

CRISIS: Equestria

Chapter Thirty-two: Intersect

A dark corridor stretched before Twilight Sparkle, broken up by the faint glow of torches along the sides. Tall pillars of black marble rose high above her head, their tops swallowed up by darkness. A dark red rug covered the floor, muffling the sound of her hooves as she cantered across it. She could not see the end of the hall in front or behind; it appeared endless.

“Hello?” she called out into the black void. “Anypony?” Only her echo answered her.

As she moved along, she noticed a pair of torches up ahead glowing brighter than the others, and a third light source casted its glare out into the hall. She came to the pair of pillars upon which the torches rested, and there in between them instead of a wall was a large window.

The window was made of stained glass. Its background consisted of a great blue sky above a fertile earth, with trees of varying sizes bearing shiny fruits. Each color chosen for the artwork depicted was vivid and real, crafted into the glass with such precision that the scene seemed to pop out of the window and into the hallway. In the center of the piece was an orange earth pony mare bearing apples on her flank. She stood out with greater detail than anything else in the piece, so much that she almost looked-

“Real...” Twilight whispered to herself. She sighed and put her hoof against the picture, looking into the glass mare’s eyes. “Oh... Applejack. I wish you were here.”

Her gaze shifted downward, drawn there by a faint golden sheen that reflected the torches’ light. A plaque. She leaned in to read it:

The Greatest Failure of Twilight Sparkle.

“My greatest failure...” She frowned and looked at the picture, not bothering to hold in her tears. “I’m so sorry, Applejack. I... I promised I’d keep us all safe, and you believed in me. You believed in me!” She slumped back to the floor behind her. “I really *am* a failure...”

The glass mare’s mouth moved, and Applejack’s voice called through Twilight’s mind. “*Twilight...*”

“I’m sorry, Applejack. I... I don’t know what to do... what I should have done...”

Twilight heard a loud snap, drawing her attention to the bottom of the window. A broad crack had appeared, and she watched as it snaked its way up through the artwork. Twilight stepped back for a moment, confused as to what had caused the crack, when her eyes drifted up to look at the image of Applejack. Those same eyes, which before had been bright and

cheery, were now filled with fear.

"Twilight! Help! I don't wanna die!"

Twilight panicked, and flared her horn in a frantic attempt to repair the glass. A purple glow filled in the cracks, and the sheets of glass began to press together like the pieces of an enormous jigsaw puzzle. But then, the glow faltered, the glass separated again, and the cracks widened. Every effort she put in caused more and more glass to chip away, until she felt as though her attempt to fix the glass was making the problem worse. She persisted until her horn was shining with a purple light that was bright enough to illuminate nearly the entire hallway.

"No... no! Not again!" Twilight cried. "I won't fail you again!"

The glass shattered around the unmoving glass mare until the cracks began to creep onto her as well. Applejack's image writhed in pain as cracks tore across her legs and body.

"It's too much!" Twilight shouted, sweat rolling down her face.

"You always were an inferior mage, Sparkle," came the voice of Starlight Shadow in the back of Twilight's mind. *"I could sense your feeble magic from the moment we were introduced. That is why you could not shield your friends then, and why you cannot do so now. You are weak, Sparkle. Nothing more than a pathetic excuse for a mage."*

"No... I can do this! I can save her!"

"Submit to your failure, Sparkle. You cannot reverse the flow of time."

"I won't give in! I can't!"

"Your friend has perished, Sparkle. You failed her."

"She's not dead! She... she can't be!" Twilight grit her teeth and increased the flow of magic in her horn. Still, her spell was having no effect. She stepped forward, pressing her hooves against the glass, to Applejack's own hooves. "Even if I am a failure... I refuse to believe she's gone! I have faith in her!"

A bright flash burst forth from the window. Twilight staggered back and shielded her eyes, then watched as the glass began to repair itself. She knew she'd already ceased her own casting, so if this was not her magic, then whose was it? The brighter the light got, the more glass was repaired. The light radiated with a familiar warmth that put Twilight at ease, as if telling her that everything was going to be okay.

"How is this happening?" she asked. "This light... Princess Celestia? No... not the

Princess. Similar, but not quite her.”

Twilight glanced up at Applejack’s face. The mare bore a cocksure smile. Twilight noticed that AJ was looking less and less like glass the longer she watched. She pressed her hoof against the window, and Applejack lifted her own hoof to press right back.

