

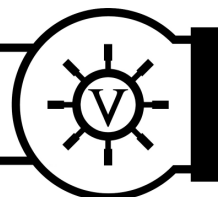
Two Ponies

Twilight Snarkle

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PONY FICTION VAULT



There are many hidden places in Equestria. Secret places: long-treasured and long-forgotten alike. If you know where to look, you might find your own. This is the story of such a place, on a certain day, with two particular ponies, and what happened afterwards.

Half a mile into the woods along Sweet Apple Acres - not too close to the Everfree Forest, but far enough from the bustle of Ponyville - stood a ring of ancient maples, long dead. Their bark had peeled away and their trunks were polished by wind, and rain, and the passage of time into a honey-golden hue. They were cracked, and their branches gone, yet their wood was smooth and warm to the touch.

They surrounded a small depression in the ground, perhaps once a pool, filled with the dust and dirt of time's progression. Still, they stood, like sentries on watch, defending a forgotten treasure.

It was here that two young ponies - a colt and a filly - found themselves, and found each other.

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Copper Key was a delicate, almost frail earth pony. She had a dancer's legs and a regal bearing, and her hazel eyes glittered with mischief. Her coat was a faint jade green, almost white. Her mane and tail were a deep forest green, worn long, but they were thinning - only a few hairs grew high enough on her neck to fall as a forelock, and her tail was more of a suggestion than a reality.

She was new to Ponyville as of that summer - the youngest child of a family that hailed from Manehattan - and already had her cutie mark: a copper padlock, closed, with a heart-shaped keyhole. Smudge had seen her about Ponyville, always in a cloak despite the weather, and had always meant to stop and say hello - but never seemed to find the time.

Smudge was a stocky, dour-faced earth pony. He was neither handsome, nor particularly bright, nor skilled in the games the other earth-ponies played. His coat was a dusky grey, save for his shaggy fetlocks which slowly darkened to a raven black. His eyes were a chestnut brown, and his mane and tail were habitually tangled, their black and brown curls festooned with twigs, leaves, and the occasional confused caterpillar he'd acquired on his wanderings through the wood.

He was a simple pony - his thoughts flighty - and was easily distracted by the beautiful things that could be found throughout the natural places of Equestria.

He was a year older than Copper Key, and preparing to enter adulthood, having passed his classes. He did not yet have his cutie mark, but his absent-minded nature prevented him from dwelling on it.

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It was autumn, in the afternoon, a week before the Running of the Leaves.

Copper Key wandered the woods, having visited briefly with the Apple family, thanking them for their generosity. They had offered her brother a job on the farm, and were happy for his help this season. She gathered her cloak about her - she was always bundled, now - and sat in a small clearing, resting against a weathered maple, shielding herself from the wind. She felt exhausted, despite the short journey from the farm, and fought the urge to close her eyes. She might not have done so, were it not for the sudden crashing approach of another pony.

Smudge followed a blue jay, curious as to its presence. He had thought they would have all flown south by now. He made no effort to conceal his presence, and tramped through the brown and green underbrush with a reckless stride. A turn here, a turn there, and soon he lost sight of the bird. He paused a moment, and heard a noise. Curious, he followed it, and was surprised to find another pony so far out.

She appeared startled at his presence, and he paused, warily, at the edge of the clearing. A silence stretched out between them, broken only when Smudge shook off the chill, and spoke.

"I'm sorry," he began slowly. "I didn't mean to frighten."

She regarded him, unreadable, for a moment, and then furrowed her brow. "I know you, don't I? You work at the smithy."

He smiled, faintly. "Yeah," he drawled on. "Whenever they need me to push around the ore carts." He took a few steps into the clearing, and continued. "Seen you before. From Manehattan, right? The family near Sugarcube Corner?"

She answered with a smile of her own, and Smudge felt more at ease. "I'm Smudge," he declared, walking towards her, "what's - are you alright?"

It was then he noticed she had been crying.

"I'm... I'm fine." She glanced away, embarrassed.

An uncomfortable moment passed, and he worked to find more words.

"Can I sit with you? It's a little lonely out here."

"Yes. Yes, it is," she answered.

He took that as an affirmative, and laid down next to her, facing - as she was - back out towards the farm. It wasn't visible from their spot, but when the wind changed you could occasionally hear Applejack dressing down her big brother.

Time passed, and the two ponies watched the leaves rustle, and the clouds move by. Smudge didn't mind the silence - indeed, he preferred it to the noise of the village. His new friend - was she a friend? - dug out an acorn cap from the ground before them, and balanced it absentmindedly on one hoof, then the other.

The sun was setting before she spoke again. "I'm Copper Key," she said. "It's nice to meet you, Smudge."

He smiled, and began to stand. "Nice to meet you too, Copper Key. Getting late. May I walk you home?"

She nodded, and pulled her cloak tighter around herself, putting up its hood against the night air. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

He waited for her to rise, and silently walked alongside her, careful to match his pace to hers. Soon, they were at her home, its windows already yellow against the darkening sky, and she paused at the door.

It was a small home, not meant for a large family, and it had seen better days. Its gardens were barren, and its paint was peeling. Still, it was sturdy, and warm.

"Thank you again. It was nice to be with another pony today."

"But we didn't do anything," he protested, puzzled.

"That's what made it nice," she grinned, and smiled again, her eyes twinkling as she passed him and entered the home.

He stood outside, unaware of the passage of time, staring the sky, until he realized that Luna had already begun to raise the moon. Her elder sister had long set the sun on the opposite horizon.

• • •

It was winter.

Again, they sat, side by side, in the copse. Again, they spoke little, just enjoying the world around them, and each other's company, as they had every evening for the last few months.

Smudge let his mind wander. This was odd in itself - usually it wandered on its own - but around Copper Key, he found it easier to think, and easier to pay attention to her.

It was almost the Winter Solstice, and he wanted to get Copper Key a gift. Something small, to be sure - he was not a wealthy pony, and the bits he had saved were supposed to pay for his move that summer - but heartfelt. He thought of flowers, and feathers, and other beautiful things they had enjoyed in the copse, when his eyes fell upon her ever-present cloak.

A brooch. A clasp. That was it. Something to adorn the plain fabric of her garment, something to make it shine like her smile did, to make it sing like her -

He was shaken from his reverie by a coughing fit. Copper Key buried her head in her forelegs, and coughed again, her chest wracked by another wave of pain. The coughs had been more frequent, lately, and more violent.

He made an effort to stand, to reach over to her, when she raised her head and looked at him, eyes wet, forehead peaked in pain.

"Don't."

"Don't?"

"Don't look at me like that." She coughed again, shallowly. "You've got your concerned hero's face on again."

The coughing subsided. He made an effort to un wrinkle his brow. She made an effort to steer the conversation away from her thoughts.

"What are you going to do when you move? You've got that apprenticeship in Hoofington, don't you?"

"That's not till summer, y'know."

"I know."

A minute passed, perhaps two.

"Probably start anew. Nobody will know me there, not like they do here." Finding more words was an effort. "Have to make a name for myself again. But I feel lucky to have been here for so long."

"Mm. Me too."

Another minute passed as her words sunk in.

He sighed, flopping to a side to look up into the skies above. "What about you?"

"Oh, this and that," she demurred. "Suppose I'll find out if I'm graduating."

