

# Half the Day is Night

by AugieDog

## Chapter 14

Shuffling a deck of cards always took most of Pinkie's concentration, but it was still one of her favorite things to do. She'd loved it, in fact, ever since her Uncle Abernathy had taught her how to do it after her cutie mark had appeared and the family farm had started getting more famous for its parties than for its rocks.

Of course, Pinkie had known even as a twinkie Pinkie that none of the ponies who'd come to live at the farm after her parents had started smiling and helping out with the parties were really related to her, but she'd loved them all so much, not a one had ever objected when she started calling them aunt and uncle and gramma and grampa and cousin.

She could still see Uncle Abernathy with his gap-toothed grin and his plaid vest flinging cards around with hoofs and teeth in ways she was sure even Twilight couldn't match. And all the time he'd spent with her at that big table in the barn where he and the other uncles would play cards all night,

whooping and laughing and drinking her dad's root beer! Pinkie had practiced and practiced and practiced like nothing else she'd ever worked on before, and after a few months, she could shuffle cards and deal them out as easily as any of her unicorn uncles could.

Which was lucky since she needed something to keep her busy, sitting in Princess Luna's library with the others. The castle she'd built with books yesterday had been taken apart and put away, and as much as she wanted to get them back down and rebuild, the sheer weight of all the frowniness around her made the air seem almost too heavy to move. So she dug through her pack till she found her cards, stretched out on the carpet, and shuffled while her friends tossed around words, words, and more words.

"I'll get him to talk!" Dashie was shouting, hovering so angrily, Pinkie was surprised she didn't have a little storm cloud floating between her ears. "Some iron shoes and five minutes, and Rigel'll tell you anything you want!"

Applejack blew out a slow breath. "I'm starting to think we might hafta."

"No." Princess Luna was getting more beautiful with each passing minute, Pinkie thought, and not scary-pretty like when

she was Nightmare Moon, either: royal-pretty like her sister. Even if she was just as serious-faced as ever... "The very reason we have laws, Minister, is for those rare occasions when a pony does wrong. And since those laws have saved my life twice, giving me banishment instead of death and allowing me the chance for return and redemption, I will see them followed in this case."

Dashie rolled her eyes. "Fine! But Des has been downstairs to talk with Rigel, AJ's been in there, Twilight's been in there, you've been in there, princess, and nothing!" She spun in mid-air and waved at Fluttershy, sitting with her legs tucked under her next to Rarity, both of them way grayer than they usually were. "Unless you can give him the Stare, Fluttershy--"

"Oh, no." Fluttershy's ears drooped. "It's too awful. And anyway, you know I can't control it, Rainbow." Her voice got even quieter, something that always amazed Pinkie: getting louder was easy-peasy, but the way Fluttershy could get softer? "Though I almost wish I could," Fluttershy went on in that whisper of her, "if that would let us find out who's behind all this terrible commotion."

A sigh from Twilight. "That's the problem. We know who's

behind it." She gave Applejack a distressed look. "I've been thinking about what you said after we left Mom and Dad's, AJ, and you're right. No pony would've thought twice about Lady Stargazer moving around the palaces, and she could easily have recruited Commander Rigel and those other members of the Night Guard. She's got to be the one."

"Well??" Dashie shot practically to the ceiling. "Let's go get her!"

"Ha!" Grouchiest of all, Spike sat clenched like a fist beside Twilight, his green ear ridges almost flat against his head: Pinkie was starting to think she maybe shouldn't've told him about the plans she'd started making for Rarity and Ory wedding when he'd asked her at lunch what was up.... "If there's one thing the Stargazers know, it's how to make friends, so we pull in Lady Stargazer, we better be ready to prove our case to ev'rypony in Canterlot!" He kept trying not to look at Rarity, but his squinty little eyes slid over to her all the time anyway. "Orrery, though, I'll bet if we arrested him, he could prob'bly tell us all about--!"

Rarity cleared her throat, her glare louder than any words she could have said.

"Well??" Spike waved his arms. "You wouldn't be the first

pony to fall to that guy's slick patter! He's a--!"

"Slick?" Twilight's mouth went sideways. "Spike, you used to say mud had more personality than Ory Stargazer."

Spike's eyes wavered, and Pinkie almost threw down her cards to rush over and hug him. But before she could, he was standing, bowing to the princess and saying, "If you'll excuse me, your Highness, there's some things I need to take care of in the city." He turned and began marching toward the door.