“*Y’all just continue ta have faith in me, y’hear?*” Applejack said. “*I’m comin’ back ta all o’ ya, an’ that’s the honest truth.*”

Twilight pried open her eyes and brought a hoof up to rub the sleep out. Her dreams had been getting more vivid with each passing day, but this one felt as real as the pillow under her head. She’d dreamt about Applejack constantly since the crash, and her dreams had been filled with doubt and despair. She knew they were just dreams, but this one felt more like a vision. The change perplexed her, but it certainly made her feel better.

She yawned and stretched her legs before rolling off the surprisingly-comfortable sofa and landing on the cool marble floor. With a quick glance around the room, she could see that everypony else was still asleep. This didn’t come as a surprise, really; with Applejack gone- no, that was the wrong way to put it. With Applejack *not present*, Twilight and Tick Tock had always been the first ones awake.

Tick Tock herself was still asleep on the next sofa over, splayed across the cushions with half her limbs hanging over the side. Rainbow and Pinkie slept on a larger sofa on the opposite side of the room, wrapped up in one another; how anypony could sleep through Rainbow’s snores was still a mystery. Rarity slept on a chair nearby, curled up with the fluffiest pillow she’d been able to find. Fluttershy slept alone in a corner away from everypony else, using Ophanim, taking the form of a tiger, as both a pillow and a blanket. Lockwood and Blackburn also slept together, though they did so on the floor at Lockwood’s insistence, as it gave his crippled wing more room to spread out.

Twilight quietly trotted over to the nearest window and peeked out without drawing the curtains. The sun was shining, casting a bright golden glow on Utopia’s tall marble buildings. Twilight was surprised at how much this city resembled an older Canterlot, based on images from her history books. It certainly lacked the sleek aesthetic of modern Canterlot, but the smooth marble fashioned into geometrically-precise columns, walls, and roofs carried a pleasant quaintness. She assumed that the city had maintained this same architecture for centuries, an impressive feat if there ever was one.

She’d been more surprised when they had entered the central Harmony Guard district the night before. The architecture was similar, though, unlike the other parts of the city they’d traveled through, all the structures were kept in perfect order. The white marble and gold and

silver accents gleamed like crystal in the moonlit sky then, and the bright, sunny sky now. If the majority of Utopia appeared to be like Classical Age Canterlot, the Harmony Guard sector resembled the Crystal Empire. The Temple of Harmonia itself was the most impressive, a sprawling superstructure that dwarfed every other building in the city and could be seen even from the outskirts. Of course, she couldn't see it now, since she was inside it, but the waiting room window was high up enough that she could see out into the rest of the city fairly easily.

Twilight pulled away from the window with a sigh. As similar as this city was to home, it still wasn't home. It was time to do her duty as group leader to make sure they got home safely and quickly; she'd already failed too many times in that regard, and she wasn't about to stand around and let that trend continue. Twilight grabbed her pointed hat off the table, then left the waiting room through the hallway door, intending to make her way for the entrance to the inner sanctum. She hadn't had the chance to explore the temple last night; now seemed the perfect opportunity to do so. A little wanderlust might do her some good.

As she strolled aimlessly through the hallways, the temple reminded her of how the Ancient Castle in the Everfree Forest would have looked like when it was still in use. The white marble walls were shiny and clean, as if they'd just been built. Lavish rugs colored in purples and blues decorated the gold tile floors, and detailed banners and tapestries decorated the walls and balconies. Few ponies walked the halls; they were all polite, bowing to Twilight as though she were a visiting foreign dignitary and addressing her with the unnecessarily formal title of "Lady Sparkle". Their outfits reminded her of the royal guards back at home, only with silver instead of gold and much more elegant.

Some of the fancier tapestries depicted events from Utopia's history, a few of which Twilight recognized from the Gryphon Ruins. She stopped to examine a series of them along one of the longer halls, starting with one that she recognized. The artwork had an oddly familiar layout, and after a moment, she realized what it was: the civil war that convinced the gryphons to leave the continent. As depicted here, the war seemed less brutally violent, and the gryphons themselves weren't depicted at all. That made sense, since they'd made it clear in their own depiction of the war that they hadn't gotten involved. The rebuilding effort of Utopia and the subsequent establishment of a continent-wide union of ponies were also depicted in greater detail in the following tapestries. Apart from the departure of one group, it seemed as though the end of this war had united the entire southern continent's pony population.

One figure was particularly prominent in every single piece of art: a great white light in the familiar shape of a pony with both wings and a horn, but otherwise without any distinguishing physical qualities. The light, despite being sewn into a tapestry of cloth and wool, seemed almost alive in the artwork, an aspect that impressed Twilight as enchanting cloth and silk was much more complicated than enchanting stone. If this tapestry was anything like the gryphon murals, the light likely represented Harmonia. Another figure took up secondary prominence in each piece, which based on how Twilight had heard the position treated, must have been Harmonia's Warden. Earlier events each had a different Warden depicted in great

detail, but around the time of the civil war, a familiar figure appeared, and it was he who appeared in every following piece along this hallway:

Silvertongue, the Warden that Gilderoy had revealed as a traitor.