"Thought you had good grades."

"Something like that, sure." She smiled, then, one of her mysterious, secret smiles, and dug an acorn cap out of the leaves before her, balancing it on a hooftip. She looked at Smudge again. "Hey," she said, "can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, sure."

"You're not going to forget about me, are you?"

"When I move?"

She didn't answer, directly.

"When you're off in Hoofington, and you've got your fame and fortune..."

Smudge stifled a laugh. She glared at him for the interruption, then softened, and continued.

"When you're well-off and without worry... You'll remember me, right?"

"Of course."

She smiled again, and carefully placed the acorn cap on his nose. He snorted, shaking it off, and she closed her eyes for a moment, as if setting something to memory.

"It's getting late. Help me up, Mom's probably going nuts wondering if I'm in a ditch somewhere."

"Bah," he chided. "World needs ditchdiggers too."

She laughed and they picked their way out of the woods.

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Winter Solstice came and went. She did not return to the copse afterwards.

He visited her home, gift in tow, only to be told that she was ill. They would not say with what, only to come back in a few days.

When he returned, the home was dark, the windows unlit, and a pale yellow pony was locking the door.

"I... is Copper..."

Her brother looked at him sadly. His hazel eyes, just like his sister's, were teary beneath his pale blue mane. He opened his mouth as if to answer, but instead dropped his gaze, and turned, and walked towards the outskirts of town.

"But..." Smudge looked at his saddlebag. "I had a..."

He couldn't continue. He felt chilled, his blood ice, and he stumbled off towards the only home he knew, the smithy. There, he closed the door, stoked the fires, and sat in the middle of the building, buffeted by waves of heat that paled in comparison to the tears running down his muzzle.

In the dizzying heat, Smudge found solace and, after a moment, inspiration. Drawn to act, he stood, seized a piece of coal, and with atypical haste, set to work.

When Mr. Ironhoof returned to open the smithy the next morning, he found the fires dead, the back door open, and a tendril of snow collecting within.

He lit the oil lamps, and was stunned to find that all the tools had been pulled from the shop wall, and on that blank, gray canvas had been crafted, in charcoal, an image of a young mare. Her eyes were sad, her frame graceful yet thin, and her smile so radiant, it seemed to magnify the light around it. He knew the filly, he thought. She had visited the shop before, whenever Smudge worked.

Roseluck opened her shop about the same time, a hint of fear speeding her efforts to unlock the door. All the flowers, the shrubs and the vines that normally filled the greenhouse outside of her shop were gone, and she worried that the inside of the shop might be similarly ravaged. "Why, theft is almost unheard of," she thought to herself, "except by foals who didn't know better." Her thoughts fled as she finally opened the door, and was greeted by a small fortune in bits that had apparently been poured through her mail slot.

Late in the day, the ceremony over, Copper Key's family returned to their home, only to find it not as they left it. It had been repainted - not expertly, but with care. Its gardens were overflowing, in all the colors Copper Key loved. The wobbly step had been patched, the glass flutes on the oil lamps replaced, even the windows had been cleaned. Everything she had wanted to help with, all the odd jobs she was too weak to contribute to, had been completed in their absence.

And in the woods, half a mile from Sweet Apple Acres, not too close to the Everfree Forest, but far enough away from the bustle of Ponyville, a pony stood in a copse of trees. He dug a small hole in its center. In it, he set a small box, containing a copper brooch accented with tiny emeralds. Then, he covered it in rich soil, and pressed it down with a hoof.

"A gift," he murmured. "For you." His words exhausted, he pondered what to do next. He didn't believe he could go back to Ponyville. They'd be sure to ask questions, and he had no answers. He couldn't stay here... but how did that tempt him. He just wanted to be away from the loss, away from the pain he felt growing, rising in his chest. Away. Yes, that was it. Hoofington. He had an offer there. Perhaps he could find something to fill the time, and his mind, in the meantime.

He shook off his hooves, tightened the strap for his saddlebags, turned, and began walking. Maybe he'd do something else entirely, once he got there. Working the forges was satisfying, but there were other options. It wasn't too early to begin anew, or too late. Soon, he was distracted again, his mind cluttered with thoughts of birds, and leaves, and feathers.

He was so taken by the world around him, he forgot himself for a time. He didn't notice his cutie mark had appeared.

It was a simple mark - an acorn cap - that looked to be drawn in charcoal.

Cayenne rested on the roof line of a convenient house, her hind legs dangling gracelessly to either side of its peak, while she rested her chin on her forelegs. Warming her wings under the early morning sun, she would have been easy to see, had anyone cared to look up. Her lime-green coat was hardly camouflage, and it contrasted strongly with her deep red mane and tail. Still, earth ponies rarely did look up, which was fine with her. Pony-watching was more fun if they didn't know they were being watched.

Tinsel, an ice-blue unicorn with a white mane, trotted past, apparently on yet another errand. She passed a herd of foals from the Apple family, excitedly gathered about an older yellow-coated mare with a pink bow in her red mane. Her own foal was snoozing on her withers. They followed her in the opposite direction, demanding to hear about her cutie mark story, making quite the ruckus. As Cayenne's gaze drifted past, she was surprised to find herself staring into the eyes of a dusky grey stallion with a greying curly mane, who smiled a moment at her, then continued walking towards the town square.

Ol' Smudge had been the town's odd-job pony for as long as she could remember. She recalled that he'd helped put the roof on the new school when she was just a foal, and she was several years past that now. She had her cutie mark, after all: the pepper emblem was the same brilliant hue as her mane and tail, and it was ringed in orange flames that matched her eyes.

How had he noticed her? Did he know she did this often? Curiosity piqued, she followed him at a distance, flitting from rooftop to rooftop.

She realized he was somewhat of a mystery.

Oh, he wasn't unknown, quite the opposite. Every family in town had hired the stallion for something or other, and he did solid, honest work. He would make this journey every morning, waiting in the town square until someone asked him for help.

He was at least twice her age, possibly thrice, and ruggedly handsome in her opinion, but with eyes that seemed to gaze through you. Absentminded and easily distracted, he had dabbled with apprenticeships throughout Hoofington but had never settled in to master any one craft. And now, he worked when he was needed, where he was needed, as often as he could set hooves to a task.

That gave her an idea. A mystery he would be no longer, she decided. Before she was aware, she was halfway home to ask her parents if they needed any help about town.

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"Absolutely not!" her mother had declared. "You should leave Mr. Smudge be. He harms no-one, helps a great many, and is a genuinely kind pony."

The upbraiding had continued for some time. Still, once Cayenne made up her mind, it was difficult to dissuade her. Once the tempest abated, she returned to her room. Pulling a small coffer from a hiding space, she opened it gingerly. She had no bits, but she took out a gem she had found on a mountain peak, and a phoenix feather dropped by Celestia's pet, some years ago. Perhaps she could get something for them at the trading post.

She flew back to town and lit upon the ground just outside the shop. A bell chimed as she entered, and the proprietor, a faded blue unicorn with a white mane and tail, shouted a welcome from the back room.

"Well, howdy, Cayenne," he drawled. "Didn't 'spect t' see you in here today. Is this business or a social call?"