Concern on her face, Twilight called, "Spike? You'll be back for the party, won't you? We'll need all of us there if we're going to--"

"Yeah, yeah." He pushed out through the door into the hallway, and when it clicked closed behind him, Pinkie almost felt her mane straighten out, Spike was so sad. A couple dozen donuts, though, she knew, and he'd be back, ready to show Rarity he was still the best friend she would ever have. Pinkie could already see him in his purple tuxedo and gigantic bow tie at the wedding, too, so that pretty much settled it as far as she was concerned.

Rarity gave a sigh that Pinkie figured was at least three-and-a-half times bigger than the one Twilight had blown out a minute ago. "This is going to devastate poor Ory, knowing

his own mother was behind the attack on us last night! I don't know how I'll ever be able to tell him!"

"Don't," Applejack said sharply. "Even supposing he ain't in on it--"

"He's not," Pinkie told her, cutting the cards and shuffling them again. "But you're right about not telling him, Applejack. I'm pretty sure Ory would be almost as bad a liar as you are."

That got half a smile out of Rarity, a real achievement, Pinkie thought, considering how drab everypony was being.

"Speaking of which," Pinkie said then, spreading the cards out on the floor and flipping the whole row of them from face-down to face-up with one flick of her hoof. "It's about time to stop all this moping around, don'tcha think?"

The gloomy silence in the library got even thicker, and Pinkie could almost smell how tired Applejack was when her friend closed her eyes and let out another big breath. "'Less we can get those varmints to tell us what they know 'bout Phillipa Stargazer, we ain't got much else we can do..."

"Well, why didn't you say so??" Pinkie squished her cards together into a big jumbled heap, stuffed them into her pack, and jumped to her hoofs. "Like my uncle Abernathy used to say,

'Some other pony shuffles the cards, you get a deck fulla deuces!'"

The others all stared at her; it was Twilight who finally asked, "Which means what, exactly?"

"Which means--" Pinkie skipped toward the door. "I'll go talk to 'em!"

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"You're sure about this, Minister?" Princess Luna's silver shoes tap-tap-tapped along the stone hallway leading down to the Day Palace Detention Center.

Pinkie had been doing her best once more to match the princess's stride, but even though Princess Luna wasn't as tall as her sister yet, she was still taller than last night, the last time Pinkie had tried to walk like her. It meant a lot more hopping than Applejack or Twilight seemed to approve of, but with all the sourness today, Pinkie wasn't really surprised by that.

She wasn't surprised either when, after telling the princess, "I'm sure about ev'rything, your Highness!" the doubt in Princess Luna's sideways glance came out as sharp as her footfalls. "I'll just start with the sister," Pinkie told the three of them, "and work my way around!"

"Sister?" Applejack pulled up short, and since she was walking in front, Pinkie couldn't stop from mooshing face first into AJ's tail; she'd been paying such close attention to Princess Luna's hoofs-- "Rigel ain't got no sister!" Applejack looked at Twilight. "Does he?"

Twilight's horn shimmered, and a scroll popped into the air in front of her, unrolling as she skimmed through it. "An only foal," she said.

Pinkie brushed her mane out of her eyes. "Not Rigel! Why would I wanna talk to Rigel?"

The scroll vanished, Twilight blinking. "But Pinkie, I thought you said--"

"I said I'd talk to 'em!" She made sure to pronounce the last word very carefully, but figured she'd better explain anyway. "That means 'them,' y'see, not 'him.'" She shook her head. "We wanna get Rigel talking, we've gotta start with the sister, then the brother, then the other sister. 'Cause that's the sister Rigel's in love with."

Twilight was still looking confused, but Applejack's eyes suddenly went wide. "Them earth ponies you an' Rainbow Dash brought in yesterday morning! Didn't hit me till just now how much they both looks like--!"



"Right-a-roony!" She tapped a hoof against the tip of Applejack's nose.

"Mirabelle," Princess Luna said, a trace of a smile touching her face for the first time in months, days, hours, even, Pinkie was sure. "One of the Night Guard ponies whom Minister Fluttershy identified as attacking them last night," she explained to Twilight's still-confused look.

"Huh." Twilight's scroll reappeared and did some more unrolling. "Mirabelle has--" She gave a little smile, too. "A brother named Lumberjack and a sister named Sharpen."

"Yep!" Though Pinkie hadn't known the names till just now, the minute she'd seen Mirabelle exercising this morning, she'd known she was related to the two who'd been dancing with Pinkie at Pancake's. And sure, maybe Dashie was right that they'd been trying to fight with her, but she was sure they'd be good dancers, too, if they put their minds to it...