Apparently, the ponies here were completely unaware of the events up north following the construction of the Beacons. As Twilight continued her aimless trek through the temple to the main hall, she noticed Silvertongue's image quite liberally placed in just about every corner of the building, as though a figure of incredible importance second only to Harmonia herself. A large statue of him took up a great portion of the main hall, and was the most glamorous piece in the collection of statues of Wardens. A plaque beneath his statue read *Sir Silvertongue, The Uniter, Bringer of The New Dawn*. He even had two titles, while the others only had one each: *Sir Brightest Star, The First Warden; Lady Golden Shield, The Peacekeeper, Lady Morning Dew, The Ambassador*. The list went on and on, and each of them had many great feats listed beneath their names, but it was abundantly clear that Sir Silvertongue—or *Lord Silvertongue*, as Gilderoy had called him—was treated as the greatest amongst them.

Twilight made it a point that she'd ensure the current Warden, and Harmonia by proxy, knew what had happened to him.

Having arrived in the main hall, she noticed an abundance of knights, and knew that meant she was close to something important. She did not take long finding the entrance to the inner sanctum, and trotted up the walkway lined on either side with more members of the Harmony Guard. As before, they all bowed low as she trotted past, including the two guards stationed just in front of the door. She still felt a little uncomfortable with the semi-royal treatment.

"Bonjour, Lady Sparkle," greeted the stallion on the left, a light brown pegasus with a dark black mane. "Il fait très beau aujourd'hui, n'est-ce pas?"

Twilight blinked, then cleared her throat. "Er... sorry, I really don't speak much Romantique. Um... let's see. Good morning to you, too? That's what you said, right?"

The pegasus laughed and nodded. "C'est magnifique, you did vell enough. Une bonne dame such as yourself should not trouble—"

The mare to his side, a dark blue earth pony with a whitish-silver mane, elbowed him in the midsection.

"Ouille!" the pegasus exclaimed. "Vhat vas zat for?"

"Espèce d'idiot! C'est déplacé!" the earth pony hissed. "Soit respectueux envers l'invitée du Varden!"

“It’s quite alright,” Twilight said, hoping to avoid causing a scene. She didn’t know exactly what the mare had said, but it was clear from her tone that the pegasus had breached some sort of protocol. “Um... I was just dropping by to see if we could be let in to see the Warden yet? We’ve been here all night, see, and we’re in a bit of a hurry.”

The earth pony shook her head. “Ah, non, c’est impossible pour l’instant.”

“At zee moment,” added the pegasus. “Forgive mon associée, she does not speak Equine well.”

“A pony that... doesn’t speak Equine. Huh.” Twilight frowned. “Well, could you tell me why we can’t see the Warden *now*? That’s what the guards said last night too.”

“Je suis désolé, but ve ‘ave our orders. Ve vill let you know first zing when it is time.”

“Well, thank you anyway.”

Twilight bowed and headed back the way she came, as confused as ever as to why they weren’t being allowed admittance yet. It wasn’t entirely a bad thing; it did give her and her friends a chance to rest after two *more* straight days of walking. She was getting tired of the constant treks across great expanses of terrain, even if at least this time they had a road to follow. Still, with only a few days left on Tick Tock’s three-week timeline, every minute wasted seemed unnecessary. She wanted to be back at home, where she could curl up with a good book and get some much-needed rest.

When she arrived back at their assigned waiting room, she found that her friends were all still asleep, save one: Tick Tock, who was seated at the table in the center of the room drinking a cup of tea. Twilight hadn’t a clue as to where she’d gotten the tea, but chalked it up to her asking a passing knight; the knights had been friendly and polite, and provided them with anything they’d needed or asked for. Twilight herself wasn’t keen on taking advantage of the service, as she never did when she was a guest in the Royal Palace, though she did admit she appreciated the hospitality.

“Oh, good morning, Tick Tock,” she whispered as she trotted in, taking a seat opposite the other unicorn and pouring a cup of tea for herself. She took a whiff and breathed a contented sigh. It was a pleasant blend, strongly reminiscent of one of her favorites back home.

Tick Tock took a sip of her own tea, then nodded. “Same to you, Twilight. I assume you went to check on our wait time?”