"Afternoon, Silv - er, Mr. Scales." She faintly bowed her head in greeting. "Business, I'm afraid. I'd like to see if these trinkets are worth anything." With that, she set them on the counter.

Silver Scales whistled when he saw the phoenix feather. "That there is powerful interesting. I know just the p- well, creature, who'd be interested in that. The gem ain't worth much - a few bits at most. It's a pretty color but not really a rare one." He magicked up a small book, filled with tiny lines of neat numbers, and flipped forward a few pages, then pursed his lips in thought.

"Would you take, say, 100 bits for the lot?"

"One *hundred*?!"

"Well, I might manage s'more if I were certain t'were a need for the feather, but,"

"No, no, that's far more than I expected. That'd be fine. That'd be *just* fine."

"A deal then." The feather and gem vanished into the back room, a well-worn spell the unicorn hardly had to trigger as he dug into a small pouch.

"Do you have a... no, you don't. Here." He set the pouch on the counter top. "100, if I count aright, and I'll throw the pouch in for free."

She picked it up and rested it on her back. It was heavier than it looked.

"Wow, thank you. Thank you a lot."

"My pleasure, Cayenne. Say hello to your folks for me. And if you see Tinsel about, send her on back won't you?"

"Of course!" She headed for the door, then paused. "Mr. Scales?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Does ol' Sm, uh." Her bad habits were getting the better of her. "Does Mr. Smudge come in here, often?"

"Often? No, can't say that he does. But frequently enough that I keep a few things in store for him."

"Like what?"

He scowled. "Now, that's personal business. Run along."

"Yes, sir," she answered quickly, feeling the heat on her cheeks. So many rules, so much 'propriety'. She was still getting the hang of it.

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By the time she reached the square, Smudge was long gone, and the pouch was getting heavier. She decided to stop by the Tack House - a local clothier - and buy a pair of bags so she could more evenly distribute the weight. Besides, she'd need the bags if she were going to flight school that fall.

A few bits later, she felt steady enough to take back to the skies. With a few beats of her wings, she was soon doing lazy circles over the town. It was harder to gain altitude with the bags, but manageable, and she kept one eye out for that familiar grey coat.

He wasn't in the fields, but with harvest weeks off yet, that wasn't surprising. Not near the lake either. Perhaps he was indoors? The smithy, maybe. He seemed to go there often. No, wait. There he was, on the outskirts of town. Was he heading home?

She altered her course, steadied herself, and lost a bit of altitude in the process.

There was a building there, in the distance, nestled in the trees. She adjusted towards it, but soon had to land, unaccustomed to the extra weight.

By the time she arrived, Smudge was sitting on a wide, flat step outside the large door, looking towards the woods. He was apparently lost in thought, and Cayenne cleared her throat softly.

"Uh, Mr. Sm-"

"Shh..." he rumbled. "Just a moment. Don't move."

Cayenne froze, partly because she was told, and partly out of shock. She'd never heard him speak more than two or three words.

He continued to stare into the woods. What did he see that she didn't? Her eyes were stronger than his, that she knew. Not liking to be bested, she stopped searching, and instead investigated her immediate surroundings.

The single-story barn was old - possibly older than Smudge. Its timbers were well-weathered and grey, blending into the woods. The slate roof was covered in fallen brush - Smudge wouldn't have been able to reach the top to clear it. Past the open door, she saw a surprisingly small single room. To the left, an iron stove rested in the corner, a pot balanced atop it, and nearby sat a pallet of quilts. On the right side was a small table, a shelf with a few dishes and books, and a small chest. Mismatched lamps kept the room well-lit, and it seemed warm and homey enough.

But what caught her fancy was the second door. Iron-bound and set with a solid lock, it commanded attention as it stood, stoically, against an otherwise blank wall. Her inspection was cut short as the older stallion stood, shook out his shaggy mane, and leaned back, stretching his forelegs.

He turned to her, and smiled warmly, and waited.

"Oh! I'm Cayenne, Mr. Smudge, and I, uh..." she froze, realizing she had prepared nothing.

"I know you, Cayenne." His voice was deep, and his words almost painfully slow, like stones being tilled out of soil. "You're the one that likes the rooftops."

"Y-yes sir."

"No need for sirs," he ground on. "How can I help?"

Help. Yes! Help! She wanted to hire him, to learn more about him, but what? Her mind raced.

"Can't think of it now?" He had noticed. "No matter." He turned to go inside, then paused, and glanced over his shoulder. "Hungry?"

"Uh," her stomach convinced her to tell the truth. "Yes, a little."

"C'mon in. Don't have much company. You're welcome to join me." He shouldered the large sliding door open the rest of the way, and trudged towards the stove.

Cayenne followed, and paused at the threshold. She glanced once over her shoulder at the darkening sky, and stepped inside.

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She didn't know how long she had been inside, and cared less. Ol' Smudge, if slow to speak, was a gracious host, serving up as many ladles of his hearty stew as she wanted. Between bites, he regaled her, in his own fashion, with tales from his time in Ponyville. For her part, Cayenne listened attentively, patiently waiting for him to finish his thoughts, enthralled by the earth pony's view of the world. He had such an appreciation for nature, especially the woodlands, and a surprising depth of knowledge about its creatures.

When he got up to refill a bowl, or check on the fire, she took a turn. No matter what she shared, he would smile faintly, the corners of his eyes crinkling with understanding, and amusement.

From time to time, however, he would pause, as if hearing something, and tilt his head, staring out into the night-cloaked woods. When he did, she found her eyes drifting back to the door, her curiosity growing. These little reveries did not take long, and without fail the two of them were back to laughing and sharing.

The noise would explain why she hadn't heard her parents land outside, nor head them approach, nor noticed when the slate-grey mare stood behind her. Smudge's eyes went wide, but not quickly enough...

"CAYENNE." Her mother's imperial tone was unmistakable, and the filly leapt in surprise, spilling her stew. Turning in midair, she landed clumsily on all fours, her wings akimbo, and looked for all the world like a foal caught in a prank. Her mother glared down at her, chest out, hooves together.

"WHAT," her mother began, then took a breath. Tossing her sky blue mane in frustration, she continued in a low fury, sapphire eyes glittering with danger. "What... are you doing here? We've been worried sick, your father and I. It's past midnight! You're lucky I remembered you mentioning Mr. Smudge, or else we'd still be searching!"

As if summoned, Smudge stood, and picked up the bowl before moving away from the table. "Ma'am, I-"

He found a stocky white pegasus in his way, red eyes burning, short red mane bristling. Cayenne's father stood there, motionless and silent, as his wife bustled the filly away from the house.

"But, mother," Cayenne began.

"No. We're leaving now, young lady. Go, or so help me I'll have your father drag you."

His family far enough from the confused earth pony, the pegasus turned away and followed them home.

"We were talking," Smudge said to himself. He gazed at the floor, the events of the evening replaying. He found himself missing her company - it was refreshing to find someone with the willingness to slow down.

His eyes fell upon something by the table. Cayenne had left her bags. Mumbling, he picked them up, and set them on the table so he would remember them in the morning. With a heavy sigh, he rolled the door shut, blew out the lamps, and curled up on his pallet.

The next morning, Smudge picked up the saddlebags, and rested them haphazardly across his back. They were sized for a much smaller pony. He made a curious sight as he plodded into town, his eyes locked on the rooftops rather than the road ahead, and the early risers often did doubletakes.

