

Who We Are

kits



"Whoa!" Rainbow Dash stumbled as a giggling Pinkie Pie spun her around. The blindfold robbing her of her sight and the jerky motions of the earth pony conspired to make staying upright more than a minor task.

"Remember, Pinkie. She needs to be spun in a circle at least six times," Twilight helpfully supplied. "The goal is to disorient her."

"Yeah, make sure ya get her nice an' dizzy, Pinkie," AJ said, not even trying to hide her amusement as Dash nearly tripped over her own hooves again.

"Hey! Watch it –" Dash bit off her complaint as she was forced to concentrate on untangling her legs before she ended up on the floor.

"Oh... my," Fluttershy said, peeking out from behind her mane as Pinkie began to spin Rainbow faster and faster. The shy pony's eyes begin to spin in sympathy and she had to look away.

"Don't you think that's enough, dear?" Rarity asked.

"Nope!" chirped Pinkie.

"P-Pinkie. I don't think I can –"

What Rainbow couldn't do was never revealed; at that moment Pinkie slammed into the pegasus, stopping her spin cold, and wrapped her forelegs around the blindfolded pony's neck. She pressed her lips to Dash's, swaying with her girlfriend as Rainbow stumbled from the sudden assault.

Applejack rolled her eyes at the couple. "Why don't y'all get a room?" she teased.

Pinkie broke from her kiss to giggle, leaving Dash gasping for breath and listing to the left slightly. "Silly, this *is* my room," she said while bending around to plunge her muzzle into her curly tail. After a second or two, she found the object she had been searching for and pulled out a small blue pony tail with a large pin in the top.

"Here you go," Pinkie said as she carefully pressed the blunt end of the pin into Rainbow's mouth, stealing another kiss. Giggling, she lined the pegasus up with a cartoony drawing of a pony that lacked a tail and, with a "good luck, Dashie," pushed her off towards the poster.

Struggling to keep moving in a straight line, Dash stumbled towards the tailless pony. Her friends called out all manner of conflicting directions, which she did her best to ignore. Under the blindfold, her brows knit together and she struggled against the waves of dizziness. She leaned forward slowly.

Without the spinning, Rainbow was a good enough judge of distance – she had to be, or she would have become Equestria's coolest pancake by now – that she was able to stop just before she walked into the wall. Even with the dizziness, it was more a matter of walking in a straight line instead of a crooked one. The pin in her mouth touched the wall when she was leaning forward only a few inches further than she thought she should be. The suggestions from her friends redoubled in volume; even Fluttershy hazarded a weak "up!". She ignored them all, tuning them out like she did when performing particularly difficult stunts. Deciding that she had veered slightly to the left of her target, she moved the pin and then pressed in it.

The intake of breath from the other five ponies was all she needed to smile triumphantly. Slipping the blindfold up, she prepared to bask in the glory of her own awesomeness. She smirked and puffed out her chest as her eyes were uncovered to see her nigh perfect placement – if this were pin the mustache on the pony.

The other five ponies broke the silence with their laughter as Dash sighed and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up." Rainbow gestured to the pair of purple and yellow tails decorating the wall and the orange tail that had fallen onto the floor. "At least mine's *on* the pony."

"My turn! My turn!" Pinkie leaped extra high as Rainbow finished removing the blindfold.

"Geh. Hold still!" Dash said between her clenched teeth as she struggled to get the cloth around her girlfriend's head.

With a giggle, Pinkie stopped bouncing, but she never quite achieved what most ponies would call "still." The mare swayed and bobbed slightly even with all four hooves planted firmly on the floor. Another giggle, followed by a snort as Dash finally secured the blindfold.

"Payback time," Rainbow whispered, eliciting another series of high pitched laughs. Then Dash began to spin Pinkie around.

"Woo!" shouted Pinkie. The pink mare had no problems managing her hooves despite the rough way her girlfriend was shoving her.

Turning to Twilight, Applejack smirked. "Bet ya lunch Pinkie beats RD," she said, idly tossing an apple into the air.

"You're on, Applejack." Twilight grinned. She closed her eyes and tilted her chin up slightly. "Rainbow's balance and athleticism give her a major advantage when it comes to –"

Rarity and Fluttershy's gasps drew her attention back to the party game just in time to see Dash nuzzle a beaming Pinkie. The pink tail firmly pinned into the crayon pony's cutie mark was all the explanation she needed.

Applejack opened her mouth, a taunt ready to be directed at Twilight, but the sound of the front door being slammed open cut her off before she could even begin. Everypony's attention was drawn towards the stairway as they heard someone scampering up it. A second or two later, a gasping Spike crested the landing. The young dragon was panting, sweat running down his face as he paused for a few breaths.

"Spike!?" Twilight half-shouted. She wasn't sure what calamity could bring her assistant running, so it seemed, all the way from the library.

At the sound of her voice, Spike looked up at her. Sprinting the remaining distance he slid to a stop in front of his caretaker. Proffering a scroll, he gasped out, "Letter. From. The Princess! Super important!"

Levitating the curled scroll out of his grasp and summoning a cup of punch from Pinkie's snack table for the exhausted dragon, Twilight examined the message. The wax seal of Equestria, seldom used on her correspondences with her teacher, was unbroken and the word "super important" was penned just below it. A prickling sensation ran up the back of her neck causing her to tense, and her eyes grew a little wider.

Twilight frowned as she looked at her friends. Each of them were staring at the letter, no doubt remembering the last time a missive marked like this had been received. That time they had ended up battling a veritable deity of chaos and nearly lost themselves in the process. Wasting no more time, she snapped the seal, unfurled the scroll, and began to read aloud.

"My most faithful student." Some of the tension in her back eased; the letter concerning Discord had started with no such pre-amble. "I have been putting off sending this

missive for several hours now. I do not mean to cause you or your friends distress, but the investigation concerning the changeling attack on Canterlot has turned up news I feel you all deserve to know." Twilight stopped reading to look at her friends again. All were leaning forward, hanging on her words. Even Spike, still breathing hard, was staring at her in rapt fascination.

She cleared her throat and continued. "Many who suspected the changelings of having agents in place before the attack have been proven correct. Several letters were found amongst the imposter's belongings that confirm this. While this may be of interest to you on an academic level, the reasons for this letter are of more direct concern to you and your friends.

"One of the letters is a report from such an agent. While badly damaged, it details how he tracked a different agent, who had been out of contact for years, to a small, unremarkable village where she had established herself as a valued member of the community. What is more, the letter specifically refers to her as a national hero" – Twilight's pupils became pinpricks and her voice trailed off in disbelief as the next phrase passed her lips – "and as one of the Elements of Harmony..."

Twilight's magic winked out and the letter fell to the floor. She watched it fall as her mind reeled at this news. Stumbling a step away from the letter, and then another one, she remembered her friends. Her gaze took all of them in.

Fluttershy was curled up and lay shivering on the floor. Her mane hid most of her face, but her one visible eye was closed tight. She was biting her lip as she trembled. Rarity had fainted backwards onto Pinkie Pie's bed. While Rarity was prone to over-dramatizations, this time Twilight felt the reaction was warranted. Applejack stood stock still, her face was slack, seemingly devoid of emotion except for her eyes, which were as wide as Twilight's own. Rainbow Dash had been hovering above the floor when Twilight had started to read. She was now lying in a heap next to Pinkie Pie. For her part, their hostess was sitting back on her haunches and otherwise still. Normal pony still – no bouncing or restless shifting.

She was frozen in terror. Her friends, the ponies that meant more than anything to her, now knew her darkest secret. She had feared that this day would come ever since her kin had attacked the wedding. When no sign of suspicion had shown, she had relaxed. Secure in the knowledge that she could remain in Ponyville, she had forgotten. The thought of fleeing and leaving her life here had been more than she could take; she had wanted to forget.

Now, they knew; Twilight knew. And that pony would not stop until she had been unmasked. Summoning every last shred of willpower, she put a stop to these spinning thoughts. There would be time to think – to panic – later. If she wanted that time, she had to make it through tonight. Even if it meant consciously manipulating her friends. Even if that very thought made her ill. It would be the hardest impersonation she had ever done: acting like herself.

Twilight was consciously aware of how dry her mouth was. Most of her mind was still consumed by the sheer shock of this news. One of her friends was a changeling? A lump of ice had formed in her chest and it grew larger as she considered each in turn. All of them seemed shocked and dismayed too.

"No," Rainbow Dash said as she picked herself up off of the floor. All the attention in the room focused on her. "No. You're reading it wrong, Twilight." She bent around to smooth a feather misplaced by her fall. When she once again faced Twilight, her mouth was set in a tight frown and her brows were furrowed as she glared daggers at the unicorn. "None of us could possibly be an enemy."

"But, Princess Celest–"

"No," Dash spat as her wings flared. Pinkie place a hoof gently on Dash's withers, which the pegasus shrugged off without looking. "I refuse to believe it." Dash's eyes flashed and her voice took on a hard edge. "It's just a trick!"

"Simmer down now, RD." Applejack shot Dash a glare of her own as she gently prodded Rarity. "There ain't no cause to be yellin' at Twilight. She's just readin' the Princess's letter." Turning a questioning gaze to the unicorn, Applejack asked, "You're sure it *is* from the Princess?"

Offered this glimmer of hope, Fluttershy peeked out from behind her mane. Twilight's horn lit once more and a magenta field sprang into being around the letter. After a moment, the broken seal began to blink a pale yellow light. "It's genuine, alright," Twilight announced, tasting ash in her mouth.

A pop and a whiz drew everypony's attention, including Rarity's, to Pinkie. She had a noisemaker in her mouth and a double hoof-full of confetti rained down around her. "Why are you standing around with pouts on your snouts? This is supposed to be a par–"

"Pinkie Pie," Rarity snapped as she rolled back onto her hooves. "Now is *not* the time." Fluttershy and Applejack nodded their assent; even Spike glared at her.

"Um." Pinkie blushed under the disapproving gaze of her friends and stooped to scoop up a small pile of the scattered confetti. "I'll just..." she stammered as she scooted behind Rainbow Dash, "save this for later then."

"So, um," Fluttershy said through her mane as she glanced at each of the ponies in the room. "This means that... one of us is... one of us is a changeling?" She looked down at her hooves again as she fidgeted.

"Sure looks that way," said AJ as she helped the timid pegasus to her hooves.

Dash's face screwed up and she snorted. "Maybe."

"I don't care much for it none neither, RD, but the Princess wouldn't lie about something so serious." Applejack glanced at Twilight. "Right?"

"She *does* like to play small pranks and jokes on ponies from time to time," Twilight allowed. "But they're always small, and never serious."

"And if you can't trust the Princess, who can you trust?" Rarity flipped her mane with a hoof.

