

Within and Without
by [Cloudy Skies](#)
Chapter 12

The distance practically melted away before the ponies now. Reunited, and with a certain rainbow-maned pegasus still high on the thrill of victory, spirits were soaring. It felt odd for Twilight to be the exception. She'd always felt like she was defending Luna from her friends to some degree, but it had been quite some time since she'd last had to defend the princess' actions to anypony, even AJ. Now, *she* was the grump.

She replayed their last conversation in her head over and over again, the sun seemingly blinking vast distances across the sky between every time she checked. She was vaguely aware that Applejack and Rainbow Dash were chatting and laughing somewhere ahead of her. At some point, the road under her hooves had become cobbled and wide. Presumably, it must have joined up with some other road coming from the north. Ahead, the vast plains of southwestern Equestria stretched out before them, broken only by farms and small forests all dotting the countryside. Nearby, not too far down the road, they could see a particularly large cluster of cottages and larger structures, including multiple windmills. Twilight didn't have to engage a lot of her brain to guess they were coming up on Miller's Haven.

Twilight looked ahead. Luna was chatting with Fluttershy now. The unicorn upped her pace a little to join them, refusing to let herself be intimidated into silence, of becoming afraid of talking to Luna. She waited for their conversation to die down a little before she spoke.

"What did you do while waiting at the fort, anyway? You got cut off. You mentioned something about Princess Celestia?" Twilight asked, giving the princess what she hoped looked like an earnest smile.

"Ah, I suppose I did," the princess chuckled. "The first thing I did was fly out on the very first night to the surrounding villages, but you know that. I think I mentioned that I had to contact Celly in case she learned about what happened at the Hollows, yes?" Fluttershy and Twilight both nodded at the question, letting Luna go on.

"She can be a little bit too protective at times, so I preempted her by telling her of it and saying that we should leave it. No sense in digging in the wound." The princess shrugged and smiled.

Twilight clenched her jaws together so tightly it felt her teeth would shatter. Luna seemed perfectly happy to pretend they'd never argued. She had earlier said she would think on what to do regarding the town of Grey Hollows, and she apparently had. The princess accepted it, and ignored it. Luna didn't try to right any of the wrongs; she was hoping it would go away of its own accord. Being immortal, perhaps it would, but she didn't even try to fight.

Before Twilight could say anything, though, the princess went on. "Perhaps more disconcerting, there has been an attempted burglary in the castle. Celestia's wards were triggered, and she sent a unit to investigate, but they failed to discover anything useful."

"A break-in at the royal castle?" Twilight blinked.

"Ah," Luna paused to shake her head, smiling at herself. "I meant the old castle in the Everfree. My mind is still a little behind, I suppose."

"But there's nothing there," Fluttershy protested. "I mean, I think. We were there, and there isn't exactly a lot to steal, is there?"

"If I remember it right, what you saw was only a part of the top floors of the old royal castle, Fluttershy. There is a lot more below, and there are not exactly a whole lot of ponies brave and stupid enough to go through the Everfree. No offense, of course." The princess offered the two ponies a grin, making Fluttershy giggle. Twilight was still staring.

"What were they after? What did they take? You don't know who? Do you have any leads? Where did they break into?" The questions spilled forth from Twilight so quickly it was a wonder that Luna even managed to catch half of them.

"We do not know, that's the unfortunate answer to most of those questions until somepony with the necessary expertise investigates it, and Celly has her hooves full," Luna answered.

"You're not going to see for yourself?" Twilight asked, suspecting she knew what the answer would be.

"I have no desire to, no," the princess answered, flinching imperceptibly, but she was quick to smile again. "Not that I think I need to. I do not know the who and the why, nor do I have so much as a single lead, but I know they broke into my old, ah, study."

Twilight and Fluttershy both looked expectantly at the princess, who hesitated. "The items contained therein are, well. Suffice it to say that most were meant to be destroyed long ago, but we simply never had the time. We thought them safe. Most likely, anypony who broke in fled at the sight of them. If they had tried using them, they would likely not have survived."

A chill went down Twilight's spine. There it was again. The feeling that there were questions she decidedly did not want answers to. Sadly, the 'want' had never been the driving force. There was another, stronger word operating her brain. 'Must'. She *had* to know.

"What sort of items could do something like that?" Twilight asked quietly.