Reaching the square, Smudge paced restlessly and, for the first time in memory, refused offers of work. Instead, he would ask anyone who approached if they had seen the lime

green pegasus with the vibrant red mane. Soon, everyone in town knew of his question, if not why, but by the end of the day neither Cayenne nor her parents had been seen.

He left, that evening, without finding his quarry. The next day, he returned, once again refusing for work as he waited for a word.

This continued for four days, when a change began to overtake him.

Smudge was anxious, afraid, and... angry. He couldn't remember being angry, but he took to it like a familiar dance. Matching the scowl on his face, his thoughts turned dark. What did her parents imagine? What stories had they told themselves? What were they doing with the fiery filly? *Why couldn't he have one friend?* As the last rays of light faded over the horizon, he reared up on his hindlegs, and bellowed in frustration. Nearby townsfolk gasped as he leapt forward, running back towards his home, grateful for the shroud of night hiding his tears.

After that, he was nowhere to be found.

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"Mr. Smudge?"

Smudge's sleep was fitful, restless. The dream again. He knew he was dreaming, but he didn't care. Maybe this time...

He would enter town, looking for Cayenne. Sometimes, he would be alone, the town empty. Sometimes, he would be alone, by virtue of being ignored. And on rare occasions, he would be chased out of town, the other ponies shouting the most bizarre accusations. But he had never found her, and he knew time was short.

"Mr. Smudge!?"

The old stallion stirred from his pallet, and shook himself awake. He had thought-

"Mr. Smudge!"

He HAD heard! Stumbling over himself, he clattered across the cluttered floor and pushed open the large door. It groaned, unaccustomed to being opened any more. There, in the sun, was Cayenne. Wait. Full sunlight? How long had he slept this time?

"Smudge! I *thought* you were in there!" She bounced forward, giddy, flitting with her wings, and leaned up against the old pony. "I was so worried. I missed you, Smudge."

"I missed you too, Cop- Cayenne", he rumbled, his head a dizzying cloud. "I truly did." He paused, looking her over best he could, drinking her in, as she leaned into his shaggy coat. "Where have you been?"

"My parents... well, we went back to Cloudsdale. My mother was in hysterics that whole night. My father insisted we go. I couldn't get away, until it was closer to admissions."

He blinked, blearily, at the sunlit world. How long had he been in a haze? How long had he been going through the motions? He turned to look over the untidy, unkempt mess about his home. She stepped back, and finally saw him. "By Celestia... are you okay?"

He looked down at himself. His gray coat was shaggy and ungroomed, his fetlocks caked with dirt and coal dust. He stepped over, cautiously, to a brass pot hanging just inside the barn, and looked at his face.

He looked old.

He *felt* old.

His mane and tail were irrevocably tangled. The knots would have to be cut out. His eyes were weary and red-rimmed, heavily lidded.

"You look sick, Smudge," Cayenne murmured, worry creeping into her voice.

He paused in his examination, and then moved deeper into the barn. Clattering noises, then the sound of something being dragged, and more odd sounds rattled out. "Smudge?" She called after him. "Smuuudge?!", a note of panic beginning to edge in. "Just a moment," he replied.

He came back out, then, her saddlebags in his teeth, and gently placed them on her shoulders. "There,"

he said, as he took a step back and regarded her. "You had left those."

"Oh, Smudge, I didn't come back for that," she pleaded. "I came back for you. I missed my friend."

He stumbled.

"But we hardly know each other."

"That's the neat thing about friends," she said simply. "You're supposed to learn all that on the way."

He smiled, then, an earnest smile, a flicker of flame dancing in his ancient heart. "I think... I'd like that." Turning once again into his barn, he picked up a small pouch and lazily looped its string around his neck. It jingled quietly in protestation. "Let's go to town."

As they walked into town, the energetic filly talking all the while about her hopes for flight school, the old stallion reminisced. So much joy had been brought to him by the most unexpected ponies, who had seemed much wiser than he.

They stopped first at a cafe', Cayenne insisting he eat, and her expression brooking no argument. Smudge complied, amused at her insistence, and found the apple pie was superb, the coffee bracing. He sat back, satisfied, and set down his bag to pay. "Oh no, dear," replied the waitpony with a smile. "That's already been handled."

Their next stop was the farrier. This was his call. A coat-brushing and clip later - the clip took some time - and he looked like a new pony. Again, he reached for his pouch to pay, only to be told it had been taken care of.

Their last stop was Silver Scales' trading post, at Cayenne's prodding. "Come on," she said, her voice taking on the commanding tones of her mother. "Miss Scootaloo says I need some materials for the first few weeks. We might as well get them here." He deferred to her, just happy to see her so pleased. As he browsed, he noticed her speaking with Mr. Scales, and slipping him a small stack of bits. Ah, that explained the earlier shops.

He picked up his backlog of parcels, tightly wrapped in oiled paper, and slung them over his shoulders. She finished shopping and joined him outside. "I'm still hungry," he said. She turned towards the cafe, again, and he shook his head. "Home cooking, if that's okay." She paused, and looked at him, her expression unreadable. Finally, she nodded, and walked back with him, at his side.

They walked in silence for a time, her eyes in the clouds, his at the road ahead. They passed the edge of town, and he stopped, stone-still.

She had taken a few steps before she realized. Turning, she looked at him, and was surprised to find his cheeks damp.

"Smudge? A-"

"Shh..." he glanced up, and looked at her, and smiled.

"B-"

"Thank you."

"What, for today? Don't worry about it. The bits aren't-"

"For coming back."

"Oh."

He stepped forward again, and nipped at her ear playfully as he passed.

"Help an old pony home, won't you?"

"Yes sir," she teased.

• • •

They had stew for lunch, as she expected. Then, they talked most of the afternoon and into the evening, and it was time for stew again. She served it this time, and he set the table. When she brought the bowls back, she was surprised to see a tiny carved box bound with a faded purple bow.

"Smudge. What is that?"

"After dinner."

"...kay."

They returned to their bantering, and soon dinner was done. Smudge stood, and Cayenne reached for the empty bowls.

"Leave 'em?"

He walked outside, and laid down to rest on the weathered stone step.

She followed, curious, and sat down beside him.

They enjoyed the silence for a moment, when Smudge tilted his head towards hers.

"You remind me... of a friend," he began.

"I *am* a friend," she offered.

"That's true."

Silence fell again. They listened to an owl hoot its evening welcome.

"Who was this friend?" she asked.

He smiled wistfully. "There was a filly named Copper Key." He paused, and seemed to steel himself. "She was pale, and beautiful, and she was dying."

"Dying?" Cayenne seemed troubled. "I don't..."

"I didn't know it then. I'm not the cleverest of ponies."

Cayenne opened her mouth to comment further, but then she saw the effort in his eyes. She let him continue.

"Her family had come down from Manehattan. Something about the clean air of Ponyville, and the Everfree Forest."

"Ponyville?"

"Where I'm from."

"Oh."

"We only knew each other a short time. A few months. But I fell in love, and she loved me, and we were happy."

Cayenne gave a half-smile, her eyes twinkling with sadness.

"I didn't have my cutie mark, then. She did." His voice grew stronger, more confident. "A shining golden padlock with a heart-shaped keyhole. She wore... a cloak. A cape. Green. She was always cold."