"You can trust your friends!" Dash's wings flared and she hopped into a low stance, her legs spread wide. She stalked towards Rarity. "We can trust each other!"

Applejack stepped in front of Rarity, blocking Dash. "'Cept one of us ain't who she says she is!"

"Please..." Fluttershy whimpered. "Don't shout."

"Fluttershy's right. Everypony needs to turn those frowns upside--"

"Just what're you saying, Applejack?"

"Oh, this is the *worst* possible thing!"

"I ain't saying nothing. Why're *you* so defensive?"

"If everypony could please stop yelling..."

"Girls, I think we need to approach this calmly and rationally. Princess Celestia would--"

"Can it, Twilight. The princess's flipped her feathers if she thinks --"

"My dear! One *simply* cannot talk about royalty in such a vulgar man—"

"You can shut it too!"

"Princess Celestia is —"

"Now, don't ya talk to her that way!"

"Oh, please stop yelling. Please?"

"She started it!"

"No, you did!"

"No —"

"QUI-ET!" Pinkie shouted, drowning out the argument. All eyes turned towards her. The normally energetic mare was sitting on her haunches, rooted in place. Her eyes cast down towards the floor, she neither bounced nor swayed. "Why are you *fighting*?" She sniffed, tears welling up in her eyes. "We're all *friends* and parties are supposed to be *fun*." Her hair seemed to lose some of its volume as she talked. "I know sometimes fun can be loud, but this is screamily loud and *not* cheery loud."

Dash was at her side in an instant, nuzzling the distraught mare. Pinkie buried her face in Dash's short mane, small jerks shaking her body. Rainbow's eyes narrowed and she carefully maneuvered to take in the other four with her hostile gaze. "That's it," she said. "Party's over." She gestured with a hind leg towards the stairs as she wrapped her wings around her sobbing girlfriend. "We'll pick this up tomorrow when you girls are thinking straight."

"But —" all four of them began.

The gaze Dash leveled at them could cut steel. When she spoke, it was clipped and short. Her tone dared any of them to argue, just for a second. "Out," she commanded, her teeth clicking together as her eyes flashed.

Applejack looked ready to take her up on the challenge, but Rainbow gave her a double dose of her glare and the farmer thought better of provoking the pegasus further. "Alright then —"

The reflection of the party lights, themselves so warm and inviting, became a thing of menace as Rainbow's eyes further narrowed. Applejack fought down the urge to gulp as she turned and walked hurriedly down the stairs while trying not to look rushed. Fluttershy, Rarity, and Spike followed without argument, the latter still nursing his punch.

As the others left, Dash turned her attention to the mare still clinging to her neck. Her expression softened, all hints of anger and all promises of violence disappeared. She stroked Pinkie's mane with the care she might have had for sculptures made of hardened sugar. Gently, she nuzzled and hugged the other mare.

Twilight lingered near the top of the stairs. "Rainbow... I'm sorry. I didn't mean for – for this."

Without turning away from Pinkie, without lifting her head or shifting a wing, Dash answered her, voice filled with a weariness seldom heard from the energetic pegasus. "It's not your fault, Twilight. But... tomorrow. Please?"

Twilight wanted to go comfort Rainbow. She would have stayed to try to help Dash without being obvious about it, but the pegasus was too busy being strong for Pinkie and would likely only repeat her demand Twilight leave.

"Tomorrow then," she said as she trotted down the stairs.

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"You okay, Pinks?"

Pinkie sniffed. "Yeah, Dashie. I'm just p-peachy. Or maybe, more like plummy."

Dash let out a sharp laugh. "Okay, you're almost making sense. What's up? Don't tell me this changeling thing got to you."

Pinkie's mane rubbed against Dash's neck as she shook her head. "Everypony was so angry. You and Applejack and Twilight..."

Dash continued to hold Pinkie, waiting for her to continue. It took several long moments before Pinkie's breathing no longer shuddered from repressed snuffles.

"You..." Her voice was calm, regaining much of the high pitched cheer it was usually embellished with. "You seemed really upset about how maybe one of your friends is a

little different on the outside than you thought. Like, you wouldn't *be* her friend if she was a black and had holes in her legs." Pinkie's face fell into a frown. "You... would still, right?"

"Can we... not talk about this now?"

"Sure, Rainbow Dash." Pinkie slipped out from the hug to look Rainbow in the eyes. "If you can promise me one thing?"

"Anything for you, Pinkie. You know that."

"Can you try not to hate her, whoever she is?"

Dash's eyes narrowed, part of the anger she had directed at Applejack returned to her eyes. "So you *do* think one of us is a bad guy."

"Nope!" Pinkie shook her head. "But you didn't want to talk about it, right?"

"I – yeah." Dash glanced away. "Can we just, not think about that tonight?"

"Sure thing, Dashie!" Pinkie chirped, her voice slowly gaining back its normal sugary tone. "Oh!" she gasped. "Maybe we could play a board game! Or read a story! I *know* I have that new *Awesomery* comic *somewhere* around here!"

"Yeah, Pinkie." Rainbow grinned. "Let's do that." Dash moved off towards the chest Pinkie kept their 'together' games in.

"And then we can have a sleepover! Just the two of us! Yay!"

Dash chuckled. "Come on, Pinks. You *know* I have to clear the clouds at sunrise. If I stay here, we'll be up all night playing games." Rainbow glanced over her shoulder to see Pinkie sticking her tongue out. "Yeah, yeah. Don't worry, I'll be back in time for pancakes."

"Yay! Pancakes!" Pinkie hopped in place. "I'll make them super extra scrumptious!"

Dash snorted. "As if you could ever make not awesome pancakes." She reached into the chest and pulled out a beat up copy of *Daring Do and the Voodoo Crew, Issue One*. "How's 'his one?" she said around the small book.

"Oh! That one's my favorite!"

Dash rolled her eyes. "You say 'hat about eve'wy thing, Pinkie."

"'Cause it's true!" Pinkie bounced over to a cushion positioned in front of the fire place and settled into it. "As long as you're the one reading it, it's *always* going to be my favorite."

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Beyond the bakery's doorway, Twilight heard heated voices. She was unable to make out exactly what was being said, but she had little doubt she would find Applejack and Rarity arguing in the middle of the street as Fluttershy tried to alternatively stay out of it or break the two apart. As she pushed open the door, her suspicions were confirmed.

"...I ain't sayin' I *want* one'a y'all to be one'a them changelings, but I don't think the princess would joke around with somethin' this serious!" Applejack was glaring at Rarity. "And I ain't inclined to think somepony who ain't a pony is gonna be too happy 'bout the rest of us finding out."

Rarity glared at Applejack. "And *I* say you needn't have brought up such a horrifying prospect right before Fluttershy and I were going to sleep. There is *simply* no way I will *ever* get my rest now."

Fluttershy, for her part, was hunkered down, wings and tail pulled in tight.

"Consarn it, Rarity! I –"

"What's going on?" Twilight interrupted.

Three sets of startled eyes turned towards her.

Clearing her throat, Rarity spoke first. "Applejack was just regaling us with the most horrific tale –"

"I was not!" The earth pony stomped her front hooves. "Alls I was sayin' is that we should have all stayed put at Pinkie's. With five on one, there ain't a sundae's chance in summer of our little changeling friend tryin' nothin'."

Fluttershy shivered and covered her eyes with her hooves.

Eyes narrowing, Twilight glared at Applejack. "Thanks, AJ," she hissed. Turning to face all three of her friends, Twilight's voice softened as she said, "You're all welcome to come stay with me at the library."

"Thanks, Twi. But I gotta warn Mac 'n Granny 'bout this. I –"

"No!" Twilight tried not to shout. Applejack raised an eyebrow, but let herself be cut off. "We can't tell *anypony* about this!" she hissed, much quieter. "It would spread panic!"

Rarity's own brow furrowed in confusion. "My dear, surely you're not suggesting that we keep this from even our families? What possible good could come of that?"

"Aside from not having the entire town stare at us and avoid us until we figure this out?"

At Twilight's words, Fluttershy's eye grew wide. "T-the entire town?" She began to quiver at the thought.

Twilight moved to nuzzle the shivering pegasus before continuing. "And then there's the issue of safety." She jabbed a hoof at Applejack. "You were just saying how you were worried now that the changeling knows we know. What about when you tell your family?"

Applejack's eyes widened as she realized what Twilight was saying. "So anypony we tell, anypony who knows, might be in danger?"

"I don't know, Applejack. Whoever she is, she hasn't hurt any of us yet. But..." Twilight let the rest go unsaid. Turning back to Fluttershy, she gave the mare another reassuring nuzzle. "Come on, Fluttershy. You can stay at the library tonight."

"Oh. I don't want to be a bo–"

"I insist." Twilight looked up at both Applejack and Rarity. "In fact, I insist you all stay."

"But Twilight!" Rarity whined. Applejack's jaw squared off as she prepared to argue with the purple unicorn.

"It's quite simple. With you three under my eye, and Dash and Pinkie keeping an eye on each other, the changeling won't be able to act without revealing herself."

Applejack squared her jaw and narrowed her eyes. She was going to be stubborn about this again, Twilight knew. Internally, she debated how much it was worth arguing with

the farmer and concluded that there wasn't any harm in letting anypony who wanted to go. Even if she *was* the changeling – a thought that she still couldn't wrap her mind around – the worst AJ would do is run away. Come to think of it, none of her friends really had the capacity to intentionally harm each other. Even Rainbow and AJ kept their scuffles to what both of them described as friendly.

"You're right 'bout not tellin' Big Mac 'n the rest, but ain't no way I'm gonna leave 'em unprotected tonight."

"And I have already promised that Sweetie could stay over at the boutique tonight. I simply can't abandon her!"

Twilight sighed. "Alright." She looked about down at the kneeling mare. "What about you, Fluttershy? I suppose you need to look out for a sick ferret or something?"

Fluttershy shook her head.

"Oh? So would you like to stay with me tonight then?"

Fluttershy nodded, meeting Twilight's eyes. "But um," she stammered quietly. "I need to make sure all the animals get fed tonight. And I absolutely, positively, have to be back early for their breakfast." Fluttershy shuffled her front hooves as she looked away from Twilight.

"Fluttershy," Twilight said, "do you want me to go with you?"

The pegasus nodded.

"Well, okay!" Twilight's eyes narrow in determination. "Fluttershy and I will go feed those animals, you two'll go home and sleep, Pinkie and Dash" – a pair of voices, muffled, but clearly in throes of laughter, drifted down from above – "will do whatever it is they do! And tomorrow, we'll get this whole problem sorted out!"

"Sure thing, Twi."

"Of course we can, dear."