"The sort of items created by somepony very far gone, Twilight Sparkle," Luna said, never missing a single beat. "They were not meant for mortal ponies, and their effects would be unpredictable at best. If I feel up to the task, I will ask Celly if I can take over her duties for a day while she destroys them."

"Wouldn't it be simpler if you did it?" Twilight asked. She knew it was a stupid question. She knew Luna would not want to go to the site of the ruined city when the mere memory of it tormented her so much. Even if it annoyed Twilight to no end, she had no right to keep throwing salt in the wound in the hopes that Luna would change. If the princess blew up on her and yelled at her this time, she had no defense. She already regretted asking.

"Please, *stop* it," Luna implored, and it hurt a thousand times more than any amount of anger could have. The princess' voice was a mere whisper, and Fluttershy was quick to look away from the scene, recognizing the pain in her voice. Twilight fixed her eyes on the ground, swallowing a lump.

"I'm sorry," Twilight muttered. "I didn't mean to say that."

"Hey girls, bet you five bits this is Miller's Haven!" Applejack's voice was a welcome distraction. The apple farmer had hopped onto a rock by the side of the road, her shape outlined by the setting sun. Rarity and Pinkie Pie stood at the base of the rock, and Rainbow Dash hovered overhead. Twilight was quick to leave Luna's side, joining them in surveying the town ahead.

The township was centered around six huge windmills that spun lazily in the afternoon breeze. Clustered all around this half-dozen of white stone giants were thatched roof cottages of varying shapes and sizes. Some were clearly abodes that housed single ponies, and others were two-story commercial buildings. All around the town shapes bustled about, and Twilight was fairly sure she could see a market at the crossroads that made up the centre of town.

"Shall we?" Luna asked as she passed by the ponies and kept walking.

"My turn to pay, I believe," Rarity commented as they fell into step at the princess' side.

"I'll look into paying you two back the second we get back to Ponyville," Twilight told Applejack and Rarity, still feeling a little guilty about the whole ordeal.

"Nonsense. What sort of Element of Generosity would I be if I let you do that?" Rarity replied with a chuckle, and Twilight just shook her head, joining her in a laugh.

Mere minutes later, the seven of them trotted into Miller's Haven proper. Ponies of all types, shapes and sizes were going about their business all around, and most of them had that business interrupted when they passed by. The locals bowed or stared, and Luna nodded to

each of them in turn as they passed. Twilight wondered how the princesses could keep up; her neck felt sore just from looking at Luna's efforts to acknowledge each and every pony.

They passed through where the ponies of the market were packing up their stalls, vegetable and fruit salesponies closing shop for the day. Clusters of ponies hung out in the square or at the corners of houses, and it felt very much like a little slice of Ponyville, making Twilight suddenly miss the little town that had become her home. If she squinted, she could pretend the green mare over there was Lyra, the rather unorthodox unicorn mare. The nearest windmill behind the cottage over there became the library tree all too easily, and she swore Spike was waving from a window.

"Y'okay sugar?" Applejack asked, snapping Twilight back to the present.

"Oh, sorry. I guess you're not the only one who gets homesick," Twilight chuckled nervously. "I bet you miss your family just as much as I do mine. I mean, Spike."

"More'n you even think," Applejack said, but she smiled despite her words.

"This is the tavern at which our elusive 'Phoenix' performed," Luna said as she indicated a large building nearby. It was a two-story stone tavern, and ponies flocked to it now that evening set in. "I did not busy myself with details, only directions. As such, I suggest we see what we can find out before we try to find a place to sleep."

"Elements of Harmony private eyes go!" Pinkie whispered gleefully.

"Right," Twilight sighed. "Let's get this over with." She looked up at Luna expectantly, but the princess did not move.

"I think if I go in there, it will cause a bit of a stir. I shall wait outside," Luna said sceptically.

"I regret to say it, but you may have a point. I myself am a little reluctant, too. It doesn't quite look like my type of establishment. Mind if I sit this one out, too?" Rarity said, frowning.

Fluttershy looked over at Rarity, smiling. "I'll stay with you, Rarity. We could maybe try to find a place for us all to sleep in the meantime? If you want, I mean."

Rarity nodded thankfully. "That sounds like an excellent idea, Fluttershy."

Thus reduced to four, Twilight, Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie approached the tavern proudly named 'The River of Laughs'. Pinkie was bouncing merrily, higher and higher with each hop, as if she fed on the energy of all the ponies around her. Rainbow Dash had to pull her down to stop her from crashing against the top of the door frame as they entered.

