

Calling the Shots

The Business Trip

Part 2 - Dragon About

An MLP:FIM Fanfic by Midnight Shadow.

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One thing Twilight knew, without the shadow of a doubt, was that it was hot. The dry air wafted through her bangs and took with it any trace of cooler climes, leaving only dust and grit. The sun was hot in Leviathania. The streets were hotter. Both glowed with a fierce intensity that hurt to look at.

She'd been warned about the flies. She hadn't listened. Haywood was perched on her forehead now, cleaning himself off after his last meal and she'd given up trying to chase him away. He'd appeared soon after leaving the terminal building crying, "Hey! Hey! Monster-lady! You got any dung?"

"What?" she'd asked, momentarily stunned at the half-foot-long abomination hovering in front of her.

"Dung. I said have you got any dung?"

"I... uh... no? Leave us alone! And I'm a unicorn, not a monster!" She moved to go past him.

"Hey lady, I've got three thousand mouths to feed! You're gonna make my wife and kids starve? What sort of monster are you?"

"Still a unicorn! Ugh! Get lost!" She swatted at him with her tail, "Go home!"

"Go home to three thousand screaming kids and the wife? You really *are* a monster!"

Twilight sighed, "What do you want?"

"It's not so much what you can do for me, but what I can do for *you*. I'm a guide, the best in the city. Haywood's the name. Haywood D'Jaboozarf at your service." It - presumably he - lifted an appendage for Twilight to shake.

She stared at it and raised an eyebrow, "We can find our way quite easily all by ourselves, thank you very much."

As she said this, Spike hiccuped. There was a brief flash of green and a sound not unlike the crackle of paper being incinerated, "I'll just... pop inside and get another map." said the dragon with a weary sigh.

Twilight slowly checked over the princesses, the wagon and her

dragon-assistant, who was once again climbing up into the seat, "Do you know where I can find... are we in the right place? Ooh, this gives me a chance... where's that phrase book?"

The unicorn searched through the luggage for a small, worn booklet, lifting it up with her magic and flipping through the pages. She cleared her throat as she pronounced, awkwardly, "I want D'Long Kerk."

Haywood's wings snapped straight and he almost fell out of the sky, "Ahem, you mean... ah... yeah, that's here. For a moment there..."

"What?" asked Twilight, peering back and forth between the book at the creature.

"Well, the tourists... yeah... you're probably... yeah. Just watch the pronunciation there, Miss. You're in the right place, no fear."

Twilight blinked, people certainly were *odd* sometimes. Twilight turned back to the fly, who grinned hopefully. She felt like strangling him with her tail, but he did seem, well, *cheap* to maintain. Besides, it was going to take more than a tail-swat to remove him and there were a million more waiting in the wings. Some of them a lot *less* polite, as hard as that was to believe.

"Okay, Haywood, you're on. Lead us to our hotel. And no funny business - I may be a vegetarian but Spike isn't."

"I am at your service, madame!"

Whilst Spike sat in driver's seat of the wagon, holding the reins, it was really the unicorn who was in charge. Spike had cracked them *once* with a cry of "Hiya!" but Twilight had threatened to tie him up in them and leave him there overnight if he did it again. After that he'd been sulking for the last hour as the wagon rolled through dusty street after dusty street.

The wooden contraption which held the luggage was hitched to Twilight, who was pulling it in very bad grace. As they traipsed through the boiling, mad city, Twilight was rapidly growing tired of the populace who were alternatively trying to sell the unicorn something, buy her, feed her, or some mixture of the three. It would have been an eye-opener of a cultural experience if it hadn't been offset by the arguing of the two other equines, the alicorn princesses, tied with ropes to the back of the wagon.

Clack clack clack came from the general direction of a smaller blue winged unicorn, followed by the clatter of something wooden covered with beads falling to the ground. There was a shriek, "Abacus! Abacus! Speak to me! Tia how *could* you! You'll hurt... you'll break it!"

"It was an accident, my dear sister! Just stretching my wings!" replied the elder, a white winged unicorn with a regal countenance.

There was another shriek, this one a different timbre and resonance,

"My... my mane! Do you have *any* idea how long it takes me each morning to clean, brush and enchant it to flow in the wind?"

"Oh, I'm sorry big sis, my hoof slipped..."

There was a meaty *thunk*, followed by a feathery *slap*, followed by the grunts and squeals of the two slapping hooves, wings and tails at each other.

