

Within and Without
by [Cloudy Skies](#)
Chapter 3

"Are we all ready, then?" Twilight asked, inspecting the ponies that stood in a half-circle around her. Her saddlebags were full, and she was confident. She was packing *knowledge* and she was ready to go.

"Got my tools an' some apples. All ready ta hit the road," Applejack nodded. The farm pony looked confident and comfortable, though Twilight guessed that the load she carried in her saddlebags would likely snap her own back.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Rarity said, adjusting her hat.

"Ready, I guess, yes," Fluttershy said.

"Let's DO this!" Pinkie Pie said with a little hop.

"Ready for takeoff!" Rainbow Dash cheered. Notably, she was the only pony without any saddlebags. "*Not my style*," she had explained earlier.

There was a moment in which exactly nothing happened. Ponies went about their business all around them, sometimes nervously glancing at the princess who was patiently waiting nearby. The tall and imposing alicorn looked around slowly, appearing to do some stationary sightseeing. Twilight scratched the back of her head and frowned. Something was missing.

"Um, speaking of readiness, princess," Rarity said, turning to the moon princess. The fashionista pointedly glanced around the town square and its myriad of roads. "Which way is it that we are going?"

Directions. That was the missing component. Luna simply smiled and approached the group, the ponies spreading out a little to let her join their huddle. "Twilight Sparkle, do you have a map of our immediate environs?"

Twilight expertly fished out a small guide from her saddlebags with magic. "Of course! *The Traveller's Guide to Equestria*, though, truth be told, it was harder to find maps and such than I would've thought." She frowned at that even as she opened the book with her telekinesis. Mapmakers were apparently as undervalued as librarians in Equestria.

"Hm. That is very basic, even if accurate. I should have brought a map from my personal library in Canterlot, if only for your benefit," Luna said, apparently disappointed with what she saw and dismissing the book. "I know the roads by heart though. They cannot have changed

that much in the last thousand years."

There was a brief pause before Luna added, "That was a joke." Rarity immediately laughed, and Twilight looked a little sheepish, with the rest of the assembled ponies in various stages of awkwardness. Twilight petted her book and stowed it away before the princess could slander it any further.

Princess Luna began a slow walk towards one of the bridges that crossed the nearby stream, explaining as she went. "I am thinking of heading West and South out of Ponyville. Trixie was last seen heading South, and it puts us closer to the border to Scandineighvia," the princess clarified, glancing behind her to make sure the ponies were following. "There are a number of villages that are so small that they do not have a direct line of communication to Canterlot, and I think it would be prudent to see if Trixie passed through there."

"Scandineighvia? We're leaving Equestria?" Twilight had to struggle to keep moving, her legs threatening to lock up for a second. She had never been beyond the border. From the look on their faces, most of the other ponies shared her sentiment. Fluttershy only seemed determined.

Luna's pace did not slow one bit, and she kept her gaze forward. "We may have to, yes. While I'm fairly certain Trixie went south, I don't know where she is now, but reviewing monthly reports from the southwestern border posts, I read about a lone griffin leaving Equestria's border."

"The griffin tribes in Scandineighvia," Rainbow Dash muttered to nopony in particular. "Gilda, you complete and utter haybrain..."

"What of Prince Blueblood? If you'll forgive me, princess, you never fully explained what became of him." Rarity's voice was tense, but Luna just shook her head. Once again, the white unicorn didn't dare push the issue, but it was clear she was getting frustrated.

"We'll get to that later," the princess said cryptically, glancing around at the ponies that watched them go. They had an unintended entourage, but the closer they got to the outskirts of Ponyville, the fewer curious ponies were following them, and soon it was just the seven of them.

It wasn't before they walked past the turnoff that led to Sweet Apple Acres that Twilight really appreciated what they were doing. They were actually travelling by hoof, and they might be gone for weeks or even months! While she was certainly comfortable enough in the houses and libraries that had been her home so far, she couldn't pretend to be immune to the allure of adventure. As Sweet Apple Acres threatened to fade out of view behind them, Applejack shot a look backwards and sighed deeply.

"Cold hooves already, AJ?" Rainbow Dash asked, but Twilight noted that there was no

trace of the usual superiority, no challenge in her voice. The earth pony began shaking her head, but arrested the movement and just trotted on. Twilight remembered when Applejack had told her of how she got her cutie mark, how homesick she had gotten. She trotted up to her and offered a sympathetic smile.

"Ah just know Ah'm gonna miss'em," Applejack said. "Don't mean Ah regret this, or that Ah'm gonna go back, but Ah can't help it."

Twilight didn't quite know what to feel, herself. Of course she'd miss Spike and all the friends and acquaintances they'd left behind, but there was so much to see and learn out there! For every time Celestia had applauded Twilight's academic prowess, she'd also warned her that experience was equally important.

And thus time flew by, the shadow of the Everfree forest ever to one side, and open fields on the other. The road was a broad and well travelled dirt road in good maintenance. The few times they encountered other ponies, they were usually earth ponies hauling large carts, often in teams. They would without fault stop and stare or bow, and Luna usually either seemed uncomfortable or simply walked on, ignoring them.