Inside, there was hardly any free space on which to stand, and their saddlebags caused quite a bit of trouble, even earning some unsavory comments. They clearly stood out in the crowd - all the other ponies seemed to be locals come to enjoy the cider. In places where the ponies were particularly tightly packed, pegasi hovered over the tables chatting with each other, and Twilight had to wonder if the room had a high ceiling for just this reason.

Twilight pointed towards the bar positioned in the centre of the room. "Maybe we should just ask the barkeep?" Twilight asked, her voice disappearing in the chaotic soup of talking, yelling and the clatter of cups.

"What's that?" Applejack yelled.

"I said, maybe we should just ask the barkeep?" Twilight repeated, louder, just as she noticed something. Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash were missing. "And where the hay-" she began, but Applejack pointed over her shoulder. Following her direction, Twilight saw Pinkie Pie up on a small stage. They did not so much draw a small crowd as it was impossible, due to the lack of space, for ponies to avoid listening to what appeared to be a stand-up comedy routine led by Pinkie. Rainbow Dash did not look very happy about the situation.

"Right," Twilight said with a shrug. It was easier to get to the bar with only the two of them, and they soon managed to find a spot at the counter, wedged in between a duo of unicorns.

"Strong or weak, how many?" one of the barkeepers manning the desk asked. He was a burly grey unicorn with a tap adorning his flank. Giving them a second look, spotting their saddlebags and cloaks, he paused before elaborating. "Two bits for the weak cider, three for the strong cider. Welcome to the River in Miller's, ladies."

"Um, actually, we're just here to talk," Twilight said, offering him the sweetest of smiles. "We think-"

"Plenty of ponies to talk to," the barkeep said almost dismissively, looking around for somepony else to serve. Sadly for him, nopony else needed his services right now.

"Two mugs of the darkest cider you have, then, bucko," Applejack said, throwing eight bits on the counter. The barkeep took six of the bits and immediately obliged. Two mugs were soon levitated onto the counter, filled to the brim with a dark orange sludge.

Twilight grumbled to herself. They could just as easily head outside and ask Luna to come with them. Being seen with the princess would get them the answers in a heartbeat.

Applejack reached out with a hoof and gently pushed the mugs to the side, smiling

lopsidedly at the barkeep. "Changed my mind. Ah'll have words instead. You can have the drinks yourself, partner."

"We just need to know about an entertainer who passed by here some weeks ago," Twilight tried again.

"Yeah, well, I'm busy, but you can head up and check with the manager. Second floor, stairs are over there," he waved a hoof. "Tell Rhapsody that Chrome sent you. Just get out of my mane."

Offering no protest, the two ponies left the surly barkeep to his business of keeping the spirits of ponies up and flowing. They wove, pushed and muscled their way through the soup of the crowd until they hit a broad set of stairs guarded by a yellow earth pony with a reed and a pair of water lilies on his flank. He let them pass when they dropped Chrome's name, and given directions, they quickly found the office of the manager and rapped on the door.

"Enter!" came a feminine voice from inside. Twilight opened the door, admitting the two and revealing a small and dirty office housing a dark red unicorn mare behind a desk. She looked a little apprehensive, but Twilight supposed she and Applejack made an odd pair. The fact that Applejack's cloak was torn on the flank didn't help, either.

"Is there a problem? Can I... help you?" the unicorn mare squinted and slowly stood up from behind the desk.

"Oh, no, no trouble at all, we just had some questions about somepony who performed here some time ago." Twilight put on her most disarming smile. Or, at the very least, she tried to approximate what Rarity would smile like in a moment like this.

Judging from the way Applejack looked at her, she didn't do very well.

"Are you in service of the principality? Oh dear, am I in trouble? You'll have my full cooperation of course! I- my name is Thimble, owner of-"

"Oh sweet Celestia no, we're just- *Applejack!*" Twilight groaned desperately.

"We're just travellers chasin' a lead that we don't have the sense to leave the hay alone," Applejack said, gruffly. "Sorry fer being a bother."

"Well," Thimble calmed down a little and drew a deep breath. "Okay, well, welcome to Miller's Haven. I'm sorry, I just had a bit of trouble when I let a rather, ah, controversial artist perform here last year, and I still haven't heard the end of that."

"Don't worry 'bout it none," Applejack said. She looked a little sour, and Twilight had to

wonder if the farmpony was still opposed to the idea of trying to find Trixie.