Twilight grit her teeth before stopping in her tracks, craning her head back and shouting, "For goodness sake cut it out! I've been listening to this for the last half hour and I have had *enough*! So help me I will have you *both* muzzled if I hear another peep out of either of you! Don't make me come back there!"

Twilight stood, breathing heavily in the sudden silence as the street itself paused. Celestia and Luna froze, mid-ruckus, and sheepishly arranged themselves. Abacus vanished into the back of the wagon. Celestia smirked at Luna, but dropped it when she caught sight of Twilight's beady glare and the furious glow of her horn. The purple unicorn snorted, pawed the ground once in warning, and turned back to the fly, "Our hotel. Where. Now."

"Don't get your fetlocks in a tangle, we're almost there."

"Are you... are you sure? I'm not finding this street on the map..." asked Spike, indicating an intricate, detailed drawing. There was a soft tearing noise as his claws penetrated the paper. He scowled in frustration.

"Well you didn't want to stop and ask for directions, and Haywood here says he knows the way."

"Haywood D'Jaboozarf, city guide extraordinaire, has *never* left a mark, er, I mean a customer, hanging." replied the fly.

"And you'd better not try it, Bub," snorted Spike, screwing up the map into an angry ball and incinerating it, "or I'll squish you." The baby dragon turned to the unicorn and instantly his tough-guy voice was replaced by a wheedling moan, "When're we gonna get there Twi? I'm *tired* and *hungry* and it's *hot* and I haven't had *anything* to eat for *hours*!"

"Spike, it's been an hour tops, and all you have to do is sit there! The last quartz candy-stick is under the seat, you can snack on that."

"Easy for you to say, it's not past your naptime. Are we there yet?"

"No."

Spike sat for a few moments, "How about now?"

"No."

"...Now?"

"*Spike!*"

The dragon grumbled sullenly, picking up a large crystal from behind his seat right where Twilight had said it would be and crunching on it. He almost slipped off, hiccuping, when Twilight came to a sudden halt.

"The hotel! we're here!"

The buildings were mostly made of sandstone, yellow and brown, with a large pool in which were lounging several very large green, red and bronze coloured dragons. There were no gates, no fences. The paved slabs just gave way to what appeared to be granite and palm trees. Hosts of six-winged bird-like creatures sunned themselves on the rocks and called to each other, nipping at scales on their underbellies. Other smaller dragons lounged in hollows, puffing on elaborate water-pipes and conversing in the lilting sing-song of Draconic.

"This is so exciting!" said Twilight, hopping up and down, "I can't wait to see our rooms!"

She was led through the complex to a covered shed where the wagon was unhitched by attendant draconic creatures with four legs and two extra limbs on the upright portions of their bodies, "We will stow your luggage sir, not to be worry." one of them hissed in broken Equestrian to Spike.

"I will be to taking your steeds to their accomodation."

"Oh goody!" said Twilight as she shrugged out of the halter, "I cant wait to see my bed and the view and the room and the facilities... oh I hope it's got a shower! I bet it does, I bet the princess has got us top notch rooms with everything and this is going to be so much fun! I'm going to have a swim and get a nice cool drink and then I'm going to curl up and read a good book and relax and..."

She was led further into the covered area and shown through a small door into an alcove with what appeared to be straw on the floor. The door was bolted behind her.

Twilight's right eye twitched, once. She'd had a long day. An... eventful trip. All she wanted now was a nice, calm, quiet place to relax in. She resolved to have a few words with the manager. Pony to... dragon. Calm, cool, collected words. Logical discourse. Things, she resolved, would be subtly but surely be *improved*.

"Twi..." asked Spike, as he watched the staff scurrying about putting out the last of the fires.

"Yes Spike?" replied Twilight in a sing-song voice as she lounged in the otherwise-vacant pool.

"I don't want to question my best friend, but don't you think that was a bit excessive?"

"Spike, dear, my darling best-ever most-appreciated number one assistant... when have I *ever* been excessive?"

"You set the stable on fire."

"I... redecorated. Incendiarily."

"You *blew up* the lobby."

"Just... just a little remodeling. They now have a wonderful skylight."

"They're missing the roof! And did you *really* have to eat the ledger?"

"I *was* showing some *slight* displeasure at that point, perhaps."

"And I don't think they've yet coaxed the concierge down from that tree nor will they ever get the stain out of the carpet..."