"Oh, that would be great."

With a final goodnight, the ponies parted ways.

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Twilight sighed and rolled over in bed, pulling the comforter tight around her shoulders. She had read and re-read the letter, until courtesy for her guest demanded she put out her light. There had been more. Celestia had ordered her to "see the situation resolved." Once again, she went over her spell, the one she'd use to strip the changelings of their disguises during their recent battle. She had thought of it immediately upon returning home, almost kicking herself for not bringing it up at Pinkie's.

She was glad she hadn't; it wasn't a very... gentle spell. Analyzing it had left too many uncertainties. The changelings she had used it on certainly reverted to their natural forms, but they'd also been struck senseless. Were it just a matter of knocking her friends out, she'd employ it as soon as she had their consent, but there was more.

The principle the spell worked on was reliant on turning unfamiliarity with a form against the shapechanger. The changelings had assumed their forms immediately before attacking them; they were very unfamiliar with their new forms, and so the spell had not required much power. Still, she'd knocked out a changeling who'd held a form for mere minutes. This changeling, according to the princess's letter, had held her form for *years*. The amount of magic required might seriously injure her, to say nothing of what it would do to her non-pony friends. For some reason, the thought of hurting the changeling bothered her immensely. Far more than her reluctance to cause pain to any living creature could account for. Maybe she didn't really have to...

Rolling over again, she snorted. Her brain was getting fuzzy again; a combination of shock on top of a late night was conspiring to inhibit her ability to think. She'd have to figure this out in the morning. Satisfied that she could not do anything more tonight, she closed her eyes, and was asleep in seconds.

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She should leave – disappear into the night, never to be seen again. A sharp ache formed in her chest at the thought. She didn't want to leave. The last few years had been the best of her life, outweighing even her discovery of friendship – friendship that was slipping out of her hooves.

Besides, Twilight would chase her; they all would. She was good, that much she knew, and could probably escape. In the process she knew her friends would grow to hate her – to despise her.

That thought hurt worse than anything she imagined she'd endure in Celestia's dungeons. Even being banished to the moon was preferable to knowing she was hated by her closest friends. Banishment only meant years wasting away, wallowing in loneliness with nopony to love her, even if only by proxy. The hatred of her friends, experienced as only her race could, would kill her heart. She'd survive only in the most technical of terms, a hollow broken shell. Chrysalis could have her then, there would be nothing left of her to torment.

She could give herself up. Maybe by surrendering, she could escape, at least, outright hate. The resentment, the loathing, the loneliness, those would still follow. But it was better than hatred. Maybe.

A dark thought from an almost forgotten former life whispered in her mind. She could use her race's mind magic; there was more than enough love and support for her in Ponyville to do almost anything – to make them all forget. Bile tinged the back of her throat and she curled up into a ball on her bed, fighting back the urge to retch. How could she even imagine abusing her friends like that?

She nearly fled right then. If there was the remotest possibility she'd hurt one of them like that, then she deserved the hate and scorn that would follow. She'd suffer it a million times over. She'd give herself to Chrysalis now. She couldn't change anything she'd done in the distant past, but she could refuse to ever treat anypony like that again.

It was several long minutes before she could uncurl again without sicking up. She couldn't flee, she couldn't turn herself in, and she absolutely refused to prey on the ponies who trusted her. Faking her own death briefly crossed her mind, but that was absurd and would only cause her friends pain and suffering. And at the end of the day, she'd be alone and they still wouldn't know if there was a changeling in their midst.

The only option that remained was the one she had yearned for all along. She could stay. She would probably get caught – Twilight would never stop digging at this, even if it took her entire life – but until she was discovered, she'd gain more precious memories, more time amongst the ponies who meant more to her than anything. Even her own future.

A hopeful thought, the single bright light in the darkness: she might escape detection altogether. Were she in a normal changeling's predicament, she'd have no hope. Impersonating another was always trickery, doubly so once it was known somepony had been replaced. Their abilities only extended to the surface, color, shape, sound. Cloning a personality was impossible, but she wasn't impersonating anypony this time. While her coat was false and her cutie mark picked rather than granted, she had not played

herself false. All of her emotions and reactions had been genuine. She didn't have to worry about being discovered by being caught on bad acting; she just had to be herself.

"Please, Celestia," she whispered into the night, "let that be enough."

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A loud crash catapulted Twilight out of bed. She landed on all fours, her knees bent, heart pounding in her chest, and horn buzzing with energy as she sought for the intruder. In her state of panicked hyper awareness, she noticed several things. One, it was early morning, perhaps even pre-dawn. Two, that same light revealed that neither Spike nor Fluttershy were still in their respective beds. Three, Spike had dug his claws into her ceiling and was as wide-eyed and awake as she was.

"Oh my goodness!" Under normal circumstance, the soft voice wouldn't have been audible, only the adrenaline pumping through her system made Twilight aware enough to make out the words. They had come from outside her door.

With an effort of will and a flash of white she winked out of reality and reappeared on the other side of her door, ready to face this menacing... "Fluttershy?" she yelped in surprise.

With a yelp of her own, the pegasus leapt into the air, legs windmilling as her wings clamped to her sides. The covered tray she had been attempting to lift onto her back fell to the floor again with a clatter. Twilight saw the muscles on Fluttershy's back bulge as they fought to open her wings to no avail. Shortly after leaping into the air, she fell to the ground, legs locked as she rolled onto her back.

"Oh, Twilight!" she said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... um."

"Are you okay?" Twilight asked as she levitated away the tray.

As she rolled over to get to her hooves, she nodded. "I'm sorry about the noise. I didn't mean to wake you."

"What were you doing anyway?" Twilight asked as she brought the tray to hover in front of her and lifted the cover off. Inside was a sopping mess of orange juice, toasted oats, some kind of salad, and the soggy remains of toast. Twilight stared at the ruins of the, by her standards, extravagant feast. "You made all this? For me?"

"Well, I didn't know what you liked and I wanted to thank you for letting me stay over and for helping me take care of my animals and..." Fluttershy hung her head. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine!" Twilight quickly reassured her friend. "I just never expected... You didn't..." Awkward silence filled the hallway as the two ponies struggled to find something to say other than apologies. They were saved from dire embarrassment as Spike opened the bedroom door, his hand not quite up to the task of hiding his yawn from the mares.

"Oh, hi, Fluttershy," he said, stretching his arms high above his head. Both of his eyes closed as another jaw popper struggled forth. Fluttershy blinked as she was given an unprecedented view of a non-scary dragon's mouth. She blinked again and drew back a little as the youngster's breath hit her.

"Oh! Is that toast?" Spike grabbed the spongy bread slices from the tray and popped them into his mouth. "And orange juice!" His eyes opened wide in excitement. "Thanks, Fluttershy!" He grabbed ahold of the tray and yanked it from Twilight's spell. "Twilight *never* makes me breakfast! This is great!"

The two ponies stared in shock as the dragon wandered downstairs, still picking choice morsels from the tray and exclaiming over their flavor. Once he had disappeared around the curve of the stairway, the silence returned.

"Twilight?" Fluttershy's voice seemed to shatter the quiet. "Thanks again for letting me sleep here. I'm... um. It means a lot."

"Oh, it was no big deal." Twilight smiled and stood a little straighter. Etiquette required she downplay the thanks.

Fluttershy shook her head. "I mean, you let me stay here. With you. Alone... After the letter..." her voice trailed off and a small frown played across her face.

Twilight's pupils contracted as she realized what Fluttershy was trying to say. She had let a potential changeling spend the night in her room. The thought had never crossed her mind. "Oh... I..." Twilight stammered as the implications hammered home. "But there's no way *you'd* do anything to me, Fluttershy."

Fluttershy smiled at her. "I really need to go give Angel his breakfast, he'll get grumpy if I don't." She gave the still shocked Twilight a nuzzle and with a quiet "Thanks again," she hopped into the air, and glided down the stairs.

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Twilight spooned in another mouthful of cereal and chewed without enthusiasm. Her mind was too busy turning over the chain of events from last night that had led to her placing herself and Spike in danger. Fluttershy could be a changeling. She had known that, it was the reason she'd invited her friends to stay with her. How could she have slipped up and let just *one* of them sleep over? Did this mean that Fluttershy *wasn't* the changeling? She had been completely at the other mare's mercy all night. Fluttershy could have –

Could have what? Try as she might, no matter how she twisted it in her head, the concept of Fluttershy so much as striking her while she slept seemed alien. The pony she'd known all these months simply didn't have it in her; she was far too kind.

So Fluttershy *could* be a normal pony, and she wouldn't do anything to Twilight, or she was a changeling trying to throw her off by pretending to be a normal pony, who wouldn't ever hurt her. Either way, if Nightmare Moon's and Discord's defeats were anything to go by, she had to embody the Element of Kindness.

That went for the other four as well. One couldn't simply pretend to be kind or loyal or generous: a pony had to embody the ideal in order to wield one of the Elements. There was no way to fake that. This realization left her in the uncomfortable position of almost agreeing with Rainbow Dash: Princess Celestia might just be wrong.

At the thought of her friend, Twilight glanced out of her window. The weather schedule had called for a clear morning, but fully half of the horizon was still dotted with clouds, turning orange in the light of dawn. A single pink-orange fluff vanished as a dark speck collided with it; Rainbow was still hard at work.

A sudden desire to share her realization overwhelmed her. She wanted, no, needed, to talk with somepony about her sudden doubt in her mentor. Levitating the remains of her breakfast into the sink, she trotted out of her door.

Reminding herself not to gallop so soon after eating, she hurried over towards the town hall, where the majority of the clouds had yet been cleared. Twilight spent several minutes casting her eyes about for the colorful flier before spotting Rainbow Dash. She was hovering upright in midair, hanging from her wings, all four legs limp and eyes closed. Her mouth opened and closed in time with her breathing. Twilight fancied she could hear the soft snoring from the ground.

"Rainbow! Rainbow Dash!" she called. Receiving no response, she reached out with her magic and gave the other mare's tail a light tug, followed shortly by a solid yank. "Rainbow!"

The pegasus yawned, stretching her forelegs above her head. "Oh, hey, Twilight," she said through another yawn. "What're you doing out so early?"

"Rainbow, I need to talk to you." The words brought the pegasus sailing down to land next to her.

"Sure thing, Twi." Dash smiled and then yawned again. She shook her head, sending her mane bouncing.

"It's, um... about the letter."

Dash's smile slackened, fading into a scowl. She crouched and her wings flared, looking for all the world like she was ready to attack the unicorn. "Listen, Twilight. I know this seems like a nifty problem to solve or something," she growled, "but I –"

"Tell me why," Twilight blurted out, cutting Dash's rant short.

