupted from its forehead where its horn would be. Lightning from the clouds arced into the bottom of its fiery hooves, little tendrils of energy creeping up into the flames. Its eyes were blinding white discs, their searing light visible even through the flames.

There was no anger on the faces of the two sisters. Celestia's eyes were brimming with tears behind her champron as she looked at the fiery figure. Luna's expression was flat and dull and she wobbled unsteadily in the air.

Long moments passed silently before Celestia finally spoke.

“Twilight, please...”

• • •

The visions came faster. Images of the past, present and future ripped across Twilight’s consciousness. Her friends struggling against unseen foes. Dragons laying waste to a dark and twisted castle in the middle of the Everfree. Herself, draped in elaborate caparisons and standing alone on Princess Celestia’s throne dais. Chaos and death raging across Equestria while the princesses fought a draconequus that as much resembled the Discord Twilight knew as a puppy resembled Cerberus.

She watched foals grow up, have their own foals, grow old and then disappear in an endless cycle. She saw the sun and moon chasing each other across the sky. Seasons passed in the blink of an eye, decades in mere moments.

Twilight.

• • •

Twilight’s eyes snapped open, and the world was engulfed in flames. Flitting fingers of red, yellow and white danced before her eyes. Beyond the flames, she could see an expanse of clouds with a dragon standing on them. The dragon watched her, eyes wide.

Twilight reached out with her will to the dragon. She was so small and so afraid. Her mind burned with ten thousand years of loss and pain, anger and regret. Scars on her bones, damage to her wings and scales that would never heal, injuries right down to her very cells, Twilight saw them all.

For each scar Twilight found on Najstariot’s body, the dragon queen bore several on her mind and soul. She was tired and bitter, her mind dominated by fear, her sense of responsibility to her people and to the world worn down to an angry, self-important nub. She had her hoard, and her mask of nobility, and beyond that Twilight could only see terror and emptiness.

Najstariot’s one good eye looked out over the cloud bank, and through it Twilight could see herself. She was a blazing effigy, a pony made of fire and wreathed in lightning, her magical wings long since burnt away by the raging inferno. Next to her she noted two other ponies, one white, the other dark blue. The princesses, she noted abstractly. They,

too, were so very small. With a thought, she reached out and shattered the wall of force around Princess Luna.

Drawing away from Najstariot, Twilight's will reached out to explore these other ponies. They also bore scars. Some came from battle, some from their long lives. Some were self-inflicted, injuries to the body and soul that had been unnecessary but happened anyway. Fear and anger simmered in them, too, and uglier things. Inside Luna Twilight found old wounds, old resentments. Arguments that shouldn't have happened. Loneliness she never needed to feel. Twilight also found huge, dark expanses that had been healed and scarred over by the power of Harmony. Maybe she would open those later and see what was hidden behind them.

The princesses had surrounded Twilight with some sort of force bubble, and they and Najstariot were all shouting, but Twilight took no notice of the words. There was so much beyond this little dispute. Thousands of feet below her, she could feel the lives of thousands and tens of thousands. The little clear lights of ponies stood out against the muted glow of plants and small animals. Small fires burned in the souls of gryphons next to the rough incandescence of heated stone at the heart of the ghuls.

Reaching out further, away from Canterlot, Twilight found more lights, the distant stars of her fellow ponies and other creatures. She saw the small cluster of light that was Ponyville. It stood at the edge of a raging storm of fire and lightning, life run wild, life without constraint: The Everfree. In other directions she found the mountain aeries of the gryphons, the burning fires of their souls melding together into distant beacons of home and hearth. Far below them, toward the molten core of the earth she could see the glowing coals of the ghuls.

Further and further she reached. There were other lights now, other lives. The bitter, eye-searing colors of the beings imprisoned within Tartarus. The maddening, brilliant *noise* of Discord. Even beyond the world, beyond the moon, there were other lights, and Twilight reached out toward the stars...

Screams echoed around her and Twilight was momentarily confused. She drew her will back to her body and the world was once again cloaked in flame. Twilight saw the dragon before her, wrapped in twisting bolts of lightning that were coming from her own horn. She watched as Najstariot twisted and danced with her power.

Twilight!

"Hello, princess," Twilight said to the voice, dreamily. "Isn't it pretty?"

Twilight saw Princess Luna recoil as she spoke. Celestia, too, was stricken but did not to show it. Why would she lie to Twilight like that?

Twilight, you have to stop this, came Celestia's voice.

"Look how strong I've become. Aren't you proud?"

Yes, Twilight, I see, the voice said, softly. *And I am very proud of how far you've come with your magic. But it's time to stop now.*

"Why?" Twilight asked. Why indeed? It was so beautiful, the way the lightning coursed over Najstariot's scales. Soon her pain would be ended. Ten thousand years of suffering, washed away in such beauty.

Twilight, please. You mustn't do this.

"But I can," Twilight replied. "She's caused so much suffering."

So did my sister, Celestia replied. *You helped her. Would we be better off if you had destroyed her instead?*

Helped her. Yes, she had. She had felt it was her responsibility to fight Nightmare Moon. Now she had no responsibility, just power.

Please, Twilight. Don't do this. The Princess' voice was pleading now. *You'll just prove her right again. I don't want to lose somepony else that I love because of her.*

Twilight turned in the air to once again look into Princess Celestia. She was afraid. Afraid for Twilight, afraid for Najstariot, for her sister, for Equestria. She was afraid for everyone except herself. Within Celestia's mind, Twilight found thousands of years of loss and pain, anger and regret. Unlike within Najstariot, however, the injuries had healed, one after another, and had only strengthened the princess' armor of endless love and endless responsibility. It was beautiful, far more than the lightning had been. Beautiful. Indestructible.

Perfect.

Come back to us, Twilight. Please.

"Alright, princess."

Barely a thought passed through Twilight's mind before the lightning bolts dissipated and Najstariot fell heavily to the cloud bank. Lightning and fire erupted from Twilight's horn, piercing the night sky as the unicorn screamed.

And then she fell.

The roar of wind rushing past filled Twilight's ears as she fell. She could faintly hear screams from somewhere above her accompanied by the crackling sound of lightning. Her stomach lurched as she tumbled through the air. Reflexively, she tried to pull her legs in in a futile attempt to stave off the cold of the icy rain that fell with her. Through narrowly slitted eyes, she could see Canterlot castle in the distance, its spires rushing up at her.

