

# My Little Alicorn

A "My Little Pony Friendship Is Magic" fanfiction  
By InsertAuthorHere

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## Chapter Eight

The light faded just as quickly as it had appeared, taking the rainbow with it. Remarkably, the magic shielding along the throne room walls and windows held strong, and no part of the actual palace structure was harmed. The same could not be said for the candles; the rush of air from the explosion had blown each of them out, leaving the entire chamber shrouded in near darkness.

It took Luna's eyes a few moments to fully adjust to the sudden change in lighting. Heart pounding, she immediately turned to physically and magically scanning herself in case anything had changed. Fortunately, whatever the spell's effects were, it had apparently not been powerful enough to reach the princess. Her coat was the same color, her cutie mark was intact, her magic was still working, her wings were functional, her mane and tail still shimmered like stars, and a quick comparison to one of the windows confirmed she hadn't shrunk. Everything was all...

*Oh no! Celestia!*

Luna quickly cast a "light candle" spell, illuminating the entire room. Nonetheless, her brain was working far too fast to actually focus on anything. The spell was the same one she had used on Celestia to begin with, that much was sure. It might not have affected her, but if Celestia was at the center of the blast, there was no telling how much younger she might have gotten. *The Arcanus E Draconus said the Youth Restoration Spell could not regress a pony past the point of their birth. But...what if she's a baby? I can't take care of a baby Celestia by myself! I'm thousands of years too young to be a mother!*

"Ugh...Grah...Luna..."

The small voice broke through Luna's panic mode. The alicorn glanced towards the spot where her sister stood, and to her relief saw the same white pony lying there. Luna cleared the gap between herself and Celestia with a single bound, landing with enough force to shake a few of the items around the throne room. On the plus side, she seemed uninjured. On the down side,

she was still a silly little filly.

With a quick jerk, Luna flung Celestia into her upper barrel, squeezing her in a vice-like grip. Celestia choked and gagged against her sister's bear hug, wrapping one of her own forelegs over her neck and pushing back with all her might. "I'm so sorry, sister! I thought I had lost you forever!"

"Well, you haven't," Celestia croaked. "Can you please let me go?"

Luna quickly released her sister, the filly flopping onto the floor. "What happened back there?"

Luna shook her head sadly. "In all honesty, I'm not sure. From what I can tell, the curse was able to...recast itself."

Celestia yipped in horror. "Recast? Does that mean I'm even *younger* now?"

Luna's horn glowed as she went back to scanning Celestia. The enchantments from before were still there, but nothing had been added or subtracted to the mix since then. "As far as I can tell, no. You're the same size, your memories are obviously all there, and I can't really see any injuries."

"You mean, before or after the bear hug?" Celestia joked.

That was when they heard the other groans and moans.

Very high-pitched groans and moans.

Very *foalish* groans and moans.

Luna and Celestia both went stark pale with fear as they slowly turned their heads to where the other six had been standing earlier. In their place were a collection of little fillies, all of which bore the exact same coat colors and cutie marks as Twilight and her friends. The necklaces were still around their necks, while Twilight's tiara had fallen off her shrunken head and rolled onto its side.

The princesses galloped to the fallen heroes, prodding and muzzling the pile in hopes of getting a response. After a few seconds, Twilight's eyes finally forced themselves open. Celestia jumped in front of her personal student's face. "Twilight Sparkle! Are you all right?"

"Mmnh, guh." Twilight cleared her throat and stared up at her mentor. A big smile registered across her face as she took in the new size difference. "Princess Celestia! It worked!"

"Um...Twilight?" Celestia scrunched her face as she tried to articulate the words. "The

Elements...didn't work."

"What? B-But you're bigger!"

Luna stepped into Twilight's view. "Would you please stop avoiding the issue?"

Twilight gasped at the sight of Luna's massive form. The shock from the rainbow explosion had started to clear, only to be replaced by the horror of her situation. "P-P-Princess Luna? When did you get so big?"

"I'm the same size as ever," said Luna. "It is you that has changed, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight groggily climbed to her hooves. Even she could not deny that something had gone horribly wrong anymore. She reached a trembling hoof to her forehead and tapped her little stub of a horn. Sure enough, it had receded back into her skull, far more than Celestia's horn had. "I-I'm a filly?!"

Celestia wrapped a foreleg around her student's neck. "It's all right, Twilight. It's not that bad being a filly, remember?"

Twilight still felt quite weak, and her horn was hurting something fierce, but she still managed to muster enough strength to stare at both princesses before letting out a long, soul-shattering scream. The instant her voice broke through the air molecules, the doors crashed open, revealing several dozen armed and armored pegasi and Unicorns. They took one look at the two stunned princesses, another look at the panicking filly and her recovering friends, and a third look at the princesses. "Your Majesties!"

Luna quickly recovered in face of her protectors. "I will explain everything later. Just return to your post!"

"U-Understood, your Majesty." The guards quickly dispersed back to their usual posts in the palace, and the doors came back to a gentle close.

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By the time the two had managed to calm Twilight down a little, the other ponies had begun to awaken. Applejack's head was buried in her hat, the brim of which sat around her small neck. Rainbow Dash's mane and tail looked like they had not seen a comb since the day she was born. Fluttershy, despite apparently being one of the oldest ponies in the group as far as Celestia and Luna could tell, was now the same size as the others, with her hair parted over one of her eyes. And Rarity...had not changed much at all, besides the smaller horn and much larger eyes. Fortunately, all the ponies still had their cutie marks, and the Elements of Harmony, now too large for their bearers, were still sitting on the spots where they had slid off.

It didn't take long for the four to realize something was very wrong. Seeing a gigantic Luna tended to have that affect on ponies. "Wh-Wha' happened?" asked Applejack.

Luna turned back to the spot where Celestia had been standing, her horn prodding for any magical interference. "As far as I can tell, when the Elements of Harmony interacted with the curse, it triggered a magical backlash. Instead of removing the enchantments, the rainbow caused them to recast themselves. Since there was no pony to focus the spell through a Possession spell, it instead reduced everypony affected to the point where they more closely matched Celestia's age. And because Celestia was the source of the blast, she was unaffected."

"But what about you?" whined Rarity.

Luna shrugged. "I've already scanned myself, and found no changes. The only explanation that comes to mind is I was out of the spell's range."

"Th-Then we're fillies forever?" sobbed Rainbow Dash. The other ponies immediately joined in the chorus of screams and moans. The guards were once again at the door, only to back down when Luna gave them a Nightmare Moon-worthy glare.

"You need to calm down, my little ponies," said Celestia. "It's not as bad as you think."

"N-Not as bad?!" growled Applejack. "Look a' us! How can ah buck apples when mah rear legs ain't more 'an stumps?"

"Fillies can't join the Wonderbolts!" exclaimed Dash. "By the time I'm old enough to try again, they'll all be in retirement homes!"

"And what about my fashion career?" complained Rarity. "I can't run a business like this! I'll have to sell Carousel Boutique and move back in with...my...PARENTS!" The white Unicorn filly swooned and hit the floor with a solid thud.

Twilight bit her lower lip to keep from crying any more. "Magic...Kindergarten."

"I promise you, there is nothing to worry about," said Luna. "If the spell is the same one..."

The princess' logical musings were interrupted by frantic beating noises. Dash was beating her wings together in a desperate attempt to gain some altitude. She was able to fly straight upwards and hover about six inches off the ground, but otherwise didn't dare to try anything else. In any case, that was all the height she needed for her next step. Pitching herself downwards, she charged right at the still-stunned purple Unicorn. "It's your fault, Twilight! You did this to us!"

Celestia was at her student's side as fast as a pony could blink. The poor Unicorn was absolutely terrified underneath Rainbow's hooves. "It's not her fault! She couldn't have known the Elements would have caused this!"

"I...I didn't mean to..." Twilight sobbed.