Dash's wings slowly relaxed and she straightened. "Why?"

"Yes. Tell me why you don't believe the letter."

Dash sat back onto her haunches, a frown forming as her brow furrowed. Her mouth opened, but she shut it again without talking. Ears drooping, she became very interested with a tuft of grass several yards to her right. Just as Twilight was about to ask again, Dash spoke.

"It's Pinkie, isn't it?" Dash's voice came out low, as if she were mumbling only for herself. "She's the only one that works." As Dash turned to look at her again, Twilight's jaw fell; tears threatened to overflow Rainbow's eyes. "It can't be AJ or Rarity, they grew up here. I know it's not me, and I've known Fluttershy way too long. If she'd been replaced, I'd know. So that leaves Pinkie." Dash sniffed and wiped her nose. "I thought... I thought I knew her. But if she's... If she can pretend to be... to be Pinkie, what else is pretend? Is... are *we* pretend?"

Twilight took a hesitant step towards Dash, and then quickly moved to the mare's side. Dash leaned against her, hiding her face in Twilight's mane. After a few moments, Rainbow drew away, wiping her eyes on a foreleg. A red rim and a final snuffle were the

only signs of her momentary weakness. "That's why she has to be wrong. Because I won't accept a world where Pinkie is playing with me like that."

Twilight tried to imagine the crushing blow Dash's denial was protecting her from. To think that the pony you were closest to had been playing you for a fool, she could hardly comprehend it. Just trying to imagine Celestia telling her something like that – that she was only a means to rescue her sister from Nightmare – tore at her soul. She knew now that Dash's denial was not based on logic or some undisclosed tidbit of knowledge; it was sheer refusal to accept a world too painful to bear. Dash was holding up remarkably well under such a flimsy shield.

"What if she isn't?" Twilight's voice shattered the silence. "Faking it, I mean."

"Huh?"

"Well, you clearly believe that if one of us is a changeling, it's her." Dash opened her mouth to protest, but Twilight gave her no time to get a word in. "I could point out how changeling magic can alter minds, but you've already fabricated a worst-case scenario and it's eating you." Twilight poked Dash in the chest and locked eyes with her. "So just be quiet and listen."

Twilight held eye contact until Dash closed her mouth and nodded. "Remember when I was trying to tell you girls about Cadance acting weird?" Another nod and a slight blush. "Well, I knew something was wrong because *Cadance* doesn't act like that. If she could have, she would have emulated her personality too."

"I *know* that, Twilight." Dash rolled her eyes. "You've pointed it out more than once."

"And I'll point it out again and again until you *get* it." Twilight narrowed her eyes. "It doesn't matter if Pinkie is a changeling or not, because the Pinkie we know is her real personality."

Dash tilted her head and her brow furrowed. She stared at Twilight in confusion as her mouth faded into a slight frown.

Twilight closed her eyes and rubbed that spot just under her horn. "Okay, let's try this a different way. What if Rarity dyed Pinkie blue and styled her mane. Would she still be *Pinkie*?"

Dash cocked an eyebrow. "Duh. It's not like some dye and a manecut would change who she is. That's just crazy."

"What if it was *really* well done? As in, good enough to fool anypony who saw her?"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes and snorted. "Yeah, okay. But the first time she opened her mouth, or tried to throw a party, or made a face, it'd be totally obvious it was Pinkie." Dash glared at Twilight. "It's like you're saying I only care about her because of what she..." Dash's features relaxed and her voice dropped to a whisper, "...looks like." The pegasus rocked back onto her haunches, her eyes unfocusing and her mouth forming a small "O".

Twilight fought back the urge to giggle at her friend's antics, but couldn't keep a smile from forming on her face. Dash had only needed somepony to force her to actually think about her problems for a minute. Maybe now that it wouldn't seem to be a solution to Dash's problem, she could bring up her own doubts and worries. She needed somepony to tell her she was right and explain how Celestia could have been mistaken, or that she was wrong and why.

"Thanks, Twi. I really owe you," Dash said before taking off. "I'll catch ya later!" she called over her shoulder as she sped back into the sky.

"But..." Twilight reached a hoof towards the receding pegasus. She could shout or use her magic, she could demand Dash help her with her silly issue, but what was the point? She couldn't help Twilight. Dash hadn't doubted the letter for any rational reasons. Twilight needed irrefutable logic, not an emotional appeal.

Letting her hoof drop back to the ground, Twilight turned and trudged back to the library. She would need to think about this more.

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"What?" asked Applejack. One brow cocked, she challenged Rarity and Fluttershy with her gaze. The two mares glanced at each other; Fluttershy sported a slight smile while Rarity's face was set in a mask of severe disapproval. "Will one'a y'all say som'thing?"

"My dear, you simply *can not* show up at the spa looking like... like that." Rarity's waving hoof encompassed all of Applejack's mud-coated figure. "You look simply filthy, no offense, darling."

"I thought the whole *point* of this frou-frou nonsense was to *get* clean." Applejack snorted, then turned to spit. "Pardon."

Fluttershy cringed away from the crude display. Trying, and failing to maintain her smile, she said, "Oh... it is, but not like a river or pond."

Rarity made no such attempt at diplomacy. "Applejack!" Her voice managed to convey almost the entirety of her disgust at the rural antics of her friend. It was the same tone of voice AJ herself reserved for the word "citrus". "I will *not* tolerate such unrefined barbarity in my presence."

"Um, maybe I should go see what's keeping Twilight?" Fluttershy offered.

"Furthermore, such a crude disregard for our host's establishment is simply *rude*." Rarity tried her best to loom over Applejack. Her graceful height and years of practice projecting her presence made for a noble attempt. It was doomed to fail, but the attempt was no less impressive for its brevity. As the immaculate unicorn drew herself up, so too did the stubborn earth pony. Further and further they stretched, closer and closer their faces crept, each trying to overawe the other. Rarity focused her disgust of dirt and grime, Applejack, her sheer stubbornness, until it seemed the very air would ignite between them.

"Or maybe check on Pinkie? Or Rainbow Dash?"

Closer the two drew, until the front curl of Rarity's mane made contact with Applejack's mudcaked forehead. Jerking her head away, Rarity's eyes focused on her purple locks and the fleck of brown now staining them. She began to shiver and shake, like Pinkie Pie on the dooziest of days. Emitting a high pitched squeal she danced in place, her hooves kicking up a cloud of dust as they pounded into the ground at a frenzied pace.

"I'll just be off then... if that's okay with you." Fluttershy took the lack of any kind of response as assent and fly as fast as her wings could take her.

"Oh my mane! My beautifully sculpted mane!"

"Calm down Rarity," said Applejack, not even attempting to wipe the smirk from her face. "'Tain't like you're not already at the spa." Her words fell on deaf ears and the unicorn continued to flail in place.

Shrugging, Applejack walked around Rarity. Leaning forward, her jaw opened to grasp the door knob to the main entrance of the Luxury Lotus Spa. As her teeth closed around the brass, she gave a single brief prayer of thanks that the fastidious ponies who ran the place took care enough to ensure that earth ponies and pegasi didn't have taste anything

unpleasant on their way in. A simple push door would have been nice. Right as her teeth made contact, she noticed that the shrill, piercing cry, emanating from her fussiest of friends, had ceased.

"Ap-ple-jack." The menace dripping from each syllable of her name sent icy shivers running down her back. She turned, lest she give Rarity an advantage in whatever was about to happen.

Rarity herself was breathing heavily, her legs set in a wide stance, and a grimace etched onto her face. Her horn glowed. Held aloft in a field of gleaming blue were the instruments of her wrath: a garden hose, wash bucket, and stiff bristled brush.

"You wouldn't..." Applejack's eyes grew wide as Rarity shifted her weight and drew a foreleg back slightly. With a cry more suited to the ancient battles common before the founding of Equestria, Rarity leapt.

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Pinkie sang to herself as she folded the tiny chocolate chip muffins into her mixing bowl. Giggling, she licked her hoof clean of the fruity batter. She had resolved last night to make her chocolate chip muffin chip muffins, but only after Rainbow Dash had come home, eaten her pancakes, and then fallen asleep at the table had the idea to add raspberry to the mix sprang into her head.

Deciding she had enough chocolate chip muffin chips for now, she tipped the bowl onto its side, pouring the gooey mixture into heart shaped muffin tins. She giggled again; Dash always complained and made faces when she used them, but then they *always* had the best cuddles afterwards. Though she was loathe to admit it, Pinkie could use a good hug right now.

A thump and crash from upstairs signaled that Rainbow was now awake. Even after two months of napping at Pinkie's almost every day, the pegasus had still to remember that the floor was only a few feet below when she rolled out of bed. Pinkie nosed the muffin tray into the oven and pressed the timer.

A clip-clop from above let her know Dashie was really awake and was climbing back onto her hooves. She had only seconds before Rainbow made her way downstairs. Quickly, she threw a few pastries onto a wire rack and splashed a bowl of glaze and another of sprinkles onto the fruit-filled treats. They were strawberry, one of Dash's favorites, even if the pegasus didn't like to admit liking something that wasn't especially cool.

She gave the treats a bare three and one seventh shakes of her tail to cool before she gave the rack a kick, launching them in an arc through the kitchen area and onto a waiting tray. It was a good thing Dashie had slept so late, the lunch crowd had come and gone already, so she'd be able to spend a lot of time getting hugs. And if nopony else came in, she might even coax out a few nuzzles.

"Hiya, Pinks," Dash said as she landed at the base of the stairs. She yawned, cracking her jaw as she stretched out her wings and forelegs.

"Dashie!" Pinkie squealed as she launched herself at Rainbow, wrapping her forelegs around the pegasus and clinging to her. "I missed you!" she said, bouncing as she held onto the pegasus. A bubbly tingle filled her as she felt Dash put a foreleg around her neck.

Pinkie grinned as she squeezed tighter, feeling the warmth from the other mare. Closing her eyes, her smile widened as the hug continued. Dash often broke their hugs long before they could get to this point where happiness began to tickle the back of her ears and bring out giggles no matter how hard she tried to stop them – even nibbling on a stray bit of purple mane or an ear wasn't enough after a while. Pinkie resolutely took a frizzled lock of blue and green in her mouth, determined to make this hug last as long as possible.

"Pinkie." Dash turned her head, tugging the scrape of mane out of Pinkie's mouth. "About last night... I'm sorry." Dash's voice sound a teensy bit tired, like she had last year after practicing all day long for the Best Young Flyers competition.

Brimming with happiness at another hug successfully concluded, Pinkie stepped back and to the side so she could meet Dash's eyes. "About what?" she asked. Without giving any time for Rainbow Dash to answer, she gasped. "Was it because you totally got my almost complete set of threes?"