Twilight sighed. “I did. They gave me the same story as before: ‘we’re not ready yet’. Don’t they understand the kind of hurry we’re in? I thought we told them it was urgent.”

“You have to understand, Twilight, the Harmony Guard take rules and regulations *very* seriously. It’s kind of the point of representing Order... or Light, or whatever,” Tick Tock said as she leaned back in her chair. “If Harmonia’s Warden says you have to wait, then you have to wait. They always have good reason for their actions, Twilight, I assure you.”

“I sure hope so...” Twilight sighed. “How do you know so much about them, anyway? I didn’t think you’d ever been to Utopia.”

Tick Tock shook her head. “I haven’t, but Master Zenith made a few trips here in his youth. He never met with the Warden at the time, though, so I can’t really use that as leverage. I doubt it’s the same Warden anyway, if all those statues in the main hall are any indication.”

Twilight glanced around the room at the rest of her sleeping friends, then returned her gaze to Tick Tock. “What time is it? Did we really wake up this early?”

“It’s just after six o’clock. No pony else is likely to wake for another few hours, except maybe Her Highness,” Tick Tock said, tilting her head towards Blackburn.

“Well then, would you like to head outside and work some more on your teleportation magic? We should have plenty of time and room to make some excellent progress.”

Tick Tock smiled and took another sip of tea. “Yes, that sounds lovely.”

Were one wanting of a quiet, soothing place to relax or study, the courtyard garden of the Temple of Harmonia was amongst the best places in Utopia to do so. Marble fountains decorated the main plaza, and the entire enclosure was surrounded with tall, neatly-trimmed trees of several varieties: oaks, larches, pines, etc. Many small birds made their homes in these trees and flew around the courtyard, giving the place the appearance of natural serenity. Wooden benches were strategically placed to acquire varying amounts of shade and proximity to the fountains, providing a relaxing atmosphere for almost any personality.

One large section of the yard, however, was completely clear of ornaments or decorations. The clear field was perfectly square, each side half of a mile long, and was divided into four neat subsections with lines of chalk depicting various shapes to be used for sports and other physical activities. Here, in the crisp, cool morning air, a gathering of Harmony Guard knights were performing the first parts of their morning exercise routines. None of them wore their usual armor, but instead wore training outfits composed of plain-looking beige cloth. Some ran laps around the clearing, some lifted weights, while others sparred with one another.

While it certainly wasn’t sparring, Tick Tock felt as though Twilight’s training may as well

have been for how much energy it forced her to exert. This was easily the most strain she felt she had ever put herself through over any extended length of time, including Master Zenith's training. Twilight would have fit right in with the old coot, Tick Tock thought.

Her horn flared again, and once more, for the dozenth time in the past hour and probably the two hundredth over the last two days of travel, she moved absolutely no distance. She panted and collapsed to her stomach with a groan. "Ugh... it's much too early in the bloody morning for this..."

A bright flash later, and Twilight appeared in front of her, her legs dominating Tick Tock's view of the courtyard clearing. "Come on Tick Tock, get up and try again. You're never going to get the hang of this if you give up."

"Right, right... 'constant vigilance' as Master Zenith used to say." Tick Tock huffed and rose to her hooves. Her head felt as though it had been spinning for hours, and her attempts to shake it off only made the feeling worse. "What exactly am I doing wrong? I've been at this for two bloody days with no results."

"Your problem is that you're still thinking in simplistic terms." Twilight pointed towards the patch of grass no more than a yard in front of Tick Tock, which was marked with chalk powder. "Remember, the key to the spell is to focus on arriving *at* the target, not moving *to* the target. Picture your destination in your mind, and place yourself there in your picture. Then, release your magic and your mind's picture will become reality."

Tick Tock flared her horn again, and closed her eyes. In her thoughts, she pictured herself standing on top of the chalk marking, and focused putting all of her energy into imagining herself there, not here. No distractions. Constant vigilance. A great popping sound filled the air, and the tingly sensation of magic burst throughout Tick Tock's body. She opened her eyes...

And found that she still hadn't moved to her destination.

"Bloody hell!" Tick Tock slumped to the ground again and buried her face in the grass. "At this rate, I'm never going to learn this bleedin' spell..."

Twilight pat Tick Tock on the back and helped her rise to her hooves. "It's okay, Tick Tock. It just takes time, that's all. Don't feel too bad though, you're finally getting the hang of it. Congratulations!"

Tick Tock stared at Twilight, keeping her expression blank. "...what? 'Hang of it'? 'Congratulations'? Twilight, in case you have the sun in your eyes, I haven't moved a bloody inch."

Twilight shook her head. "On the contrary, you moved *precisely* one inch in that last try."