Another sigh from Twilight. "I blame myself." The glow of her horn flickered out and took the scroll with it. "If I'd checked the backgrounds on those ponies as soon as you brought them in--"

Pinkie turned to tell Twilight it wasn't her fault, but Princess Luna was already saying it. "With just seven of us

trying to run half a world..." The princess shook her head. "But we have the information now, and we shall act upon it." Those deep dark eyes shone down over Pinkie. "We're in your hoofs, Minister Pie."

A little squeak bubbled up inside Pinkie, and she let it out, listened to it float toward the ceiling. "Just like we practiced it, then!"

Applejack blinked at her. "Practice?"

"Makes perfect!" Pinkie spun the rest of the way into the detention center and gave her biggest grin to the guard ponies standing there. "Hi, ev'rypony!" she said. "You'll never guess who I am!"

The pony with the most scrambled egg-looking stuff on her uniform, a gray unicorn with stripes like a prison window on her haunches, saluted. "Minister Pie. We were told to await your arrival as well as-- Ten hut!"

All the ponies, already standing so straight and tall they made Pinkie's knees ache, got even straighter and taller when Princess Luna stepped in with Twilight and Applejack. "At ease, Warden Hoosegow," the princess said.

"Yes, your Highness." She gave a whistle, and they all went back to just being regularly straight and tall again. "If

I might speak freely, however, ma'am, your message was..." The warden smelled just the slightest bit uncomfortable for a moment, and Pinkie found she liked her a lot better because of it. "Somewhat unspecific," the guard pony finished.

The princess nodded. "I think the phrase is 'playing it by ear,' warden."

Pinkie giggled. "But not really with your ears," she said, flapping hers. "Unless you've got great big ones and a pair of bongo drums!" She took several shuffling steps toward the corridor that opened at the back of the guardhouse. "Now, who's gonna unlock the door for me?"

A burly blue unicorn gave a smart little stomp and moved up next to her so smoothly, it was like the room and everything in it slid over while he stood still. "Oooo," Pinkie cooed, looking up at him. "Do that again!"

"Minister," Princess Luna said, and everything she didn't say came out almost too loud for Pinkie to hear.

So she pretended she hadn't not heard any of it, and skipping down the corridor, proclaimed, "This is gonna be the best surprise party ever!"

"Yes, ma'am," the burly unicorn said, and Pinkie skipped even higher, her ears almost feeling like pegasus wings. But

that meant she didn't notice when her escort stopped by one of the stone doors a short way down the hallway; he cleared his throat, though, and she hopped back to land beside him. "If you're ready, ma'am?" he asked.

"Always," Pinkie told him.

He grinned, his horn flaring, its glow flipping through keys till one floated forward, stabbed into the door's lock, and the door slid open without a sound. Pinkie stepped inside, and a young pale brown earth pony, the plain round gray circle of her cutie mark almost brand-new, looked up from the pile of hay in one corner of the cell, afternoon light steaming in through the small barred windows along the top of the wall.

"Hi," Pinkie said with what she hoped was the right amount of perkiness for interrogating a prisoner in a dungeon. "I'm Pinkie, and you're Sharpen, so this should be easy!" She shrugged off her pack.

Sharpen didn't say anything, but Pinkie could smell how scared she was, maybe more scared than she'd ever been in her life. Pinkie wanted to tell her everything was gonna be OK, but, well, that really depended on more things than Pinkie could juggle in her head right now. So instead, she said, "You and your brother are really good dancers! Do you practice that, or

is it just a natural thing?"

"How did you know--?" Sharpen's voice was a lot gentler than Pinkie had expected, and that made her get a little more hopeful. But then the other pony's voice got hard and asked, "How long have you been spying us?"

Pinkie shook her head, pulled some streamers from her pack, started tacking them to the rough stone walls. "I just got into town yesterday, a couple hours before we met at Pancake's place." She smacked her lips. "He sure does make good chocolate mush!"

"What are you doing?" She was confused, Pinkie could tell, but it wasn't making her mad: another hopeful sign!

"You wanna help?" Pinkie held a streamer out to her.

She didn't get up to take it, and the way her mouth went sideways told Pinkie she had just enough of a temper to make her interesting. Which was good since the few uninteresting ponies Pinkie had ever met weren't much fun at all. "Lemme guess," Sharpen said, her voice as dry as extra-fine flour. "It's my 'getting out of jail' party, right?"

Pinkie grinned and turned to press the streamer she was holding in place against the wall. "That's up to you."

Sharpen gave a little snort. "Oh, I get it. Turn on my

friends, and I can go home."

"Your friends?" Pinkie shook her head. "I'd never ask anypony to do that. All I'm asking is--"

A knock at the cell door, and Pinkie couldn't keep her mane from poofing up a little. "Oooo! Our guests are arriving!"