So this is it, her foggy mind thought numbly. I'm going to die. I wonder if it'll hurt?

There was a sharp stop and Twilight felt as if she had been thrown into a wall. For a moment she hung there, unwilling to move, her body screaming in pain. Eventually she willed her eyes open, and the entire world was tinted pink.

Twilight hung in a telekinetic bubble floating in midair. Raindrops pelted the field of energy and thunder roared mutely around her. She turned her head, looking for the source of the familiar energy.

"It's alright, Twilight, I've got you," came a soft voice, and Twilight turned with a weak smile. Next to her, horn wreathed in the same pink energy that currently held Twilight, hovered Princess Celestia. The princess' wings beat slowly as the rain rolled down her feathers.

Relief flooded Twilight, followed by exhaustion. She felt battered and bruised and the call of sleep was irresistible. Her eyes began to close again. Somewhere in the distance, Twilight could hear the princess, her voice alarmed.

"No, Twilight! Open your eyes, stay w—"

• • •

Light stabbed at the back of Twilight's eyes as she slowly blinked them open. The cold and rain was gone, although she could still hear the roar of the wind from somewhere nearby. Her vision rapidly resolved and she sat up, groggily.

She was in the ballroom again. Celestia was standing over her vigilantly and her friends were all grouped nearby, with the notable exception of Luna. It was pitch black outside the ballroom's tall windows and the wind and rain raged outside, punctuated by intermittent flashes of light and roars of thunder. The rest of the ballroom had likewise

clustered protectively into small groups. It all gave Twilight the impression of an overly-elaborate bunker rather than a ballroom.

“Princess, what’s going on?” Twilight asked, thickly. “Where’s Princess Luna?”

A warm smile came from Celestia in response. “Calm down, Twilight. Luna is making sure Najstariot is alright and then she’ll be reigning in this storm. She should be joining us shor—”

A loud roar shook the ballroom, drowning out the wind and rain and cutting off Celestia. The roar was followed by a hollow whooshing sound from somewhere far above, and the darkened sky outside the ballroom was briefly tinged an ugly shade of red. Twilight cringed; she was fairly sure that there was only one thing that could have caused that and it didn’t say anything good about what was happening with Princess Luna.

A burst of dark blue energy flashed at the center of the ballroom and several groups dove away. It was accompanied by a wave of heat that washed across the room. A moment later, the blue energy faded, leaving behind a shaky Princess Luna, a few small wisps of smoke vanishing into the air around her.

“Sister,” Luna said, speaking between gasps. “Please, say that the dragon wards remain intact.”

Celestia’s face hardened. “The dragon wards?” she asked cautiously. “Luna, we dismantled them all hundreds of years ago. It was part of our treaty with Ormsreich.”

Luna stamped a hoof angrily on the marble floor and began walking slowly toward Celestia and Twilight’s group. “Fie! I had expected as much. There is no time, then, we must rouse the guards and begin evacuating the city.”

The murmurs going through the crowd had dulled to an uncomfortable hush, and Twilight felt the hair on her neck stand on end.

“Luna,” Celestia said. “What’s wrong? Has something happened with Najstariot? Is she alive?”

“Najstariot is more than alive! She pledges to attack the city!” Luna snapped back. “I escaped with my life, but only just. She is bound by moonlight but it will not hold her long.” The blue alicorn seemed to droop in front of Twilight, exhaustion winning the battle against adrenaline. “Tia, you remember the old legends, don’t you?” Luna asked in a small voice. “How in the last days she would devour the sun and moon? Perhaps—”

“No,” Celestia said, cutting Luna off firmly. “Those are old pony tales and nothing more.”

The tension in the room broke suddenly and the crowd erupted in shouts and arguing. The din was punctuated by the ear-splitting shrieks of gryphons and occasional shattering noises. Twilight could hear the ponies nearest her group arguing about what who or what had caused this sudden breakdown in relations and her name came up more often than she was entirely comfortable with.

A loud crack sounded and the noise of the crowd dulled. It was repeated, the sound of Hadalsnan al-Dhi’b’s staff rapping loudly against the marble floor. Twilight watched as the unruly crowd parted before her. The old king, flanked by his retinue, stalked up to the two princesses, his long cloak sweeping imperiously behind him.

“Dragon queen break treaty!” he roared, his fractured Equestrian filled with the finality and determination of a judge’s gavel. The last of the crowd noise died away under the magically enhanced shout. “For seven centuries, three nations at peace! Maybe she have personal dispute with somepony, no matter. Ghuls not stand by, let old wars resume, let innocents die. We stand with ponies in defense of Canterlot.”

Twilight looked up and saw an unfamiliar hesitation in Celestia’s face, before the alicorn acquiesced with a nod. “Thank you, Hadalsnan,” she said. “I only hope we can repay you some day.”

With a loud snort, al-Dhi’b waved a paw dismissively, his other resting on the head of his staff. “No repayment needed. Friends stand with friends. Magic of friendship, yes?” He turned his shaggy head slightly and winked down at Twilight, who drew in a sharp breath.

“You certainly get some attention, don’t you, Twilight Sparkle?” Trixie asked under her breath.

“The gryphons, too!” Twilight watched as Gianna—Lady Gianna, she reminded herself—lofted up above the crowd. “We of the Mount Grundle aerie,” the gryphon said, her voice lapsing stiff as though this were a speech she had rehearsed but never before given, “pledge our lives in defense of the citizens of Equestria against this act of aggression. By the terms of the treaty of... um...” She trailed off, tapping a talon against her beak.

“Dream Valley,” Celestia said, softly.

“By the terms of the treaty of Dream Valley,” Gianna resumed swiftly, “and for the duration of the present hostilities, I place my forces at your command, Princess Celestia.” She finished with a piercing shriek of gryphon language then looked down, her head tilting left and right. “I know there’s only a few of us,” she said with an awkward smile, before sinking back down into the crowd.