The princess often joined in on their chatter, and where she'd initially taken the lead, they all walked together in a tight cluster by the time the sun set, with her as the center of attention. Fluttershy seemed less reluctant to be near Luna, but Twilight doubted any of them would live to see the day Rarity stopped calling Luna 'princess'.

"I do not think I have ever had the pleasure of tasting distilled rainbow, I must admit, no, Pinkie Pie," Luna chuckled. "Nor does it sound like something I would want to try." The party pony had hogged most of Luna's attention with questions for the past few hours, much to Rarity's subtle chagrin. Luna seemed tireless, Twilight noted. Most ponies could get a Pinkie Pie overload after a short while, but the princess answered every question patiently to the best of her abilities.

"I want to try using them to make cupcakes or maybe muffins! But *somepony* is being stingy with the rainbow juice." Pinkie Pie huffed and pouted in Rainbow Dash's direction. The chromatic pegasus sighed, and it became very obvious this had been a recurring discussion between the two of them.

"I can't just check buckets of rainbows out of the weather factory just like that!" Rainbow Dash explained, but Pinkie Pie was still pouty. In the end, Dash threw her head back and groaned in frustration. "Fine! I'll see if I can't get you a sample for you when we get back."

Pinkie Pie's resulting cheerful antics went on long enough and distracted the group so efficiently that they didn't even notice they had come up on a building before Luna stopped. Twilight and the others looked up at the large two-story log cabin while Rainbow Dash was still

trying to get Pinkie off her back. Soft light spilled from the windows on the first floor, and the sign outside proudly proclaimed it to be the 'Copper Road Inn'.

"This will be a good place to stop for the night. If we have to travel outside of Equestria, there will be no shortage of nights under the naked sky, so we may as well indulge ourselves while we can," Luna said. The notion met with agreement. Leading the way, Luna opened the heavy wooden doors to a large common room filled with tables. The room was largely empty except for a pale green unicorn colt with a frizzy grey mane who stood behind the bar and a pair of gruff earth pony stallions nursing their cider in a corner.

"I'll cover expenses," Luna said as they approached the counter. The unicorn perked up at the sound of customers and looked up from the cup he was cleaning with a rag. Spotting the princess, he gasped and threw himself into a low bow. Being behind the bar, it almost looked like he dived to hide, and there was a muffled giggle from Pinkie Pie.

"Your majesty! Our humble establishment is at your service," the unicorn, who had a torch for a cutie mark, declared. A brown unicorn mare poked her head out from a nearby door and disappeared again immediately. There was a loud clatter of pots and pans.

"Nonsense. We're paying customers," Luna responded, but before she could go on, there was a clatter of bits on wood as a hoof-ful of currency landed on the counter. Everypony turned to Applejack. The farmpony had opened one of her saddlebags and was, for her part, looking at the unicorn stallion. "That enough for three rooms? Ah assume the beds're big enough for two?"

The innkeeper nodded, though it was obvious that shifting his attention off the princess was very hard for him, and he kept glancing at Luna. "They're big enough to share, Miss. Three rooms for the night, dinner and breakfast tomorrow?" Applejack nodded, and he obviously did some quick math in his head, prompting Applejack to put a few more bits on the counter, which she did. Only then did Luna finally voice her protests. The princess looked a little confused, Twilight thought.

"I did say I would cover expenses, did I not?"

"Respectfully, princess," Applejack said with a dip of her head. "Ah can't let you cover for Sweet Apple Acres and then go and do somethin' like this without feelin' bad about it. Ah'll pay for my friends and myself."

Twilight felt a little nervous all of a sudden. Luna actually looked indignant, and Applejack herself even looked a little sorry. Not sorry about what she'd said, Twilight knew, but that she felt she had to do it. That pony was more stubborn than a mule.

Luna dispersed the tension with a little nod. "I cannot very well stop you. At any rate, I

need to attend my royal duties. We will meet here for breakfast in the morning, yes? I am eager to cover more ground tomorrow, today was cut short by our late start." With those words, Princess Luna turned and walked back out through the door.

"She's not having dinner?" Pinkie Pie asked, a little puzzled.

"Evidently not," Rarity said, failing at masking her disappointment. "Applejack, I insist on covering at least half the cost. While I think it's rude to reject a gift like this, I can easily cover for all of us. The boutique is doing very well, thanks in part to your help and modelling." The unicorn swept a hoof over to indicate all her friends, smiling.

Applejack herself shook her head, adamant. "Ah get to choose how I spend mah own pocket money, don't Ah? Sweet Apple Acres might not leave me swimming in bits like your business, but Ah've made up my mind." Rarity looked a little wounded, and Applejack huffed, looking down at the ground. "Thanks Rarity, but you can pay next time or somethin'."

Twilight had no idea what to say to any of this. Truth be told, she hadn't thought about money at all, assuming that travelling with the princess meant such things were a non-issue. Given that she lived in the public library at Celestia's behest, bits were a thing of leisure to her. She coughed and drew attention to herself. "I, um, thanks. I didn't really bring any bits myself," Twilight admitted, even though she still felt the princess could have covered it. The other ponies also said their thanks, and Applejack looked a little happier for it.