"No –"

"Was it because you ate both of the pumpkin swirl cupcakes?"

"Pinkie, I –"

"Oh! It must be because you –"

"Pinkie Pie!" Dash's voice was much louder now and that draggy, tired feeling was completely gone. Mission accomplished. Pinkie grinned and relented, bouncing as she waited for Dash to finish with her silly, not-needed apology.

Rainbow Dash kept her annoyed stare fixed on Pinkie for a near record setting seven seconds before her frown broke into a slight grin and she rolled her eyes. "It's not about the games. I'm –" Dash took a deep breath and let it out again slowly. "I'm sorry for being such a jerk at your party."

Pinkie's eyes widened as the party came rushing back to her. The shouting, the arguing, the mean voices and faces: all ran through her mind like a bowling ball through a snow cone scattering colored fragments *everywhere*. The image of Rainbow angrily taking the offensive, shouting down her friends, rage barely contained behind her eyes flew through her mind.

"Whoa." Dash's voice sounded surprised. "Is that Pinkie Sense?"

For the first time, Pinkie realized she was shivering, even though it wasn't cold at all. It would have been nice to say yes to that question, but it wasn't true. She shook her head while trying to avoid Dash's gaze, but dating an athlete had its disadvantages too; Dash was too quick. When she next blinked, she was gazing into a set of rose eyes.

With a start, Rainbow realized that Pinkie didn't know she'd calmed down. The other mare was probably worried she'd start yelling again. "Oh geez, Pinkie!" Dash recoiled, a look of horror flashing over her face. "It's not bad! I swear!"

"You promise?" She hadn't asked the question since they'd started dating; she'd never needed to before, but this was *Important*.

"Pinkie Promise." Dash sat back and halfheartedly performed gestures that could generously be called an approximation of the Pinkie Promise. "Cross my heart, hope and fly, yadda yadda, something, I."

Despite the way her insides felt like they were turning into ice cream that had been left outside for five, maybe six hours, Pinkie couldn't help but smile at Dash's attempt. "Okay, then!" she chirped, summoning images from last night to combat the silly, ghostie thoughts in her head. Dash's promise helped drive them out of her mind. Giving her head a quick shake, just in case any silly pictures were clinging to her ears, she focused on the other mare and waited.

"Um." Dash looked down at her hooves, then scratched the back of her neck before looking up to examine the ceiling joists. Rainbow Dash still wasn't looking at her when she starting talking. "I had a talk with Twilight this morning, about..." Dash paused and slowly meet her eyes. "About you."

"About me?" Pinkie tilted her head.

Dash sighed, her wingtips lowering to the ground. "I'm sorry, Pinkie, but I thought you were the changeling."

Before she had a chance to reply, her mouth was filled with Dash's hoof. "And I thought that if you had been lying about that, then you were lying about other stuff too. Like us, me, whatever." Dash's tail flicked, the cascading rainbow drawing Pinkie's attention for a moment.

"Mrphglr?" she asked around the hoof in her mouth, tilting her head slightly.

"No, that's not all. I got really mad at everypony, especially AJ. Every time they insisted the letter was true, all I heard was 'Pinkie doesn't love you'. And -"

Pinkie spat Dash's hoof out of her mouth and pressed her muzzle against her girlfriend's. "That's the silliest thing I've ever heard!" she quipped before closing her eyes and pressing her lips against Dash's. The pegasus didn't normally like makeouts in public, any more than she liked hugs, but Rainbow threw herself against Pinkie and didn't pull away. It was Pinkie who had to break the kiss; her nose was squished up against Dash's and she had been getting all light headed and woozy and the corner of her vision was getting the tiniest bit black. It wasn't fair; Rainbow Dash was hardly winded.

"So yeah, I guess that was pretty stupid, huh?" Dash's grin made Pinkie want to risk blacking out, which was like falling asleep, which was the worst thing *ever* because it meant she might miss something fun, again.

Rainbow Dash lowered her eyes. "I still kinda think it's you, you know."

Pinkie's ears twitched and her eyes shot open. "You do?"

Dash nodded. "Yeah, I kinda do. And if it is, I guess I kinda understand not telling. It's not like it matters. Much."

Pinkie beamed. "So you're not mad at any one from last night anymore?"

"Nope!"

Her eyelids lowered halfway, sending an almost palpable wave of heat towards the pegasus. The widening smile didn't do much to ruin the effect. "And you're not just after Pinkie for her smoking hot body?"

"Heh." Dash smirked. "I wouldn't go *that* far," she said, rolling her eyes and her entire head. "I mean, Pinkie Pie comes in a pretty nice package."

"And you wouldn't mind if Pinkie had secrets?" Pinkie bumped her forehead into Dash's softly.

"Well," Dash murmured. "There's *one* thing I'd be mad at you for."

"Oh? Is it about the wasp thing?"

"No, silly." Dash chuckled, her cheeks turning red. "If you are a changeling, then we could have been staying at *my* place this whole time."

"And why would we do that? The bakery is here, Dashie."

Dash's face fell as she stuck out tongue and made a fake gagging sound. "Mattresses suck, Pinkie."

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"Would you like the daisy scent or the honey suckle?" Rarity asked as she needlessly scanned the spa's stock of shampoos. She knew the Lotus sisters' stock by heart, but it never hurt to make sure some new product had not escaped her notice. "Ooh! Perhaps you'd like to try this hay and pomegranate one? Or this raspberry and..."

Applejack shook her head as she stopped paying attention to Rarity's fussing. She didn't really like coming to the spa much; sure, relaxing in a warm bath was a great way to unwind after a long day working the farm, but it was only mid-afternoon and the spa entailed so much more frilly nonsense than "warm bath" should have attached to it. Sniffing the sweet scented water, her muzzle crinkled as she muttered some choice words about the kind of ponies who needed even water to smell funny. The sole reason she had come was to spend time with all of her friends, and they were late.

"Applejack?" Her name drew her attention towards the other mare, who had one brow cocked and her mouth curved into a concerned frown. "Is something the matter, dear? You look positively incensed."

"Are you saying I smell?" Applejack snapped. Before Rarity could do more than drop her mouth in shock, Applejack sighed. "I'm sorry, Rarity. I just ain't too happy with all this frilly nonsense. I didn't get too much sleep last night neither."

Rarity's expression melted into a sympathetic, wry smile. "I didn't get my usual beauty sleep either, Applejack." Rarity reached up a hoof to flip her mane, which had been placed into a curler already. "That ghastly comment you made last night had me fretting for hours, you know."

Applejack slumped forward in the water, dropping her head until her muzzle was a bare fraction of an inch above the pool. She let out a deep sigh. "Rarity, I ain't exactly thrilled about it myself, and I can't say that ain't the biggest reason I'm so riled up today." Her eyes opened and she stared down at her reflection in the surface. "And I'm sorry about being so short with you, but I just can't help but think about it." She turned to look at Rarity, her eyes seeming to droop. "One of my best friends in all of Equestria has been lyin' to me. Possibly for years. I –" She shook her head. "I just don't know how to deal with that." Sighing again, Applejack deflated, slumping down until her nose was just above the water line. "How can you trust a pony who even lies about her face? It's like she's trying to fake who she is by changin' what she looks like."

Rarity pursed her mouth and brought her hoof to her chin as her eyes rolled up in thought. "Does it really bother you that much?" Rarity asked, her voice tinged with concern. At Applejack's raised brow, she clarified. "Somepony who alters her appearance in order to make a better impression on others? Somepony who uses her looks to her advantage in social situations?" Rarity paused for a moment, and when she spoke again, her voice was subdued. "Somepony like me?"

Applejack frowned and studied the water in front of her. Rarity's mouth curved into a larger and larger frown as she stared at Applejack, scarcely breathing as she waited for an answer. "Rarity, you're a great pony and all, always willing to help in your own way and I love you for who you are." She paused for a moment. Closing her eyes to breath deeply, she continued. "But I can't say that it sits well with me all the time, the way you gussy yourself up and get all flirty with ponies sometimes."

"You make me sound like a floozy."

"Dagnabbit, Rarity. You ain't a floozy and I'm no good at speeches like this." Applejack sighed. "Look, what I'm tryin' to say, is that you mostly seem to do it for yourself. You ain't just being beautiful to get things from ponies. Even if you do sometimes. Just like Rainbow don't do her tricks and stuff just so ponies'll cheer her on, even if she likes that just fine." Applejack scratched her neck. "I guess what I'm tryin' to say is you ain't changing your looks to fool nopony into thinking you're something you ain't. And that matters."

There was a long awkward silence while Rarity digested what Applejack had told her. For her part, the farmer tried to think of something, anything to restart the conversation on a different topic. She didn't want to talk about changelings or dresses or nothing. Just as she was about to get desperate and bring up the subject of mane care, Rarity spoke.

"I just had a most... well, not disturbing, but rather disruptive, thought." Rarity's brow was knitted as she stared off at nothing. "What if..." She trailed off.

"What if what?" asked AJ after a long moment.

"No, nevermind. It's silly." Rarity put on a false smile and waved a hoof as if she could toss her last musing aside.

"Come on, Rarity. Can't be any sillier than half the things we could pretend to talk about."

Sighing, Rarity twirled a loose end of her mane with her hoof. "Well. What if our changeling friend wasn't trying to fool anypony about who she was."

Applejack rolled her eyes and snorted. "Rarity. That's what they do. They pretend to be somepony else and feed on love. Heck, that big high-and-mighty princess changelin' told us herself."

Rarity was already shaking her head. "No. I don't mean the way she looks," Rarity said, examining the tip of her hoof, her nose crinkling in disgust as she found some small chip or imperfection. She shook her head and looked back at Applejack. "I mean, what if she's acting – being herself. I doubt you would think different of me were I the same color as dear Pinkie."

"But it's different!" Applejack's voiced was raised. "She –"

"Would hardly be welcomed in Ponyville, were she to not appear as a pony," Rarity smoothly interjected. "Were I a changeling who wished to live in peace and create

dresses, I too would disguise myself as normal. Or have you forgotten how we all treated Zecora when she arrived?"

Angry denial died on Applejack's lips as Rarity's words struck home. It was true, they had judged Zecora harshly simply for being scary looking. A changeling in its natural state was much scarier and stranger than Zecora ever had been. "I – you're right." Applejack sounded surprised to hear herself say that. "Ponyville'd never even give her a chance, would we?"

Grimacing, Rarity shook her head. "It pains me to admit it, but I don't think we would."

"Well, don't that beat all." Now it was Applejack's turn to stare off vacantly. She opened her mouth, but at that moment the door to the spa was flung open.