Cayenne glanced back at his cutie mark, the familiar acorn cap she'd seen so many times before.

"I never asked her what she thought her mark meant. It's awfully personal." His voice began to change, sounding more youthful. More certain. "But for me, it meant she was someone who wanted to know my secrets, and keep them safe."

"We spoke every night, about nothing at all. And every day we would smile at each other in passing. It was enough, and more than enough. Everypony should be so lucky to have such a friend." He paused. "And I've been lucky enough to have two."

Cayenne blushed beneath her coat, too embarrassed to meet his gaze.

He glanced back at her cutie mark, and murmured, "Fire and spice. I suppose you've brought that to this old stallion's life as well." He rose, slowly, to his feet. She saw him, then, silhouetted against the starry blue sky. He looked stronger than she remembered. Powerful. And infinitely troubled. And then he bent down, and kissed her, timidly, on the cheek. "And for that, I thank you."

He turned, and walked into the barn, pausing a moment at the door to glance at her. As he entered, she rose, and followed behind.

She laid down with him, then, a friend, and a companion. Together, they rested, side by side in silence, hearing only each other breathe, feeling only each other's warmth against the rapidly cooling night.

• • •

When Cayenne woke the next morning, Smudge was gone. He had been busy while she slept. The barn was swept, the dishes clean, and the small carved box rested on the table, still tied with a bow. She stood, and saw that it held down a slip of paper.

The paper, in turn, held six words. "Dearest Cayenne," it read, in flowing letters, written in charcoal. "It's yours. Love, Smudge."

She stared at the box for a long time, and then reached down, and untied the bow.

Smudge was almost to Ponyville when he turned and entered the forest. He still knew the way after all these years, even though the road was not recognizable. Ponyville had grown, and Sweet Apple Acres was actually within the town limits now. He picked his way through the underbrush, in the faint sunlight of early dawn, and eventually found himself at a clearing, surrounded by broken trunks of weathered maples. In the center was a small depression.

He neared the center, and paused. With a weary hoof, he dug an acorn, cap and all, out of the ground. He polished it against his coat, and then settled down on the cool earth. Cradling the acorn against his chest, he sighed, and then he was gone.

Cayenne put the old copper key in the lock, and turned it. The old tumblers fell, well-oiled, and the door swung open into darkness. Lifting a lamp from the wall, she lit it, and stepped inside. Then, she sat, unable to continue.

The room was filled - every surface, every wall, and every beam - with the world. In brilliant strokes, nature was captured to the page. Birds sang silently from above. Rabbits, stoats, mice, and even skunks gathered, motionless now, about the pillars. Trees, flowering plants, shrubs, and exotic cacti bloomed everywhere... and then there were the ponies.

She knew them all.

The baker smiled at a customer, here. The smith reworked a pitchfork. Silver Scales played with his new foal, Tinsel. Pegasus, unicorn, pony, they all breathed on their pages. Further on, huge sheets of paper swayed, decorated with a hundred images of the Princesses, Celestia and Luna, as they visited their subjects.

No wonder Smudge had spotted her. He watched ponies, too.

She walked further in, and found, behind the Princesses' banners, just two more sketches above a cluttered desk, festooned with scraps of oiled paper.

To the left was a delicate, almost frail earth pony. She had a dancer's legs and a regal bearing, and her hazel eyes glittered with mischief. Her coat was a faint jade green, almost white. Her mane and tail were a deep forest green, worn long, but they were thinning - only a few hairs grew high enough on her neck to fall as a forelock, and her tail was more of a suggestion than a reality. She sat against a weathered tree trunk. She was beautiful. And she was dying.

To the right was an athletic lime-green pegasus, eyes flashing, red mane and tail billowing about her as she traversed the sky, her face set with determination against the troubles of the world. She, too, had a regal bearing, and proud, but her gaze held a sense of wonder. She was beautiful. And she lived to the fullest.

She turned, taking it all in. And she noticed that on every picture there was hidden, somewhere, a tiny acorn cap. A signature, she guessed. There was one on the skunk's tail.

Another on Celestia's horn. One nestled between Luna's wings. She turned again, and examined the two portraits - and found them, over each pony's heart.

• • •

Half a mile into the woods along Sweet Apple Acres - not too close to the Everfree Forest, and just out of sight of Ponyville - stands a ring of ancient stumps. Long dead, their bark has peeled away, their trunks polished by wind, and rain, and the passage of time into a honey-golden hue. They are broken, splintered, yet their wood is smooth and warm to the touch.

In their center stands a mighty oak, ancient and massive. Its trunk is a dusky gray, its roots raven black. In its branches, it holds aloft - proudly, joyously - a bough of beautiful, delicate leaves of a singular jade hue, almost white. There is a peace, here. An understanding.

The pegasus family that watches over it calls it an old friend, but none could tell you who planted it, or when.

Luna broke the seal and glanced over the latest letter. The writing was rough, blocky, from someone unaccustomed to the task. Tucked inside was a second sheet, a slightly yellowing scrap of parchment, folded on itself.

She pulled out the second page, unopened, and began reading the first.

*Your Royal Highnesses
Princess Celestia
Princess Luna
Bearers of Equestria's Light*

Princesses,

My name is Spice Drop, a pegasus pony of Hoofington. I am writing to you not for my own benefit, but for that of another. I am not as well-travelled as you, but in my experiences I have never seen a pony that shared his most singular gift. There is a small image enclosed in this letter, detailing his work.

Luna unfolded the parchment, now, and smiled - her eyes twinkling with a fond memory. In the image, the two sisters danced amongst the clouds, frolicking like they once did before... well. It was a happy time. Luna remembered - she had stayed up, rather than sleep the day away, and surprised her older sister with a day without distraction: no guests, no festivals, no ceremony. That was long ago - longer than most ponies should be able to remember.

More critically, the piece was exceptional. Small, but with clear focus, the two princesses seemed to breathe on the parchment, and the clouds shimmered in the background. Somehow, in addition to the image, he had captured the love and joy that flowed forth. Something sparkled in the colors of their manes, and they glittered like the sky before dawn. Were it not for the warmth of her chambers, she might imagine being there again.

The letter continued.

I do not know when this was drawn, but my mother tells me she knew the artist at the end of a long life. His name was Smudge, and he was a dear friend of hers.

The handwriting changed here. More fluid, but the same hoof. Spice Drop had apparently placed the letter aside, and continued writing sometime later.

I would like to make a request of you. My mother raised me as a practical pony, not given to sentimentality, but on this I differ. She has shared her life with others, and it will live on through us. But this artist spoke only on the page, and until now his work has been hidden away. Would you consider showing some of his work in one of your galleries in Canterlot?

I know you've not seen the rest of his sketches, but they number in the hundreds. I would take the greatest joy in showing them to you both, if you wished.

Your subject,

*Spice Drop
Hoofington*

Luna sighed, wistfully. The other ponies had such short lives, but they worked such magic into Equestria in those brief moments that she felt obligated - no, honored - to listen to their requests. She resolved to stay up and ask her sister, and show her the letter once the sun was raised.

• • •

Celestia listened patiently, sipping on her orange juice, and then studied the picture. Immediately, she grinned.