The innkeeper had apparently disappeared a while ago as the ponies talked, and now he returned, exiting through what must be the kitchen door. Following him was the brown mare they'd seen earlier, and a little turquoise unicorn filly about the age of the Cutie Mark Crusaders. All of them carried trays of food, and one of the large tables was soon set for dinner. Honeyed oats, daffodil burgers, hay fries and more was laid out before them, and the ponies wasted no time in setting to work filling their bellies.

When the last piece of bread was made a victim of Pinkie Pie's unfathomable appetite the air was heavy with contentment and laziness, and there was a brief lull in the small talk about travel and who was paying for that. The earth pony stallions had vacated the common room for their own rooms above sometime earlier.

"Um, how do we split the rooms?" Fluttershy asked as she gingerly pushed her plate away from her.

"I'd love to share a room with you, Fluttershy, darling," Rarity told Fluttershy to nopony's surprise and nod from the butter-colored pegasus. Twilight got up and looked around, wondering if they were expected to help clean up. She'd eaten in many fine bars, restaurants and diners in Canterlot and Ponyville, but this was an inn. How did they even work?

"I'll take a room with Pinkie Pie," Applejack declared. This caused a few raised eyebrows, including Twilight's. They were all good enough friends that she hardly expected any drama from something as simple as sleeping arrangements, of course, but it was still a little surprising. Rainbow Dash glanced between Twilight, Pinkie Pie and Applejack and shrugged nonchalantly. Pinkie Pie nodded at Applejack while scratching her chin with a hoof.

"Well played, Apples', Well played," Pinkie said, her voice comically gravelly.

"Ah intend to get some sleep tonight," Applejack said with a shrug, though Twilight couldn't imagine how Pinkie Pie was conducive to sleep. She was, in fact, pretty sure that Pinkie herself never actually slept. She didn't do sleep-overs. She did parties.

Soon enough, the ponies had split off and found their rooms. Fluttershy, of all ponies, had commented that travelling could be tiresome, and that they really should get as much rest as possible while they could. Closing the door to their room after she and Rainbow Dash were well inside, Twilight lit up her horn.

It was a small, cozy and mostly clean room with a large bed, a nightstand, cupboards, a washbasin and a mirror. The walls were bare, the corners were a little dusty, but it was certainly more than Twilight had expected of a roadside inn.

Rainbow Dash's first instinct was apparently to hop onto on the bed and bounce up and down on it with enthusiasm. Twilight lit a candle with her magic before she sat down on the floor and merely watched the pegasus until she noticed and stopped.

"Er, I was just testing it. See if the springs are any good." The multicolored pony shrugged and grinned as she hopped off the bed. "They are. Great springs!"

"Uh huh," Twilight said with a smile, glad to finally have Rainbow Dash alone for a second. "Hey, listen, about that little argument, I really am sorry. And, um, I think you just kind of struck a nerve."

The pegasus looked blank for a second, and then huffed. "You're still thinking about that? Come on Twi, it's cool. I wasn't even thinking, I just don't like Luna pushing us around. Heh, and she wasn't. She's cool, I guess."

Twilight nodded at her friend, a little relieved, but also beset by a nagging feeling that Rainbow Dash didn't give her own perceptive abilities enough credit. She didn't mind letting the subject drop, but now it was Dash's turn to look a little hesitant.

"But, er, I'm still not sure about this whole trip. I didn't want to say anything since Applejack's already pretty busy with that. You know. Busy saying she's not cool with this." Dash looked uncomfortable and almost uncharacteristically serious as she gazed at Twilight. "And

no pony talks about why we're going, you're all just excited that we're going at all."

Seeing Dash openly distraught like this worried Twilight a little. Back in Ponyville, she'd never speak so openly about something that concerned her, at least not to Twilight. She thought about it for a moment before she replied. "We just left today. There'll be plenty of time for that, and I'm sure Luna will tell us everything she knows eventually." Twilight thought about their conversation with Applejack earlier in the day, understanding dawning on her slowly. "Besides, I think we all have cold hooves to some degree. I'm a little scared, too, but this'll be fun."

Rainbow Dash jerked and looked like she might protest at being called out on it, but deflated again almost instantly, puffing out her cheeks. "Yeah, heh, sorry. I just, I've never really been anywhere except Ponyville and Cloudsdale, I guess."

"Will you be okay though?" Twilight asked, but Dash hopped onto the bed and grinned, her trademark confidence quickly returning.

"I'm not really scared, it's kind of nice, too," the pegasus said, gazing out the window. "It's like doing a really cool stunt, you know? Or, well, I guess you don't." Twilight rolled her eyes. "Just a lot slower... Luna?" Dash finished with a note of surprise.

Twilight followed Rainbow Dash's gaze and trotted over to the window, pressing her snout against the glass.

The small window faced away from the road, giving them a nice view of a tall grass field of perhaps a hundred paces across leading up to the edge of the Everfree Forest. As Rainbow Dash had suggested, Princess Luna was in clear view, standing in the middle of the field and facing the forest, her head hanging low. On the horizon, above the treetops of the nearby forest, the moon began its ascent even as the two ponies watched.

"That is so cool," Rainbow Dash gasped.