"Guests?" Sharpen asked, but by then the door was opening, Applejack standing there with the burly unicorn guard and--

"Lumberjack?" Sharpen darted forward to meet the other earth pony Pinkie had met yesterday, and happiness blossomed so brightly around the brother and sister, Pinkie almost had to squint. She didn't, though, not wanting to miss an instant of it.

"Sharpen!" The big colt pushed his head into her neck, and the two hugged as Applejack nodded to Pinkie and the door swung shut again.

"Surprise!" Pinkie didn't even try to keep the bubbles out of her voice.

"Who--?" Lumberjack looked up, his eyes narrowing as they focused on Pinkie. "You!" He stepped around Sharpen and started toward her. "You're the pony who--!"

"That's right!" A quick swoop to her bag, and Pinkie lunged forward, snapped the elastic band of a blue-and-white

striped party hat around his chin and straightened it between his ears. "I'm the pony who's throwing you this party!"

He staggered back, his jaw dropping, and Pinkie stuffed a paper noisemaker into his mouth, the swirly end of it puffing straight out with a squeak when he shouted, "Hey!"

Pinkie smacked a purple and gold hat over her own tangled mane and held a third hat out to Sharpen. "I saved you the pink one!"

Sharpen blinked at her, but Pinkie could hear the corners of her mouth cracking as she tried not to smile. "What are you doing?" she asked again.

"Giving you a hat." Pinkie realized then that Sharpen was older than Lumberjack but not as old as Mirabelle. And as the middle foal in the family, she would feel like she had to be the responsible one, would respond to-- "'Cause maybe we're all not friends yet, but we sure aren't enemies, either. At least, I'm hoping."

She wagged the hat, and after a moment, Sharpen stepped forward and took it, all the angles of her face saying 'prove it to me.' Pinkie giggled, grabbed the folding table she'd stuffed into her pack, and slid it out. "Can you please help me with this, Lumberjack?"

The big earth pony had managed to spit the noisemaker out and was staring at Pinkie like she was crazy, a look Pinkie was very familiar with. "Sis?" Lumberjack asked, his eyes darting in Sharpen's direction.

"It's OK, LJ," she said. "We're just getting a little song and dance here."

Pinkie clapped her hoofs together. "Dancing again! Yes!" She gave Lumberjack her biggest grin. "Your sister says you guys practice a lot, and I sure could tell!" She gestured to the table. "You take that end, I'll take the other, OK?"

Almost all his anger gone, he stumbled a little stepping forward, but he grabbed one of the table's handles--she'd known she didn't have to explain to him how it worked--and pulled when Pinkie pulled, the table snapping open quite nicely. "Sharpen?" Pinkie flipped the little leg locks. "If you're real careful, you should be able to pull a cake out of my bag there."

"Cake?" A little of that edge was back in her voice. "OK, there's no possible way you've got a--" The words cut off, and Pinkie looked over to see her staring down into the bag, her hoofs shaking as she reached in and pulled out the chocolate double-layer cake Pinkie had set in there earlier.

For a second, Pinkie shook, too, afraid that not even that



would do it, but then, oh, then, the most beautiful thing in the whole entire world happened and Sharpen smiled a real, honest, happy, amazed smile. "I'm not even gonna ask," she said, and she turned to set the cake gently on the table.

The knocking that should've come from the door at exactly that moment didn't come till a couple seconds later, but that was OK since it gave Lumberjack a chance to go all wide-eyed at the cake as well. And when the door opened to reveal Twilight and Mirabelle with the big guard unicorn, Pinkie decided those couple of seconds really added to the effect.

"Surprise!" she yelled again, getting things back on schedule, and the three earth ponies all rushed together, gasping out each other's names and hugging, the door closing with a click none of them even noticed.

She gave them as much privacy for their moment as she could, trotting over to her packs to rummage out a gold and silver hat for Mirabelle, and when she turned back, the Night Guard pony was staring at the cake and the decorations, her brother and sister standing behind her. "What--?" she asked, and that she was the older sister came through so clearly, Pinkie missed her own sisters for just a second. "What in Equestria is going on here?"

Pinkie held out the hat. "I hope you don't mind, but I really needed to throw a party for all of you."

"That--" Mirabelle shook her head. "That makes no sense."

"Sense?" Pinkie could see them at home, now, could read in the tired lines of every hair on their manes how much their lives had been like hers before Dashie's first Sonic Rainboom, before Pinkie had seen the truth, before her heart had popped open like a firecracker and spread all of life's banquet before her. "Parties don't need to make sense. In fact--" She raised her other front hoof and blew over it, the colored glitter she'd stepped in while getting out the hat scattering green and blue into the air between them. "The best ones make the least sense of all."