"You stayed awake for *that* day, too, sister, and I remember how lovely it was." She glanced at her sister, and her doe-eyed expression. "YES, yes, we'll go. Today, even. I have an audience with some students before lunch but we'll go."

Her sister nearly squealed with glee, and bounced to her, hugging her close. "Thank you!"

"Anything for my little sister," she said, and she meant it.

Luna trotted away, tossing her mane in celebration. Celestia rested a hoof upon the parchment, and noticed, very faintly, an acorn cap sketched into the clouds, floating behind the sisters and holding them together in its slight curve.

• • •

The town of Hoofington was abuzz with excitement when Spice Drop visited around noon. She lit upon the square, and walked the short distance to the Trading Post to pick up a bag of carrot seeds.

The little brown pony with the red gumdrop mark folded her wings, adjusted her saddlebags, and checked her red mane - the same color as her mother's - in the reflection of the shop window, then went inside.

"Afternoon, Ms. Tinsel," she called as she entered. The ice-blue unicorn smiled, and finished stocking a small display of pins and needles.

"Afternoon, Spice Drop. Here for your seeds?"

"Yes'm. And to browse, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," she reassured the filly. "I'll just get your order ready while you look around."

The little pony made a beeline for the consignment section, as she always did, examining the hats and scarves and accessories. She loved to try them all on, but never had enough spare money to buy one. Besides, even if she did, her mother would never let her spend a dozen bits on some clothes.

"There's a new box of things near the shelves I've not sorted yet," called a voice from the back room. "You're welcome to look."

Spice Drop peeked her head around the corner, and sure enough there was a box of fabrics, bags, and, oh! New hats!

She murmured to herself as she rooted through the box. "Too stuffy, too frilly, too lacy... oh, WOW." She pulled a small black newscolt's cap out of the chaos. It was made of some soft, fuzzy fabric - she had no head for fashion - with a button at the peak. She pulled her mane back and slung the cap on. She was delighted to find it fit.

She shoved everything back into the box and trotted up to the counter. Ms. Tinsel was just coming out from the back room. "Here you are, dearie. I tied the corners together so it'd be easier to carry." She glanced up, and saw the haberdashery on display. "Why, that looks lovely on you, Spice Drop!"

Winning the battle against containment, Spice Drop's forelock fell from within the hat and lay across her vision. She blew it out of her face with an annoyed look, and smiled at the shopkeeper. "How much is it, Ms. Tinsel?"

"Mm. I hadn't priced the goods yet, but for you? Two bits."

"REALLY?" Her deep green eyes widened with excitement. She turned and dug through her bags immediately, setting the coins on the counter. "I'll take it!"

She pranced a moment, and then turned to leave.

"Spice Drop!" the unicorn called.

"Yes'm?"

"You, ah, forgot your seeds." She nudged the bag with a hoof.

"Oh." The pony sheepishly returned to the counter, stuffed the seeds into her bag, and then headed back for the door, her mood undampened.

Spice Drop stepped into the warm sunlight outside the shop, adjusted her hat - HER hat! - and picked up a little speed for the flight home.

"There she is!" called a pony, gesturing towards her.

"Spice Drop!" yelled another, moving towards her.

"She wants to see you. THEY want to see you!" a third approached.

Spice Drop backed up, backed away, flitting away from the rapidly approaching ponies that filled the square.

"C'mon, Spice!" called a familiar earth filly. "They're waiting at the meetinghouse!" A bright orange pony with blue mane and eyes bounded up.

"*Who* is waiting, Daffodil?" She looked nervously at all the eager, smiling ponies.

"You don't know? You don't know! Luna and Celestia are here! In person! And they want to see *you*!"

The feeling of worry graduated into dread. "Me?" She swallowed. "Did they say why?"

"Nope! Only that they got your letter!"

"My letter! I... let's go, Daff!" Dread melted away into excitement, and the little pegasus soared into the sky, Daffodil running behind. Catching herself, she dropped back down next to her friend, and ran to the meetinghouse.

There was a throng of ponies gathered about the meeting house, staying back from the guards circling the entrance.

"Coming through! Coming through!" shouted a small, imperious voice. "Make way!" Daffodil shoved through the crowd. She had never picked up on the usual earth pony sense of propriety, and for once reveled in the opportunity to get her way.

Spice Drop followed close behind. She didn't like to walk, especially not around so many other ponies. Small, even for a pegasus, she was always worried about being stepped on. But Daffodil was doing her earnest best to clear a road, and so she walked, grateful for the effort.

Daffodil reached the edge of the crowd, and stepped into the clearing.

"Halt!" called a guardpony, stepping closer.

"This is Spice Drop," declared the proud orange pony. "And I'm her friend Daffodil. The princesses wanted to see her."

Spice Drop timidly stepped out of the crowd, and hesitated.

The guardpony looked doubtful, but signaled to another, and together they escorted the two inside.

• • •

A well-dressed yellow pony with a pale purple mane met them just inside the building.

"Thank you, Captain. I'll take them from here." The guardponies saluted and returned to duty.

"You're Spice Drop, yes? Who is your friend?"

"Her n-"

"Daffodil! Pleased to meet ya!" She offered a hoof to shake.

The ponydomo eyed it, and forced a smile. "A pleasure. I'll announce you. Please, enter after you have been named."

Inside, the two princesses reclined on a pile of cushions on the far end of the speaking floor. Celestia spoke quietly with the mayor who, while gracious, seemed eager to be elsewhere. Luna was chatting with the mayor's daughter, who seemed enraptured at the alicorn's presence.

The yellow pony entered, and tapped her hoof twice on the parquet floor.

"Introducing Spice Drop, pegasus pony of Hoofington, and her friend Daffodil."

Precise, measured, and efficient. Typical Lemon Tart, Celestia thought to herself. She turned to face the newcomers, and the Mayor, murmuring his leave, bustled his daughter out of the room. Luna giggled.

The door stood open for a moment, and then a small, red-maned brown pegasus stepped inside. She seemed unsure of herself, and made her way down the ramp to the speaking floor. Moments later, a bright orange blue-maned pony joined her, urging her on.

Spice Drop stood before the princesses, fear fighting excitement.

"That's a lovely hat," said Luna murmured to her sister. "Quite fetching on her."

HER HAT. She had forgotten to take it off! In a panic, she knocked it off her head and stuffed it into a saddlebag, her mane a tattered mess.

"I, uh, thank you, Princess Luna." The flood began. "I'm Spice Drop, and this is Daffodil, and I'm so happy to meet you in person, I didn't know that you'd come yourself, and your mane is gorgeous, Princess, and uh," the words abated, "I wrote... the letter?"

Celestia's eyes twinkled, and her sister stood as well. "No need for panic, my little pony. We're just here to see your drawings, as you asked, and spend a day away from the palace."

Luna added, "It really is nice to meet you. And you, Daffodil. We aren't taking you away from anything, are we?"

Spice Drop shook her head, and Daffodil followed suit.

"Good," chimed Celestia. "Is the work near?"

Spice Drop was beginning to regain her balance. "Yes, highness, near the treeline. Our house."

"Oh! Does your mother expect us?" Luna asked.

"She's not home, princess. She should be teaching the second half of her class by now."

"Well, it would hardly be proper to visit her home without her there," Celestia mused.