"It doesn't even look like she's doing anything. It's nothing like when Celestia raises the sun at the summer sun celebration," Twilight mused as the night sky slowly came alive with the twinkling of innumerable little stars. Indeed, the night princess appeared to have done very little. It must be very subtle magic, if it was even conventional magic at all. Perhaps Luna would be less cryptic than Celestia in answering questions about it?

After the night sky was in place, so to say, there was a long pause where nothing happened. Eventually, Luna slowly began raising her head. As Twilight and Rainbow Dash watched, the princess first levelled her head with the forest, and then craned it upwards to gaze at the sky. All the while, she opened her wings, tentatively at first, but when her muzzle trained on the moon above they were fully spread, large dark wings that seemed a part of the night-dome itself.

Suddenly, Luna folded her wings and sat quickly down in the grass. She lowered her head and sat completely still. Twilight had no idea how long they had been staring at the princess doing nothing at all when Rainbow Dash broke the silence.

"What the hay just happened?"

Twilight climbed onto the bed, sitting down atop the covers before she replied, feeling a little scared and numb both. "I have no idea, but I suggest we don't tell Luna we saw that. I mean, it's probably nothing, but..."

Rainbow Dash sat down on the bed as well. "It? We don't even know what that was, if it was anything at all," she said, though whether she was agreeing or disagreeing with Twilight, the unicorn couldn't tell. Rainbow Dash was still looking out the window, past her. "I think she's crying."

Twilight Sparkle felt her heart stop for a second and made a noise halfway between a snort and a cough, incredulous. "That's crazy," she said, but she didn't dare turn around to see. Instead, she slipped under the covers and shut her eyes. There was shuffling next to her, and cracking one eye open a little, Twilight saw Dash had just laid down on her back atop the covers. Twilight fervently hoped that Rainbow Dash would just be quiet and sleep.

"I bet they're just ponies too, you know," Dash muttered. "Luna and Celestia. Why can't they cry, too?"

"Because that's crazy," Twilight said, hating herself for her own irrationality. Her eyes popped open of their own accord, and she lay staring at the ceiling. Luna was Celestia's sister. They were not just royalty, but goddesses. Of course they had emotions, but Celestia had always been strong, always had a smile ready for her and everypony else. Luna was not at all what she had expected – she was, simply put, confusing. Were the two sisters really that different? Did Celestia ever cry? Did it really matter?

Twilight turned her head and saw that Rainbow Dash was still looking at her, no doubt waiting for a better answer. The purple unicorn swallowed. She had no idea what to say, so she did the only thing she could. She changed the subject. "Fluttershy's travelled this road before? She's not as, um, Fluttershy about this as I thought she'd be."

Rainbow Dash smiled wistfully. Twilight hadn't known Dash could pull off "wistful", but there it was. "You could ask her about it, but yeah, I think she's seen more of Equestria than any of us."

Twilight scanned the pegasus' face for any indication that it was a joke, but no. Wistful. "Er, haven't you known each other for a very long time? Wouldn't you know?"

The brightly colored pegasus turned away and she sounded very tired all of a sudden. "Can we just go to sleep, please?"

Twilight got the impression that she'd said something wrong without knowing exactly what. She stared at Rainbow Dash's back for a few moments before muttering a pained *"I'm sorry."* It took an uncomfortably long time before she managed to fall asleep, dreaming something about darkness that was not quite a nightmare.

A knock on the door woke Twilight and Rainbow Dash up, and the former's first thought was that having the two late sleepers share a room might not have been the best of ideas. The sun was already up. Twilight groaned as Applejack's voice came through the door, loud and clear. "Wake up lazybones, breakfast's served!"

"Right." Willing herself out of bed, Twilight's body thankfully soon obeyed and followed. Dash made an incomprehensible mutter and curled up into a ball. Without waiting for the notoriously lazy pegasus, Twilight walked down to the common room. As it turned out, all the others were already nibbling on or gorging themselves on breakfast. Everypony seemed in high spirits, but Twilight found that she had a hard time looking straight at Luna as she shuffled over to take a seat next to Fluttershy. She attacked her oats with a vengeance as the others discussed their opinions of inn life. Rarity, unsurprisingly, wasn't quite satisfied with the quality of the rooms, but she also admitted it was to be expected, and she never said a word on the topic when the owners of the establishment were nearby.

Not half an hour later, having dragged Rainbow Dash downstairs and practically forced her to eat under the threat of whining, they said their goodbyes and were out the door, facing yet another stretch of road that seemed to go on forever.

"I am hoping to reach the village of Braidford today," Luna said once they started moving, setting a higher pace than yesterday. "We should have time for a few breaks, but do not be afraid to say if you have trouble keeping up, please." This earned set of nods and a little chuckle from Rainbow Dash and Applejack as if the very notion of falling behind was unthinkable. Dash hovered up over their heads.

"Actually, I'm gonna go for a little flight, see how things look up here. You know, stretch my wings and get a little speed. No offense or anything." Dash was grinning even as she rocketed off straight upwards, leaving an explosion of dust in her wake. Rarity coughed and Applejack shook her head, but Twilight saw an opportunity. She aligned herself with Fluttershy, who was staring straight ahead, gaze distant as she trotted mechanically on. The others had began asking Luna questions about Braidford, giving the two of them a small measure of privacy.