She pointed at the ground, directing Tick Tock's gaze there. "See?"

Tick Tock raised an eyebrow, then shook her head. "I don't follow."

Twilight paused, then chuckled and tapped herself on the temple. "Right, you can't see it. Sorry. I put an enchantment on the grass around here that would highlight your movement. It was part of the exams I took to test my teleportation ability. Let me modify it so you can see it too."

She lit up her horn, causing the grass around Tick Tock to briefly glow bright blue. The glow disappeared after several seconds, save for a tiny trace of it, roughly an inch or so behind the rear of each of Tick Tock's hooves.

Tick Tock glanced back at Twilight a moment before returning her gaze to the glowing marks. She found that when she moved her hooves across the grass, both glowing and not glowing, that the glow didn't change position or shape. "Does... that mean—"

Twilight smiled and nodded. "Yes. You teleported *precisely* one inch forward. The spell only reflects movement achieved through teleportation, so you definitely teleported. You just need to focus more on *placing* yourself from here to your target in your mental image, not *moving*. That lowers your accuracy, because the spell is trying to read too many points of contact. Still, you're making progress."

Tick Tock sighed and wiped her brow. All this work was making her sweaty, tired, and hungry. Her stomach gurgled in agreement. *No! No distractions. I'll keep practicing this bloody spell until I collapse if I have to.*

"Maybe we should take a break," Twilight said through a giggle. "You sound like you're getting hungry." Her own stomach murmured to. "Me too, apparently!"

"Again," Tick Tock said. "I'm going to try again."

"Are you sure? You don't have to push yourself so hard, you know. You're making better progress than the average pony; you can take the chance to relax." Twilight laughed. "That's coming from me! When I learned this spell, I went without sleep and skipped meals. I'm hardly the pony whose example you should follow though, since doing stuff like that is what kept me from making friends."

Tick Tock grunted and settled herself back into place. "No. I want to learn this spell. I *need* to learn this spell. This isn't like studying for some sort of bloody exam, this is a matter of practicality and pride."

"Okay then, if you insist. Go ahead."

Tick Tock took a deep breath and cleared her mind of all distractions. The wind in her mane was nothing. The heat of the sun was nothing. The cool grass beneath her hooves was nothing. It was all nothing before her calm serenity. The only image in her mind was that of the marked ground ahead of her, herself standing triumphantly upon it. She willed herself to make that image reality, flared her horn, and released all the magicks she could. Her body felt like it was on fire for a fleeting second.

Then, she slowly blinked open her eyes and glanced around her. On a first look, nothing looked different. Then, she noticed that Twilight was a full half a yard behind her. When she lifted a hoof, she noticed the dim blue glow beneath. True, she still hadn't made it to her intended destination—the chalk marking was still another few inches ahead of her—but she'd almost made it. Her mouth split into a wide grin.

“Aha! You're right, Twilight, I *am* getting... better?”

Twilight did not seem to hear her, and kept her gaze focused on the courtyard gardens. Her mouth hung open, and her eyes had started to water.

Tick Tock huffed, put off by the fact that Twilight had been so distracted that she'd missed a great leap in her progress. She stomped over to the other unicorn. “Twilight, what in Equestria had got you so—”

Twilight grabbed the side of Tick Tock's head and turned it to look at what she was looking at.

Tick Tock's jaw dropped. “Bloody hell...”

Rarity sighed and took a long sip of her tea, then leaned back in her chair to relax against her cushion. The knights of the Harmony Guard were certainly a friendly, charitable lot, and had provided a full course of lovely dishes with nothing more than a simple request. Twilight had asked they not abuse the privilege, but the knights seemed determined to make that impossible. All Rarity had asked for was something to eat, but the knights had brought in a large dining table laden with waffles, pancakes, toast, and assorted fruits—real fruits at that—as well as juice, tea, and coffee. Truly, the service and quality at the temple was impeccable, easily comparable to a five-star hotel. Combined with dinner the night before, this had been the best the party had eaten since they'd first arrived at Hope's Point, and even then a little bias may have influenced their opinion of the meal at Buns 'n' Stuff.

Still, Rarity found it difficult to enjoy breakfast. She chanced a brief look into the opposite corner of the waiting room. Fluttershy had drawn the room's lone nightstand over to herself to

eat her breakfast at, and nothing anypony had said, or could say, was able to get her to sit beside anypony else at the large table they'd taken up. Even Pinkie, who'd pranced over and attempted to take a seat at Fluttershy's table, had been dismissed with a look.