"She calls herself Phoenix. A red mare with short hair, allegedly very thin, and she's a storyteller," Twilight explained, unable to keep the frown off her face at the thought of the confusing mess it was. "She'd be telling the tale of the Great and Powerful Trixie." Twilight actually stared at Applejack as she said the name this time, but this time, there was nothing.

"Oh, I remember her. She stayed in town for a few days three weeks ago waiting for our weekly open drama night," Thimble said. "It drew quite a crowd considering that Trixie herself has come by the plains more than once. It wasn't everypony's usual fare, though. Quite tragic, really."

"You attended?" Twilight asked. "What more can you tell us?"

"Well, it's quite remarkable for a unicorn to abandon all use of magic in a show. The earth ponies and pegasi thought it was very respectful because we unicorns tend to steal the shows with what they perceive as an unfair advantage." Thimble raised a brow at Twilight and Applejack's nonplussed expressions. "It's quite the subject in the entertainer communities. A unicorn storyteller is fairly rare in the first place. She seemed quite serious about it – my husband noticed it when she was having a drink after the show."

"How do you mean?" Twilight pressed. "Serious about what?"

"She used her hooves when drinking, even though she looked very clumsy," Thimble said, giving a shrug. "Again, she was a huge hit because of it. The story was remarkably good as well."

Twilight shook her head slowly, trying to put the puzzle together in her mind, but she was astutely aware that she was missing some pieces. Applejack had her face scrunched up, obviously also thinking.

Oblivious, Thimble continued. "It was a re-imagining of Trixie's career, I suppose, with a tragic bent. She told of Trixie's early years, when she supposedly hated her own magic because of something that had happened before. She travelled the roads and would not accept anypony's help, so she was forced to perform magic tricks and such just to survive."

"Being lonely, she got used to depending only on herself, and in the end, she thought she knew who she 'had to become'. If all she had was the magic and the cutie mark she now hated, she simply had to make herself be the best at it. It ended with a bit of a cliffhanger as she approached a town called Ponyville. Does this help?" The red unicorn looked at the pair and smiled. Twilight nodded slowly.

"I think so. Thank you very much," Twilight muttered. Applejack echoed her thanks as

they headed out of the office and started making their way downstairs to find Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash.

"Three weeks ago. She's pulled ahead," Applejack said.

"It's because of our detour," Twilight agreed. "But we're faster, she's apparently not in any rush. If she stayed here for days before moving on, I mean. You still wish we weren't trying to find Trixie?"

Applejack looked a little surprised at the question, and thought about it long and hard. They were on the ground floor, surrounded by ponies, before she answered. "Ah'm not gonna lie," she offered.

"Which means?" Twilight pressed, spotting a pink tail in the crowd ahead.

"That you're right, Twi'," Applejack said, simply. Twilight let it drop as they found Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash in the crowd, dancing to the tunes of a band that had stolen their stage.

"Best. Band. Ever." Rainbow Dash explained as they met up. "If they hadn't come along, I'd still be up there, and hey, the Dash does not do comedy!"

"Not intentionally," Applejack chuckled, though Dash did not seem to hear.

"They chased us away!" Pinkie said, hopping over, pouting at Twilight. "They said you had to 'register' and stuff, and I'm all, that's silly, can't we make ponies laugh whenever we want? But noooo, they had to have this band, and I mean, they're great ponies and the music is nice, but but- we were having so much fun!"

"No pony else was laughing, Pinkie," Rainbow Dash groaned.

"Well, as long as one pony is laughing, it's not a total loss!" Pinkie protested.

"You're always laughing," Twilight objected.

"Which is why I never lose," Pinkie nodded, grinning.

Their primary objective completed, the ponies vacated the premises before anypony suggested that they just "grab one drink". On a large stage in the back, a band comprised of four grim-looking ponies was getting ready to play. They were all wearing ridiculous amounts of metal accessories and colored pale white by what looked suspiciously like flour. Getting out of the tavern seemed like the best option.

Outside, Luna had apparently taken the most literal approach possible to waiting. She

stood at the very same spot, entirely unmoved. The princess was talking to a little pegasus filly who couldn't have been much older than Apple Bloom. It was an easy comparison to make considering she was yellow, though her mane was a pale green, not red. The little pony had taken a seat on the ground in front of the princess, looking straight up at her.