The crowd began to swiftly move around. Many of the unicorns, other ponies and a few members of other races shifted to cluster behind Celestia. Others, especially the gryphons and ghuls, formed into more regular ranks. The various leaders spoke back and forth rapidly, using language Twilight had only read in books about military history. “Area denial.” “Base of fire.” Disturbingly, “civilian casualties.” From what Twilight could tell, they were furtively discussing strategies that had been devised against airship attacks or entire flying divisions. Appropriate, given that Najstariot herself could most likely devour the entirety of the city guard in one bite.

“Lady Gianna, thy gryphons shall join with the Night Guard,” Luna said, eventually. “Thou and I shall lead the aerial defenses.”

Gianna swallowed hard, but nodded. “Your majesty.”

The groups nearest Luna parted and the Princess of the Night, with a quick nod from Celestia, walked to the exit from the ballroom, Gianna and her gryphon forces in her wake.

“Izvinete,” a loud voice said. “Excuse me.” Twilight immediately recognized Zlatan’s basso voice and she watched as the miniaturized dragon took his turn to approach, stepping into the space left by Luna. His head was held low, near the floor, and his tail dragged behind him heavily.

“Zlatan,” Celestia said.

The dragon raised his head slightly. “I—” He paused. “I regret what has happened here today. However, I cannot stand against my queen. However—” He paused again, inhaling deeply as Celestia watched him through lidded eyes. “The shantytown is also at risk. I can protect the area. I do not believe She would... intend to see innocents harmed.”

“Thank you, Zlatan,” Celestia said, inclining her head.

The dragon inclined his head slightly and vanished in a burst of golden energy.

“So,” al-Dhi’b said. “That leave only hero ponies. Blue friend, too. You fight?”

Only Rainbow Dash responded immediately, rising up next to Celestia defiantly. “Heck yeah!” she said. “We beat a dragon before, and we’ll do it again! Right, guys?”

Twilight felt far too many eyes on her. Her silence hung heavily in the air.

“Right? Guys?”

“Twi?” Applejack asked.

Seconds passed, broken only by a barely audible grumbling sound from Trixie, before Twilight finally answered. “The Elements,” Twilight said. “We can use them.”

“The Elements of Harmony?” Leaning down next to Twilight, Rarity spoke slowly and softly. “Twilight, this is not Discord we’re talking about. We can’t simply turn a foreign ruler to stone.”

Shaking her head, Twilight inhaled deeply and stood up straight against the protest of her straining joints and overtaxed muscles. “No, it’ll work. We can help her. I saw...” Najstariot was hurt. Deeply injured, and not just physically. “I saw inside her, up in the clouds. She needs our help, like Princess Luna did.”

An unsure look crossed Princess Celestia’s face. For a moment, it seemed to Twilight that the whole room held its breath. Even the thunder seemed restrained.

The moment passed, and Celestia nodded quietly. “Come then, Twilight,” she said. “Let’s go get them.”

Twilight smiled. “There’s no need, Princess.”

Closing her eyes, Twilight channeled the trickle of power she could find inside herself through her horn. Somehow, as tired and hurt as she was, it seemed natural and effortless. An image of six gems filled her consciousness. A sudden weight behind her horn and a small but audible gasp from the onlookers told her that she’d been successful, and she opened her eyes.

The princess and other onlookers had stepped back, leaving Twilight and her friends standing in a group. Twilight could just see the last fading glow around the golden neck pieces that her friends now wore. Smiling, Twilight reached up with a hoof to adjust her newly-present tiara. “See?”

“Shoot, Twi,” Applejack said, softly.

• • •

Wind and rain cascaded through the night, crashes of thunder and unsettling screams in the sky chilling Twilight even more than the icy rain that lashed against her coat. She leaned heavily against Applejack, the rest of her friends arrayed around her. Celestia stood next to the group, her white-coated unicorn guards holding an all-round defense position around the princess and the Elements of Harmony.

Celestia leaned down next to Twilight. “Are you sure about this?”

Twilight nodded, taking a deep breath. “I’m sure.”

“Twilight!” Pinkie shouted. “What do we do what do we do what do we do? I can’t see any dragons!”

“She’s on the cloud bank!” Twilight replied. “Princess Luna said she was restrained!”

Rainbow Dash fluttered her wings, throwing water droplets everywhere. “Well, what are we waiting for?”

The sky was dark, the clouds heavy. Twilight blinked as she tried to see through the rain. The dragon queen was enormous; Twilight only needed to find a gap in the cloud bank. *It should be easy*, she thought sardonically. *All we have to do is find a small black space in the middle of a big black space.*

Another flash of lightning lit up the sky, and for a moment Twilight could see a curiously green spot, about the size of a pea, illuminated from underneath the clouds. At the thousands of feet above the cloud bank hung, it must have been a huge gap. Perfect.

Twilight closed her eyes, focusing on the image in her mind, that green spot against grey clouds. “Everyone, get ready!” she shouted.

A warm feeling welled up in her as she focused. She felt her horn begin to channel energy, not from her depleted reserves but from something deeper within her. It was a familiar feeling and a comforting one. Images of the six Elements of Harmony swirled in her mind. She felt her friends close to her, not just the shivering mares crowded next to her or even Applejack’s strong shoulder that she had put so much weight into, but the feeling she got when she spent time with them. They laughed together, cried together. They argued and fought and had parties and worked together.

Twilight's eyes snapped open as waves of energy erupted from the six Elements, beams that wove themselves together into a rainbow as they streaked into the sky.

Something was wrong. Everything seemed to slow for Twilight. She felt her hair stand on end. The warm feeling around her faded, replaced with a cold, greasy feeling.

The sky lit up brighter than the sun. Agony exploded inside Twilight once again.

When the light faded, Twilight found herself lying on her side in the damp grass, her tiara having tumbled off next to her. Her friends, too, had been tossed about. Celestia and her guards had also been thrown aside, Celestia's left wing bent at a painful looking angle underneath her. Twilight reached out with a hoof and roughly shoved the tiara back onto her head.

Stumbling to her feet, Twilight heard a rough laugh from nearby. Hadalsnan al-Dhi'b leaned heavily on what remained of his staff, the old wood cracked down its length, the large gem at the top missing. "She... she strong, yes," he said, hoarsely. "Ha ha... Not make another shield like that soon."

Twilight turned to shout at Celestia when a thunderous voice came from the sky above. "Your attack failed, Twilight Sparkle!" Najstariot shrieked triumphantly, her voice far louder than the wind or even the intermittent booms of thunder. "Now I know where you are! If you're still alive, I won't give you or your princesses another chance to destroy me!"