After two whole days of traveling, the situation had only managed to get worse, despite the concentrated efforts of everypony else to improve it. Fluttershy had distanced herself not just from Rarity and Lockwood, but was beginning to push the others away as well. She barely ate, slept, or even talked. She'd also long since ditched Lockwood's old jacket somewhere along their journey to Utopia.

Rarity ran the entire scenario over and over again in her mind. How in the world had she not caught on to Lockwood's secret relationship? Certainly he'd done an impeccable job of hiding his engagement to Blackburn, so much so that even his own adopted brother hadn't known. But had he dropped any clues? Had there been anything that she should have seen that might have made her ease off trying to get him and Fluttershy together? Anything that might have prevented her from making a terrible mistake?

"I just wish I'd known where I'd gone wrong..." she muttered to herself.

Blackburn, seated opposite of Rarity, grunted and placed her cup of coffee on the table, then leaned back in her chair. "Not your fault. Tired of repeating it. You could not have known. Do not lose sleep over it."

"Don't lose sleep over it? Begging your pardon, Your Majesty, but my closest friend is terribly devastated—"

"Because of your actions?" Blackburn huffed, and shook her head. "Perhaps. Her own actions are to blame too. Repeat: do not lose sleep over it. She should carry as much blame as anypony."

"It's my fault, really," Lockwood said. "I should have noticed what was going on. I always have been rather blind to that sort of thing. You have no idea how long it took for me to notice Blackburn was even attracted to me."

Blackburn smirked. "Had to be... blunt. Blunter."

Rarity frowned. "That's partly why I feel I am to blame. I'm the one who put the idea in her head that you were attracted to her. If I hadn't, maybe..."

"How did you two meet, anyway?" Pinkie asked through a mouthful of waffles, pointing her fork between Lockwood and Blackburn.

"Pinkie, darling, I don't know if that's an appropriate subject to discuss. Especially not

loudly, hmm?” Rarity turned to Blackburn and gave her a nervous smile. “Please, Your Highness, I’d rather not—”

“Risk upsetting somepony?” Blackburn finished off her cup of coffee, but continued speaking as she refilled it. “Not concerned with who hears or chooses to ignore,” she added, turning her head just to the side so that she was looking straight at Fluttershy, who was obviously attempting to ignore the entire conversation. “Only one pony deserves to be upset over situation. Should be obvious who. Pinkie Pie wishes to know more, would gladly explain.”

“I’d rather not antagonize anypony if we could, BB,” Lockwood muttered. “She didn’t know, so—”

Blackburn interrupted him with a snort. “Met Lockwood at a party in Pandemonium, intended to make business contacts to maintain Hope’s Point’s prosperity. Lockwood was guest of party’s host. Struck up conversation, discussed business opportunities. Found his candid demeanor... interesting. Never liked being treated special because of father.

“Built up business network over following years. Became...” Blackburn trailed off, her face turning pink, then shook her head and smiled. “Became enamored with him. Suggested we consider turning business partnership into *different* manner of relationship. He accepted terms.”

“You make your romance sound so... so *clinical*,” Rarity said. “I certainly expected more out of the relationship that put such a kibosh on Fluttershy—” She put her hoof to her mouth when she noticed Fluttershy glare in her direction.

“Well, so long as we’re discussing it,” Lockwood added after taking a sip of his coffee, “I assure you, ‘clinical’ is hardly what I’d consider what happened between us. Though I suppose a... *clinic* or two may have been involved at some point. Better safe than sorry, they say.”

“Courtship lasted a few years,” Blackburn continued. “Then, was forced to return home. Father caught wind of my dealings behind his back, did not approve of certain business partners. In spur of the moment... proposed marriage. Practical consideration, as royal title cannot pass to foals out of wedlock.”

Lockwood scratched his chin, his own face bright red by this point. “Yeah we... kind of started talking about that earlier than I expected.”

“Visited at every opportunity over following years, though after father’s death and becoming Queen, visits became less frequent.”

“So... that’s it?” Pinkie asked. She threw her hooves in the air in exasperation. “That’s boring! Where’s the whirlwind romance? Where’s the holding hooves? Where’s the candlelit dinners? Where’s the *smooches*?”

“Marriage was practical; details not important.”

Lockwood chuckled and put his hoof on Blackburn’s. “Which is to say there’s a lot of things she’d rather not share. It would ruin her image as a ingenious mastermind who rules her kingdom with an iron hoof. Though I suppose a few details here and there might not surprise any of you.”

“Well... I suppose if we get a chance to, you’d be willing to share with us at another time?” Rarity asked, darting her eyes to Fluttershy’s sneer and back. “Perhaps in... other company?”