"But if you're a princess, why aren't you in a castle?" the filly asked.

"Because it gets very lonely in the castle sometimes, even if you have the best sister in the world," Luna said, smiling. "And nopony does well alone."

"I don't have a sister," the little filly sulked, sticking out her bottom lip.

"But I bet you have friends, do you not?" Luna asked. She looked up and seemed to notice for the first time that Twilight and the others were watching. The princess offered them a quick smile before she turned her attention back to her tiniest of adoring subjects.

"I have Sugar Cane and Thunder Bloom! Well, and Fog Horn, but he's kind of mean sometimes." She huffed at the thought, wrapping her wings about herself.

"I am sure he is really nice too, you just take good care of each other, okay?" Luna said.

"Are you really a princess? Mommy says the princess is white, not blue," the pegasus filly went on. Twilight winced, but the princess seemed unfazed.

"The white princess is my sister, yes," Luna explained just as a dark pegasus mare landed right behind the little filly. The newcomer pony looked up at the princess, eyes wide and fearful.

"I'm so sorry, your majesty," she stammered, inching forward to scoop up the protesting filly before giving her a harsh glare. "Hopper can, ah, be a bit of a hoof-ful at times."

"She was no trouble at all. It was a delight to meet her," Luna said, her voice a little more formal than it had been. The pegasus mother bowed low and took off, hushing her child even as the yellow filly yelled "Bye, princess!"

Luna waved with a hoof before walking over to join the other ponies, her smile staying with her. Twilight idly wondered if Luna would've reacted in the same manner a month ago if a little filly had approached her then.

"You're good with fillies'n colts, Ah guess?" Applejack asked with a chuckle.

"I try," Luna shrugged. "There is something to be said for anypony whose first instinct is not to bow and scrape, but speak his or her mind. What did you find out?"

Applejack and Twilight quickly relayed what they had heard from the manager of 'The River of Laughs', including the feeling that something was missing from the picture, and Trixie's newfound sympathies for the non-unicorn elements of the storytelling community. They had to begin their tale anew when Rarity and Fluttershy rejoined them, but as it turned out, the extra few minutes were time well spent.

"But, Twilight, that doesn't make sense," Fluttershy said, frowning. "I mean, um, I might be wrong, but-"

"Why the hay would Trixie not use magic? You even said that the story was about how she became convinced she had to be the best!" Rainbow Dash snorted.

"If I could just-" Fluttershy tried.

"It goes against her character, I will admit that much, but I wouldn't put it past her if she thought it would reward her in the end of things, either, surely?" Rarity mused.

"I just think-" Fluttershy said.

"Ooh, but what if her horn fell off, huh? Then she couldn't use magic! Oh no, that'd be so sad!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, horrified.

"But-" Fluttershy sighed, deflating.

"Horns can't just fall off like that. Er, can they?" Applejack asked. "Ah've never had a horn, so-"

"Girls!" Fluttershy said, a little more forcefully. "Luna said that Trixie never reported back to the guild, she's not working with the entertainers."

Twilight stared at Fluttershy. She had forgotten that little detail. "Wait. You're right. There's no reason. Unless she has contacted them since, something I doubt, she isn't doing any of this for the fame. I mean, we already know this, she's taken on an alias."

"Whatever does this mean, then?" Rarity asked. Even Luna looked a little curious now.

"I don't know, but I'm very eager to hear the next part of the story," Twilight said.

Rarity and Fluttershy had done a quick circuit of town and asked around a little, quickly discovering that all the inns were fully booked for the evening. It wasn't very surprising, given

the amount of traffic they had seen on the roads once they hit the southwestern plains, but it was still inconvenient. The best suggestion they got was to check with the local farmers to see if they had a barn to spare. Rainbow Dash was quick to complain about the local weatherponies being too diligent. She'd take a cloud over a barn any day of the week, yet the skies were clear for leagues around.

As it turned out, empty barns were in short supply, too. Luna had refused to take any of the farmers up on their offer to let them have their beds, leaving them very short on options. In the end, they were given the keys to one of the great windmills of the city by an insistent farmer who happened to own it. The chill would pick up through the night, he'd predicted, and he would hear none of their protests. Twilight had snatched the key and thanked him before Luna could refuse.

Rainbow Dash flew up to Luna's side as they made their way towards the mill. The town lay silent except for the very distant throb of music from the tavern in the distance.