Mirabelle stared, her every muscle still clenched. Pinkie slid a careful half-step toward her, the hat extended. "You haven't had a lot to celebrate lately, I know, but you saw the guard barracks coming back to life this morning, you heard Princess Luna say she was gonna make things right, and you can feel the change happening." Another half-step. "It's a good change, so you're not used to it, but--"

Pinkie stopped, took a breath, wanted to jump up and down, squealing these next words at the top of her lungs, but she knew

that would be the worst thing in the world she could do. So she thought about Fluttershy, about how her friend made herself quieter when she wanted to make a point. "But it's real, Mirabelle," she said as quietly as she could. "The realest thing anywhere ever." She wiggled the hat. "We're asking you please to be a part of it, please to look at what we're doing, please to think about what we're doing, and--"

This next knock came exactly on time, the three siblings turning as one to stare at Rigel stomping in, Princess Luna framed by the arch of the doorway behind him. "Miri!" he cried, his wings shooting out, and leaping into Mirabelle's waiting embrace, the pegasus whirled her around a couple times before the two dropped back to the floor of the cell.

Pinkie found her heart blocking her throat so much, she could barely whisper, "Surprise," but the relief and joy in the tangled voices of the four ponies in front of her would've drowned the word out even if she'd yelled it, she figured. She nodded at Princess Luna, still in the doorway, and found the blue and yellow party hat in her pack while the commotion settled behind her.

"I know," she said turning to meet Rigel's half-angry, half-confused gaze. "It's not what you expected. But that's

really kinda what this is all about." She held out both hats. "'Cause we're not what you expected: me and my friends, sure, but mostly Princess Luna. She's not a tyrant and she not a monster and all we want is a chance to show you, a chance to prove it to you." She couldn't keep from bouncing a little. "And I really, really, really wanna dance with you guys! So please say 'yes'!"

The smile that pulled at Mirabelle's mouth made Pinkie's heart soar, and when Rigel nodded, turned to Princess Luna, and bowed, Pinkie almost did a back flip. "Your Highness," he said. "After everything I've seen so far today, I'm starting to think Lady Stargazer was wrong about you."

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Feeling like she'd swallowed a pine cone, Twilight marched beside Princess Luna, the rest of her friends following, her namesake time of day darkening the late-autumn evening above. A lot more ponies filled the courtyard than the night before, but this time instead of the Night Palace lying cold and dark ahead of them, Pinkie's torches lined the archway and the corridor beyond, a really dramatic effect, Twilight had to admit.

Of course, it would've been even more dramatic if Commander Rigel had been able to carry out the plan Phillipa Stargazer had

set up, the plan he'd told them about while leading Applejack and some of the Night Guard troops to a cache of flash powder globes that he was supposed to be bursting right now to disrupt the procession. And as much as Twilight wanted to trust that Rigel had indeed had a change of heart, she couldn't help darting some glances around the crowd in case he hadn't been privy to all Lady Stargazer's secrets.

But everypony bowed quietly--they never cheered dusk the way they did dawn, she remembered, even back when Princess Celestia was running the whole show. Most of the crowd, she was pleased to note, had red ribbons twined in their manes or tied around their horns, and a surprising number wore evening clothes, too.

Or maybe not surprising: Spike had reported upon his return just before sundown that he'd heard talk about Princess Luna's salon all over Canterlot. "It's like a different rumor on ev'ry block!" he'd said. "We're gonna have a full house of ponies tonight just wanting to see what happens next!"

At least the Night Guard was out in force, and she had to admit they looked terrific standing at attention along the wall of the Night Palace in their black-and-silver uniforms. So if anything did happen...

Step by step across the courtyard, the music from the Day Palace fading behind them, and Captain Custard gave a whistle, all the ponies stomping a salute, the red plumes on the helmets snapping in unison. Princess Luna inclined her head and entered the arch, Twilight moving after her and allowing herself a puff of relief as they proceeded down the corridor with nothing popping or cracking or falling from the ceiling.

She heard Applejack snicker. "Couldn'ta said it better myself, sugar cube."

A swoosh of feathers. "Didja see 'em??" Dash was trying not to shout, Twilight could tell. "Rarity, those uniforms were 150% cool! A hundred and eighty, maybe!"

"Indeed," came Rarity's voice. "But the pride with which your troops wore them: that's what makes the look a success."

Another rustle of feathers. "So many ponies," Fluttershy whispered, the excitement in her voice something Twilight rarely heard there. "And they all looked so nice in their suits and gowns and scarfs and hats! Oh, tonight's going to be all calm and friendly and fine! I just know it!"