"Fluttershy, I was wondering about something..." the purple unicorn began, a little hesitant, but much too curious now to hold back. Fluttershy looked over at her and was at once her usual self, brought back into focus. She smiled back at Twilight expectantly.

"You lived in Ponyville when I moved over, but where did you live before then? Just Cloudsdale?" The question was carefully thought out. If Fluttershy didn't want to talk about it, she could just say yes and leave it at that, but Twilight knew there was more to it. The pegasus mare didn't shy away from the question, though, shaking her head slightly.

"After I finished flight school I, um, travelled a little. All over the place, actually. I didn't go very far, but I spent a year on the road." The answer was given with a smile, but Fluttershy stole a quick glance up into the air where a rapidly dimming rainbow trail was all that remained of Rainbow Dash's departure.

"You stayed in flight school?" Twilight asked, unable to hide the surprise in her voice. Thinking back on it, she knew that Rainbow Dash had quit, and that Fluttershy had attended the same class. Also, Fluttershy was a notoriously weak flier, at least in comparison to Rainbow Dash, and she had fallen in love with the creatures of the ground during that one fateful race that had shaped the fates of the six friends. Twilight had simply assumed that Fluttershy had dropped out around the same time.

If Fluttershy took offense, however, she didn't show it, merely nodding. "I didn't really have anywhere else to go, and I couldn't... I couldn't follow Rainbow Dash." At Twilight's wordless question, Fluttershy visibly hesitated. Twilight looked around and saw that the others had pulled a little ahead, Rarity and Luna apparently engaged in a debate that had the former looking very disappointed. The pegasus at her side, though, wasn't looking at them, but at Twilight still.

"I tried finding Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy finally admitted. "She'd been so nice to me, and I'd never had... I didn't have a lot of friends. And she just left m- the school." The quick little correction was very obvious. "I had no idea where she went. I looked all over, until I finally found her in Ponyville. Um, and I was kind of tired of travelling all over the place, and then I found Angel Bunny." Twilight tried picturing Fluttershy travelling all over Equestria looking for Rainbow Dash, and just shook her head in disbelief.

"How could she do that?" Twilight finally asked, breathless. Fluttershy suddenly went wide-eyed and shook her head swiftly, slowing down a little.

"No, no, it's not her fault! We're very different, Rainbow Dash and I. She didn't realize. She said she was sorry, that she just had to get away. I just wish she'd told me where she was going, but we're okay now. It was a long time ago." The pegasus was beset with that indeterminable fervor that occasionally shone through her shell of shyness, and Twilight

reluctantly nodded, if only to calm her down.

"No, listen Twilight, you *have* to understand," Fluttershy said, desperate.

"I get it, it's okay, Fluttershy. I'll let it go," Twilight said, almost getting a little afraid, but the pegasus seemed to calm down, placated.

She remembered yesterday night, though. It was obvious that Dash still felt terrible about it, and she couldn't quite decide whether that made the whole situation better or worse. Before she could say anything else, though, Pinkie Pie stopped and let them catch up. The others were quite a bit ahead now. "Come on girls, we're all iron ponies today!" The pink pony giggled and upped her pace to catch up to the others again. Fluttershy broke into a brisk canter, and Twilight followed suit.

They kept up the canter for a few hours until the sun crawled high in the sky. Rarity was obviously struggling to keep up the pace, yet she didn't say a single word of complaint, laboring silently in the shadow of her hat. Twilight herself was also feeling the effects of the pace they had set, but she resolved to say nothing, either. If Rarity could keep up, so could she. Even so, when Luna slowed down, she was very grateful.

The Everfree Forest had fallen away, no longer following them to the West, and as they came to a stop, it felt like they stood on the top of the world. The gentle upward slope that they'd followed all day relented and released its height in the form of a huge valley. On the other side of the valley, across a river, they could barely see a settlement surrounded by expansive worked fields. Further still, at the top on the other side of the valley, a dense mass of dark green.

These were only afterthoughts, though, compared to what drew their eyes. The entire valley was covered in beautiful flowers of every color imaginable. Botany had never been Twilight's strong suit, so she couldn't name many of them, but it was hard not to be amazed by the carpet of yellows, blues and reds, streaked with violets and lush greens.

Rarity gasped. "I have never seen anything like this," she said. "The colors are simply beautiful. I mean, certainly, I've seen paintings and such of scenes *like* this, but..." She trailed off and rummaged through her saddlebags, extracting sketch paper and a piece of coal with which to take notes and draw sketches.

Luna nodded appreciatively. "I was in fact looking forward to seeing this place again, and I'm glad it hasn't changed much. Is it still called Breezevale?"

The question, another reminder of the temporal gulf between her and the rest of the ponies, gave Twilight pause. She almost wished she was a simpler pony, that she couldn't frustrate herself with the impossibility of understanding the difference, the orders of magnitude that separated the princess and the other ponies on so many levels. She had been banished for

a thousand years. How old had she been then? How could she remember a specific valley after so long? And what had she been doing yesterday? Twilight stared straight ahead, unmoving, trying to understand how Rainbow Dash could claim she was 'just a pony' other than out of simple ignorance.