"You know, what's the point of being a princess if you can't let ponies be nice to you?" the pegasus asked, brows furrowed in consternation.

"I do let ponies be nice to me, Rainbow Dash," Luna said. "As long as it is for the right reasons. Me being a princess is a terrible reason for somepony wanting to give me a gift."

Before the pegasus could protest, Luna smiled at her and continued. "You being 'awesome', however, is a terrific reason for ponies to do something nice to you. It is different. If you had not done anything fantastic, would you still want gifts and praise?"

"Sure," Rainbow Dash shrugged.

Luna tilted her head. "How about the idea of a last prize trophy? Would you ever accept a trophy for being the loser?"

The chromatic pony paused, thinking. "I don't know, but you're not a loser."

The princess opened her mouth and closed it again, momentarily at a loss for words. Twilight was staring intently at her and tried to imagine what she was thinking.

"I am not. Nor did I mean to say I was, I think," Luna finally said, chuckling weakly. "I think perhaps I lost track of my own logic there."

Twilight looked up at the large windmill as they approached it and levitated over the key, opening the door for them as she thought. She was sure the princess knew what she was saying, she just hadn't thought anypony would call her out on it.

The interior of the mill was hardly a palace, but the stone walls kept the night air out, and Luna didn't have to exert herself for it. The mill wheel was disconnected, so the only real noise was the faint creaking of the windmill above. In quick order, the ponies had set about gathering some nearby straw for a makeshift bedding area, and soon the unicorns, pegasi and earth ponies were snug under the cover of Rarity's everpresent blanket. As they closed their eyes one by one, the sounds of soft snoring filled the air.

Twilight, as was fast becoming a habit, lay wide awake for a little longer. She stared up past the rafters to the ceiling of the mill, thinking about nothing at all until Luna approached Twilight and leaned close. Her horn was softly glowing, the princess intending to shut the purple unicorn out from her dream.

"You're going to keep doing this for how long?" Twilight whispered, halting Luna in her tracks. The princess looked honestly surprised at the question. Twilight gazed up at her, lying on her back.

"And why wouldn't you meet my eyes that night at the banquet, back at the fort?" Twilight asked. She had so many questions she had never known when or how to ask. They chose now to escape her brain through her mouth.

The princess said nothing for the longest time, their eyes fastened on each other, violet on blue, neither part so much as blinking. Luna's horn was still glowing, pulsing without a sound. The light illuminated both their faces, neither of which held any discernible expression.

"When you said there was merit to anypony who dared to speak their mind to you rather than bow and scrape," Twilight said, shaking her head slowly. The back of her head ground against the hard floor. "I thought at first it was an insult to Rarity, but there's a difference between obeisance and observing decorum. I'm asking you the questions. Why won't you answer? Why won't you show me?"

Luna was still staring at her. The princess was mute, but she leaned in a little closer. Her breath was hot. Twilight blinked, noting that there were tears in her own eyes, and she was shivering even though she felt warm all over. Her body obviously didn't even know what it was doing any more.

The final word in their discussion still hung above Twilight, the spell that clung to Luna's horn in silent threat. Despite how much she didn't want that spell cast on her, Twilight felt herself drawn up, raising her head off the ground to get closer to Luna. Her breath came ragged.

"If your duty and your purpose is to raise the moon, and the memory you cling to is what's keeping you from doing that," Twilight said, gripped by a surge of the nauseating anger that accompanied thinking about the dichotomy that was Luna. "Why can't you let it go? What the hay am I *missing*?"

The last words were spoken between gritted teeth, and the tears didn't feel so much out of place any more. Luna looked saddened and finally leaned down to touch her horn to Twilight's own. There was an electric little spark that passed through them, muting Twilight's magic, but the unicorn didn't even try to resist, letting her head fall back down to the ground.

"I will tell you what you are missing, Twilight," Luna said. The princess had drawn back a tiny bit. It was an almost imperceptible distance, but also gesture Twilight did not miss. "You are missing the fact that before this is a question of why, it is a question of respect. Of looking at another pony as an equal, as one should."

Luna's was not even a full hoofbreadth from Twilight's face. She smelled faintly of rain. Twilight was paralyzed, trapped, and scrabbled to eject some words. She felt utterly pathetic where she lay, tears streaking her face. Her voice cracked. "Why don't you... what do I have to do to earn your respect? I just want to help. Why are you-"

"I have always respected you," Luna whispered. Her voice was gentle, almost apologetic. "I respect you and your choices, I respect your drives and ambitions, though I sometimes fear for you, too. I consider you my equal, as do I all of you, not as subjects, but as fellow ponies."