"A-hem," Pinkie said--she didn't clear her throat; she actually said the word. "It's going to be a little bit wild, Fluttershy. I mean, it's a party, right?"

Princess Luna turned a smile over her shoulder that looked so much like one of Princess Celestia's, most of the prickliness in Twilight's stomach just plain dissolved. "Not too wild, I hope, Minister?" the princess asked.

Pinkie's sigh ruffled Twilight's tail. "Since it's our first party, fine. But by the end of the week, you better believe I'm gonna be leading a conga line at least a hundred ponies long around this place!"

"Understood." The princess nodded as they reached the door to the throne room, two more of the Night Guard soldiers waiting there. They saluted, and when Twilight followed Princess Luna in, Spike waiting at the foot of the carpeted ramp that led up to the throne, the rest of Twilight's unease disappeared. Whatever happened, they were all together.

She looked at Applejack, her neckpiece shining red and gold in the torchlight, and nodded. Applejack smiled and swung her head around to take in all the others. "Ev'rypony got the plan?" she asked

"Party!" Pinkie shouted.

Rainbow Dash shook the jagged edge of her mane back and forth. "Gotta go with Pinkie on this one."

Applejack gave a little snort. "Just keep your eyes and

ears open. Reckon we're gonna get this thing wound up tonight or not at all." She turned to Spike. "How's ev'rything shaping up 'round here?"

Spike closed his eyes, raised his snout into the air, and clapped his hands twice. Lights immediately sprang on at the far end of the throne room to illuminate rows of tables, and unicorns in black and white waiters' outfits began filing in through a doorway, plates and pots and platters suspended in the glow of their horns.

"Ooooo." Pinkie leaned forward, something like a glow coming over her. "It smells like a bakery! Only better!"

"All righty, then." Applejack tapped her front hoofs on the marble floor. "Showtime, folks!" She ran to the big doors, spun, and lashed out with her hind legs, the crash ringing through the whole palace as the doors swung open completely to reveal the torch-lined corridor, the two guards catching the swinging panels in the glow of their horns and easing them into place. "Pinkie! We're up!"

Pinkie danced over to Applejack's side, and the two earth ponies headed down the hallway toward the arch out into the courtyard. Spike, quick claws fastening his red bow tie into place, took his position in the doorway; since he knew everypony



in Canterlot, Twilight figured the best place for him would be at the door so he could announce the guests as they arrived. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy took off so they could keep the whole throne room under surveillance, and Twilight, taking her stance on Princess Luna's right, nodded to Rarity, doing a bit of last-minute primping to her mane on the princess's left.

Looking up, she caught Princess Luna's eye and gave her a smile. "Nervous?" she asked.

"Only completely," the princess answered.

Then Twilight heard hooffalls in the corridor and turned to meet their guests--and was surprised at how smoothly it all went; she could even forgive Spike for mangling Ory's name when the stallion arrived with the Borealis family, a group she vaguely remembered as Night Ministry workers from her years in Canterlot. Rarity, who had been as charming and vivacious as Twilight had ever seen her since they'd begun greeting the guests, somehow got even more so, and Twilight shook her head. Ory had filled out a little maybe since she'd last seen him some two years ago, but he still looked like the same Ory Stargazer she'd had such an uneasy relationship with since they'd both been foals--

Until he came up, bowed to her, to the princess, to Rarity,

and introduced the Borealis daughters, their eyes shining, their red ribbons carefully placed within their perfectly styled manes. He then slid up beside Rarity, and the two of them fell into a light and witty banter that almost made Twilight's chin drop.

What was it Applejack had said the other day? That Rarity could charm rocks out of a field? 'Cause she'd certainly done something to Ory...

More guests, then, Spike calling out their names, Princess Luna telling them how glad she was they could come, Twilight nodding to those she knew--former classmates, mostly, some of them with husbands, wives and foals in tow--while Rarity and Ory seemed to know the rest. The throne room began filling up, a small combo in the back swinging into some sort of music so light it was almost invisible, and Twilight found herself having flashbacks to the Grand Galloping Gala.

Not that Pinkie was letting that happen, popping around the room to clap a pony on the shoulder, drop some enigmatic phrase into the conversation, and whirl away in a cloud of streamers. Twilight saw Dash shoot overhead more than once, Captain Destrier and several other pegasi, obviously military even in civilian clothes, often with her, and Twilight's good feelings

kept growing, Fluttershy's words about everything being calm and friendly and find coming back to her--

Till Spike announced, "Nocurne and Tercey Sparkle, and Phillipa Stargazer."