Mocking laughter filled the air, and Twilight could feel her hair begin to once again stand on end.

"Everypony!" she screamed into the raging storm. "We have to do it now!"

It was no use. Her friends were all in disarray. Applejack lay slumped against the stone wall of the ballroom, a small crack in the surface above her head showing how hard she had struck. Fluttershy had curled into a small ball and was obviously crying behind her wing. Rainbow Dash and Rarity had recovered their hooves and were trying to help their fallen friends, leaving only Pinkie Pie, her hair flattened by the rain and an uncharacteristically angry look on her face, standing with Twilight.

Thunder roared and lightning flashed, and Twilight squeezed her eyes shut, expecting to be struck down by the same power she had turned only recently against the dragon queen. An angry roar filled the air, slicing through the wind and pounding rain, and Twilight opened her eyes once again.

The air was lit a bright blue, revealing the scene before her. Trixie stood, her horn glowing brilliantly, at the center of an enormous ring of scorched earth and burnt grass. A glowing beam rose from the tip of her horn into the sky, vanishing somewhere near the clouds. Twilight watched as another bolt lanced from the clouds into Trixie's magical lightning rod, burning the ground around the cyan unicorn. A scream of frustration came from the looming dragon queen.

A loud crack erupted from the sky and the huge mass of clouds split. A massive head pushed through followed by a long, sinuous neck. Enormous claws pressed down through, digging into the side of the mountain far above them, and Twilight found herself once again staring up into Najstariot's hate-filled eye, which was illuminated by the dull glow that emanated from the dragon's throat. She fell back on her haunches, dully, her mind blank.

"Twilight," Fluttershy's voice said, softly. "We're ready."

Looking around quickly, Twilight saw her friends once again gathered around her. Rainbow Dash had a wing over Applejack and Fluttershy's face was puffy with the tears that still streamed from her eyes, but her friends all stood with her.

This time, the rainbow streak flew straight and true, wrapping around the dragon's snake-like neck like a noose before it engulfed her head and claws, as well. Najstariot shimmered, her green scales surrounded by a shifting field of multicolored magical energy. Her screams died away inside the cocoon.

With a deafening roar an explosion of energy erupted from the dragon. The shockwave blasted outward in all directions. It tore the clouds over Canterlot apart, carrying the wind and rain away and blinding everyone.

After a short while, Twilight's vision began to clear. Through the spots that danced in front of her she could see that Najstariot was no longer present. The wind, rain and overcast had gone too, leaving only a clear, peaceful night sky studded with stars over Canterlot.

There was a moment of silence, then unicorns began filing out of the ballroom slowly. Gryphons and batlike pegasi, accompanied by a grim Princess Luna, flew in from the edges of the city. Celestia had recovered her feet, her wings seemingly none the worse for wear, and she was looking about, first in the sky, then along the ground.

“Where is she? Where is she?” Pinkie Pie’s voice pierced Twilight’s ears. Twilight watched the pink pony, her mane returned to its usual cotton-candy puff, bounce erratically around, her head swiveling rapidly. “Where’s that meanie dragon? Where’d she go? Did we send her to the moon? I’ll bet she’s on the moon!”

“Is this what you’re looking for?” a voice called out. Twilight turned and saw Amarok, the wolf-king sitting on his rump next to what appeared to be an egg. The egg was large and green, crisscrossed with jagged red tiger stripes. Slumping to the ground, Twilight watched quietly as Luna and Celestia trotted over to examine it.

“So, Twilight Sparkle,” a voice came, its smug tone broken only slightly by a short coughing fit. “Excuse me. What do you think of—*kaff*—Trixie’s magic now?” Trixie stumbled over near to Twilight, dropping heavily to the ground down next to her.

Twilight smiled up at the cyan unicorn, whose horn was spitting small blue sparks. “Trixie, you saved us,” she said softly. “You saved everyone.”

Trixie grinned back. “Was there ever any doubt?” She then lay her head down in the grass, her eyes rolling back as her eyelids closed.

A breath later and Twilight joined her in unconsciousness.

• • •

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The soft, regular sound cut across Twilight’s consciousness. As she sluggishly returned to the waking world, she was momentarily alarmed by the darkness she was cast in. After a moment of thought, an idea occurred to her and she tried opening her eyes.

A few moments passed while Twilight adjusted to the painfully bright light. After her vision cleared, she found herself lying in a hospital bed. Glancing to the left, she saw an IV stand with a saline bag hanging from it, clear tubing snaking down next to the bed, across the sheets and into her left foreleg. A cardiac monitor stood next to the IV stand, emitting the soft beeps that had awoken her.

Slowly she turned her head to the right. There was a small endtable there. It was occupied with a pair of small, framed pictures. Twilight’s parents looked back at her from the first, her mother’s purple and white mane more white than she remembered. When was the last time she’d seen them? She’d come back to Canterlot to visit quite a few times since

she'd moved to Ponyville, but there was always so much to do... At least the photo was there. It made the room feel less empty.

The other photo was a larger picture of her with her friends, all together at the library. Twilight remembered the day this photo had been taken. It was several days after her first Winter Wrap Up. Rarity had insisted she wear her All-Team Organizer vest, and so in the center of the picture Twilight stood, looking awkward in her vest while her friends looked as they usually did. She had felt self-conscious but was now glad that Spike had finally convinced her to let him take the picture.

The rest of the room was a typical hospital room with plain beige walls and a frosted window facing outside. The clear light of the sun streamed in through the cloudy glass. How long had she been out? She leaned back and rested her head back against the pillow.

A soft knock came at the door a few minutes later. A moment later it opened, a unicorn with a nurse's cap putting his head in the door.

"Hello?" Twilight asked.

"Ah, Twilight Sparkle, you're awake," the nurse said, kindly. "You have a visitor. She says her name is Sunny Ray. Should I send her in?"

Sunny Ray? The name didn't ring any bells for Twilight. "Um... Alright," she said.

The door closed and opened again a moment later. A white-coated pegasus with a bright yellow mane walked in, smiling brightly. "Good morning, Twilight," she said in a very familiar voice.

Twilight giggled. "Princess, that's a terrible disguise."