Applejack galloped up to the three, stopping to point an accusing hoof at her friend. "Whether ya meant it or not don't matter! Ya'll promised us nothin' would go wrong!"

From her vantage point on the floor, Rarity continued to moan. "No mother, don't wear those pants. They don't go with your sweater..."

"Um...excuse me, but we have a problem."

Everypony's eyes turned to Fluttershy. In all the confusion, the yellow Pegasus pony had remained almost completely silent, making nary a squeak as her companions started tearing at each other's throats. She didn't seem overly worried or terrified about the current situation, which seemed rather surprising for a pony as easily frightened as her. Once everypony's eyes were on her, however, she began to grow more and more self-conscious. "That is, I think it's a problem, but have any of you seen Pinkie?"

All three normal fillies and both princesses gasped as they realized what she was talking about. There was no sign of Pinkie Pie, or of the Element of Laughter itself. Dash's attention immediately returned to Twilight. "And now you killed Pinkie?"

"Wh-Wh-What?" Twilight gasped.

"Ya must've made Pinkie so much younger that she jus' disappeared!" Applejack snapped.

Twilight's growing fear and guilt were driving her to near-catatonia by this point. Rarity, meanwhile, was already there. "I am a lady, Father. I don't want to be a hoofball star."

**"ENOUGH!"**

The force of Luna's voice was enough to send Celestia and Applejack toppling into Rainbow Dash. All three fillies rolled off of Twilight, collapsing in a pile of dusty, bruised foals at the far end of the chamber. Fluttershy sprinted as fast as her tiny legs could carry her behind the throne itself. The acoustics of the chamber were enough to snap even Rarity out of her catatonia-induced nightmares, just as Sweetie Belle was preparing to earn her "Good Big Sister" Cutie Mark. Twilight was still on the ground, shaking with abject fear of her coming fate.

The princess took a few seconds to clear her throat before continuing. "As I was saying, the spell wears off by itself in two hours. The only reason my sister has not returned to normal herself is because she is different from normal ponies. Furthermore, I do not know what happened to your friend, but she is still alive. The spell's instructions specifically stated it could make a pony no younger than when they were born and no older than when the spell was first cast." Her eyes locked on the still-cowering Twilight. "Or did Celestia's favorite student forget to mention that information?"

The entire room fell silent. After a few seconds, the noiseless atmosphere was broken by several sets of hooves clopping and scrapping along the palace floor, as three little fillies slowly walked towards Twilight. Being the closest to her, Rainbow Dash was naturally the first pony to reach her sobbing mess of a friend. "Um...Twi," she mumbled. "S-Sorry I flew off the handle back there. I was just so scared."

"An' me too. Ah was worried 'bout Apple Bloom an' Big Mac an' how they all would run the farm without me, an' ah guess ah overreacted."

"And I...suppose it wouldn't be too bad if I *had* to live with my parents again. I mean, they raised me wonderfully, and Sweetie Belle is turning into quite the mature filly, so...I apologize for my behavior."

"It's really not *too* bad," said Fluttershy. "And well, it's going to wear off soon, so we have nothing to worry about. And besides, I'm sure Pinkie is fine. She probably just ran off for some cupcakes."

Behind her shaking hooves, Twilight dared to smile. The good feelings only intensified as Celestia stroked her along the back of her mane. "You see, Twilight? Your friends may be upset, but they don't hate you. You just need to think things through a little better next time."

Twilight climbed back to all fours, her small filly body filled with a renewed sense of confidence. Wiping the few remaining tears from her eyes with one foreleg, she looked back at her friends and mentor with a guilty but still loving smile. "I'm sorry, girls. I didn't mean for this to happen to all of us. And Princess Celestia, I'm glad you're all right. I was so sure the Elements would work."

"Yes, about that..."

All six ponies turned up towards Luna. The princess' mood was still more than a little dark and angry, something that greatly terrified all six currently in attendance. The blue alicorn fixed her eyes on Twilight in the sternest, most chilling of ways. "You were supposed to research a way to break the curse, not spread it to other ponies. We were fortunate it only affected you and your friends, Twilight Sparkle. Had we performed this in a less fortified location, the spread might have been much farther."

Twilight's ears drooped as her eyes turned away from the princess' cruel gaze. The other Ponyville residents were still too frightened of the now much larger Luna to respond. Fortunately for all five, Celestia was still more than willing to stand up to her sister. The white alicorn stepped between Luna and the others and locked her eyes on the pony before her. "That's quite enough, Luna. Twilight may have made a mistake, but it was based on the information she had at the time. She was just trying to help."

Luna's eyes softened, but her voice remained firm. "And in doing so, she may have caused an even bigger disaster. What if the spell had recast itself on *you*, little sister? Who knows how much younger you would be right now."

"Th-That's true, but it doesn't mean you should be..."

Celestia's counterargument was cut off by a slamming noise from behind, followed by a familiar voice. "Hey, no fair! I was supposed to be back before you gals woke up!"

Everypony turned towards the now open doors and the pony that had forced them open to begin with. Pinkie Pie had an entire serving platter of cupcakes perched on her back, showing all the balance and expertise of a tightrope walker. Her mouth was twisted into a goofy, nonchalant grin, something that clashed with Luna's still-stern demeanor and the fear from the rest of the fillies in the room.

And then there was the strangest thing of all. *She was still a full-grown mare.*

The stares, slacked jaws, sunken-in eyes and low whinnying from her friends and rulers eventually managed to drill their way through Pinkie's otherwise impenetrable giddiness. "Oh, you're wondering why I'm still big and you're all small now." She quickly dashed underneath Luna's head and politely closed her open mouth. "Well, except for you Princess Luna. You're still as big as ever!"

"Wh-Wh-How-A-WHAT?!" Twilight shouted.

"How in blazes are ya still grown up, Pinkie?" Applejack stammered.

The pink one was quiet, almost contemplative, before she gave a response. "Well, when we were using the Elements to zap Princess Celestia, I got this *iiiiitchy* feeling on my crest! That's Pinkie Sense for 'Somepony's gonna turn you into a filly unless you run away really fast!' So I did! When the spell died down, I saw you were all such cuties that I *had* to get you some cupcakes but there's no Sugarcube Corner in Canterlot so I ran all the way down to the kitchen where a nice pony called Greeny-something gave me some cupcakes she was making for a party tomorrow so I could give them all to you!" Pinkie huffed and puffed from her last energetic outburst. "And here we are."

The six fillies looked about each other disbelievingly, quietly dissecting the holes in Pinkie's story. Luna, on the other hoof, did not require that much time to figure things out. Her hoof struck the floor with enough force to shake the entire chamber. Pinkie reared back, somehow managing to not drop a single cupcake in the process. "I do not appreciate being lied to! You will tell us – *all* of us – what really transpired this instant!"

Pinkie went completely frozen in horror, both from the shock of Luna's outburst and the growing realization that she was cornered. For the second time today, sweat poured down the party pony's face as she squirmed underneath Luna's terrifying gaze. Salvation came only when Spike walked into the room, carrying the chest holding Celestia's regal ornaments. "Hey guys! Is Princess Celestia ba-"

Spike went stiff the moment he saw his friends' current condition. The wooden box fell out of his claws and clattered on the floor. Twilight could tell this was not going to be fun, no matter how her assistant reacted. "Spike, we can explain..."

The dragon's mind finally managed to focus on the most proper emotion in such a situation. Spike sputtered and smirked before just falling backwards, barely managing to avoid landing right on his tail. The ponies crowded around their fallen comrade, echoing a chorus of questions about Spike's wellbeing and the like. Twilight in particular was blushing with a combination of embarrassment for herself and fear over her surrogate son/brother's brain freeze. She shook the dragon by the shoulders, desperate to rouse some sense of life out of him. All the small boy did was mutter something about Luna cursing them all before falling right back into unconsciousness.