“Well sure—”

Blackburn snorted. “No. Details not important.”

Just as Rarity was about to change the subject, a bright flash filled the room, accompanied by a loud pop. She, and the others, shielded their eyes from the flash; the origin point had been literally inches in front of their faces, except Fluttershy’s of course.

“*Really*, Twilight, must you enter the room so dramatically?” Rarity huffed as she rubbed orange-colored spots out of her eyes. “There is a *door* you know? It would be easier to use.”

“Well shucks, nice ta see you too, Rarity,” said a familiar voice. “Sheesh. Some ponies.”

Rarity’s eyes snapped open. There on the table stood Applejack, as broad and tall as ever, nearly covered in now-ruined breakfast, her face alight with a glowing smile. Rarity couldn’t believe her eyes, as though what she saw before her were something out of a dream.

“A-Applejack?”

She reached her hoof forward and poked the earth pony’s leg, not particularly concerned with the abundance of maple syrup that had splattered over it. When her hoof pressed against solid pony—and sticky syrup—her breathing hastened. She looked up into the earth pony’s eyes, which looked back down at her filled with a warmth and familiarity she sorely missed.

“Oh my... Applejack!”

Rarity leapt up onto the table and wrapped Applejack in a tight hug, unperturbed by getting herself messy. She was joined soon after by Rainbow, Pinkie, and even—no, *especially* Fluttershy, forming a veritable ball of laughing, cheering, breakfast-covered ponies.

“Oh Applejack, you’re alive!” Rarity cried as she buried her sobbing face into the fabric of

Applejack's shirt. "You're alive, you're alive! Oh my goodness, darling, you're actually here!"

"Of course she's here, Rarity," Rainbow said as she made to ruffle Applejack's mane. She apparently decided against it after seeing her hoof covered in grape jelly. "Applejack's unstoppable, you know that. I never doubted it for a second."

"We were so worried about you!" Pinkie said, tugging Applejack out of Rarity's hug to tighten her own. "I was so afraid that you went to the big party in the sky!"

Applejack chuckled and squirmed out of Pinkie's grip. "Thanks for all the warm greetin's, y'all, but d'ya mind if we not do this on top o' yer breakfast anymore? I sure don't wanna waste any, seein' as I'm a mite hungry myself."

Rarity blinked. "On top of- oh! Oh dear, what a mess!"

She flustered and hopped off the table, and immediately set about fussing over whether her cape had been tarnished with any syrup. Luckily, everything seemed to be in order, minus a few ghastly globs of gelatinous goop that had become glued to the collar.

"Aaan' everythin's back ta normal, thank goodness for that," Applejack said with a happy sigh before leaping off the table herself. "It's good ta be back, y'all. I missed all o' ya somethin' fierce. I was worried somethin' might've happened ta y'all."

The waiting room door opened, and Twilight, Tick Tock, and another unicorn walked into the room, smiles plastered on all their faces. "Okay Applejack, you proved your point. The big entrance *was* a good idea," Twilight said. "A little messy, but good. I hope there's something left for *us* to eat."

"Really, darling, you shouldn't have teleported her right onto the table like that. The room *does* have a door, which I can see you are well aware of," Rarity said as she scrubbed a stain off her collar with her magic. "Oh, just look at this mess! After doing such a good job keeping it clean while crossing miles of grassland, *now* I get it dirty?"

Fluttershy snorted. "Give it a rest, your stupid cloak's not ruined," she said, her voice icy. "Be glad that Applejack's back, it's the only good news we've had in days." She turned to Applejack, a weak smile on her face. "It's good to see you, Applejack. We were worried about you."

Applejack nodded, and returned the smile. "I was worried 'bout y'all too. I just knew nothin' was gonna keep y'all down, though. Glad ta see y'all made it here safe 'n' sound."

Fluttershy made to say something else, but apparently decided against it. She gave Rarity another quick, harsh look, then trotted back to her corner and slumped into her chair with

a huff. She batted away Ophanim's orb when he attempted to get her attention, before sinking further into her sour mood.

"I guess I missed more than I thought. What's eatin' her?" Applejack asked Rarity in a hushed whisper.

Rarity sighed. "Let's just say that you were right, dear, and that I shouldn't have been butting my nose in where it didn't belong. She's been getting worse ever since we got separated, and I just don't know what we can do. I've never seen her this angry before... and believe me, I thought I'd seen her at her angriest."

"I'm hopeful she'll get back to normal when we finish our business here. It's the only thing left that I can think of, at least since she stopped talking to us," Twilight said as she took her own seat at the table. "Hopefully we won't be waiting too much longer. The sooner we get done, the better. I just want to get home."