"Aw yeah!" trumpeted Rainbow Dash as she glided in through the door. Pinkie bounced through next, giggling as she held Dash's tail in her mouth, followed by Twilight and Fluttershy. With an extra hard flap of her wings, Rainbow shot out over the tub, dragging Pinkie with her. Applejack and Rarity watched in awe as the pegasus pulled up into a loop, still trailing her pink companion, and then splashed into the tub, showering everyone with a spray of water and sending a huge wave splashing over the side.

Twilight and Applejack chuckled as Rarity protested. Pinkie pinned Dash's wings to her side until, after a brief struggle, she apologized. Once all six ponies were comfortably seated in the tub, the spa attendants delivered robes and towels for everyone. The group settled in for a steamy afternoon spent catching up on the latest gossip and news that last night's party hadn't had time for. Pinkie trotted out several of her new jokes for the occasion as the group was ushered to the sauna. Once they were settled in the wood-floored room and the steam generator was working at capacity, Aloe assured them they could relax as long as they wanted.

Twilight watched as her friends joked and laughed about the mundanities of everyday life in Ponyville. She wasn't being as social as her friends. Twilight's mind was not on Time Turner's sudden preference for bowties. She didn't acknowledge the news from Appleloosa nor Dash's recounting of a particularly devilish stunt, complete with Pinkie-provided commentary and sound effects. She didn't even pay much attention when Rarity recounted a rumor that Princess Luna had been spotted attending concerts outside of Canterlot. Her mind was on one thing: her unmasking spell.

She had been working on it all day, dissecting the magic she had instinctively channeled in the midst of battle to find out what it did and why. She was very close to being able to

refine the process so that it would at least not harm real ponies. It should make her feel good that she'd so quickly analyzed the spell. Soon she could use it, unmask the changeling, and then things could go back to normal.

No, not normal. It would never be normal, not after that. There'd only be five of them.

Last night, if she'd had her spell, she would have cast it on the group then and there, but now she was having second thoughts. Unmasking the changeling would destroy one of her friendships. Her eyes burned a little. She was lucky the steam masked her almost-tears or her friends would pry.

It wasn't fair. Why couldn't this changeling be somepony she wasn't close to? Why did it have to be one of her best friends in the world? Anger flared up inside of her. Why did Celestia have to burden her with this knowledge? Why did she have to be so gods-cursed good at magic? Never before had her talent seemed such a burden. She'd finish the spell and then she would rip away the changeling's secret – the secret that allowed her to keep her friend.

Suddenly she noticed it was quiet. The din of laughter and murmur of conversation had ceased. Even the hiss of steam had vanished. A blue blur crossed her vision as she glanced up to see what had befallen her friends.

"Hey! Equestria to Twilight," Dash said, waving her hoof in front of Twilight's face again. "Anypony home?"

Shaking her head, Twilight forced a grin back to her face. It was hollow and empty, but nopony seemed to notice. "Sorry, Dash. I was just thinking."

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "Come on. This is talk-y time, not egghead time," she said. Dash flipped into the air and glided back over to Pinkie, kicking a large puff of steam into nothingness as she passed close.

"What're you thinking about?" asked Pinkie. "Oh! I bet you're thinking about how tasty a chocolate-dipped, cream-filled cupcake would taste right now."

Rainbow snorted and nudged Pinkie. "The last thing you need is more sugar. I've got morning cloud patrol again and I'm not letting you talk me into playing Chutes and Ladders all night again." Dash lay her head on her hooves. "Besides, you eat too many of those things and you'll get too fat to carry."

Dash yelped as Applejack pinched her flank. "I don't think Pinkie's the one who needs to worry about gainin' weight, sugarcube." Even Twilight couldn't hold back a giggle as Dash blushed and rubbed her side. "I'm sorry, Twi. What were you gonna say?"

Twilight sighed, a wry grin spreading out on her face. Her friends would not let it rest. The more she tried to keep her thoughts to herself now, the harder they'd dig. Conceding to the inevitable, she told them. "I was thinking about the changeling again." There was a short moment of silence before smiles began to slip.

"Whatever did you go and bring this up again for, Twilight?" asked Rarity as she put a leg around Fluttershy. "I certainly have no wish to dwell upon this anymore and you've gone and scared poor Fluttershy again."

"Um, actually." Fluttershy flashed Rarity an apologetic half-smile. "Actually, I'm not really that scared anymore. Sorry."

Now all the attention in the room focused on Fluttershy. She shrunk away from their stares and stepped to hide behind Rarity. Pinkie bounced forward and yanked her into a hug. "Oh wow, that's so great Fluttershy!" she nearly yelled, forgetting to use her inside voice. "Now you and I can totally be on the not-scared team together!"

"Good for you, sugarcube," Applejack congratulated her. "But if you don't mind, what made you change your mind? Last night you were pretty shook-up."

"Oh, well... This morning, when I thanked Twilight for letting me sleep with her even though I could have been a changeling, she told me that she couldn't imagine me doing anything mean to her." Fluttershy pawed at the ground. "So, um. I thought a bit about it and... none of my friends would ever do anything really awful."

Applejack tilted her head but it was Rarity who spoke. "Whatever do you mean? You do remember the wedding, don't you?"

At the mention of the wedding, Fluttershy closed her eyes and shuddered. Rainbow Dash zipped over and put a reassuring hoof on her neck. "Come on, Rarity. Can you really imagine, say, Applejack actually trying to hurt you?" Dash gave a derisive snort and Fluttershy's eyes opened, a tentative smile forming on her face as she looked up at Dash.

Applejack's snort echoed Dash's. "'Course not. I ain't the changeling."

"Ooooh!" Pinkie waggled her eyebrows and grinned. "That sounds exactly like what a changeling would say." Her smile fell as she knitted her brow. "But it also sounds like

what a pony would say." Her brows pulled together as her tongue stuck out of the side of her mouth.

"It is true that you'd make the ideal candidate, Applejack," Rarity offered. "Your family knows practically everypony in town. And you're... not exactly in the public eye much, but everyone knows of you. No one would *ever* suspect you, thus you are the perfect cover for a changeling."

"Right. My family." Applejack rolled her eyes. "Kinda hard to not be a pony seein' as how I've got Mac 'n Granny who been around my whole life. Sorry, sugar. I can't be the changeling."

"Oh, but you could!" Twilight blurted out. "I mean, theoretically," she added at AJ's glare. "Changeling magic helps them fit in, to blend. Their queen was able to cover any gaps in her act with mind magic. She just got sloppy because she didn't know I knew Cadance. It's entirely possible that you could be a changeling and that Granny Smith and Big Mac only think they remember you as a foal."

"Or maybe Ponyville was founded by changelings." Dash giggled. Holding onto Fluttershy for support, she starting laughing. "Maybe we're all changelings and just don't know it!" Pinkie Pie squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. A moment later, she started growling quietly. Sweet broke her forehead and she arched her back. Her tail began to twitch and her flanks began to tremor.

Dash gave her girlfriend a wary look. Amusement tinged her voice as she strived to keep from laughing. "Pinkie Pie, what are you doing?"

At the question, Pinkie stopped. Her face broke out in a grin as she stood up straight. "I'm trying to see if I could make wings!" she said. "I figured if you were right, I could totally grow wings and throw you house parties and work parties and thanks-for-the-pretty-sunset parties!"

Dash stared at Pinkie for a moment before she collapsed in a fit of laughter. "T-thanks, Pinkie," she forced out as she convulsed. After a second, Pinkie joined in on the laughter too and soon, all six were shaking with mirth.

The good mood carried on through the remainder of the visit. There was no more talk of changelings or the letter, even if Twilight thought she caught Pinkie trying to sprout wings once or twice. As the evening wound down, Twilight had all but forgotten her earlier bout of depression in favor laughing with her friends. She smiled, enjoying the

crisp evening breeze as Rainbow said goodnight to Pinkie. It was taking longer than necessary, but more than once she caught the words "sleep" and "morning shift". After extricating herself from Pinkie's goodnight hug, Dash walked her home before disappearing into the night sky.

The library was dark; Spike had gone to sleep already. Twilight made her way to her bed, pulled her covers around her tight, and drifted off with a smile for another wonderful day spent with her friends.

• • •

Failure. Oh, her friends didn't suspect her, at least none now gave voice or acted differently around her, but she had failed, still. She had failed the moment Twilight's mind had turned towards uncovering her. Things had been going so well, everything had been normal, but still Twilight had been thinking of her. And when Twilight Sparkle thought about something, results weren't merely reached, they were seized and examined with a thoroughness that would be called invasive if the thoughts had anything to say about it. Twilight was thinking about her now; even in the midst of company, her mind was fixed on her. She was running out of time.

Running. Again the thought that she should flee entered her mind. There was no longer any hope of avoiding discovery, not that she'd had more than a foal's hope to begin with. It would happen tomorrow, or the day after, or the week after. Fleeing made sense. Fleeing was the only rational thing to do. But she knew she wouldn't.

Maybe it was selfishness. Now that she knew her moments were numbered, each one took on importance she couldn't possibly have imagined before. She couldn't give up a single one, even to spare herself and her friends pain. She would hoard them, she would count them, the way some counted bits, and treasure them more. Her selfishness was going to get her caught, was going to hurt her friends.

Maybe she deserved her fate? For the lies, for the deceptions. For the way she'd used her friends. That last hurt the most. She had been using them, been feeding on them, without their knowledge. Her rationalizations sprang into her mind. She wasn't taking anything, she hadn't done that since she was a child and feeding was instinctual. She wasn't even intercepting something meant for another, the way so many of her kind did. The love and friendship her friends had was for her, freely given, and she returned it with every bit of her heart. Why did she still feel wretched every time she thought about it? It wasn't as if they hadn't all risked far more for each other. It wasn't like feeding or not feeding would affect her friends, other than her eventual death would. In short, she had forced nothing,

demanded nothing, and stolen nothing. But she hadn't asked. She hadn't told them. She hadn't trusted them.

How could they trust her? Telling them any of it meant telling them all of it. About how she'd cloned dozens, hundreds, until she knew enough of ponies to fit in. Telling them about the times she'd erased all knowledge of her presence from her trial homes. Telling them about her failures, about the times she was chased out before she left. Telling them how she'd ultimately used her magic to insert herself in pony society, a memory that made her ill now.

She didn't even know if she'd change anything. Had she not created memories, created her own history, she would never have met them. Would never have learned how truly desperate she had been for that simplest of needs: to belong, to have friends. It wasn't even unique to her kind, though few creatures' health was so dependant upon the affection of others. She knew she deserved punishment, because she would do it all over again, just to have had these ponies as friends.