Luna sighed. "He didn't know the spell wears off, either."

Twilight nodded, eliciting another groan from Luna.

"In any case, what's done is done. I will expect you to resume your research once the spell's effects are gone. The guards have already seen all of you, so I suppose there's no harm in letting you return to Celestia's chambers for the time being. I will have Spike taken to the infirmary for the time being."

"But he should go with us," said Fluttershy. "I mean, um, he's just a little dizzy, right?"

"He can join you once he's awake, but if he faints just by seeing the lot of you as fillies, I doubt he would be able to stand being in the same room as six of you. Even after a thousand years, boys are exactly the same."

Luna turned her attention back to Pinkie. "And seeing as how you're the only adult in the party at the moment, I want you to keep an eye on these girls until things return to normal. Consider



yourself their royal *chaperone*.”

“Oooh, that sounds all official and stuff!” said Pinkie. “I like that! I’ve always wanted to be called something like ‘Pinkie Pie: Queen of Laughter!’ Can we call me that instead, huh?”

Luna just had to facehoof to that. *Honestly, with this one, how can you tell if the spell did anything or not?* “Just...keep them out of trouble.”

Pinkie fired a quick salute. “Okie-dokie-loki! Pinkie Pie is on the case!”

And just below the two, six fillies looked at each other with a growing sense of doom...

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Celestia’s room was still a disaster area by the time the fillies got back. The doors had been fixed from Luna’s earlier rampage, the broken hinges replaced with brand new ones that didn’t match the other half of the door. The same could not be said for the room itself. Her companions were shocked at the sight before them, save for the one pony that had actually been in the palace the whole day.

“Would you look at this place?” said Rarity. “I have never seen such a disheveled mess in all my life.”

Celestia smiled. “I know. Isn’t it wonderful?” Rarity managed to let out a few surprised gasps and jaw creaks before wisely deciding to drop the subject before everything she knew about the princess was dashed forever.

The fillies (plus one adult) quickly found their respective spots amidst the clutter. Twilight hopped onto one of the guest cushions and started for one of the books. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash jumped onto Celestia’s bed, bouncing slightly on the small cushion as they did so. Rarity sat in a corner and busied herself with straightening the messy bedroom, a fruitless task without either her magic or enough strength to lift the several thousand page tomes within. Applejack buried her head in her hat and leaned against the wall, eager to take a Dash-level nap. Pinkie Pie sat the cupcake platter down on top of a pile of encyclopedias and started munching away on her portion.

Celestia laid herself down next to Twilight. The adrenaline from earlier was wearing off, allowing the princess to begin assessing the situation clearly for the first time tonight. Here was Twilight and her friends, the very bearers of the Elements of Harmony and saviors of Equestria twice over, reduced to mere fillies before her eyes. They were still shocked and scared by what had just occurred, but were otherwise unharmed, like her. And even more, these ponies had known and interacted with Celestia more than any other pony in the last thousand years, save for Princess Luna prior to her banishment.

In other words, this was an *opportunity*...

“Sooooo, what shall we do until the spell wears off?”

Everypony was silent for a few seconds after she said that, save for Pinkie’s gleeful munching. Rainbow was the one who finally broke the tension. “What do you mean? It’s not like we can do anything like this.”

“Sure we can!” Celestia chirped. “We can sing a song, or play a game, or just do something other than mope around.”

Applejack raised her hat enough to peek out from underneath. “Ah-Ah don’t know. Ah mean, it’s nice ya’ll are okay ’n such, but ta whole day’s ’en wasted on this.”

“And how are you supposed to function with a place like this!” shouted Rarity. “Books on the floor, bed unmade...UGH! It’s like Sweetie Belle’s room after one of her Crusader meetings!”

Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy remained silent, the former simply rolling her eyes. Pinkie was so enraptured in the last of her cupcakes that she wasn’t even paying attention to the others. Twilight, meanwhile, was busy looking through reams of books for some light reading material, no doubt hoping to find something that would help steer her research back on course after this latest blunder. Celestia’s hopes deflated like a leaky balloon, returning the princess to her dour, depressed self. “...I see. It was a stupid idea, anyway.”

“Now wait just a minute!”

Pinkie, having saved her appetite from the scourges of hunger, hopped to all fours in a manner befitting a conquering hero. Everypony’s eyes were upon her as a beacon of light appeared to shine from behind. “Your princess said she wanted to play a game, so that’s what we’re gonna do!”

“But Pinkie, um, none of the other ponies sound interested,” said Fluttershy.

All this earned was a swift rebuke from the pinkest of ponies. “Nonsense, I say, nonsense! You don’t think Pinkie Pie, party pony *extraordinaire*, can’t recognize a room full of gloomy gusses when she sees it? Now, are you gonna just sit there and moan like a bunch of babies?”

Pinkie’s frantic energy quickly spread to everypony in the room. All six fillies jumped up and shouted, “NO!”

“Are we gonna be lumps on a log and make Princess Celestia unhappy?”

“NO!”

“Or are we gonna get off our hineys and actually do something *fun* with all this?!”

The six fillies huddled together in one, unified mass of furry cuteness. “YEAH!”

“Fantastic!” Pinkie’s voice dropped back down to normal levels in a desperate attempt to save what remained of her vocal chords. “So...did you have any ideas?”

The glee on the fillies’ faces fell as they came upon a horrible realization: not a single one of them had any idea what to actually do. Even Celestia had failed to think that far ahead. Within that period of silence, however, Twilight got to thinking. *Pinkie’s lying to me, I know it. If she knows anything about Kuchen and the magic he used, I’ll have to make her tell me everything.*

The purple filly’s hoof shot into the air. “I have a suggestion! Who’s up for ‘Truth or Dare?’”

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By the time Luna arrived at the ballroom, preparations were already well under way. The room itself was still under obvious repair. Plastic tarps were tied across the floor and along walls and columns, and more than a few workponies had left their tools and painting supplies behind for the day. More than a few windows had been shattered in the animal stampede, and had instead been covered in the same cheap plastic sheets to protect against tonight’s storm. The stage had been reduced to splinters and scrap wood in the same scuffle, and the statues had yet to be replaced. It would be a miracle if the room was ready for the next Grand Galloping Gala.

Nonetheless, the room’s size made it ideal for storing the supplies for tomorrow’s formal soiree. Over a dozen ponies were busy unloading boxes from carts, inspecting tables and chairs for the most minute of infractions, and reviewing each part of the party step-by-step. Luna’s presence was hardly noticed by the frantic workers.

It didn’t take long to find Ruby. She was the Pegasus flying just a few feet under the ceiling, a clipboard precariously held between her forelegs as she shouted orders. “Everypony, please make sure the chairs don’t have any chips or splinters! The last thing we need is some duke getting angry about a wooden stick in his hind quarters! Elegance, please make sure the tablecloths match the napkins. If they have to be cleaned, send them to the laundry immediately! And if the food has to be chilled, PLEASE take it straight to the kitchens! We’ve already lost a whole crate of ice cream!”

The brief lull in Ruby’s hysterics was enough for her to make notice of Princess Luna. She immediately dived to the floor and bowed. Her sudden movement clued everypony else in on the royal in their presence, and everypony followed suit. More than a few suddenly-dropped dishes and decorations crashed and shattered against the floor, further igniting Luna’s flustered

feelings. Nevertheless, she had enough time walking to the ballroom for her nerves to calm a little, enough at least to prevent another outburst. "I assume everything is in order, Miss Dream?"

Ruby rose to her hooves. "E-E-Everything is...fine so far," she stammered. "There's been a few problems, but nothing too serious."

Luna didn't buy the lie for a second. Ruby's very speech and demeanor was like a small child playing innocent after raiding the cookie jar, despite being covered in bread crumbs and standing right next to the broken jar. "And what problems have occurred?"