And Twilight's whole stomach tightened.

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"Twilight!" Phillipa Stargazer still looked exactly the same as she always had, and Twilight scolded herself for expecting otherwise. Just because she was responsible for all the bad things that had happened the past couple of days...

"Phillipa." Twilight forced a smile, looked away, and focused on her parents. "Princess Luna? Have you met my father and mother?"

Princess Luna dipped her head as they bowed. "I've not had the pleasure, though I've of course heard so many wonderful things about the both of you." Her voice softened. "Your daughter is the reason I'm able to be here tonight, and her friendship has meant more to me than I can ever express."

The sentiment made Twilight swallow against a tightness in her throat, as did her father's gentle reply: "We Sparkles have been privileged to serve Equestria's royal household for generations, your Highness. And seeing our daughter here at

your side is the proudest moment of our lives."

A gust of breath from Phillipa Stargazer that almost sounded like a snort to Twilight's ears. "Yes," she said. "Though of course in my case it's my son who's standing here and, well, perhaps 'proud' isn't the word I'd use."

"Yeah." Applejack had come up quietly behind the three elderly unicorns, the Night Guard troops moving in to take positions along the walls of the throne room. "I don't reckon so. 'Specially since you been trying your ding-dangedest to sabotage ev'rything all week."

Phillipa's ears twitched, as sarcastic a smile as Twilight had ever seen spreading over her snout. "Why, Minister Applejack, I don't know what you--"

"'Sall right." Applejack moved around to stand beside Ory, the stallion's brow creasing with confusion. "Once Commander Rigel showed us them flash bombs, we set a couple guards waiting, and they grabbed the varmints you'd sent to cause trouble tonight." She shrugged. "So I reckon most ev'rypony'll be able to enjoy the party just fine."

When Lady Stargazer's ears twitched this time, they stayed down, her smile edging over into something much closer to a frown. "Mother?" Ory asked then, and Twilight saw Rarity inch

closer, press her shoulder against his.

The party went on around them for a few seconds, then Applejack blew out a breath. "Y'wanna do it this way, Phillipa? Y'want me to in'nerduce Ory here to Mirabelle? 'Cause we got her and her shoes, and I'm betting a little unicorn medical magic'll show the blood on them came from the gash on Ory's--"

"Stop," Phillipa said, her eyes clenching shut.

"Blood??" Ory stared, one front hoof going to the cut on his cheek. "Mother?? What is she talking about??"

"Stop!" Lady Stargazer didn't quite shout it, but it was still loud enough to make Twilight and her parents flinch.

Applejack turned to Ory. "Mirabelle's the sister of Lumberjack and Sharpen, two more ponies your mother knows. They was nice enough to tell us where they hid the saw they borrowed so them and their pegasus friends could cut the--"

"Thank you, Minister." Princess Luna lowered her muzzle to Phillipa's ear. "Lady Stargazer, I'll ask you please to surrender yourself into custody. Your actions against the ponies of Canterlot--"

"What??" Lady Stargazer's head snapped up, anger in her eyes. "You were the one destroying the foundation and balance of this city! I acted in defense of Canterlot when you refused

to listen to reason and Princess Celestia refused to overrule you!"

Princess Luna gazed steadily down into Phillipa's glare. "That I was at fault in what I did I have admitted and will continue to admit. But what you did, madame--"

"Mother!" Ory's mane was nearly standing on end. "You-- You tried to kill us last night!"

Pain flooded over the anger in Lady Stargazer's face. "I knew you'd be all right, Ory! I knew you'd find a way to save yourself and--"

"But I didn't!" His eyes narrowed, his lips pulling back from his teeth. "If not for Rarity and Fluttershy, I'd be spread all over the valley right now! How could you--??"

"Stop!" This time, she did shout it, nearby groups of ponies turning wide eyes to stare. "I did it for you, Ory, for your future!" The words seemed to tear out of her. "It wasn't like I had any other choice, and--!"

"No." Princess Luna spoke softly, but Twilight knew everypony in the room could hear her. "There is always a choice, Lady Stargazer, always a point at which decisions are made and actions taken. And when those decisions we make are wrong, we must own up to them, correct them, and strive to do

better. Therefore, for the decisions you have made and the actions you have taken--"

"No!" Phillipa reared back, a light exploding so brightly from her horn, Twilight felt the force of it against her like a driving wind. Eyes clenched, she sparked her own horn, threw a defensive bubble around her with as large a radius as she could, heard cries and gasps, the rustle of other unicorn magic pushing back into whatever spell Phillipa had blasted out.