"Oh Spike, don't be so... so..." Twilight waved a hoof, "everything worked out for the best! They upgraded us to the ambassadorial suite for free, after all!"

"After you threatened to run the manager through and string his intestines up like party favours."

Twilight twitched, "*They put me in the stable and gave me straw to eat!*"

"But... you like straw!"

"IT WAS THE WAY THEY DID IT!" she shouted. Several members of staff dived for cover and at least two made benedictorial signs to some invisible sky-being. Twilight clopped her hooves together in the universal sign for service. Lots were drawn and the unlucky dragon was sent with a silver platter heaped high with green plants and a selection of fruits and vegetables. He quivered silently as Twilight picked over it and floated a few pieces in front of her thoughtfully, "I shall write a letter of apology. Tomorrow. First thing."

Spike rolled his eyes and pulled another gem from the pile heaped next to where he was sunning himself. He rubbed it to a shine on his bulging belly, before popping it in his mouth and chewing.

Twilight threw open the doors to her balcony with a triumphant push of her forehooves and strode out into the morning sun. She breathed deeply. The charred woodsmoke aroma of burning hotel offset the other exotic scents in the air. She looked down at the princesses and studied their outfits. The first thing that came to mind were the beads. Everything they wore was covered in beads and sequins and gold and silver loops. It looked like a glitter factory had exploded next to a rope factory and had taken out the fabric store next door. When they moved, they clattered and clashed like an army of bangles on the run.

"Wow..." said Spike, poking his head through the railings.

"I'll say," said Twilight, "glad I don't have to wear something like that."

Spike grinned sheepishly at the floor before looking up at Twilight, twirling a claw, "Umm... about that..."

Twilight walked warily through the baking streets towards their unknown destination. Behind her she pulled the wagon, now emptied of the majority of their luggage and filled only with a myriad of gifts for persons unknown. In what passed for the lobby of what was left of the hotel, they'd dressed her up in one of her more flashier saddles, keeping as much distance as they could between her horn and hooves and any sensitive body parts, and the straps chafed. She was wearing a getup that she could only describe as *ridiculous*. Her hooves hurt, the wagon was heavy, Spike was digging his heels in at every opportunity and Celestia was being mean to Luna who was doing her best to wind up her older sister - and succeeding.

Celestia had made Twilight bring three sets of tack, and had admonished her for being difficult about getting along with local mores and customs. The sun princess herself and her younger sister both looked resplendent in their shining, ostentatious, lightly-armored harnesses. They were respectively made of what appeared to be red gold, and a silvery platinum. Each were bedecked in an armada of frilly lacework and furious filigree that Twilight was forced to label '*chichi*', to use a word Rarity had thrown at her on more than one occasion. The straps appeared to be fine hemp, with silvery buckles and clasps that exploded in a shower of cleats and belts. What *really* chapped her horn was the bridle... and the bit. She chewed the metal bar lodged firmly in her muzzle angrily; it made her drool and she *really* didn't like it.

As they wandered once more through the hot streets, through the throng of dragons hawking wares, smoking hookahs or eating and drinking, Twilight attempted to revel in the atmosphere. The very air was alive with a thousand voices calling, singing, shouting, conversing in languages she couldn't understand. Strange, lizard-like animals ran between their feet on four, six or more legs, or flapped their way through the maze of twisting passages.

"Wh're 're ve g'ng?" mumbled Twilight, pulling her head about and slurping at the rivulets that were dripping onto the sandstone road.

"Where are we going?" asked Celestia rhetorically, unhampered orally since she was wearing a simple - if ornate - bridle and was tied to the wagon with her sister. Luna was sulking about having to pack her hoofheld device in Twilight's wagon. Celestia twitched an ear with mirth and looking at her favourite pupil, "Why, we're going to see my old friend Quincy for a quick social chat and a spot of light lunch."

"I th't oo s'd th's w's b's'n'ss" spat Twilight, scowling.

"Of course it's business, *very important* business - but we can hardly be impatient and rude guests! Quincy is a stickler for entertaining his guests. It won't be long now, just up the road, then you can get out of those things

and into something a lot more comfortable, like the saddle Rarity designed for you in the white and gold trim with red and purple gems - very fetching indeed!"

Twilight kept her thoughts on where the saddle in the white with gold trim could be put as Spike held on to the thankfully well-cushioned item for dear life.