"Well...the seating chart has feuding houses right next to each other, the storm is going to make the entire garden too wet and soft for the guests, and somepony on the kitchen staff ordered *cranberries* instead of *blueberries*! And that's just in the last half hour!" She threw herself at Luna's hooves. "Please forgive me! It's my first time!"

*Oh, for the love of Mom.* "Miss Dream, your concerns are far from serious. The aristocracy will have to stomach sharing space with ponies they dislike, especially if they wish to remain within Equestria's power circle. It should not take very long for a few Unicorns to dry the grounds for tomorrow. And lastly..." She cocked an eyebrow. "What's wrong with cranberries?"

Ruby very slowly rose back up, still a shuddering wreck of a pony. "Well...Princess Celestia specifically forbids them at all royal functions. I don't know why. As far as I can tell, none of the guests have any allergies."

Luna sighed. "It's because she hates them. And I swear the only reason she hates them is because I love them. Place an emergency order for the blueberries, but make sure the cooks incorporate some of the other berries into the cooking. I have had nary a one since my return."

Ruby grabbed a pencil from the top of the clipboard and furiously scribbled the note down before returning the instrument. "At once, your Highness. And I also need to inform you of some changes to the number of ponies attending. Word of Prince Blueblood's arrest has apparently started to spread."

Luna groaned and hid her face behind one foreleg. "Let me guess, they all decided I was some kind of horrible monster and cancelled."

Ruby's eyes shifted to the left. "Actually...our attendance has more than doubled in the last hour alone."

The color flushed from Luna's face almost immediately, while a chill of surprise ran up her spine. "D-Doubled? But Blueblood swore the nobility would turn on me for daring to challenge him!"

Ruby turned back to her trusty-dusty clipboard, flipping through the pages until she found the right one. "According to this, most ponies actually started avoiding these gatherings once the Prince came of age. Last month, there were only six ponies attending at all, the princess and prince included. Now we're close to a hundred."

It took a while longer for the news to travel through Luna's ears and into her cerebellum. *You mean, they won't hate me on sight? They'll actually come to a party without Celestia?*

The self-doubt soon made its grand return. *No, they're just like the rest of the ponies. They'll spend all night asking me "Where's Celestia? What have you done with her? We can't live without the only princess in Equestria!"*

"Um...Your Highness?"

Luna snapped out of her stupor as Ruby's foreleg waved in front of her face. It took her a few more seconds to realize her wings were unfolded, and a few more than that to see that a few of the objects around the room were gently floating in a dark blue aura. The princess couldn't help but rub the back of her head and smile sheepishly. "M-My apologies, Miss Dream, but I believe it's time to begin the night. I leave everything in your hooves."

The princess turned to leave, only to be stopped by a tap on one of her wings. "Your Highness, there is something else we need to discuss. It's about that errand I ran earlier."

"Ah yes, your mysterious disappearance earlier today," Luna said.

"Well...you see, tomorrow's 'Take Your Filly To Work' day at my daughter's school and...well..."

The princess groaned at the contrivance. *I already have one rambunctious foal to contend with, as well as five more that need to be tended to until they return to normal. And now my attendant wants to add another to the pile?* Nevertheless, she managed to maintain as much of her game face as was possible at the moment. "I do not suppose she has a father who can take her tomorrow? The palace is hardly a place for a filly."

"I thought about that, but her father's job is no place for a filly her age, and I had to fill out the security paperwork, and..."

Luna raised a hoof, silencing the mare. "Very well, if there is no other way around it, your daughter may come here tomorrow. Just make sure she checks in with security outside, is on her best behavior, and above all else, make sure she stays away from my sister!"

Having said her piece, Luna marched through the ballroom doors and started towards the stairs. Ruby waited until she was well out of earshot before turning back to her duties. *At least Lofty will...* "AGH! What did I tell you? You need to have horseshoes on at all times here! We can't

afford to fix everypony's cracked hooves!"

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Rarity stared at the glass before her, shivering slightly at the green bubbling liquid within. "A-Are you sure about this?"

"You picked dare, remember?" said Rainbow Dash. "You have to drink it down."

Inside the glass was boiled apple juice, laced with pepper and seasoned with a dash of nutmeg. The noxious drink fumed and raged within its glass confines, just daring the white Unicorn to take a sip. Rarity tried to think of a way out of this predicament, preferably one that didn't end with her getting her stomach pumped, but the only way was to finish her turn and drink the garbage.

With a few loud moans, the filly grabbed the glass with both front hooves and brought it to her lips. The noxious fumes were powerful enough to peel paint, but the filly held on long enough for the apple juice to slide down into her throat. Once every drop was gone, she threw the glass side, her mouth puffed up like a squirrel from all the inedible stuff inside. Everypony watched with bated breath as the miniature fashionista slowly and painfully swallowed the mass down.

Five seconds later, Rarity was feeling more than a little queasy, but was otherwise still alive. A few more seconds, and she was pounding on the door, begging to be led to the nearest bathroom or outhouse. Fortunately, the same guard that had ordered the disgusting drink for the ponies was willing to escort the filly to where she could properly empty the contents of her stomach.

Rainbow Dash was already rolling on her back, kicking her legs in an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Applejack was snorting back a few giggles, but the other ponies were far more concerned about Rarity's safety than finding schadenfraude in their friend's misery. It wasn't until the diminutive Unicorn returned, still gagging but otherwise relieved, that they finally gave in to the humor of the situation.

Rarity's eyes locked onto Rainbow Dash, as if she was trying to will an army of soldiers into existence who would punish that accursed foal. "I am so glad my \*cough\* suffering is making you happy, Rainbow."

"Well, it's your own fault!" Rainbow broke into another bout of giggles. "You didn't have to say dare, you know!"

"And you didn't have to give me food poisoning!"

Rarity gave a final "Hmph" before turning back to the rest of the crowd. In the last half hour or

so, four of the seven ponies in the room had taken their turns in the game, and it had only taken that long because it took twenty minutes to calm Applejack down. Then again, admitting you had to use preservatives in last year's apple strudels, and still sold them as "all natural," was more than enough to make the proud workhorse break down completely.

Celestia's mouth was in a wide grin, despite having never been picked once so far the whole game. So far, this "Truth or Dare" had turned out to be one of the most hilarious things she had seen in a long time. The fact that such a game had eluded the princess for so long was slightly frustrating, but then again, even if she had known about its existence, there would be few to no chances to actually play it amongst the stuffy aristocracy she had unwisely surrounded herself with. The only thing that could make it better was actually being picked.

Once Rarity and Rainbow Dash had finished their little spat, the white Unicorn turned her attention to her next target. "Twilight. Truth or Dare?"

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By the time Luna reached her designated balcony, the first few drops of rain had begun to fall. The mass of clouds blocking her line of sight with the celestial objects under her control made things slightly more troublesome than before, but after a few tries, the sky was sufficiently dark enough to tell the moon was in place.

As much as she didn't want to think about it, her thoughts inevitably returned to her sister and the other fillies. *No doubt they're having the time of their lives while I have to endure another long night of work. Why does Celestia have to get all the breaks in life? I...*

It was right about then that Luna noticed something was wrong with the clouds. It didn't take long to find one of the pegasi to interrogate. "Excuse me. May I ask who is in charge here?"

The mare froze in mid-air, her wings barely generating enough force to keep her from plummeting to the ground. "Um....that would be me, your Highness. Rainy Days at your service."

Luna eyed the ever-growing mass of clouds. "Just how large was your overflow? You have enough rain here to flood half of Canterlot!"

"We're draining as much as we can on the way here! And that's not to mention the lightning clouds!"

Luna's fur stood on end as she heard the word. *Lightning*. "Why did you not tell us this was a **THUNDER STORM?!**"

Rainy Days hovered back a short way, hoping to create some distance between herself and the

rather peeved princess. "B-But that shouldn't be a problem! Canterlot is already magically shielded against lightning, right?"