"Yes," Fluttershy answered after a brief pause. Perhaps it had been expected that Twilight would answer? No pony was looking at her, though, busy taking in the valley still. She shook her head to clear it and puffed out her cheeks.

There was a thud as Rainbow Dash not so much landed near them as she impacted, sweating but grinning. They'd spotted her in the sky a few times, but she hadn't rejoined them since she took off.

"Why're we stopping?" Rainbow Dash asked, and Luna chuckled at the smaller pony.

"Because not everyone is graced with your gifts of flight and speed, Rainbow Dash. Besides, this is a nice place to stop for some food. Surely you are hungry?"

Shrugging then nodding, the pegasus smiled at the princess. "I guess I could eat, sure. The village is like, right over there, though. It's kinda small compared to the ones to the East, isn't it? This road is getting smaller." She waved a hoof in the general direction of Braidford.

"It's not as close as it looks, I think. It'll probably take us the greater part of the day to get there," Twilight said, staring at the settlement, and Luna nodded at her words. It was impossible to make out individual houses at this distance.

Pinkie Pie shrugged at this, losing none of her mirth. "At least we got dinner!" She set about munching on the most colorful flowers she could find, hopping along and sampling them one by one.

Rarity was frowning now, staring at the grass and flowers. "Grazing, is it? I suppose it was unrealistic to think there would be a restaurant or even a bar at every corner of the road, but..."

"Ah think Ah prefer apples," Applejack agreed between mouthfuls. "But what can ya do?"

The ponies ate in relative silence for a short while until Fluttershy finally spoke. Twilight had noticed she was giving the princess occasional worried glances. "Aren't you going to eat, princess?"

Luna looked a little surprised. She had indeed not been eating, apparently content simply enjoying the sight of the valley. "Ah. Of course, Fluttershy," the princess finally said with a smile, and she walked a little ways off to graze. Twilight, feeling satiated, sat down on her

haunches and rested while waiting for the others.

"I don't think my hooves have been this sore since, well," Rarity said, having sat down next to Twilight. "There's the problem. They haven't. I didn't even know hooves could get sore." It was a less of a surprise to Twilight, but she decided that it might not be the right time for a lecture, so she just offered a sympathetic smile.

"Y'get used to it," Applejack commented as she walked past. "Guess for my part, applebuckin' kind of toughened up my hooves a bit though." Rarity shot Applejack a sour look.

"Pinkie Pie ready to roar and soar!" Pinkie Pie announced as she hopped over to them. "And these flowers are *tasty*! I mean, way better than the flowers in Ponyville!"

"I thought you didn't eat anything, well, not sugary," Twilight chuckled as she got up and stretched her legs.

"Oh, when I'm out and about, sometimes I get so hungry I just can't wait until I get back to Sugarcube Corner. I'm so happy Daisy usually leaves snacks for me outside for when I just need a little pick-me-up!"

There was a moment of silence as Twilight mentally checked this against some gossip and a discussion she'd had with the earth pony herbal shop owners and florists in Ponyville a few weeks ago. "Wait, you're the one who's been eating Daisy's flowers?!"

Pinkie Pie bounced and nodded, clearly not seeing a problem. "Yetsy-depsy!"

Rarity sighed heavily, and Twilight noted that she'd have to have a chat with Pinkie about this before they got back. Luna was making her way over to them that very moment, though, addressing the group. "Are we ready to move? I think we can afford to set a slightly slower pace and take another break in the afternoon. How are you all feeling?"

"I think I can keep up," Twilight said, and Rarity nodded as well. The rest of the ponies agreed, though Rainbow Dash was still eating and said she would catch up with them later. The colorful pegasus pony was a tempting next candidate for Twilight's cellar laboratory by virtue of her remarkable metabolism, she idly thought to herself.

Even at a slightly more leisurely pace, the distance diminished at a reasonable rate. In part, Twilight suspected it might just have been that their surroundings were so pleasant it was hard to complain about anything. Even for the bookish unicorn, rarely concerned with such things, trotting along amidst the flowers was a pleasant affair. That said, she was reasonably sure that Celestia's words on 'getting out more' didn't stop her from combining the best of both worlds. Twilight soon levitated a book in front of her as they moved, busying herself with some light meta-magical theory. It took a little while to perfect compensating for the movement with

her telekinesis, but it worked out in the end.

As the princess had predicted, they made it to Braidford with time to spare before sundown. Twilight's hooves and legs began to ache the second they passed the stone bridge that took them into the centre of the village, as it were. Most buildings were hay and oat farms scattered in the distance, and the village centre offered only a dozen buildings. Of these, one was marked as the town hall, and it was this one Luna beelined for. Twilight was eager to learn how the smaller villages organized themselves, and as such, she was smiling brightly.

"Well, here we are. It is a relatively small farming community, and it is the first village South of Ponyville. As such, it would make sense to see if Trixie has passed by here." The princess surveyed the assembled ponies. "We may not have a lot to go by yet, but I hope something pops up before we hit the border, which I suppose is our main goal. If not, we will pull on further resources. Braidford has a mayor, from what I read. I thought it would be prudent to begin there. The rest of you may of course see the sights, if you wish." Luna looked expectantly at the group, and Rainbow Dash gave a laugh.