'Sunny Ray' trotted up next to the bed with a small pout. "I thought it was a very good disguise." She then giggled herself and smiled again. "How are you feeling, Twilight?"

Experimentally, Twilight stretched her various limbs. There was some stiffness and a faint echo of muscle soreness, but nothing worse than she'd expect after a day of physical activity. A small headache warned Twilight against trying any significant magic, but she was able to telekinetically adjust her blankets with no difficulty. "I'm alright, thank you."

Celestia nodded. "You nearly died," she said.

Twilight's blood froze. "What?"

Celestia walked around Twilight's bed, her blonde mane glittering in the sunlight streaming through the window. "You had hairline fractures on many of your bones, some burns and internal bleeding." Celestia spoke matter-of-factly. "Luna and I had to use some strong magic to restore you."

"What about everypony else?"

Celestia smiled again, leaning in to brush Twilight's cheek with a wing. "Oh, my Twilight. Trixie and Hadalsnan needed some attention but are resting comfortably. Everyone else is fine. They even came to visit you earlier." She gestured toward the photos. "As did your parents."

Twilight leaned up, pressing a hoof against her forehead to stave off a head rush. "How soon can I leave?"

The small pegasus glowed and after a moment was replaced by the towering figure of Princess Celestia, her multicolored mane flowing in a non-existent wind. "Let me speak with your doctor," she said.

Beep. Beep. BeeSKREEE—

With a shriek and a puff of blue smoke, the cardiac monitor tethered to Twilight's forehoof breathed its last. She blinked and shook her head lethargically; she had just been looking at the monitor, hadn't she? Futilely, she waved her hooves at the squealing machine.

"No, no, stop!" she said urgently. Her hackles rose at the sound of the door opening behind her. She turned sheepishly as a doctor and a pair of nurses, all unicorns, bustled into her hospital room, followed closely by a worried-looking Princess Celestia, the alicorn's wings obviously tensed. She slumped back against her bed helplessly as two of the medical professionals began examining her, while a third traipsed across the room to investigate the failed piece of equipment.

"I'm really sorry," Twilight said, gesturing at the broken cardiac monitor. "I didn't mean—"

The doctor standing next to Twilight raised a hoof kindly. "It's alright, Miss Sparkle, it's not your fault." She looked past her patient at the stallion in nurse's whites who was investigating the machine. Twilight turned to see him shake his head ruefully.

"Looks like it just blew out, doctor," the nurse said.

The doctor shook her head, echoing the nurse. "These new machines..." She sighed and turned to address Twilight, a calm smile coming to her face. "In any case, Miss Sparkle, everything seems fine."

Twilight let out a deep breath and settled back against the firm pillow behind her. She watched as Celestia, too, visibly relaxed, her wings rustling as they folded back beside her body.

"I'm sorry we haven't yet been introduced. I'm Dr. Lancet. I've been overseeing your care since you were brought in." The aging medic offered a hoof, and Twilight reached out to gently rap it with her own.

"It's nice to meet you, doctor," Twilight said.

"You gave us quite a scare last night," Dr. Lancet continued in her measured fashion. Her horn glowed and a clipboard floated up from the end of Twilight's bed. The doctor's eyes

flicked rapidly between the levitating notes and her purple patient. “Your injuries were extensive. You were very lucky that the princesses were able to stabilize you and start you on the mend, otherwise we might have been spending quite a bit of time together.”

“How bad was it?”

“Well,” the doctor said with a small chuckle. “Let’s just say I don’t recommend being struck by lightning too many more times. Even if all the cool fillies are doing it.” She winked, drawing a giggle from Twilight.

“I’ll be more careful next time,” she said. Giggle or no, Twilight was cringing inwardly; Princess Celestia had been more blunt about what had happened and she felt slightly resentful of the coddling. On the other hand, it was likely that Dr. Lancet was simply relaying the version of events she had heard. Across the room, Princess Celestia’s worry had completely abated and her expression was once more one of serenity, betraying no sign that anything the doctor was saying was unexpected.

Dr. Lancet chattered pleasantly and gently poked and prodded Twilight, and Twilight played her expected role by tuning the doctor out and dutifully nodding on occasion. After a few moments of this, the doctor withdrew, the two nurses already waiting behind her.

“It looks like you’re in good shape, Miss Sparkle,” Dr. Lancet said. “Princess Celestia tells us you’d like to get going as soon as possible, so unless you have any other questions I can go and prepare your discharge paperwork.”

Twilight smiled, relieved. “Thank you, doctor. I’ll be glad to get going back to Ponyville.”

Dr. Lancet nodded back, smiling as well. “A nice town. One of my former interns is from Ponyville. Well, then, I’ll see you in a few minutes and you can be on your way.”

Dr. Lancet and the two nurses walked out, closing the door behind them. Celestia moved out of the way as they passed, then approached Twilight’s bed.

“So,” the alicorn said as she looked down at Twilight with a small smile. “What did you do to the machine?”

Twilight’s heart skipped a beat. “What? So you...” She trailed off awkwardly.

Celestia knelt down next to the bed. “Would you like to tell me about it?” she asked in a pleasant, even tone, not unlike the doctor’s.

Twilight hesitated. How could she explain what had been happening to her? Would Celestia be disappointed in her? “I’m not sure what to say,” she said.

Celestia nodded silently. With no preamble, Celestia’s horn glowed, and a glowing ball of pink energy formed between the alicorn and her student. It floated above the bed serenely, slowly rotating in the air.

“Twilight,” Celestia said. “Look into the ball and tell me what you see.”

Twilight looked into the glittering ball. It looked very little different than Celestia’s familiar telekinetic aura, a transparent energy field the color of dawn. She could see the far wall of the room through it. Her horn tingled as she gazed at the magical construct. There was something in there. If she could just...

“Twilight, focus,” Celestia’s voice said. “Tell me what you see.”

“I don’t know,” Twilight said, softly. “It’s the same thing that was in the machine.”

“Don’t touch it, Twilight. Just tell me what it is.”

What was it? She had felt the same thing in the fire. It was there, in the clouds. It was entrancing, magnetic. She wanted it.

“Power,” Twilight finally said. “I think.”

“What sort of power? What does it feel like?”