"BUT YOU CAN STILL **HEAR** IT!" Luna's horn lit up with a teleportations spell, but it only sputtered and died. *Oh no, that blasted enchantment is still around Celestia's room! No pony but herself can teleport inside there! I'm going to have to run!*

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"And that's how Spike takes his baths."

Just about everypony in the room felt like having an encore presentation of Rarity's gut movement. Even Celestia, a princess that had seen many a dragon take a bath - usually after she had tossed them into a lake - cringed at Twilight's sordid tale. The only pony unaffected was Fluttershy; she actually seemed more enthralled than anything else. "Wow, it must be a lot of work getting between all those scales."

"It all depends on how fussy my little assistant is. Usually though, all I have to do is tell him it's for Rarity, and he'll go along with just about anything."

Rarity squealed in embarrassment, her face turning beet red under her coat. The other ponies shared knowing glances with each other, save for the rather confused Celestia. "I'm afraid I don't follow, Twilight. What's all this about Spike and your friend?"

Twilight blushed a little and scratched the back of her head. "Oh, you know, just a little childhood crush. I mean, I'm sure even you had a few of those in your time."

Celestia rolled her eyes. "Yes, I've had my share of lovers over my lifetime." *That's if zero counts as a share, anyway.* "But getting back on topic, I believe it is your turn."

Twilight grinned. At last, her diabolical scheme was coming to fruition. She turned her attention to the pinkest pony she knew. With a grand wave of her hoof, she exclaimed, "Pinkie Pie, truth or dare?!"

Pinkie was silent for a few seconds before shaking her head sadly. "Sorry Twilight, but I'm not playing."

Twilight's elation melted into a small puddle of disappointment. "Wh-What?"

Pinkie closed her eyes and rose onto her hind legs. "I'm your royal *chap-a-roni!* Princess Luna herself has trusted me with taking care of all of you, and that's exactly what I'm gonna do! I will keep an eye on the game *and* make sure you have plenty of fun and sweets, but I cannot actually play, no matter how much you or I may want me to!"



The purple Unicorn was utterly dumbfounded. Pinkie was not only behaving like a grown pony for once, she was denying her from the truth! "But...I wanted to..."

Pinkie sat back down and raised a hoof skywards. "Sorry, Twi, but rules are rules. You have to pick somepony else."

Her scheme ruined, Twilight groaned and turned back to the others. "All right. Princess Celestia, truth or dare?"

The princess couldn't help but yelp for joy. "YES YES YES! I've been waiting all day for my turn! This is going to be so wonder-"

Twilight glanced at the clock. "Um...Princess. We're running out of time."

"Oh...right. Um...truth!"

Twilight froze up. She had picked the princess just to make her happy, but she hadn't thought through what she would ask. She didn't want to humiliate her like her friends were doing to each other, and she certainly didn't want to cause the princess any harm. Then she hit upon an easy question. "Princess Celestia...who is your best friend?"

Celestia scoffed. "Really, Twilight? Everypony knows my sister Luna is my best friend."

Rainbow Dash facehoofed at Twilight's simplistic question, as well as Celestia's equally simple answer. "Oh, puh-/eeze! The whole 'my sister is my best friend' thing? You must have had more friends than that!"

The princess could feel the fur on her neck starting to stiffen. "Um...Of course I've had friends. I've had a lot over the years."

"Really?" asked Rarity. "If you don't mind, can you tell us more?"

Celestia could feel herself starting to sweat. She hunched herself a bit closer to the ground, desperate to not let the other ponies see how obviously she was lying. "Well...there was that...one mare from six hundred years ago..."

"Are they famous?" asked Fluttershy. "I mean, you must have known everypony that has ever done anything to make Equestria a better place."

"And ya mus' have all sorts a' stories ta tell!" Applejack leaned her hat back enough to see clearly and walked closer to the princess.

Celestia's eyes began to quiver. "Oh...I have stories. Plenty of stories. But...I don't...I mean..." She gave a cautious glance to Twilight. The Unicorn looked absolutely horrified at the inquisition she had unleashed. "Twilight...help me."

\*KRA-KOW!\*

The entire room shuddered from the sound of a gathering of fillies screaming in terror. Outside, the storm began to roar with full force, as flashes of thunder and arcs of lightning crashed along the sky. Even worse, from the palace's high vantage point, the crashes and sounds were far louder and fiercer than in Ponyville. The filly parts of each ponies' mind took the opportunity to seize control, sending the friends running into each other as part of a protective group hug. Even Pinkie joined in, her large limbs practically crushing the other ponies in the huddle.

Finally, after a few seconds, the thunder abated, leaving only the sound of rain water trickling down the window pane. The ponies sheepishly pulled away, giving each other confused grins. "W-Well, that was...intense," said Rainbow.

"Even in Canterlot, those Pegasus ponies sure do get carried away sometimes," said Rarity.

"No way y'all gettin' home tonight," said Applejack. "Ah reckon we should try ta find some place ta stay the night. No sense getting' all rained on-"

A sudden pain raced through each of the ponies, save Pinkie. The fillies felt every muscle in their body loosening and shuddering, as if they were being yanked at in a taffy puller machine. This was followed by a massive white light that engulfed the entire room, accompanied by almost electrical shocks running up each pony's spine. Finally, the light faded away, revealing a ponypile of five full-grown mares.

It took a few minutes to fight out of the maze of limbs, tails, and necks, but the six friends were facing each other as normal ponies again soon enough. This was accompanied by a standard group hug session, along with the usual coos and shouts for joy and happiness.

And then Luna bucked the door open. There was a manic glint in her eyes as she approached the others, her wings extended. "Celestia. Where is Celestia?"

A few moans and whines from the bed answered that question. Underneath the covers sat a big, shaking lump. Another blast of thunder blared from the sky, eliciting even more cries from the mysterious bed creature. It didn't long for everypony to realize what had happened to Celestia.

Twilight telekinetically pulled back the covers, revealing the sobbing princess underneath. Celestia's eyes were covered with her forelegs, while her hind legs were tucked underneath her barrel. The six normal ponies started to approach, mouthing concerns and offers to help, when

Luna teleported in front of them. "Please...just leave this room."

"Wh-What happened to the princess?" asked Fluttershy.

Luna looked down at the filly. Behind her hooves, the princess' eyes looked up at her sister, silently pleading her not to tell the truth. Alas, there seemed to be no way out of it now.

"She...When she was a filly, she was afraid of thunder," Luna explained. "And I mean, very afraid of it. Back before there were Pegasus ponies, when storms were wild and spontaneous, she would spend every waking moment underneath a rock or in a cave somewhere, just cowering in a corner until it was all over."

Everypony let out a collective gasp, save for the clearly upset Celestia. Twilight was the first to actually speak up on her monarch's behalf. "Then why do you want us to leave?"

Luna hesitated before speaking. "I cannot tell you. I just...want you to trust me for the time being."

The ponies gave each other confused looks as they quietly debated whether or not to go along with Luna's orders. Eventually, the six slowly shuffled out of the room, giving the princess one last glance before following the guards to some quarters for the night. Once they were all gone, Luna closed and locked the door before turning back to her still-shivering sister. "I'm sorry. Rainy Days said it was just a rainstorm. She never mentioned thunder."

Celestia sniffed. "Then why did you tell them all that? They probably think I'm a joke now."

"Because you're scared of some loud noises?" Luna laughed. "Everypony is like that when they're young. You'll be all grown out of it once you're back to normal."

Celestia didn't respond; in fact, she could herself dozing off. The blast from the Elements, her rampaging around the grounds, and the fountain of tears she had just let out all seemed to catch up with her at once. Sensing this, Luna gave the princess a quick nuzzle before heading back to work. Once she was sure they were all gone, the princess threw her head into the pillow and started to fall asleep.