"Look at what, farms?"

"What's wrong with farms?" Applejack asked with a frown, but all the same, everypony followed as Luna entered the large wooden structure. While there were few ponies about outside, probably by virtue of it being fairly late, they found two ponies amiably chatting inside. An earth pony and a pegasus, the former a dark red and the latter a shade of off-white, turned at their entrance. As was the norm, they both bowed, wide-eyed. Twilight wondered if Luna ever tired of having to ask ponies to get off the floor.

"Please, rise," Luna said, indeed sounding a little weary. She turned to the older of the two, the white pegasus with a silver chain as her cutie mark. The mare had been leaning on the table behind which the other pony sat, in what seemed to be a simple but functional reception room. The Braidfordians were quick to gather their wits again, and rose to smile at the party.

"Silver Links is my name, Princess. I am thrilled, but surprised, I must admit, to meet you." The mare, presumably the mayor, spoke swiftly, but it sounded as if it was out of habit rather than nervousness. "This is Double Time, my assistant."

Names were exchanged all around, and Luna briefly explained the nature of their visit. When it became clear that it was an unofficial visit rather than the business of the Royal Castle, the mayor further relaxed and invited them to join her in her office, even though she was just closing up for the day. The mayor's office was a fairly humble affair, and the eight ponies crowded the room a little. Twilight had to get more intimate with a potted plant than she would have liked.

"We would greatly appreciate food and lodging, though I must insist on paying you,"

Luna explained when they were well inside. "However, our real business here is one of an investigative nature. We suspect that some months past, a blue unicorn mare called Trixie passed through here. A travelling magician."

"The Great and Powerful Trixie," Twilight corrected, remembering well her mannerisms and boastful nature.

"S'what she'd have called herself, anyway," Applejack snorted, and Twilight couldn't keep her eyes off her friend, surprised at the level of venom in her voice at this. Sure enough, Applejack had been upstaged by Trixie, but so had Rainbow Dash and Rarity, neither of which seemed to want to offer comment on this.

Silver Links shook her head. "I don't think so, I'm sorry. I think I've heard the name before, but only two entertainers have passed through here recently. Bumble came by a month ago or so, he usually visits twice a year in addition to festivals. He's from Nipswitch to the West." She paused and smiled. "Terribly talented magician and comedian, in fact. The other was Phantom, Perigrin or Phoenix, I think." She frowned, clearly trying to remember, and eventually just sighed in defeat. "I'm afraid I don't recall the name, it was something with a 'P'. She was a mare, but bright red and not a magician. A storyteller, rather. I didn't have an opportunity to watch her personally, but I heard of her visit."

Twilight sighed inwardly. To think they might have missed entirely on the direction of Trixie's travel was depressing to say the least. She had been content to think that the blue unicorn had learned her lesson, and assumed that everything would work out as it usually did. Then she'd learned how much Trixie had actually lost, and if Luna was worried, or at the very least felt there was reason for concern, then so did she. It would feel a little odd to disagree with a goddess of dreams and prophecies.

Fluttershy was looking a little distraught as well, and the same held for Rainbow Dash, though Twilight assumed that was simply because she usually hated wasting time. Luna, thoroughly practical, nodded her thanks to the mayor. "That still leaves the issue of lodging, though. Do you have anything suitable?"

Silver Links smiled a little at that. "I am sorry I couldn't be more help with finding your friend, but the rest, I can easily help with. We don't have a real inn or hotel here, but we have plenty of families and ponies who have room for a couple of extra ponies, and I think the idea of being able to say they played host to a princess would be a big deal too."

"Actually, I will not be requiring quarters. But if you can provide beds for my... companions, then that would be very much appreciated." Luna hesitated a little, and it didn't go unnoticed by Twilight. The mayor looked a little disappointed, but nodded.

"The Oat family has a lot of room, I'm sure we could fit at least three of you in there.

They never turn anypony away, and they're very friendly ponies all." The pegasus mayor paused, pensive. "Ah, and the rest of you could share a bed at Summer Glare's place, perhaps? His wife and foals are out of town, so his house is very empty these days. He'd be glad for the company, I'm sure."

Twilight was very fascinated by how close-knit the community seemed. The idea of Mayor Mare doing anything similar in Ponyville, of Twilight Sparkle having ponies knock on her door telling her that Mayor Mare had sent them there to sleep, that was worth a little giggle. She resolved to write a report to Celestia about community sizes and bonds.

When they all stood outside, after a brief debate that Twilight didn't participate in, it had been decided that Rarity, Applejack and Fluttershy would head over to the pony called Summer Glare, and that Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie would take the short trek to the Oats' farm. The first trio broke off swiftly and headed for a nearby building indicated by the mayor as Summer Glare's house.

"You guys just go ahead, I'll be there in a moment," Twilight told Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash after they'd gotten their directions to the farm. The mayor was quick to excuse herself saying that she was expected home an hour ago.

"Okie-dokie-lokie!" Pinkie Pie chirped and bounced off, Rainbow Dash quickly catching up and flying at her side. They lapsed into a hushed conversation, leaving Twilight a little curious, but she had another, far more pressing curiosity-itch to scratch. She was left only with Princess Luna, who looked down at her, patient and neutral, obviously aware that Twilight wanted something.