"Tell me, Spice Drop, what do you think is the best place for a meal, here?"

"Oh. I don't know, princess. I usually eat at ho-"

"The Carriage House is excellent!" interrupted Daffodil, "Uh. Um. Princess." Her parents owned the shop.

"Well, that sounds lovely," Celestia murmured, the corners of her mouth turning in amusement. She raised her voice, "Lemon Tart? Please send someone to the Carriage House and ask for a quiet table. There will be four guests - that is, if you two would like to join us?"

The two ponies nodded, grinning with excitement. Lunch with the princesses!

• • •

It was late afternoon by the time the four of them left the Carriage House. Flanked by the royal guard, they walked down the winding path towards the wood. Luna stifled a yawn. Celestia grinned at her, only to be greeted with the royal tongue. "Well!" she harrumphed.

All the while, the two smaller ponies chattered on, asking the royal opinion on matters most important to a young filly, and sharing their hard-earned wisdom about such things as handsome colts and grades.

They approached the edge of the wood, and the house came into view. It was a simple, single-story barn. Its slate roof sagged, slightly, and its heavy beams were worn. It had been recently repainted, red and white against the grey and green of the forest. A light burned in the window, and the large door was opened a few feet.

"She's home," said Spice Drop. "I'll go get her!" The little pony raced ahead, taking wing, and barreled through the open door. The princesses waited behind for a moment, and then approached.

"What? Here? Why is she here? Luna too? During the day? Is my mane okay?" An older mare's voice could be heard from within.

Spice Drop trotted out of the barn, grinning. "She'll be right out. Just a moment."

A clatter, a crash, and a thud later, the door to the barn was pushed open the rest of the way. A lime-green pony with a red mane and a pepper mark stepped outside. Not quite sure what to do, she bowed, flaring her wings. "Your highnesses."

Luna smiled. Celestia nodded slightly in welcome. "Cayenne, yes?" The mare nodded. "Your daughter has been telling us so much about you."

"She.. she's not in any trouble, is she? I can't imagine what she's been up to."

"Oh no. She invited us to see some drawings. She says they're quite wonderful" Luna nodded agreement, and added, "She sent us one just today."

"Sent you..." the gears clicked. "Spice, did you take a picture?" A fire glowed in her orange eyes.

"I... I just wanted to show them..."

"You know I don't..." she paused, her anger at her daughter's action battling with a sense of decorum. "We'll talk later."

Ashamed of herself, her daughter answered only with a quiet, "I'm sorry."

Celestia sighed. Luna looked on in worry. "I suppose I should have written back, first, instead of visiting unannounced. But my sister insisted, and I honestly saw no harm. I am sorry." Cayenne looked shocked, she did not know how to take an apologizing princess. "We've had a delightful day, though, and it was all due to your daughter's letter." She turned as if to go. "Luna, I think these two have something to talk about. Shall we?" Luna was crestfallen.

"Wait," said the old mare, quietly. "Please." She seemed torn. "Can - may I see the letter?" Luna smiled softly, and a slip of paper floated towards the pegasus. She took it in her teeth and set it down on a weathered stump to read. She looked up, and stared into the trees, and then sighed.

"The pictures are inside. Please, come in. I apologize for the clutter - it's just Spice and I these days, and neither of us put much value on 'tidy'."

She walked into the house, and a few more lamps sprung to life. On the far wall was a smaller opening, a beaded curtain separating the areas. She passed through, into the darkness beyond, and more lamps slowly turned on.

Celestia nodded to the guards, who immediately stationed themselves outside. Luna entered first, followed by her sister. Daffodil brought up the rear, until Spice Drop tapped her and motioned to the side.

"I think my mother would prefer us here," she said, and sat at the old table inside. Daffodil joined her, and the two of them waited in a nervous silence.

• • •

The back room was cluttered, but its high roof kept it from feeling too enclosed. Luna had taken a few steps in, and paused, looking around in wonder. Celestia stepped beside her, and nudged her crown, causing it to fall over one eye. Luna grunted and readjusted her accoutrements, and then Celestia saw what her sister had.

"They're beautiful", the younger one murmured. "They're so full of expression, so alive." Indeed they were. Celestia saw the glories of Equestria laid out before them, all the jewels of nature gathered together in one place. Flocks of geese soared above. An anthill's soldiers trooped along the bottom edge of its paper world. In the corner, she noticed an Ursa Minor - not to scale - sleeping peacefully. But the ponies were what caught her eye.

She saw generations of loving, happy ponies recorded here. Melancholy ponies that kicked at the dirt. Aggressive ponies that soared through the skies, or raced along the ground. Elegant ponies at tea, or in high fashion.

Luna examined the same pieces, these ponies familiar yet so alien from her night-time vantage point. Enthralled, she walked from sketch to sketch, studying them closely, occasionally giggling.

The two sisters lit their horns, to see more clearly, and cautiously picked their way through the haphazard displays. It was then that Luna noticed the banners near the back.

"Celestia, look. It's us."

There was a picture of Celestia, wings swept in the darkening sky, determination on her brow. She touched the image, gently, with an outstretched hoof. "I'd raised the sun late that day," Celestia recalled. "Twilight had been ill the night before, and I had lost track of the time. He saw me pass."

Luna was shocked. Her sister never forgot the time. "This one, here, is from one of my first nights raising the moon again. I spent the whole night on a cloud, watching it closely, keeping it company. Somehow he saw that too."

"It's what Smudge did best," Cayenne said, her voice floating from the shadows. "He saw everything, dark or light, and the beauty in it."

The sisters pored over their images, and then each other's. Luna's eyes watered, but she said nothing. Celestia seemed troubled, but made no comment.

After some time, Cayenne spoke again. "These were his largest works. But, there are two more he held in more regard." She turned, and walked towards the back. The sisters looked up from their reverie, and followed to a corner of the room, where an old drawing desk sat, polished and clean.

Cayenne paused to let them pass.

Two portraits hung above it. To the left was a pale green filly, eyes sad and knowing, a once-luxurious mane now thinning. She bore a green cloak, and rested against a tree trunk.

To the right was a lime-green filly, winged, with fire in her step and wonder in her eyes, soaring, her red mane and tail whipping in the wind. She was proud, and majestic.

"Sister," said the eldest, quietly. "Do they look familiar to you?"

"I don't recognize the earth pony. But isn't the other.."

"Yes."

"Ah."

Silence. For a time, only Celestia's mane and tail moved.

"Cayenne?"

"Yes, princess?"

"Tell me about the artist."

Cayenne took a breath, wondering where to begin. "Well, his name is Smudge," she began, "and he's... he was an earth pony originally from Ponyville." Her voice broke then, her lip trembling.

Sensing the direction of the conversation, Celestia turned to her sister. "Luna? The fillies are probably bored by now. Would you keep them company for a while? After all, it's almost time for us to go."

Her little sister, yawning all the while, nodded, and walked out to keep the ponies company.

"It's okay, Cayenne. Tell me about the both of you."

She sniffled, and set her jaw. "He'd always been the odd-job pony. The butt of the joke. He was kind, and gentle, and slow of speech. The younger fillies would tease him, and he bore it in good grace. The older ponies kept him busy, hiring him for this job or that, and he was happy for the work."