*If anything, I learned one thing from today. "Truth or Dare" is a dumb game.*

-----

Celestia was feeling far less energetic this morning. In fact, she was starting to feel like her old self on a bad day.

For a brief moment, this had awakened some hope that the spell was wearing off, and she would soon be back on the throne and ruling her fair country yet again. That little bit of joy

vanished as she took a closer look at her current malaise. It was the same feeling she had endured for a thousand years before, the sense that no matter how many ponies she had surrounding her, and no matter how much her occasional personal students adored her, she was well and truly alone in Equestria.

The princess had sequestered herself on her windowsill, her body wrapped in a tight furry ball as she looked over what bits of the palace and city she could see. Beneath the palace's marbled archways, Canterlot was bustling with activity. Celestia could see some of the fear and resentment towards Luna hanging on the faces of the ponies, but having two sunrises in a row under the no-doubt horrible tyrant that had replaced their beloved sun princess was lightening their spirits a tad.

In her own mind, however, she could already feel herself slipping back into the same melancholy from when this terrible experience first began. Last night had gone from her best chance at having somepony to interact with outside of any rigid social or educational expectations, to the still-a-filly realizing just how alone she had been her entire life. Not to mention how she made a complete fool of herself with the lightning storm. It all served to make the princess more isolated than ever.

A gentle knock on the door was enough to jar Celestia out of her musing. In a soft voice she muttered, "Enter."

The princess could hear the door open behind her, the hinges letting a squeak so quiet only her trained ears could pick up on it. The accompanying hoofsteps were distinctively elegant enough to betray her visitor's identity. "Good morning, Luna."

Luna waited until the doors were closed before addressing her sister. "Good morning, sister. Are you feeling any better?"

Celestia let out a heavy, labored sigh. "Not really."

The Princess of the Night was understandably unconvinced of her sister's sincerity. She took a few small, cautionary steps towards the filly, being careful not to startle or agitate her more. "If this is about the storm, I can promise you there's nothing to worry about. All six completely understand what was going through your mind when it happened." She cocked her head slightly. "Or maybe there's something else going on?"

Celestia was quiet for a few seconds, contemplating whether or not to tell Luna everything that had happened last night. The desire to protect oneself from any further embarrassment was soon outweighed by the need to get all this off her chest. She raised her head from her hooves and looked Luna straight in the face, the filly's eyes showcasing her inner turmoil. "Last night, the six of us were playing this game, and...one of the ponies asked me to name any friends I've had over the millennia."

“Well, that should have been easy,” Luna shrugged. “The entire country worships the ground you walk on, and you’ve had more than enough students over the millennia to have thousands of connections wandering around at any given time. It must have taken until the spell wore off to name them-”

Luna fell silent as she finally recognized the look on Celestia’s face. It was the same withdrawn, depressed mask she had worn so many times in the past. “I...suppose I was mistaken?”

Celestia curled back into her near-fetal position. “My students were just that: students. As far as they were concerned, I was always in the right, always the master at all things pony related. Even after they stopped being my students, their entire careers were marked by a foalish belief that I would do something horrible to them if they somehow disappointed me.”

Luna shook her head. “No, that’s not it. Remember Star Swirl the Bearded? He may have technically been *my* pupil, but he was always so much closer to you. You’re the one that convinced him to put bells on his clothes, remember?”

Celestia jumped to the floor, making sure Luna couldn’t see her face. “He was also the one that told me I could use the Elements to free you from Nightmare Moon. After what happened, he was so afraid I’d come after him that he ran as far from Canterlot as he could.”

The filly braved a glance at her sister’s face, and saw everything she was afraid she would see. Luna was stone silent, her eyes quivering slightly as she learned of her first (and to date, only) student’s fate. “I...I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was trying not to hurt you further.”

“It-It’s all right,” Luna gasped. “But...what about Twilight Sparkle? She certainly seems more friendly with you than most other ponies I’ve seen.”

“She also got her entire town involved in a brawl because she was afraid I’d punish her for turning in a minor assignment late,” Celestia muttered. “The last time somepony misused the Want-It-Need-It Spell so flagrantly, it ended with an entire town destroyed and hundreds of homeless ponies. Not to mention how she tried to cover up Ponyville’s Parasprite infestation. Relief could have been given much sooner if she hadn’t been so certain I would hurl her into the sun because she had trouble fighting something nopony had ever seen before.”

Luna sighed. “Celestia...I know what you want, but I can’t let you leave the palace in your condition. Twilight’s friends have their own jobs and lives to go back to, and Twilight herself must keep working on finding a way to make everything normal again. I myself have a full day today...”

“How about the party tonight? Are you still planning to go?”

“Of course I am!” Luna snapped. Celestia’s eyes quickly flattened from her sister’s outburst, something that the blue alicorn picked up on almost immediately. Sighing, she resumed in a more quiet speaking voice. “They may be petty or insufferable at times, but they are still our subjects, and I will not disrespect them by excusing myself from spending any time with them.”

“Then...I’m just going to have to spend all my time in my room?” Celestia muttered.

The atmosphere was tense as Luna mentally weighed her options. *The garden is out of the question today. Everypony will be busy setting up for the party. And the grounds will be crawling with other ponies, none of whom can see the princess in this state.* “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to stay in this wing of the palace today. There’s just too much activity everywhere else.”

Celestia sulked and kicked her forelegs against the ground at the news, but otherwise seemed to take it just fine. “A-All right. If it’s just for today, I mean...”

Celestia felt something large and feathery crawl across her back. Looking up, she saw a large, dark blue wing draped across the entire back half of her body. The wing’s owner, Princess Luna, gave the filly a warm smile. “It’s going to be all right, little sister. Once the party’s over, I’ll see what I can do. But in the meantime, please just sit tight.”

The sun princess wasn’t quite sure how to respond. Luna’s reassurances didn’t solve any of her problems. They didn’t make her an adult again, or get her any friends, or erase the memory of last night’s disaster from her mind. But at the same time, there was something reassuringly calm about the way she spoke, and not to mention the way her wing carefully bent over the filly’s body in the most loving way possible. It was the same gesture Celestia had shown Luna a thousand years before, and even a few times after her sister’s return.

It didn’t solve anything, but it was nice to have a sister that, at least on occasion, you could talk to.

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Ruby was already at the palace’s conference hall by the time Luna arrived, fresh from her latest business with her filly of a sister. Also waiting for them was a grey Earth pony, wearing a pink bow tie and with a treble cleft for a cutie mark. To Ruby’s side was a small, yellow Pegasus filly, roughly the same age as Celestia right now. The filly was seated on the floor, apparently writing down notes for the homework assignment this trip entailed.

Both adult mares bowed upon seeing the princess enter. “My apologies, ladies,” Luna stammered as she made her way closer. “There was some other pressing business I had to attend to, and I fear I lost track of the time.”

“It’s no problem at all, your Majesty,” said the Earth pony.

Both ponies rose to their hooves, ready to begin official business. The filly, meanwhile, was too busy scribbling stuff down to even notice Luna's presence. The princess took one look at the child, cocked an eyebrow, and turned to the foal's mother. "I take it this is the daughter you spoke of yesterday, Miss Dream."

Ruby's eyes shrank back into her skull as she looked down at the little Pegasus besides her. "Lofty! Why aren't you bowing?"

The filly jumped at the sound of her name, as well as her mother's harsh, reprimanding tone. Her eyes grew to the size of dinner platters as she recognized Princess Luna. She quickly threw herself into kneeling position; so quickly, in fact, that she conked the bottom of her head against the floor. "Oh, um...hello, your Highness!"

"I promise this won't happen again!" Ruby stammered. "She's still young! She'll learn!"

Luna facehoofed yet again; any more, and her hoof would be permanently imprinted on her face. "Miss Dream, how much court etiquette your daughter may or may not know does not matter right now. All I care about is..."