Twilight trounced her way through the streets, glowering, "Ex'plain 'oo 'ee a'ain..."

"You're my steed, it's... traditional. It's all in the guide. I thought you'd have read it!"

Twilight spat out the bit with great difficulty. It wedged itself above her nose, painfully, "Was the guide the small glossy publication they hid under my pillow?"

"It was indeed. I thought you loved books."

"Not before breakfast. Besides, it has all sorts of crazy stuff in it - it states the dragon emperor and his sons are responsible for raising the sun and the moon. Everypony knows it's Celestia and Luna who do that!"

"Actually... that's not quite right," piped up Haywood, "you're in Leviathania now."

Twilight raised an eyebrow, and Spike nodded, "They don't raise the sun, moon *or* the stars in this realm. Or their own, when they're on holiday. It's why you're so... so..."

Twilight glowered at the dragon for a moment. He gesticulated, carrying on quickly, "It's why *they're* so... so..."

Twilight stopped dead in her tracks and eyed the two princesses, who were once again making faces at each other, "Wait, so... do they... wait... how's the sun and moon getting raised back home?"

"Pinkie," asked Rarity, staring out through the castle window with a thoughtful expression on her muzzle.

"Yes Rarity, my bestest ever friend who's in this room right now?" replied the bubbly pink pony, prancing about as she flapped her wings and crossed her eyes trying to get a good look at the large horn protruding from her forehead.

"Is the sun... supposed to have a big smiley face on it?"

"Well I thought 'why should the sun be the same old boring glowy ball every day' and then I thought 'wouldn't it be *just swell* if it were happier' and so I made it a huge happy glowy smiley face!"

"Pinkie," sighed Rarity, "you are the temporary ruler of the Sun and co-ruler of Equestria. Must you redecorate *everything*?"

"Oooohhh, that's a brilliant idea! Herald! Attend your party princess!"

Pinkie stomped a hoof imperiously

An impeccably-dressed unicorn with greying mane - it had been dark green earlier that day, but Pinkie had a certain *effect* when in full party mode - approached the thrones wearily, "Yes milady?"

"You know what this castle needs? Streamers! And balloons!"

"Streamers?"

"Who's the princess around here?"

"You are, oh mighty pink princess of parties and practically perfect pony. Streamers it is." he sighed. He'd had to memorize a new title approximately once every fifteen minutes since three in the morning.

"And one more thing. I declare this day *muffin day*. If ponies do not consume at least one muffin per meal, they will be punished!"

"Punished milady? I don't think we have enough room in the dungeo-"

"Yes! They will be punished by being ordered to eat a muffin!" Pinkie stamped her hoof with a definite finality. The unicorn scurried off to do the princess' bidding.

Rarity rolled her eyes. It was going to be a long day... maybe she could persuade Pinkie to get an early night. That, or feed her enough cake to get her to pass out. Tonight she was going to have a meteor shower - in all the colours of the rainbow - and planned for the galaxies to shine like diamonds. She fluttered her wings and settled herself primly into the Throne of Night. The only way this could be better was if she had some company. She narrowed her eyes. *Perfect*, she thought to herself with a smirk. Revenge was going to be *delicious*, "Summon Prince Blueblood!"

"*Pinkie?*" hissed Twilight, scattering both Haywood and Spike with her burning glare, as she once again moved through the city, stomping hooves so angrily that they sparked.

"Don't look at me! It was the princesses' idea!" Spike made several warding-off motions with his paws. Twilight glowered.

"Hey, toots, can't be all bad. This Pinkie sounds like a real doll!"

"Toots me one more time and I'll..."

"You'd make my three thousand kids orphans, and my wife a widow?"

"Do you *really* have three thousand kids?" asked Spike, "Sounds a bit much."

Haywood flapped his wings quicker, and momentarily shot a few feet up in the air nervously, "Weelll... no. Only two and a half thousand."

Spike blinked, "Oh, that's alright then. How do flies... anyway?"

"Aaaaand moving on!" interrupted Twilight quickly, "Princess! Celestia I mean! Just which way are we supposed to be going?"

They entered the courtyard of the largest single building she'd ever seen, bar Canterlot castle, through the largest set of iron gates she'd ever seen bar *none*. She glanced about herself anxiously as the gates swung shut with the sort of clanging finality she thought never to experience. All around were dragons, big and small, but every single one was female. They lounged in pools, sunned themselves on hot rocks and spoke in low rumbling whispers that rose the hackles on her neck. Twilight flicked her tail at the buzzing flies that bit with furious intensity upon the succulent and altogether softer flanks of the equines. Spike seemed unconcerned and unfazed by all but the decor.