The longer Twilight stared into the ball, the clearer it became and the stronger the pull was. The power in the ball was warm, like a comfortable summer’s day. Twilight could smell flowers and fresh grass, feel soft, warm ground beneath her hooves, hear birds chirping.

“Twilight?”

“It’s summer,” she replied, hazily.

“Look at me.”

A moment passed before Twilight was able to tear herself away from the ball. She turned her head to look toward where the Princess’ voice was coming from.

She saw the sun in all its blazing, merciless glory. Everything else was obliterated except for the furnace in front of her. Life. Death. Heat and light. The beginning of the world and its eventual end. The power of the storm was paltry compared to the mighty engine of the world that roiled and churned before her. Her mouth opened silently.

Twilight blinked. Celestia—just Celestia, Princess Celestia, her mentor—was smiling at her softly from the side of the bed. The room was just as it was before her surroundings had gone away. “You’ve been staring at me with your mouth open for the last few minutes,” Celestia said.

Breathing deeply, Twilight shook her head. The ball of energy was long gone, not even a trace of the warm magic lingering in the air. “That long? It only seemed like a moment.”

Celestia paced slowly around Twilight’s hospital bed, her metal shoes clicking deliberately against the hard floor. She stopped and glanced out the window at the sunny day outside. The rays of the midday sun glimmered and sparkled brilliantly as they passed through the flowing strands of Celestia’s mane.

“Tell me,” she said. “Is there still a spare room in the library in Ponyville?”

Twilight adjusted herself uncomfortably. “Um, it’s full of books right now, Princess,” she said. “I suppose Spike and I could clean it out.”

With a smile, Celestia turned back to Twilight and walked over to the bed. “Well, in that case, would you be up to some company for a few weeks?”

Twilight leaned up, blinking in confusion. “Company?”

The smile on Celestia’s face was soft and reminded Twilight of the look she had worn the day Celestia had offered to take Twilight on as her student the first time. Twilight furrowed her brow as Celestia knelt down next to the bed.

“Once again, Twilight,” she began, “you’ve shown me just how strong you really are, but you need to learn control all over again. You don’t seem confident that you can do it on your own.”

The fire, the storm, the cardiac machine. Twilight shook her head ruefully. “I’m not.”

“I’ve been meaning to take some quiet time away from Canterlot. Would you like to take up lessons again with me for a few weeks?”

Once again, Twilight's mind went blank. "I... Lessons? Princess, are you talking about coming to Ponyville?"

"Just for a few weeks," Celestia replied. "We can spend some time working on your control over your new abilities." She smiled. "And it will be nice to be able to visit quietly with you for a while."

Twilight smiled involuntarily. "Thank you, princess," she said. "But don't you have work to do here?"

"Oh, Twilight, there's always work to do," Celestia replied flippily. She grinned. "But the nobles need to get used to the idea that Luna is on equal terms with me once again. A few weeks of everything being in the Night Court's hooves should work wonders."

Twilight giggled behind a hoof. "Alright, and what about 'quiet'? Every time you come to Ponyville everypony always falls all over themselves for you."

Celestia's horn glowed and the alicorn vanished. In a pink flash, she was replaced by the same white, blonde-maned pegasus Twilight had seen earlier.

"I don't think that will be a problem for Sunny Ray," the pegasus said with an expansive grin.

• • •

A small amount of paperwork later, Twilight and 'Sunny Ray' left the hospital, emerging into a bright, clear day. The streets of Canterlot had already largely returned to accommodating the usual traffic of strolling unicorns. The only trace of the havoc of the previous night was the damp grass underhoof and some large, strange gouges in the mountain face that loomed over the castle town. To the side of the wide, slate-paved path leading from the entrance of the hospital to the main street stood Twilight's friends and Princess Luna.

Twilight smiled at her friends, and was rewarded by being tackled to the ground by Pinkie Pie.

"Twilight!" Pinkie squealed, standing over the purple unicorn. "We were so worried! Are you alright?"

"I was better before you were standing on me, Pinkie."

In a pink blur, Pinkie was no longer standing over Twilight, had rejoined the group and was waving furiously. Twilight recovered her feet and she and the putative Sunny Ray approached.

“Good t’ see ya on your hooves, Twi,” Applejack said, tentatively. “You doin’ okay? ‘Specially after gettin’ pounced by Pinkie?”

Twilight giggled. “I’m fine, everypony.”

A rainbow-colored blur shot up from the group and swept around Twilight and Sunny Ray. It stopped, leaving Rainbow Dash hovering above the two. “So who’s your friend?” Rainbow Dash asked.

A white streak shot up from the ground in front of Rainbow Dash, who wheeled back slightly as she was suddenly faced with a brightly grinning pegasus. “Hi, I’m Sunny Ray!” the white pegasus said effusively. “You’re Rainbow Dash, right? Pleased to meet you!”

Luna snorted, and everypony, including the slightly confused Rainbow Dash, turned to face her. “Sister, please,” she said in a low, bland voice. “I do not think it will hurt to let these ponies in on your disguise.” Looks of confusion spread across the rest of the group.

“Princess Celestia?” Spike asked, poking a claw toward the hovering pegasus experimentally.

In response, Sunny Ray stuck out her tongue at Luna. “You’re no fun,” she said, her voice dropping an octave to Celestia’s more usual register and losing its chirpy tone. “But I suppose you’re right. Hello, everypony.”

“Thy address earlier this morning has spread consternation among the nobles.” Luna smirked. “There are already rumors spreading of what sort of nefariousness I shall be getting up to in thine absence.”

Sunny Ray did a little pirouette in the air. “Well, good,” she said, her voice returning to the high, lively tone she had affected earlier. “Then that’s everything! It’s going to be fun to visit Ponyville for a while!”

“Princess, you’re... joining us in Ponyville?” Rarity asked, her eye developing an interesting twitch.

Twilight chuckled. “We’ll explain on the way.”

• • •

The sun shone brightly on Trixie's brand new wagon, glinting off the glossy red finish and yellow-gold trim. Trixie was harnessing herself in as Twilight and her friends approached from the main road out of Canterlot.

Trixie tossed her mane imperiously as the group approached. "Well, what do you think of Trixie's new trailer? Princess Celestia herself arranged for it."

With a smile, Twilight approached, Fluttershy walking closely to her side as the others held back. "It's great, Trixie!" she said, brightly. "Um... I wanted to thank you for saving us last night."