Twilight shook her head in confusion, blinking in a futile attempt to clear away the tears. A gentle hoof from Luna came to rest on her cheek.

"I wish I could say I felt the same from you, Twilight Sparkle. I do not think you see me as your equal." The princess slowly drew back, her face disappearing from Twilight's blurred view. "You look down your snout at me because you think I am weak for clinging to a memory, but you do not understand the weight of the burden. If you would respect me, then please, respect my decisions, too. This is not just about you and me."

After a few hoof-falls and a creak from the door to the mill, the princess was gone, leaving Twilight feeling desperately alone and helpless despite being surrounded by all her best friends.

The group of seven spent the next two days on the road heading towards Belltown from Miller's Haven. The road met up with Lake Joy and followed its shore in a gentle curve towards Clopenhagen, the major city barely visible across the crystal blue waters as a grey shadow. The plains were dotted with farms to such a degree that had they desired, they could have sought succor in somepony's home every night. The princess, however, suggested that they not impose, given that warding off the night chill was a triviality, and they still had plenty of entirely palatable rations.

In the aftermath of the night in Miller's Haven, Twilight would barely meet Luna's eyes, much less talk to her, and the others caught on to this rather quickly. When their gentle questions were rebuffed, most of them were quick to take a hint. Pinkie Pie, proving that she would forever be the exception to the rule, was the exception to her own rule about exceptions, and did not press the issue either.

Their time on the neatly cobbled roads on the plains was thus filled with all kinds of other chatter that Twilight did not really pay too much attention to. Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash spent a lot of time joking around and Rarity had started conferring with Luna about some of her sketches. When the township of Belltown came into view, Twilight had lost track of how many conversations had gone on around her that she'd instantly dismissed as unimportant, eager to get back to trying to figure out whether she should be mad or sad at herself or Luna. How could she respect what she couldn't understand? How could she understand what she couldn't see?

What finally roused her from her reverie was the clarion call of the bell tower that was the town's namesake. The pure single notes rang out proudly from an outsize tower made entirely of flawless white stone, announcing that it was four o'clock in the afternoon. Most of the town was made of the same white stone, wide open streets and large gardens separating the individual houses on the outskirts, with more tightly clustered commercial buildings at the town's core.

For all its elegance and neatness, it was still very much a town rather than a city, the area barely the match of Ponyville. This made it twice as surprising to find that the buildings at the center of town included a large open-air amphitheater. It seemed very odd for such a small town to be able to support such a luxury, but then, the town also had a very elaborate park that seemed very unnecessary in a town surrounded by peaceful plains and forests.

From their approach down a very gentle incline, they had plenty of time to take in the town. Rarity began taking off her cloak as they walked, neatly folding it and stuffing it into one of her saddlebags, which bulged in protest.

"What's up, sug'?" Applejack asked, raising a brow at the white unicorn.

"Well, while it may be a little cold, I will not look like a common wanderer coming into a place of culture," Rarity answered. "Belltown is where all the big names in Clopenhagen have their vacation homes."

"So not only do they have an annoying bell that hurts my ears, it's full of boring rich ponies?" Rainbow Dash asked, sticking out her tongue.

"Being rich doesn't mean you have to be boring, Dashie," Pinkie giggled. "Rarity's not boring, is she?"

"Uh, kinda? I guess not?" Dash tried, receiving a sharp glare from Rarity.

"We should probably head for the theater. I doubt this is the sort of place to have entertainers perform at taverns," Twilight said. Luna, who had visited the town earlier, did not protest this suggestion.

"I think you'll find that this is the type of town to have hotels, darling, not taverns," Rarity said with a sideways grin as she brushed her mane mid-stride. "Besides, unless we want to be received as ruffians, I suggest you all doff those hideous cloaks. It's still sun out, no?"

"Yeah, except we're travelling with a princess," Dash said, rolling her eyes. "Not a lot of ruffians do that. We just stick close."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Twilight said. "Opening doors just by fear, I mean. If we want to ingratiate ourselves here, the first thing we should do is blend in and make a good first impression. Rarity has a point."

"Egghead's guide to-" Dash began.

"Chameleon Canter's Applied Social Studies," Twilight Sparkle muttered.

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