"Wow, us dragons certainly know how to build big, don't we!"

"Mi-ni-mi-ni-miii" twittered Twilight under her breath, furious that the guards had made sure she was 'properly attired' and had replaced the bit. All the solid wall of heat and dust was doing to her was frizzing her mane and since they'd made her eat the damned bit again, her teeth were starting to ache and the drool was returning, "Theeth dwagonth... wath 'ey 'ooiin' 'ere?" Twilight managed to ask.

"Oh, these are all the wives of the emperor. He has a harem. Dragons live such a long time you see, often the agreements and treaties they make expire long before they do." explained Haywood.

"An'? Whath 'at gotha thoo with ith?" dribbled Twilight.

"Alliances are often sealed with marriage, Twilight, and divorce is such a messy procedure they don't tend to bother. Come on, this way. Spike, tell the butler who you are, he'll show us to Quincy." interrupted Celestia.

The white alicorn pointed with a wing down the long sweeping courtyard to the main doors of the palace where two dragons stood at attention like statues. Spike hopped off the cart he was nominally driving and scampered up to the guards. They peered down at him sternly.

"Spike... of Equestria. To see," he looked back at Celestia, Luna and Twilight, before turning back to the two guards and wringing his paws together, "to see Quincy."

The dragons looked at each other and raised an eye-ridge. Finally, one of them said in a grating deep voice, "Walk this way, young master."

Spike blinked, "I suppose *I* could, but Twilight and the girls may have more of a problem."

The draconic guard blinked back, and hissed, "Just follow me."

The group were led inside the spacious stone structure. Arches and crenelation disappeared off into the upper reaches and strange skittering noises were heard as unseen creatures fled the presence of the intruders. The hoofsteps of the ponies was soon the only thing to break the suddenly oppressive silence.

"Through there," croaked the guard, and pointed at a heavy wooden door set with blackened metal hinges and framework. He bowed and slipped off, fluttering wings nervously. Spike blinked again, now he was actually *here*, in the Draconic Realm, the thought of meeting a real dragon - meaning a dragon who had seen the dawn of ages long past, who had trod upon the world when it was young - was daunting. It wasn't the noise, which was a low rumble, a hackle-raising resounding growl from some great maw. It wasn't the distinct smell of brimstone wafting through the cavernous hallway. It was the sheer size of the room.

Dragons like Spike - young, with only a handful of summers under their wings - were small. As dragons grew older, they grew *bigger*. Some dragons... some dragons were like Celestia. They just carried on growing older. And with every year they added more tonnage to their scaly frames. Draconic Emperors... these were the seldom-seen behemoths of legend, mysteries even amongst other dragons.

Fearfully, Spike reached up a fist to tap on the heavy door. He briefly entertained the idea that his meek knocking would go unheard and unanswered, and they'd all be able to go home, but the door swung open before his claws had so much as brushed the surface. He led his three charges through the door, leading Twilight by the reigns to help maneuver the cart.

Behind them, the door slammed shut. Titanic torches burst into spitting flame along the walls, barely illuminating a heap of treasure that quite probably qualified as a minor mountain. Something large squatted on it, scales gleaming in the flickering light. A deep, throaty roaring rumbling noise filled the cavern and an even deeper voice called out, "WHO DARES DISTURB MY SLUMBER! SPEAK NOW, MORTALS OR FEEL THE FLESH RIPPED FROM YOUR BONES! THE BLOOD BOILED IN YOUR VEINS! THE-"

"Quincy!" called out Celestia, covering her muzzle with a hoof and laughing as Twilight quietly christened the doormat.

"WHO DARES ADDRESS QUETZLCOATL THUS? LORD OF ALL COSMOS, BRINGER OF LIGHT, RULER OF ALL LEVIATHANIA, MASTER OF-"

Twilight quivered as the thunderous voice reverberated around the titanic room, causing masonry to fall crashing to the ground off in the darkness. She christened the mat some more. It was, she reflected in what had to be her last few moments of life, well and truly christened.

"Oh Quincy you showoff! It's me! Us! Tia and Luna!"