"Excuse me, your Highness, but I do not have a lot of time," said the Earth pony.

Luby and Ruby returned their attention to their actual guest. Lofty, meanwhile, slowly knelt down to her notepad and kept scribbling things down. The Earth pony fidgeted uncomfortably, even taking a few chances to eye the door in case a certain...intruder happened to stop by. "After reviewing the details of our contract, I am afraid the Canterlot Royal Orchestra must decline your gracious invitation to perform tonight."

Luna groaned. "Is there anything we can do to change your mind, Miss...?"

"Octavia. And I'm sorry, but the situation has changed greatly in the last few hours."

Ruby raised an eyebrow. "Wait, this isn't this about what happened at the Gala? But...that was why you refused the first time. The only reason we had to come back was because the band we had was struck with Rockin' Pneumonia and had to be quarantined."

Octavia scoffed. "The Gala was an unfortunate event, but we have mostly gotten over that. And I can assure you, everypony in our little group is quite healthy. No, we've heard a certain pony is staying at the palace. Quite frankly, we would rather not-"

**"OCTY!"**

The color drained from Octavia's coat as a bounding mass of pink energy slammed into her

body. The guards immediately followed her into the room, desperate to keep the pony from harming Luna's best chance at scoring some of the best musicians in Canterlot for tonight's party. The princess' horn glowed, and all four ponies involved in the scuffle were hoisted into the air and drawn apart before being set back down. "May somepony please explain what just happened?"

Octavia shot up a hoof, her eyes blood-shot with terror. "That's her! She's the one!"

Pinkie stared at the hoof for a second before giggling. "Oh Octy, you're so silly!"

"Do you...know each other?" asked Ruby.

Octavia set her hoof down and let out a labored sigh. "She's my cousin. Unfortunately."

"I would think having a hero in your family would be something to be celebrated," said Luna. "After all, she has saved Equestria twice."

Octavia's eyes narrowed into a death glare. "She's also responsible for ruining my Gala performance, as well as over a dozen other performances in my life. I will not perform while she is here."

Pinkie's giggling slowly stopped, only to be replaced by something far worse: sorrow. "You...You mean you don't like me?"

The room was terse for a few moments, everypony afraid of what Pinkie would do next. The pony's mane and coat darkened, even as her eyes began to water. Octavia's eyes softened a little, even as the rest of her remained as confrontational as ever. "I never said that. I just mean, you keep trying to 'help' me out and just make things worse. I can't have you here for something this important."

Surprisingly enough, that was all it took for Pinkie to immediately pop right back to her old energetic, happy-go-lucky self. "Okie-dokie! Jeez, I was scared for a second there! Well, I gotta start getting ready to go back to Ponyville! Catch ya later, cuz!" And with that, Pinkie bounded off to party elsewhere.

All five ponies (plus filly) just stood there, too stunned by the mood swing to really do anything. The guards were the first to leave, slowly making their way back to their posts. Once they were gone, Octavia slowly turned back to Princess Luna. "So, she's not staying tonight?"

"As far as I can tell, no," said Luna.

"Then the situation appears to have changed. You may consider us ready and willing to play."



“Of course,” said Luna. “Just remember, this is a slow, formal occasion, so you should keep to the standard pieces whenever possible. And in the future, Miss Octavia...” She leaned in so close to Octavia the Earth Pony could smell her breath. “Do not upset your cousin in front of me.”

“D-Duly noted, your Highness,” Octavia stammered. “I...do suppose I should give the news to the rest of the orchestra. We shall see you tonight!” And with that, the grey pony was galloping out of the conference room as fast as she possibly could.

“...We were almost without a band because a few ponies don’t like somepony else?” said Ruby.

“Because *one* pony didn’t like somepony else,” Luna corrected. “Still, everything appears to be in order right now. And now if you’ll excuse me, I have a trip to prepare for.” Luna’s horn gave off a bright light, a trail of which broke away from the horn’s aura and transformed into a small dark blue ball. The transparent orb then shattered, dropping a rather large scroll. “I want these tasks finished by the time I get back. We still have a lot of work to do and even less time today to get it done.”

Ruby gulped as she scanned the list. Just about everything on it either bordered on the ludicrous or seemed downright impossible considering the sheer wealth of other tasks she still had to perform. “U-Understood, your Majesty.”

Satisfied that her orders would be followed, Luna then turned her attention back to the filly. Lofty was still scribbling away on the notepad, but this time the princess had time to actually see what she was putting down. It wasn’t notes like she had hoped; rather, it was a ludicrous drawing of a winged Unicorn yelling at a helpless pony. “...And as for you, child, I hope you will actually apply your time here more wisely. It’s not every day a filly is allowed to examine the inner workings of the palace.”

Lofty dropped the pencil from her mouth and slowly raised her head, stopping when she was eye-to-eye with the princess. “I understand, princess.”

Luna nodded and flashed a smile. All it did was make the filly dart behind her mother’s legs. The sight was more than a little upsetting as far as Luna was concerned, but alas, there was still so much more she needed to get done...

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Octavia had just turned the corner from the conference room when she heard a voice behind her. “Excuse me, can we talk?”

The Earth pony stopped and turned about, stopping when she saw the purple Unicorn staring at her. It didn’t take long to peg who this was. “You must be Twilight Sparkle, Princess Celestia’s

personal protégé.”

Twilight gleamed with pride. It always warmed her heart to have others at least recognize her. “Why, yes. How did you know who I am?”

“You were with my cousin when she destroyed the Gala.” Octavia’s teeth were clenched together so tightly they threatened to snap each other to pieces.

Twilight took a step back and chuckled nervously. She had missed most of the carnage thanks to Celestia’s thankless job of greeting every guest, but she had seen enough of the damage to know that whatever happened in that ballroom, it was more than a little messy. “Well...to be fair, it was more of a group effort than anything else.”

“I do not mean to be rude, Miss Sparkle, but I have a lot I still need to do. So if you will excuse me, I think I shall be departing.”

Octavia started to turn, only to find herself facing the same Unicorn again. The graceful, society-conscious mare immediately leaped back ten feet while giving the shrillest scream in the history of ponydom. Twilight, for her part, seemed unaffected by this. “Miss Octavia, I need your help. I was with Pinkie when she stumbled across you and Princess Luna talking.”

Octavia lay on her back, her lower lip half chewed by its upper counterpart. “Wh-What does that have to do with anything?”

Twilight gave as cheerful a smile as she could. “I need to know some things about Pinkie...”

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Luna’s chariot landed with a soft thud and a few quiet squeaks of the wheels to a dead-silent audience. The ponies gathered outside the hospital gasped in surprise before falling on all fours, quaking in fear of the night princess and her no doubt horrible plans for them all. Luna briefly flirted with the idea of just ordering the pair of pegasi to just fly her back to the palace, but alas, royal duty and all that nonsense persevered.

The princess slowly stepped out of the chariot and surveyed the building itself. From what she could gather, the Canterlot Medical Center was one of the oldest hospitals still operating in Equestria. The general belief was that the structure had been built by special order from Celestia herself in response to a Trots epidemic over two hundred years ago, and as a result the place was considered historically important to the ponies of Canterlot. Unlike the common ponies, however, Luna had actually perused the old building permits and records involved, and there was nothing special about it. Some ponies saw that Trottingham was building a hospital, decided the superior ponies of Canterlot deserved an even better one, and borrowed money from the royal treasury to build it.

In any case, the building was a far cry from the original. Like nearly all of Canterlot, the structure itself had been radically altered over the years, both to repair natural degradation and to suit the changing nature of medicine in Equestria. In between the freshly-kept shrubs and gardens outside the entrance, the sticky white paint clinging to the walls, and the giant neon sign the board of directors had obviously spent more than sixty percent of the facility's budget on running, it was certainly an attractive sight.