Trixie's haughty expression faltered, and gradually shifted to an awkward smile. "It's," she began, then faltered. "It's nothing, I guess." She looked down at the dusty ground between herself and Twilight. "Thank you for stopping that dragon. I don't think anypony else could have done it."

Twilight giggled and waited for Trixie to raise her eyes. "It wasn't just me, Trixie. It was all of us. You included."

Silence passed between the two unicorns, Twilight smiling, Trixie staring at her hooves. A rustling of feathers drew the attention of both ponies, who glanced over at Fluttershy, her face partly hidden behind a mass of pink mane.

"Um," began Fluttershy, her wings jostling at her side. "If... If you ever need a place to stay in Ponyville, I have room at my cottage."

Twilight blinked at the unusually forward behavior. Did Fluttershy really just ask Trixie to come visit?

A slight tinge of red grew to Trixie's cheeks before she raised her head and tossed her mane once again, snorting loudly. "Trixie will think about it. Trixie does have a commitment to return to Canterlot for the Summer Sun Celebration. Perhaps Trixie will visit Ponyville on the way through."

Twilight's blinked. "The Summer Sun Celebration?"

"Yes," Trixie said. Her voice was light and unconcerned. "Princess Celestia has invited Trixie to perform for the Summer Sun Celebration." A feral grin spread across the cyan unicorn's face. "She recognized Trixie's talent."

A giggle, and Twilight watched Trixie visibly deflate. “That’s wonderful!” Twilight said earnestly. “So where are you going to go now?”

Another moment of silence passed between the two unicorns as the gentle breeze rustled their manes. “Actually, I’m heading back to Hoofington,” Trixie finally said, her gaze drifting away from Twilight. She pushed a strand of mane back with a small telekinetic burst. “I—” Trixie hesitated. “I think I need to go visit my family for a while.”

Twilight nodded. “I haven’t really had a chance to visit with my parents while I’ve been in Canterlot. I guess I should do that.”

“I met your parents earlier, when they were at the hospital,” Trixie said, still looking down at the ground to the side of Twilight. “They seemed very nice. Your brother and Princess Cadance were there too but only briefly.”

“Shiny!” Twilight smiled brightly and clapped her forehooves excitably. “Yay! I’m so glad you got a chance to meet him! Isn’t he great?”

Trixie looked at Twilight with an unreadable expression, a loose strand of hair obscuring one eye. Eventually, she spoke.

“You call the captain of the city guard ‘Shiny?’”

• • •

After a brief minute of conversation, Trixie began trotting away from Canterlot, her new wagon in tow, leaving Twilight and her friends next to the main road. They stayed a few minutes more, watching the last of the tents collapse, the last of the trailers load up. A mighty golden dragon rose from a camp some distance away and flew off to the west over the ravine Canterlot overlooked, the sun glittering from his scales; Twilight could just make out a small green egg with red speckles clutched in the dragon’s claws.

The sun was setting as decisions were being made where to go. No conversation was needed; the entire group turned to Twilight, expectantly.

“Princess,” Twilight said hesitantly. “Would it be alright if I sent you and the rest on ahead?”

A little white blur shot over to Twilight. “We certainly could go on ahead,” Sunny Ray said, her still-unfamiliar high voice at odds, to Twilight’s ear, with Celestia’s words. “Do you have business left in Canterlot, Twilight?”

“Well—” Twilight lowered her head. “I really should visit my parents. I think I owe them that much.”

Celestia smiled. Even on Sunny Ray’s face, it was Celestia’s smile, soft and kind, though the poofy blonde mane somewhat ruined the effect. “Of course.” She rose into the air. “Well, come on, everypony. It’s getting late!”

A pink aura surrounded the group. Twilight noted a sympathetic nod from Rarity a moment before they all vanished, leaving Twilight standing alone. She watched the last of the tents collapsing a moment more before she turned and began walking the familiar path back to Canterlot’s gate.

• • •

Rap rap rap

“Velvet,” a muffled male voice called out from inside the small, single-story home. “Could you get that?”

“Coming!” came a sing-song female voice.

The house was just as Twilight remembered it. Small. Cozy. The lawn was neatly trimmed, the small food garden of daisies and dandelions that she had planted as a filly was still there and obviously well-tended. The walls had seen a new coat of paint since the last time Twilight had been home but it was still the little blue-and-white house she remembered from her foalhood.

Twilight fidgeted. It had been so long since she’d been home. She hadn’t even spoken to her parents at Shining Armor’s wedding. What was she going to say?

The door creaked open to reveal a slightly aging grey unicorn with a white and purple mane. “What ca—” she began, then stopped.

The two stared at each other for a long moment before Twilight finally broke the silence.

“Hi, mom.”

“Twilight,” her mother responded, softly. “Dear,” she called out more loudly. “It’s Twilight.”

Twilight Velvet was joined almost instantly by her husband, a darker-blue unicorn with a grey-streaked mane. “I... Hello, Twilight,” he said, hesitantly. “It’s good to see you.”

“Hi, dad. It’s good to see you too.” Twilight replied. “Um... Can I come in?”

Twilight found herself swept up in her parents’ forehooves.

Maybe what she was going to say didn’t matter. Tears formed at the corners of Twilight’s eyes; going home could wait at least a little while longer.

The three ponies walked inside the little house and closed the door behind them as the last rays of the day’s sun faded over Canterlot.

I had met Twilight Sparkle's family that day, at the hospital. They were nothing like I expected. She was Princess Celestia's protégée, her brother the captain of the city guard, their parents, though not nobles, both respected gentleponies from a landed family. I had definitely not expected them all to be so... nice. So much like Twilight herself, really. Even Princess Mi Amore Cadenza—"Call me Cadance!"—was... nice. Meeting them was a strange experience.

I hadn't intended to. After exhausting myself with my lightning rod spell I essentially passed straight out, and when I awoke I was at the Canterlot hospital with Fluttershy and two nurses fussing over me. I felt better than I should have, and Fluttershy explained that the princesses had helped Twilight, Al-Dhi'b and I after our exertions last night. I took care of some perfunctory conversation with the doctor and then left. That's when Fluttershy and I ran into Twilight's family in the hallway.