"Tia? Luna?" asked the voice, having lost most of it's reverberating malice but almost none of the volume. A gigantic toothed maw emerged from the gloom, eyes like diamonds, teeth like buzzsaws, scales like daggers. Twilight idly wondered quite how much she weighed now since having entered the room. "Oh it *is* you! Tia and Luna! My favourite little ponies! It's

been so long... how long has it been? A thousand years? Two?"

"More like five, Quincy," said Celestia, her eyes shining, as a gigantic claw snaked down and snatched her and her sister up. The massive visage rubbed the two seemingly-diminutive figures against its snout, enormous eyes closed in happiness.

"*That,*" hissed Twilight to Spike, "is *Quincy*?"

"That's Quetzlcoat! That's the god-emperor of all Leviathania!" squeaked Spike.

"And he's cuddling the princesses!" hissed Twilight.

"And what," asked a voice that could obliterate concrete at thirty paces, "do we have here? Spike, is that you? My you've grown! You were just an egg last time we... well last time I saw you! Come give your Uncle Quincy a hug!"

"Uncle?" choked Twilight, looking down at Spike, who looked back up at the unicorn and shrugged, as a mammoth claw plucked the pair of them into the air. Twilight swore her ears popped at the change in altitude.

"*Uncle?*" Twilight repeated, in between having her internal organs rearranged via application of giant draconic face to flank.

"Oh my yes, Spike, you *are* growing up to be a handsome young dragon. You'll be perfect as my replacement. My delinquent sons are *entirely* useless and..."

"What, *what?*" asked both Spike and Twilight together.

"Didn't you know? This is your pre-pre-coronation-party semi-official pre-introduction pre-recognition quasi-informal get-together where I announce my intention to have you as my eventual successor to the throne and my title of god-emperor of all Leviathania. Are my two steeds being lax in their education of my nephew and his Celestial Steed?"

Twilight was still trying to get her tongue around the formalities involved when her brain caught up and sheepishly, metaphorically, tapped her on the shoulder, "Did you say *Celestial Steed*?"

"Indeed! And my nephew could hardly have chosen a better mare at that! Wonderful teeth, my dear, simply wonderful. One mustn't look a gift-horse in the mouth but I think we can make an exception as you're a pony..."

The behemoth lifted Twilight up between colossal thumb and fore-finger and examined the equine, "Yes, yes, good coloration, bone-structure, excellent breeding hips... You'll want to brood this one out as soon as she's of a receptive age, Spike my boy, don't want to lose a chance like this. Only comes once every thousand years or so... I lucked out with my own pair, a fine lineage they've produced! Famous across the realms!"

"Good bone structure? Receptive age? Broodmare? What am I? Some sort of glorified *pet*?!" Twilight's voice got louder and louder until her horn lit up and her mane seemed to catch fire. Rather than drop her, which probably

wouldn't have ended well for the unicorn mare, the emperor chuckled throatily and turned the literally smouldering equine all around before putting her down gently and patting her head, "Weren't you told? The emperor is allowed companions, uh... wait, I believe the term is--"

Twilight fumed at the collection of diphthongs and syllables that followed. According to her phrase book she discovered, before her furious gaze turned it to ash, the phrase the emperor had used stood for 'hobby' as much as 'pet'.

"We will have *words*, Spike." hissed Twilight. The baby dragon gulped, waving his paws about.

"I-it's not my f-fault, it's a custom! I'm a dragon, Twilight, I'm going to live for a *long* time. We've got to have something to occupy our time!"

"That doesn't mean raising your very own herd of Twilight Sparkles!"

"It kind of does..." squeaked the dragon.

"Oh my, I certainly hope so, you're perfect for a Celestial Steed. The thaumic discharge is taking hold already, haven't you noticed?"

"Thaumic dis-whatnow?" asked Twilight, blinking.

"Here, let me... illuminate you." the dragon chuckled, as he snuffed out the lights. For a moment there was darkness, and then an ethereal kaleidoscope of stars and colours whirled across the muted features of the room. Twilight turned her head to catch a glimpse of their source, but was unable. As she turned her head, the lights danced. It took her a few moments to realize that it was her *mane*. Her mane was... glowing, with stars, galaxies and boiling plasma clouds.

"So many wonders," said the dragon-emperor, teasing a tear from his eyes, "I hereby proclaim Spike to be my intended future replacement god-emperor of all Leviathania! And the unicorn known as Twilight Sparkle to be his Celestial Steed! So let it be!"