She sighed, and continued. "He wasn't really the best at anything. Never brought attention to himself. I never noticed him, growing up. Not really. Not beyond a hello or a how-are-you."

"What changed?" Celestia prompted.

"I used to spend my free time pony-watching. Still do, sometimes. There's something peaceful about the hum of everyday life. One afternoon, I saw him watching back." She smiled, faintly. "I followed him, and realized that of all the ponies I'd met, the one I had known the longest I knew nothing about."

"So he was an older pony?"

"Much. I never did find out how old, exactly, but he remembered when Apple Bloom was a foal, and she's a grandmother now. Maybe a great grandmother. It never seemed to matter."

Celestia nodded, and Cayenne continued.

"I was a stubborn little thing back then, and I had gotten it into my head that I needed to learn more about him. So, I decided to hire him for a job, and use the time to talk to him. Get to know him better. It would have been great, I'm sure, if I had figured out what job I needed done before I got to the house."

"Oh dear."

Cayenne moved about the room, both to avoid eye contact and to turn off the unnecessary lamps. "He invited me in for dinner, and was a perfect gentleman. We spoke all day, and into the night, laughing at turns, whispering conspiratorially at others. He seemed genuinely pleased with the company, and I enjoyed learning more about him. Then, my mother found us."

She paused at another lamp, and then turned it off as well.

"She was a different person. I don't know what she assumed was happening, and don't care to dwell upon it, but she and my father swept me away to Cloudsdale and kept me away from earth pony and unicorn alike. By the time I was able to get away, and prepare for flight school, months had passed."

She walked for the beaded curtain. "I need to check on something out here." Celestia followed, concentrating a moment to douse the rest of the lamps as she exited.

Cayenne stirred a pot that had been on the stove, and replaced the lid. "Stew. His recipe." She gestured at her surroundings. "This was his place. But I'm getting ahead of myself." She turned and looked out the door into the early evening.

"When I found him again, he looked... changed. Sad. He was dying, but I didn't know it then. As he'd say, I wasn't the cleverest of ponies. I didn't care. I took him back into town, and showed him affection as best I could, treating him to this and that. I didn't understand that simply spending time with him was enough."

"We returned home, and again, talked all night. He told me a few secrets then. Some about Copper Key - she was the other filly, in the portrait - and some about himself. Just sharing it made him seem younger. Stronger. More confident. He truly loved her."

She looked away, deeper into the forest. Her cheeks were wet.

"He loved me, too. And I, him. We spent that night together, side by side, just breathing each other in. When I woke in the morning, he was gone... and I knew he wouldn't be returning. He gave me this." She gestured, clumsily, to everything around her. "All of this. And all of the work you just saw."

Celestia sighed. It always came to this. Their lives were so short, and so full of love.

They watched the ponies play in the distance. "Is he her..." Celestia began.

"No, her father lives and works in Cloudsdale. He has a home there, but we live here. I can't leave it, you understand."

"I understand, completely."

Celestia took a step outside, and, gauging the height of the sun, frowned slightly. "We should be headed back," she murmured, then turned to the green mare. "Cayenne... Smudge seems like a truly gentle soul. One who loved deeply. But he had his flaws - flaws you shouldn't mimic."

Cayenne was quick to defend him. "He was kind, and warm, and shared everything..." she began.

"I don't disagree. But he shared it with too few. He waited all his life for someone to walk back into it. It was fortunate for him that you did. But what would his life have been like had he shared his work on his own?"

The princess continued, looking out at the fillies in the grass.

"And to be honest, I don't think that holding on to the past, as he did, is best for you either. You knew him, and loved him, for a mere moment in time, and now you keep his vigil. You loved him, there is no doubt. But you love your daughter as well, and her father, do you not?"

Cayenne bristled, and she opened her mouth to speak.

"Of course you do," the princess soothed.

She shook out her multicolored mane and strode towards her sister. Cayenne followed.

"I'd like to do something about it, if you'll allow it."

"What do you mean?"

"This work, this art you value so dearly - it needs to be shared. I'd like to put it on display, and keep it safe."

"You would?"

"He had a singular talent. Beyond the skill alone, he captured creatures and plants our biologists have rarely seen. And his sketches of his fellow ponies would be invaluable to genealogy. It would be a shame to hide all this in the woods, behind a door."

Cayenne marveled at her words, thoughts racing.

"So anyone could see them? In Canterlot, I'd guess?"

"In Canterlot. Unless you'd prefer to show them in town?"

"No, no... that would... I don't know what to..." she choked out, as tears flowed freely. "I could be..."

"You could be."

"Yes. Just, yes."

"Very well. I'll have my archivist visit tomorrow, in the evening?"

Cayenne could only nod.

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A few months later, Smudge's exhibit opened to the delight of many, and a party was thrown that lasted well into the night. Both Celestia and Luna attended, when their duties allowed.

The barn was remodeled soon after, with room for the whole family. A few nights later, Drifter, a cobalt stallion with yellow mane, curled up with his wife in front of the new fireplace.

"The house is lovely, Cayenne. I'm happy to be home tonight."

"Home?"

"Wherever you are."

She kissed him, and laid against him, enjoying the dancing flames, and above them, two framed portraits. The young fillies regarded the world beyond the glass with patience and love.

"Two chances for love," she reflected, "that's what he had."

She nestled deep against her husband's chest, and murmured, "And it's what I've got too."

Cayenne woke up early one spring morning, having heard a noise in the greatroom. She was surprised to find Luna waiting, smiling - nay, beaming - with excitement.

"I found it," she said. "Just yesterday."

"Found what?" She rubbed her eyes blearily.

Luna levitated a tiny, black acorn from behind her crown, and set it at Cayenne's hooves. Moments later, a pale green leaf joined it.

"I found where he went."

"I don't understand."

"Tell your husband you'll be right back. I need to show you, quickly, before I have to lower the moon."

"I'll do it... just a moment." She disappeared into the bedroom, and returned seconds later, a very surprised stallion in tow.

"Drifter, this is Princess Luna."

He made to bow, but stumbled in shock.

"She needs to take me somewhere, for just a moment. I'll be back by sunrise, I promise."

"I... okay. I'll be here."

She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Start a fire for us, hm?"

And so he did.

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The Princess was a powerful flier, swift and sure, and Cayenne worked to keep up. Twenty minutes later, perhaps thirty, she stopped and hovered in midair, and gestured downwards as Cayenne reached her.

"It's down there. Just... go see. They're waiting."

"I..."

"Go on. I have to fly. And, Cayenne? Thank you. The banners are beautiful."

With that she was gone.

Cayenne spiraled downwards, not knowing what she'd find, and then she saw it.

The oak was still small. After all, they grew slowly. But she knew how old it was. Its branches and trunk were a dusky grey, its roots raven black. It lifted, proudly - happily? - a bough of the palest green, tiny leaves. It was him, she was sure. And her, she guessed. The love of his life. She lit upon the ground, eyed the oak warily for a moment, then laid at its trunk. She leaned against it, and felt him there.

She rested a short while, and then stood, and rubbed her muzzle against the grey bark.

"Thank you," she murmured. "For everything."

With that, she turned away, took a few steps, and leapt into the sky. Soaring, laughing, looping, she flew towards the east. The sky was brightening already, and she had promises to keep.