Twilight, for her part, was nervous. She stood at the precipice of getting answers, but she had no idea how Luna would react. She seemed steel-faced much of the time, friendly the rest of the time, and whatever had happened that night, she wasn't even sure she wanted to know. The princess in question glanced over her shoulder at where the sun had just set. "Twilight, I do not have very long. What is troubling you?"

Aiming for the honest approach, Twilight wrestled with words. "Well, I have some questions." She smiled sheepishly. "A lot, in fact. I don't know if you can or want to answer them, because Celestia never really did. Or, sometimes she did, but usually, she'd just be cryptic and smile at me." Princess Luna chuckled a little at that, as if she knew exactly what she was talking about.

"She can be like that, these days, I suppose. She has a lot on her mind. What kind of questions?"

Twilight wanted to ask if Luna didn't have a lot on her mind also. She had no idea what Luna did or didn't do in a royal capacity, but that wasn't exactly a question to set the mood. "For

example, well, immortality."

Luna raised an eyebrow. "What of it?"

Twilight couldn't comprehend the answer, eyes wide. "What of it? What *not* of it! I mean, as a concept, immortality is keyed to eternity, which is close to incomprehensible on a non-philosophical level! I-" Twilight caught herself, breathing a little faster. Her eyes shone as she stared up in wonder at the Princess. "What's it like, living forever?"

After a contemplative moment, Luna finally replied. "Would you walk with me?"

Wordlessly complying, Twilight fell into step at Luna's side as they set out towards the outskirts of town where the sunset had been, as if chasing Celestia's sun itself.

"Celestia and I are not unique. At least in the immortality aspect. At the beginning of time, many creatures were born immortal. There were very many of us, once, but not many remain," Luna said, and Twilight interrupted her right away.

"Wait, how can they be gone? Doesn't that fly in the face of the 'immortal' part of it?"

Luna smiled at the question, shaking her head. "Immortality doesn't mean indestructibility. No one is so much stronger than themselves that they cannot unmake their own form."

Trying to wrap her head around the statement, Twilight frowned. "Can you reformulate that? I'm not sure I understand. You're implying something."

"I suppose," was the answer Luna gave as she sat down on the flowery ground by the roadside. It seemed like a spot like any other. Twilight sat on her haunches next to her, but the princess was intently staring up at the sky. She was about to ask the princess whether she had asked an inappropriate question when she realized what was happening. Craning her neck, she saw the celestial namesake of the alicorn at her side crawl up from the horizon to take its place on the sky-dome where the stars already waited. Luna quickly looked down at the flowers in which they sat, studying a dark purple bell-shaped specimen in the sparse moonlight.

"What you do not understand, Twilight Sparkle, is the burden of eternity. We who are left are those who can best adjust. We can avoid the pitfalls of the Forever. Me and my sister, we are alive because we learned how to cry and laugh. How to accept emotions, experience them without fully succumbing to them."

Twilight felt her lower jaw go slack. She had intended to take notes, but the weight of the words killed the last of her lingering frustrations that she hadn't brought her writing tools.

"At any rate, eternity is a word noone really understands. Not even I can see the end of time, and foresight is one of my gifts. All we know is that it all began. Immortality means even less than the word eternity, does it not? If all you mean by it is that we choose when we die, then yes, you can describe us with the word 'immortal'. But it is not the same as forever. Noone wants forever. Noone endures forever. Eventually, if it comes to that, you end yourself because the alternative is madness. And those who go mad..." Luna sat stiff on the ground, fixed upon that one flower as she finished. "...have to be put down." There was a practiced neutrality to the voice, but it wasn't perfect, and Twilight realized that she could believe Rainbow Dash, now. Perhaps she hadn't been lying.

Being able to visualize a goddess crying didn't feel like an achievement. Luna looked over at her, as if waking up from a nap, her eyes suddenly a little panicked – that made it two things Twilight did not hope or think she'd see. "Oh horseapples, I did not mean to- that was a bit gloomy, no?"

And three. Luna had just swore in front of her.

"No, no, I asked!" Twilight said, her voice rising. "I just, uh, I didn't, I-" What? She hadn't expected to get answers? She hadn't expected that she'd be unsure, for the first time in her life, if she had wanted those answers? No, that wasn't it. Twilight collected herself with effort. She tried to make her words have some meaning. What did she think?

Twilight looked at Luna. The princess was looking very different from her usual self, and she was struck with an urge to fix something, but it was impossible. There was nothing she could do. The purple unicorn finally managed to find her voice, but finding the right words was an entirely different matter.

"I didn't know. I'm sorry," Twilight said. It was barely a whisper.

Luna was frozen, mouth half open for a second. "Ah... I, that is quite alright."

The silence was uncomfortable, and Twilight rubbed her forehooves together as if noticing the chill in the air for the first time. She gave Luna a little smile as she got up. "I should probably leave you to it," she said, still not really quite sure what the elusive 'it' was. Luna nodded as if she didn't really know either, and let her go.

As Twilight trotted off, she heard Luna's voice behind her, though she didn't know if she was *meant* to have heard it.

"Thank you."

[Chapter 4](#)