Selfish. She flung the word at her reflection. She could hardly bear to look upon the face she had come to think of as her own; the lie hurt too much right now. For the first time in more than a decade, she let her guise fall. Blue-green eyes stared at her from an unfamiliar face, her 'natural' form. She hadn't thought of this face as hers in years and it seemed almost as if a stranger stared back at her. She glanced down. Clutched in her tattered, black, alien hooves was a photograph of the six of them. It had been taken shortly after Discord's defeat and they had spent all night in celebration over regaining their friendship.

The glass was wet where her tears had fallen, but still the image brought happy memories into her heart. The night after Celestia had honored them, the six of them had snuck out of the palace. They'd spent the whole night laughing and crying and apologizing as they each recounted what they had felt under Discord's influence. They'd toasted marshmallows and drank cider until dawn had driven them to their beds.

A flash of green and she wore her real face again. The picture began to tremble. Her hooves were shaking. More droplets splattered against the glass even as she smiled at the memory. Their smiles, smiles they wore partly because she was there, were a soothing balm on her conscience. She had been as true as she could be around them. Sure she'd fought and quarreled with them, she wasn't perfect, but she'd never pretended to be somepony else with them. Sure she liked ponies to see her in a certain way, but it wasn't pretend, it wasn't a role. She did it because she wanted – needed – to. And they loved her for it, for her. Maybe even enough that they'd one day forgive her.

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Twilight awoke to the delicious smells of cooking apples and cinnamon wafting through her open door. A quick glance at her clock showed that she'd slept in. Quickly, she rolled out of bed. She skimped a bit on brushing her mane, opting to listen to her stomach's demand. Hurrying down the stairs, she found her assistant hard at work in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Spike."

"Oh! Good morning!" Spike threw a handful of cinnamon on top of what looked like a lumpy brown mess, gave it one last stir, and then spooned it out onto two plates. He grabbed the dishes and, sticking a spoon in each, slid one across the breakfast table.

"Spike," Twilight began, eyeing what looked like mushy apple slices in a brown paste, "what is this?"

"It's fried apples! Applejack gave me the recipe," Spike said as popped a large spoonful into his mouth. "'S wealwy goowd!"

Twilight grimaced. "Say it, don't spray it."

Spike swallowed. Suddenly his eyes bugged out and he clutched his throat. Falling backwards, he let loose a large belch. Twilight was about to admonish him when a wisp of green smoke materialized into a scroll.

Her eyes scanned the text as Spike climbed back into his chair. The young dragon made sure she was engrossed in her text, and then poured the contents of his bowl into his mouth, swallowing the meal in one gulp.

Twilight's pupils shrunk to pinpricks. Spike braced himself for her angry chastisement, closing his eyes and leaning away preemptively. "Spike," she said, her voice hushed. "Go get Pinkie and tell her to get everypony here."

An eye cracked open as Spike stared at Twilight. She wasn't paying any attention to him, her gaze still fully fixed on the letter. She was even levitating a small bit of apple into her mouth. "Twilight? What's wrong?"

She chewed without blinking. After a moment, she swallowed. "Celestia is on her way."

• • •

Rainbow Dash tapped her hoof impatiently even as Pinkie Pie teased another small knot out of her mane. "Come on, Twilight," Dash groaned. "We've been waiting here for *hours*." Pinkie giggled, sending Rainbow's mane bouncing.

"Um, it's really only been a few minutes," Fluttershy murmured. "But maybe you were here longer than me?" Dash just rolled her eyes.

"Be patient," Twilight said as she paced past the three ponies. "I sent Spike to get Applejack before Rarity, so we won't be long."

"Can't you at least tell us why we're here?" Dash yanked her mane out of Pinkie's mouth. "The pancakes are getting cold."

"Don't worry about that, silly," Pinkie said. She gave Dash a quick peck on the cheek. "I can *always* make more pancakes. It's not like they are only for waking you up." Pinkie's eyes grew wide. "Oh! I could even make pancakes for *lunch!*"

Fluttershy hid her giggle behind her hoof as Dash tried her best to maintain a grumpy face, but as Pinkie switched from grinning to making silly faces, her frown broke and soon she was giggling along with her girlfriend.

Twilight didn't feel like laughing, but she said nothing. The others would learn why they were all here soon enough. As if summoned by her thoughts, the door to the library swung open to reveal Applejack and Rarity.

"...simply do *not* see what is *so* important that you could not let me finish brushing my mane." Rarity's voice could be heard from outside, even before Applejack pushed her through Twilight's door. "I mean, seriously, what couldn't wait for me to finish my morning routine. Why, I haven't even had my breakfast yet!"

Applejack stood up straight and replaced her hat. With a shrug, she popped her neck before answering. "Sugarcube, we'd be there 'til my fields ripened waiting for you to get done prettifying yourself." Applejack smiled at the rest of them. "Mornin', girls. Sorry we're late."

"Where's Spike?" Twilight asked.

"Oh, I asked him to keep an eye on Sweetie Belle for me. He was ever such a dear and agreed for as long as you might keep me."

"And then *everypony* can have pancakes!" shouted Pinkie. For several seconds no one moved or said anything.

Dash blinked. "So," she began. "Why *are* we here?"

Twilight felt their eyes upon her. She paced down the line of her friends once more before turning towards them. Her face went through many expressions: starting with a steel-eyed glare, then slipping into sympathy. It regained much of its sharp edge before slipping into resignation tinged with sorrow.

"It has to do with her, doesn't it?" Pinkie's voice was unusually calm. "The changeling."

Inhaling deeply, Twilight nodded once. "This morning I got another letter. Celestia will be here to receive an update on the situation in person."

"Celestia's coming *here*?!" shrieked Rarity. "And me with my mane in such a state!"

"She's expecting me to have a solution to this... issue."

"Well," began Applejack. "I figure unless our friend feels like outin' herself, we're pretty much stuck on that front. Least ways, unless you've got a spell for sussing out changelings in one of your books." Applejack flashed a joking grin at Twilight. The grin slowly slid off of her face as Twilight's tiny frown remained untouched. "Sugarcube? That was a joke."

Twilight returned an almost imperceptible shake of her head. Her mouth opened, but no sound came forth. Licking her lips, she met each of her friends' eyes in turn, seeing the smiles slip from their faces as she did. "I –" Closing her eyes she steeled herself. "I have a spell."

Her breath caught in her throat. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Of course Twilight had a spell. She had a spell for everything. She'd let her guard down again. She'd assumed that no mention of it meant that it didn't exist. How could she have discounted her studious friend's library?

She couldn't flee. She couldn't escape. She saw her life in Ponyville falling apart in front of her eyes. The slim hope she had held to had failed her. She walled off the part of her mind that was gibbering in fear and sorrow. Praying to any being that would listen, she fervently hoped – not out of any sense it would do any good, but because the only alternative was utter despair – that this one time, Twilight would fail. Wishing her friend ill, even in this, added to the stone that had settled in her gut. Still she seized onto this last refuge, this one illusion of hope.

When she had first come amongst ponykind, she'd heard an old legend. A young pony, kept in virtual slavery to her wicked aunts, made a wish upon the sun. Celestia heard this plea and, finding it worthy and the young filly's heart pure, granted her desire. If any tale she'd ever heard, if any whisper or rumor was true, she hoped Celestia would hear her and grant her this one thing.

"The question is, should I cast it?"

Silence reigned. Hooves were shuffled, wings ruffled and settled, and glances were shared, but none spoke up either way. "Celestia is coming here, today," explained Twilight. "She may arrive at any second. And she wants to know..." Taking a deep breath to steady herself again, she finished. "She wants to know if we've dealt with this."

For a minute, nopony spoke. Each seemed stunned or lost in thought. Even Pinkie seemed rooted in place. It was Dash who first spoke up, breaking the silence. "Ca-cast your spell, Twilight." Her voice was low and hoarse, as if she were crying. Pinkie leaned towards her, but Dash suddenly turned to stare at her. "What?" she snapped. "The princess is gonna get here and she's gonna know Twilight has the spell and make her cast it anyway!"

"Rainbow Dash," Rarity started.

"No. Whoever it is... we should be the first." Dash's voice dropped to a mere whisper. "Just us."

Pinkie hugged Rainbow Dash. Soon after Rarity, Applejack, and Fluttershy moved in too, all with pained expressions.

"Um. I think..." Fluttershy's whisper was barely audible. "I think Rainbow Dash is right. We should do it before the princess gets here."

"Does everyone agree?" Twilight asked. Sullen nods answered her. "Then follow me."

Twilight led the group into the main room of the library. She'd already cleared out a circle in the middle of the room. Here they gathered. Twilight addressed her friends: "I'll start the spell. Once it's cast, the changeling should be forced into her natural form for about a minute." More nods.

She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. The spell resisted her, like something was blocking her or her mind wasn't on it. Deciding that it was just the suddenness of all this, she tried again. And failed once more to get more than a pinkish glow from her horn.

Twilight didn't understand what was so hard. Two nights ago, if she'd had her spell, she would have cast it on the group then and there. Today's events and thoughts had led her to... to what? Empathize with the changeling? When had she started doing that? One of her friends had been lying to her. She should be furious. She should be outraged. She should be, but she wasn't.

Her friends. Of course she empathized with her friends. And hadn't she told Dash just yesterday morning that their connections with each other had all been real? That the form didn't matter? So then, she wasn't just threatening to unmask "the changeling", but to rip away one of her friend's closest held secrets.

Her eyes widened; the change from "the changeling" to "her friend" was instantaneous. Rainbow and Pinkie, Fluttershy, Applejack and Rarity, they were all still her friends, still the same ponies she had known yesterday, even if one wore a false face. Her hidden friend hadn't fled, hadn't harmed them; there were no signs of changeling magic manipulating her or the others nor were any of her friends exhibiting the weird hiccups in behavior her brother had. Her friend was still the same pony who faced down Nightmare Moon, who helped defeat Discord, who sided with her against her own kind at the wedding. Sure they had had their differences, but there wasn't ever a sign that her friends were anything other than that. Memories flashed through her head.

Adventures they'd shared...

Fluttershy's face darkened as she stared the dragon in the eye while the five of them cowered against a shattered rock.

...fun they'd had...

Applejack gritted her teeth as she walked, blindfolded. She and Rarity shouted directions, but in the end, Applejack still stumbled right into the pillar of pillows. All three of them laughed.

...times they'd accepted her eccentricities...

Pinkie Pie fitted the multicolored umbrella onto her head. Twilight still felt bad about doubting her, but Pinkie didn't even give her time to start frowning. "Honk!" A hoof pressed against her nose.

...times they'd stood by her...

Rainbow Dash crashed through the door. She leapt, twisting in the air to land between her and Celestia. Even if her mentor had never intended to remove her from Ponyville, Rainbow didn't know that. She held a hoof up in a warding gesture and told the oldest, wisest pony in Equestria "no".