Until the light cut off, the pressure dropping so suddenly, Twilight almost fell forward. Opening her eyes brought nothing but darkness, frightened and confused voices starting to crackle through it. But a spark of light to her left glowing from a unicorn's horn, spreading to show her Ory's face, Rarity and Applejack beside him, Princess Luna staring upward, the bubble of light growing to show more faces, more ponies looking around, till it fetched up against a complete and utter darkness covering the ceiling, walls, and floor of the throne room: a shield spell so thick and complex, Twilight wanted to get out her pen and start taking notes.

"She's gone!" Her mother's cry brought Twilight's attention back down, her parents blinking at the spot where Phillipa Stargazer had been standing a moment before.

Panic began building in the room like static before a thunderstorm, but Princess Luna raised her voice. "It's all right," she said. "It's merely a shield spell. Twilight Sparkle and I will begin unraveling it at once. I'll ask the Night Guard to stand ready to pursue the fugitive and--"

"Twilight!" Rainbow Dash's voice from above, and she swooped down, slid along the darkened marble floor. "It's Fluttershy! She was feeling a little boxed in, so I told her to go out into the garden for a while!" She waved a hoof at the doorway, completely covered with the solid shell of the spell. "She's still out there!"

Swallowing, Twilight clenched her eyes again and started tracing the structure of the magical wall surrounding them.

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As dark as it was in the garden, Fluttershy found she wasn't scared since, after all, it was supposed to be dark on the night of the new moon. Besides, it was so lovely here this time of the year, the animals and plants all tucked away already for their winter naps, and after the party inside--

Not that it was a bad party: Fluttershy had been having a wonderful time with the Borealis girls, the fillies so proud to introduce her to their classmates. But a little party went a



long way, she'd learned when she was still in school, and Rainbow's idea to take a restful walk through the garden before heading back in was--

The sound that struck her from behind then wasn't really a sound at all, she realized at once. It was more the complete and sudden lack of sound, the little rumble of the party that had followed her even out here just plain gone. Turning, she saw the whole Palace wrapped in darkness like the skin around old pudding, a layer of something that made the night sky seem bright.

Unable to move, she stared at it, and something flashed beside the garden gate, a figure appearing, its head bowed, the anguish in its voice simply heartbreaking as it muttered, "No, no, no, no, no!"

The figure took a few staggered steps, and Fluttershy couldn't help fluttering forward, had to call out, "Hello? What happened?? Are you OK? Do you need any--?"

A light from the figure's forehead showed Fluttershy it was an elderly lady unicorn, and when she turned, tears streaming down her face, her eyes wide and as wild as any injured animal Fluttershy had ever found in the forest, Fluttershy recognized her: she hadn't actually met Lady Stargazer, but from Applejack

and Twilight's description--

"No," Lady Stargazer said, her voice like broken glass. "I won't! Won't allow you to...to destroy everything I've tried to build here!"

Fluttershy's heart buzzed like a hummingbird's wings.

"What...what did you--?" A horrible and familiar pressure began building in her chest. "My friends are in there!" She waved a shaking hoof at the black and silent palace. "What did you do??"

"They're fine!" The lady fell forward onto her knees.

"I'm not a monster! I'm not!"

The energy expanding inside her poofed away to nothing, and Fluttershy stepped forward, settled down beside the sobbing unicorn. "Of course you're not," she said the way she would to a hawk or a snake. "You were just doing what you thought was right."

"My whole life!" Lady Stargazer buried her face in her hoofs. "My family's whole life! For a thousand years, we ran half the world, and she...she thanked us! Like we'd brought her a sandwich or a dish of ice cream! And then? For the princess to leave her in charge of everything? It...it...it had to stop! I had to stop it!"

Fluttershy kept her voice quiet. "By dropping metal beams on ponies? By threatening them in the street at night? By making them fall into a river and--?"

"No!" Lady Stargazer's sobs grew even louder, her whole body shaking when Fluttershy stroked a hoof along her back.

"What have I done?? What have I--??"

The palace exploded in light and sound, shards of the dark layer scattering into the night, and with another flash, all Fluttershy's friends popped into the garden beside her, Princess Luna towering above the others. "Fluttershy!" Twilight shouted.

"Are you--??"

"Shhh!" Fluttershy gave them all a stern look. "Lady Stargazer feels bad enough about what she did without all this noise!"

Twilight's eyes went wide, and Pinkie hopped forward.

"Wow, Fluttershy! Did you give her the Stare??"

"No." Fluttershy couldn't help smiling. "It's like my uncle Sharpeye always said: 'Never play an ace when a deuce'll do.'"