The dragon roared loud enough to burst eardrums, and the torches flickered in to being once more. Very, very slowly, Twilight Sparkle collapsed first onto her haunches. Her mane glowed. She peered at it, using a hoof to pull the strands around into her vision. The stars and galaxies dancing on the walls were contained within her magnificent mane. It was, all said and done, rather more than she could cope with.

With a single raised eyebrow as her hoof fell to the floor and her bangs flopped back into position, she fainted dead away.

Twilight opened her eyes groggily. A pink dragon with green spines swam into view, "Spike? Oh Spike! I had the weirdest dream... you were there..."

A white unicorn with pink mane came into view. It took Twilight a few

seconds to realise that this 'unicorn' had wings, "Celestia? You were there too... why do you have a pink mane? and you were there too Luna!"

Luna nodded her head, smiling.

"Oh it was such a strange dream, I dreamt we went to the dragon realm and there was this... this *fly* and he could talk..."

"Hey Toots!" chimed in Haywood, buzzing into view.

Twilight closed her eyes again and sighed heavily, dropping her head back to the ground, "If I wish hard enough, you'll all vanish! I'll wake up in my sane bed, in my sane library where my sane friends are... oh dear Celestia, they're still raising the sun and moon!"

Pinkie giggled. She raised her hooves and smartly tapped them together with a *clap-clap* noise. Darkness befell the throne room. She tapped them together again, *clap-clap*, the light came back. On, off, on, off... it was so easy!

"Pinkie, dear," asked a very strained Rarity, putting a forehoof between her friend's hooves, "Could you *please* stop turning the sun on and off?"

"But..."

"*No*, Pinkie... up in the morning and down at night is enough, I believe. Now, we have a state function to attend and I want you on your *best* behaviour. Unless that ghastly Blueblood *does* decide to show up in his new royally-appointed clown-outfit, at which point you may make him do the Pony Pokey to your little heart's content."

"Really, Rarity? For real?"

"Oh, I *insist*, Pinkie! I believe I will second your royal decree for it to be the national anthem, and appoint him royal anthem singer. *And* dancer."

The ballroom was... festive. It was bedecked in ten thousand sets of streamers, each one more gaudy than the last, with so many balloons it was a sea of latex. A bouncy castle had been ordered from somewhere and was enthusiastically being used by Princess Pinkie and a few of the braver courtiers wishing to curry favour with one of the new princesses of Equestria, and a few of the younger pages who were just plain enjoying themselves. Princess Rarity, with her immaculately coiffed mane, iridescent horn and pristine pinion-feathers, entered the ballroom. The crowd hushed. It was the stars; white diamonds, blue sapphires and red rubies set into her mane completed the picture. She flung her mane back *just so*, catching the light perfectly. There were gasps as the Equestrian Anthem played, perfectly timed to match her graceful walk. She spread her wings and bowed, forelegs set forwards, before raising up imperiously and bestowing her royal gaze upon her subjects. They took the hint, falling to their knees in supplication.

It's good to be the princess, thought Rarity to herself with a secret smile. Looking up she saw a furtive figure attempting, for once, to appear as insignificant as possible.

"Ah, *prince* Blueblood, please won't you join us?" intoned Rarity. There was a quiet, strangled noise like a pony caught with his hoof in the cookie-jar, and Blueblood stood up slowly, appearing from behind the banisters of the upper balcony. His ensemble was... unique. Fake antlers adorned his noble brow. Yellow bows festooned his regal mane. Bells tinkled merrily in his fabulous tail. Large, squeaky boots that honked joyfully with each step were on his hooves and, topping it all off, was a *very* frilly and *very* pink tutu. He stepped as officiously as he could down the long stairway.

There was a soft *clop-clop* noise that barely reverberated around the room. It would never have been heard at all if not for the hush that fell at the prince's appearance, despite the giggling. The lights went out suddenly, plunging the ballroom into complete darkness. There was a cacophony of honks, tinkling bells, cries of pain and the unmistakably meaty, solid sounds of a pony repeatably bouncing off marble. A very short while later, the sun came back on to reveal that the bottom of the stairs had grown a roughly pony-shaped lump festooned with wildly situation-inappropriate and in places gender-inappropriate clothing. Not that the rest of the courtiers would mention anything. Not even those who *weren't* giggling solidly behind their hooves. Pinkie was bouncing innocently on the bouncy castle. Rarity smiled. It was going to be a *very* fun function.