The same could not be seen for Luna's welcoming committee. Luna had seen ponies huddle and cower countless times, but the last two days had certainly done their best to drain her completely. Sure, she had won a small victory just by being here, but would it be worth all the extra humiliation?

Her eyes finally caught somepony that at least looked a little official; a middle-aged mare in a nurse's uniform was huddled in front of the hospital doors, apparently in a feeble attempt to save the ponies inside from certain doom. Luna stepped towards the cowering pony and offered one of her forehooves, as was customary in the Traditional Royal Canterlot Greeting.

"THY PRINCESS-" Luna quickly caught herself, lowering her voice and assuming more modern language. "Your Princess has arrived."

"N-N-Nurse Ward, your Highness," the pony stammered. "I-I-I was sent here to e-e-escort you."

"Would it not be easier to do so if you were standing?"

Ward, unable to comprehend whether or not Luna was joking, slowly rose to her hooves. "...I have been asked to show you the improvements we have made to the hospital. If it's all right with your Highness, that is."

Luna nodded. "That is why I'm here today. Shall we begin?"

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Octavia regarded her coffee mug with much concern. Talking about her relationship with Pinkie wasn't exactly her favorite thing in Equestria to do. After giving the party pony free reign during their Gala performance, her friends and bandmates had all turned to her for an explanation. It was something she really *couldn't* give because, frankly, there was no pony like Pinkie Pie in all of Equestria. For that matter, the entire family (the "Pie Clan," as they called themselves) was amongst the most bizarre ponies to ever work the fields. Rock farming was far from the most lucrative occupation; in fact, it was an idea born more from lunacy than anything else.

And yet here she was, speaking with one of the most powerful Unicorns in Equestria, talking about the very subject. She really did not like this at all.

Twilight levitated the mug to her mouth, took a quick sip, and gently set it back down. “Now, Pinkie said you were her cousin?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Octavia murmured. “In exact terms, I am her mother’s sister’s daughter. And if I may be so bold as to ask, what is your sudden interest in my family tree?”

Twilight shifted about nervously. “Well, I’ve been a little curious about Pinkie lately. She’s been acting...kind of weird the last few days, and...”

“She has been ‘kind of weird’ the last few *years*.” Octavia raised her mug with both hooves and took a rather large, slurping sip. Twilight couldn’t tell if it was an honest slip-up giving the stressful situation, or that the classy pony really was just a bad drinker. “Then again, the entire Pie family is strange. Their...dedication to farming rocks is simultaneously endearing and rather uncouth.”

Twilight could tell she needed to lead Octavia to her point. “What I mean is, do you know anything about the Pie family history?”

Octavia stared at the ceiling thoughtfully before continuing. “Well, when my aunt decided to marry into the family, I know the rest of the family decided it would be best to look into this farmer’s past. It was a fairly routine process to make sure nopony married anypony with skeletons in their closet.”

“Ah, I understand.” *Stupid custom, but I understand...*

Octavia took a deep breath. “I was a small foal at the time, so I hope you understand if this information is strictly secondhoof. I do remember there was a fight of some sort between Pinkie’s mother and my own a short time after Pinkie was born. Then again, I was more interested with blocks and sucking on my own tail than anything that adults concerned themselves with.”

Twilight giggled at the mental imagery. Octavia smiled out the side of her mouth, but otherwise kept her cool and class demeanor. “From what I understand, the Pie family spontaneously sprung into existence about five hundred years ago, after some kind of political dispute in Canterlot. They left the city almost immediately and branched off into all sorts of bizarre professions, from professional mud slingers to tattoo scrubbers.”

Twilight had to cock an eye at the last occupation. “What’s a tattoo scrubber?”

“It is best that you don’t know. Believe me, I wish I still did not.”

“But, the Pies had to come from somewhere. Do you know anything about what they were doing

in Canterlot before they went into, for lack of a better word, exile?”

Octavia shook her head. “No. My parents never spoke to Aunt Sue again, and considered the whole matter dropped.” Her gaze suddenly drifted off thoughtfully. “Then again...there was one thing I always found rather strange.”

Little glistening stars shined in Twilight’s eyes. She might finally be getting somewhere. “Really?”

Octavia shuffled slightly as she began organizing her thoughts. “It was several years ago, during Hearth’s Warming Eve. I was visiting the Pies for the holidays, if only to keep an eye on what was going on in that dank household. I didn’t know that Pinkie had earned her cutie mark that year, or that she was now obsessed with making the normally dour celebrations more lively and enjoyable than in prior years. Instead of the quiet ponies I had encountered years past, everypony there was lively and energetic. There was even actual fruit punch and cake, not just stale bread and hot water.”

“...Stale bread and hot water?” Twilight mouthed.

“Getting back on track,” Octavia continued, “Pinkie was surprisingly happy to see me. Getting her cutie mark had hardwired her brain into a permanent state of euphoria, it seemed. She was also...curious about Canterlot. She was so curious about our nation’s capital that she barraged me with questions the whole day. She even managed to namedrop a few places, like the Nightlight Observatory, the Firefly Pegasus Academy, even The Fountain With Celestia’s Statue.”

“So what’s so weird about that?” asked Twilight. “She could have just looked those up in a picture book.”

“Not one place,” Octavia said. “She asked me about the Heartstrings Royal Opera House. She really wanted to know how the old building was holding up, whether anypony was still performing for Princess Celestia there, if I had any dreams of holding a concert there, and things similar to that. I thought she was just interested in music, so I mentioned it to Uncle Clyde. Then...”

Octavia wiped at her eyes. The next bit was going to hurt to remember. “The entire celebration just stopped. Clyde asked me to leave, saying it was a Pie Clan matter and didn’t concern an outsider like myself. I was understandably upset at this, you see, and I started to leave the farm and return to my hotel in Ponyville. But then I heard the shouting. They were furious with Pinkie for some reason.”

“...Octavia, why would they be angry with Pinkie?” asked Twilight.

The gray pony took another massive gulp, the caffeine being the only thing keeping her going by this point. “The Heartstrings Royal Opera House burnt to the ground over five hundred years ago. It was only open for about five years before then. Virtually no pictures or records of its existence are still available, and the ones that are would have a difficult time getting out of Canterlot.” Another slurp. “That’s what they were yelling about. They were angry about Pinkie let out some secret of theirs, especially to somepony from Canterlot itself. They...said something about Princess Celestia never finding out, and mentioned something about a Kuchen or whatever.”

Twilight spat out her mouthful of joe, splattering the floor in a cascade of dark brown liquid. Octavia jumped back to avoid getting anything on her coat before very slowly offering Twilight a few tissues to clean up. The Unicorn gratefully pulled the scraps of paper to the floor with her telekinesis and began wiping away, even as the pieces were starting to fall into place. *If Octavia’s telling the truth, it means it’s not just Pinkie that knows who Kuchen is. No wonder she was dodging the question back at the donut shop. If her own family was willing to blow their tops over a few innocent remarks about an opera house...*

By now, the pony was just rubbing the clean floor with soiled rags. Satisfied that the mess had been properly handled, she turned back to Octavia. “Well...thank you for your time. I understand you have a concert to prepare for.”

“Yes, I do.” Octavia scooted out of her set, elegantly set her hooves upon the tiled floor, and walked up to Twilight. “It has been...nice to speak with one such as you. There are far too many irritable, frankly insane ponies in my life these days.”

Her lips dropped into a sour frown. “Please, tell Pinkie I’m sorry if I upset her. I do like her, despite her eccentricities, but she has made a mess of things too many times for me to perform at my best when she’s around.”

Before Twilight could say anything, Octavia was well out of the door, galloping away to prepare for tonight’s party. The Unicorn, meanwhile, was left to stare at her near-empty mug. *I’m sorry, Pinkie. But if you know something that can help Princess Celestia...I’ll have to find out the truth.*

TO BE CONTINUED...

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