Her best memories all revolved around these five ponies. How could she have ever doubted that, no matter what species they might be, they were still her friends? How could she stand to be the instrument that would lose her one of them?

She may have to cast the spell, but that didn't mean she had to watch.

Her eyes closed and for the third time, she felt the familiar force of magic begin to pulse within her. Every other spell she'd ever cast, from the meanest levitation to sealing Discord, had carried a sense of euphoria, of being truly alive; the magic seemed to exult in its use. Not this time. The magic was languid and sluggish, requiring all of her will to force out of her horn and into the world. A bright flash of white light, visible even through her eyelids, and the spell was cast.

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Twilight ground her teeth, waiting for the shocked gasps and possible scuffle that was about to result. No one had said anything yet, but maybe the light show had forced them to close their eyes as well. Hers were still shut, after all. She was resolute they would remain so; while she was responsible for casting this spell, she didn't have to be the one to name the changeling and destroy their bonds.

It had been too long. The last of the blinding light had faded. She quashed a sudden fear that she had blinded all of her friends. "Um..." she said, her voice shattering the silence. "Did it work?" She was going to feel very silly if it hadn't. She was going to feel really bad if it had.

"I don't know." That was Applejack. "I got my eyes closed."

Twilight's own nearly flew open as she heard that. One of her friends didn't want to look? Had she reached the same conclusion? That their friendship was worth keeping this secret?

"Um." Fluttershy's whisper was abnormally loud against the near perfect quiet. "I do too." Twilight's mouth dropped open. "Sorry."

Twilight couldn't believe her ears. Fluttershy had been scared stiff by the mere thought of a changeling in their midst. She, too, was willing to ignore that?

"Don't apologize, Fluttershy!" Pinkie's sing song voice range out. "I've got my peepers shut as tight as they can go! Besides." Her voice dropped in pitch and softened. "If *telling* someone's secret is the fastest way to lose a friend, *stealing* it must be the fastestest."

Pinkie's words mirrored feelings Twilight hadn't really realized she had. She felt guilt. Guilt not only for being the catalyst for this reveal, but for being the one who forced their friend into the open. How would Dash and Pinkie have reacted if she'd *forced* them to admit their feelings instead of letting them discover that for themselves?

"I must admit," Rarity spoke now, "I too am reluctant to find out. I'm not so sure I actually want to know. Especially not this way. It seems positively barbaric to force our friend like this."

"What Rarity said," Dash spoke up.

The only sound in her ears was her own breathing. Several seconds dragged out in silence.

"So," Rainbow drew the word out, "are we all cool with this? You're not gonna try to cast the spell again, right, Twi?"

She shook her head. Partly in answer, but mostly out of shock. All of her friends agreed? None of them wanted to know? When had they come to this conclusion? How had they? She nearly screamed. The trouble and heartache she could have saved if only she'd had the stomach to force this conversation long ago. "I barely could bring myself to cast it once," she said. "I doubt I'll be able to make myself cast it a second time."

"So how long?"

"How long?"

With an exasperated groan, Dash asked, "How long we gotta stand here pretending we're playing pin the tail?"

"Um, actually," Twilight double checked her mental stopwatch, "right about no--"

A sudden hammering on the door caused her to jump and turn towards it, eyes opening in surprise. She caught a glimpse of her shadow on the far wall as a burst of green light briefly illuminated the room. Again whoever was outside banged on the door as if they meant to break it apart. "Just a minute!" she called, not hiding the irritation in her voice.

She didn't turn around; whichever of her friends had just changed back might not have fully recovered. Twilight wasn't sure *she* had processed what had just happened now. A third time, someone hammered on her door, rattling in its frame.

Her horn glowed as she unlatched the door. A large white stallion stood in her door. The towering figure was outfitted from fore- to fetlock in articulated golden armor. "Twilight Sparkle." She didn't recognize the pony in his identity stealing garb, but he wasn't asking.

"Yes?" Why would Celestia's guard be at her door? She'd never needed the formality before.

"Presenting her Highness, Princess Celestia of Equestria." The guard stepped to the side and her mentor filled the doorway. Sudden joy at seeing the princess welled up within her. Sudden fear that Celestia had come to render judgment choked her. For the first time since she had been accepted as the Princess's most faithful student, Twilight wasn't thrilled to see her teacher. Not knowing what else to do, she bowed.

"Rise, my little ponies." Celestia's melodic voice almost compelled her to stand, but still she avoided Celestia's gaze. She *had* failed to uncover the changeling. No. Failure could be forgiven. She had *disobeyed*. She had possessed both the means and opportunity to fulfill Celestia's commands and she had chosen not to. And she would do it again. The thought tasted like bile, but it was undeniable.

"What is the matter, Twilight?" Celestia's face radiated concern.

"I didn't figure it out," she explained. "Who the changeling is. I don't know. I don't want to."

"Oh?" Celestia's face became an unreadable mask. Her smile flattened and all trace of emotion vanished. Twilight was looking upon the face of The Princess. "And why would my most faithful student not wish to know which one of these ponies has deceived her?"

How could she explain? There was a part of her that burned to know: the same part that just had to touch hoof to flame, the same part that needed to be stung before the wasp would be feared. That part of her demanded she cast her spell and *know*. That part of her

had been routed, utterly and totally, by her love for her friends. She wouldn't just be sticking *her* hoof into the fire, but all of theirs.

"Don't you want to know?"

Twilight almost laughed. The princess's direct appeal to her curiosity only highlighted how little even knowledge meant in the face of her friendship. She was saved from having to answer by those same friends.

"You don't get it, Princess." Dash's voice simmered with barely contained rage as she leapt in front of Twilight. Her wings flared. "It doesn't matter that Pinkie Pie is a changeling –"

"I am?"

"What matters is that she's my best friend in the whole wide world. I love her. And if she was a donkey or a griffon, you wouldn't be here." Dash's hoof stabbed towards Celestia. "It's her smile and her laughter and the way she's always there to cheer a pony up that makes her my friend, not her mane or her coat! She would never hurt her friends. She would never hurt anypony."

Pinkie bounced in front of Twilight. "Yeah! And nopony cares that Dashie is a changeling either. Well, maybe the ponies she beat with her Sonic Rainboom do, but nopony really minds. She's still the coolest, awesomest, funnest, most loyalest friend a pony could ever ask for! And I'm super duper lucky that she likes me as much as I like her!"

Applejack, Rarity and Fluttershy stepped forward to join Rainbow and Pinkie. Applejack cleared her throat. "Beggin' your pardon, but it don't matter one whit what a pony *is*. It's who she is and what she does that matters."

"A pony is not merely the sum of her appearances, Your Highness." Rarity flipped her mane. "If we were to judge based merely on the surface, why, I would hardly believe that Applejack and I would even be on speaking terms, let alone fast friends."

"Um. I think my friends are the best friends in the world. And, um, I wouldn't want to do anything to hurt them and I don't think they'd do anything to hurt me."

"As you can see, Princess," Twilight stepped forward to stand with her friends. "I may not know *who* the changeling is, but I – we have resolved the situation."

"I see," Celestia's voice was ice, betraying none of her feelings. "And do you all feel this way?" She met each of their eyes in turn.

"Um, yes,"

"Yeah."

"You betcha!"

"Quite."

"Yup."

"Then it seems I must take Twilight at her word." Celestia turned to leave.

"That's it?" whispered Dash.

She might have understood, they all might have, if Celestia had not kept her face rigidly schooled until she turned away from them. They couldn't see the tension drain from her neck, nor the burden lift from her heart. Twice now, she had risked much by betting on Twilight, and twice her gambits had paid off.

As she exited the library, Luna, hidden out of sight, raised an eyebrow. Celestia merely shook her head. As the door closed, she finally allowed her smile to show upon her face.

"We assume that things went well?"

"Better than we could have hoped for. They don't know and they don't care."

"We are pleased." Though her speech was still encased in archaic rigidity, Luna's face wore a matching smile. "We owe them much and it was a grave burden on our heart that this test had to fall to them."

Celestia looked over her shoulder at the tree. "As do I, my sister. As do I."

• • •

It had been one week; an entire week since her friends had faced down Celestia to defend her, even if they didn't know it was her they defended. One week since they had defied a the ruler of the sun for her. She hoped – prayed – they had meant it.

At first, she had been shocked. She had scarce dared to hope their talk about not caring and wishing they didn't know would play out that way, but they really meant it. It had been a whole week and the only mention of the subject in her hearing had been some lighthearted joking. No suspicion, no digging. Her friends treated her, and each other, exactly the same as before. They trusted each other; they trusted her.

She couldn't hide any longer; she had to let them know what their trust meant to her. She had to show them she trusted them. This party was the perfect opportunity. They were all together, but it was just the six of them; not even Spike was here.

She cleared her throat, drawing the eyes of her friends. She hoped, for their hearts' sakes, they had been speaking the truth. "I – I have something to tell you," she said. Her voice sounded flat and almost dead to her own ears. Maybe, having already decided to go through with this, she had started shifting unconsciously? "I..."

She couldn't say it. The words wouldn't form. She knew she had to, it was tearing her up on the inside that she had kept this from her friends. Even before the letter from Celestia, before the wedding, she had agonized in private about hiding this. She closed her eyes, tears of frustration leaking from under her closed lids. If she couldn't tell them, she would show them.

As if that resolve were some spell, she was suddenly keenly aware of how much weight ten eyes focused on her could bring to bear. They seemed to goad her onwards, to challenge her to do what was right, to trust. For the first time since meeting them, for the first time since she had realized what friendship meant, she relaxed completely.

"I'm so sorry." As her guise fell, so too did the tension. The gasps of her friends washed over her, but she didn't cringe from them like she had thought she would. She had committed and was no longer in charge of her fate. If they panicked and called Celestia to imprison her, she would weep, but not resist. If they scorned her, she would wither – she'd want that. Life wasn't worth it without her friends.

She trusted them absolutely. Hopefully, she hadn't hurt them.

Her eyes squeezed tight, she waited for the screams, for the accusations. Even after last week, she still half expected it. She flinched at the soft sound of hooves against the wooden floor. She flinched again at the first pair of hooves to wrap around her. They were soon joined by four more pairs. Each pair melted away her fear, her guilt, until none was left.

The dam burst and tears began to stream steadily out. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Please... forgive me."

Her friends said nothing, but not a single set of legs slackened.

Chrysalis had been wrong; she had always been wrong. A changeling needed others' adoration to keep moving, to keep breathing. That, she could have stolen; she could've taken it and eked out an existence as a footnote, always hungering for more. With friendship, freely given and returned...

With friendship, she could truly live.