There were introductions all around and Shining Armor congratulated me on how well I'd done in the tournament and at protecting Canterlot. I didn't let on, of course, but I was flattered; Shining Armor, though a specialist in defensive magic, was well-known for his own strength and ability, so he knew powerful magic when he saw it.

We spoke, briefly. Twilight Velvet and Night Light asked if I was friends with their daughter, and Fluttershy intervened on my behalf and said that, yes, of course we were all friends, that I had even been staying with them while I was in Canterlot. I bristled at that a bit, but... well, I suppose it was true.

"So, Trixie, where are you from?" Princess Cadance asked.

I pushed my mane back as best I could. "Hoofington," I replied, trying and failing to match Cadance's beyond-sunny disposition. "Though Trixie has not been back in quite some time."

"I hear it's a nice town. Do your parents live there?" Shining Armor followed up, without missing a beat. Even if everypony in Equestria didn't know about the wedding of the century, it was obvious they were married.

"Yes," I said. "Trix—Erm, they've both lived in Hoofington their whole lives. I suppose I should go visit some time."

"Oh, yes," Twilight Velvet said, in a sing-song voice. "I'm sure your parents would love to hear about all the things you've been doing." Her husband nodded quietly next to her.

I had to make my excuses, but it really was genuinely nice to meet them. It was also interesting; judging by Twilight Velvet's reaction to my suggesting going back to Hoofington, I had to assume that Twilight Sparkle didn't visit her own parents very often.

The rest of the morning passed quickly. Princess Luna appeared and gave me Celestia's apologies that she couldn't be there personally. I assumed that meant that my promised new wagon was going to be delayed or never materialize at all, but when Luna brought us out to the road, there it was, all expensive hoof-turned wood and shiny lacquer. Neither of my previous wagons had been at all this nice. It even had a folding stage and awning already built in, so I wouldn't have to have it modified.

"I hope that this will meet with thy approval, Trixie?" Luna asked. She had an absurdly hopeful tone in her voice, as if I was about to cut down a gift from the princesses.

"It's wonderful, thank you," I said.

I definitely meant it that time.

She left and I began to examine my new cart. The frame was all good, sturdy oak pieced together with very high-quality joinery. The undercarriage was made of lightweight aluminum with a set of steel shocks, so it would be sturdy, ride well and not be too heavy to pull. The body was all hoof-turned and painted wood and veneer. I was no wagonwright but after doing lots of maintenance work on my wagons I could at least tell good construction from bad, and this was very good construction. To be frank, I would never have been able to afford it on my own. Still, never let it be said that Trixie would turn down a gift from a fan!

I was just strapping myself into the harness when Twilight Sparkle and her friends appeared. They had a pegasus with them that seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite place her. Twilight and I spoke briefly about where we were each going. I said that I was planning to head back to Hoofington to see my parents. Twilight said that she was going to go back to Canterlot and do the same. Fluttershy invited me to stay with her if I returned to Ponyville. After that, we went our separate ways.

It's nice to have friends. I hope things worked out with Twilight and her family.

I headed away from Canterlot. Hoofington was, after all, quite a long trip, so the sooner I got on the road the sooner I'd be home. On the other hoof, there are a number of good performance spots between Canterlot and Hoofington...

The small cemetery hidden within the Canterlot sculpture garden was silent; even the late-night visitors like mice and frogs were subdued under the silvery light of the full moon. A pall a thousand years long hung over the silent markers and the stands of white roses that grew around the edges of the hallowed ground.

The hedge split and a tall figure in a black cloak walked in slowly, silver-shod hooves clicking metallically against the cobbles. Luna stepped from the path onto the soft grass, and the night was once again silent as she walked among the rows of markers.

Names... Names... So many names. Some were famous names, ponies of renown from bygone eras. Some had been remembered to her by her sister, names that Celestia had told to Luna over glasses of wine or sweet melomel. Most, however, were foreign to Luna, small memorials to ponies that had lived and died centuries ago and were mourned only by Celestia, monuments to transience and loneliness.

She continued walking, carefully picking her way among the markers, flowers and weeds until she reached a far corner of the little cemetery. Luna knelt down beside a marker that was set apart from the rest and encroached by thorny rose canes. While the other markers bore names, dates and perhaps a pithy statement, this simple stone marker bore only a single word.

Rubedo

Luna's horn glowed and the hood of her cloak was pushed back from her face. She curled up with her hooves underneath her and gingerly brushed the small coating of dust from the marker.

“Oh, our precious Rubedo. We served thee poorly.”

Speakest not such things, dearest empress, spoke a voice from Luna's memory. *‘Twas never your place to serve.*

“In our madness, we made thee a monster.”

Nay, never was I but your loyal subject. I would have followed you into the bowels of Tartarus, if only to see your smile.

“We were wrong, dear Rubedo. Wrong to ask that of thee.”

What is right but to serve you, empress? If you seek forgiveness, I have none, for there is nothing you need forgiven.

Luna lowered her horn to the cold stone, a tear slithering down her muzzle and into the grass. She had had conversations like this with him a hundred times and they had served only to harden Luna's heart, convince her that she was right in her anger and resentment, that her word was law even unto death.

If I have served you poorly, then I beg your forgiveness.

That was like him, too. Maybe if she had backed away at the last minute and let the moon descend... Maybe if she had just opened up to Celestia more... Maybe if she had shrugged off Najstariot's barbs instead of letting them cut so deeply... Maybe...

"We forgive thee," Luna mumbled into the ground. "The responsibility is ours alone."

Go, dear empress. Live. Be with your friends.

Luna mulled on this, then shook her head. No, that wasn't like him at all.

Princess, a difference voice said, one belonging to her sister's student instead of her own. We're your friends and we love you. You shouldn't beat yourself up!

Luna smiled. That felt right.

Rising slowly to her hooves, Luna turned back the way she came. Morning would come soon, and with it the ministers, the petitioners, the common ponies that just wanted their princesses to hear of their challenges and hardships. That would be a good change, she thought, to add an extra hour to open court and let the peers and ministers deal with two hours for their closed-door harangues instead of three. Her ultimate responsibility, after all, was to Equestria, not to the nobility. *And then perhaps this evening I will write a letter to Twilight and my sister.* She smiled at the thought.

Spreading her great wings, Luna vaulted into the air.

It was time to raise the sun.