Pinkie let out a loud gasp, then leapt across the table and sidled up to the unicorn mare that had entered with Twilight and Tick Tock. "Say, who's your new friend? Is she nice? What's her name?"

Applejack chuckled and shook her head. "Aw shoot, where are my manners? Sorry 'bout that." She got out of her seat to stand beside the other mare, then clapped the unicorn on the shoulder. "Gals, this here's Fireburst. Fireburst, these here are my friends. D'ya remember their names?"

Fireburst rolled her eyes. "With how much you've been yappin' my ear off, shoot, I probably know 'em better'n y'all do." She took a step forward gave a friendly wave to everypony. "Heya! Name's Fireburst, and it's nice ta finally meet all o' y'all. She's said so much about ya."

"Hi Fireburst!" Pinkie greeted, giving the mare an energetic hoofshake. "I'm Pinkie Pie! Now, normally right about now I'd give *another* loud gasp." She demonstrated said loud gasp. "Then, I'd say it's this calls for a *party*, but I don't think all these stuffy knights would like me making a big mess and a lot of noise this early in the morning."

Fireburst chuckled. "Pleased ta meet ya, Pinkie. Applejack said y'all'd be the first to greet me. You're just a bundle o' energy, ain'tcha? Y'all kinda remind me o' my lil' sis."

Introductions went around the table, and Rarity noticed this new mare carried a politeness to her that Rarity recognized as "traditional", as Applejack's family called it. She was pleasant and cordial, maybe a little too eager to engage in hoofshakes as Applejack was liable to do, but overall a nice mare. Rarity did her best to ignore the poor mare's chipped horn, as it was considered rude in polite company to bring attention to that sort of handicap, especially in her case, as she herself was a unicorn.

The group gave Applejack, Fireburst, Twilight, and Tick Tock a chance enjoy some breakfast—though the former two were more wolfing it down than savoring any of it—before anypony brought up what was on everypony’s minds.

“So... what happened, anyway?” Rainbow asked. “How’d we all get separated?”

Applejack sighed and leaned back in her seat. “I don’t rightly know how it happened, but one o’ them creepy mutant zombies—or whatever they are—from the Blood Mire was on the ship, in the engine room.”

“Impossible,” Blackburn scoffed. “Fully-infected cannot leave Blood Mire, period.”

“Yeah, we saw that for ourselves,” Twilight said, tapping her chin. “When we all exited the surrounding barrier, nearly all of those things pursuing us stopped at its edge. The ones that got pushed through or didn’t stop in time disintegrated the instant they left the barrier field, as if the air outside was harmful to them.”

“And thank the bloody stars for that!” Tick Tock exclaimed with an exaggerated wipe of her brow.

“I know, and I got ‘round ta thinkin’ the same thing when I had a chance ta think ‘bout it. But, I saw it with my own two eyes, and the thing that attacked us in the engine room was definitely one o’ them things, no mistakin’ it. Same sickenin’ smell, same black skin, same nasty rot, same everythin’.” She turned her gaze over to Tick Tock. “And it *talked*.”

Tick Tock paled. “T-t-talked? Oh no... d-d-did it have—”

“Yeah, silvery wings ‘n’ all, no question. Saw him use them things ta tear apart everythin’ he touched.”

“He’s still out there... oh stars, he was on the ship with me!” Tick Tock’s breathing became panicked, and she put a hoof over her heart and darted her eyes around the room. “W-w-what if he’s in here with us?!”

Twilight patted Tick Tock’s back and pulled the trembling unicorn close. “Relax, Tick Tock... we’re here, okay? I don’t think that thing is going to come after you here.”

“But he might, Twilight, he might! If he could get aboard the ship, then who knows where he could be?!”

“This creature sabotaged the engines,” Blackburn said, by now on the edge of her seat. “How?”

Applejack nodded. "Cut right into the power... machine... thing. Whatever it was Briarthorn was workin' on, that *thing* wrecked it up good. Everythin' started goin' crazy after that... an' Flathoof shoved me right into this pod thingy that fell right off the ship." She shook her head. "I don't know what happened after that. And... seein' as they ain't here with ya..."

"I'm sorry, Applejack," Rarity said, pulling Applejack in for a hug. "I'm so sorry darling..." She turned her gaze over to Lockwood, who'd slumped back in his seat and bore a pensive expression. "And you too, Lockwood. Oh dear..."

Applejack shook her head and reached her hoof out towards Lockwood. "I'm sorry too, Lockwood. Flathoof was just tryin' ta protect me. If I could've used my powers..." She sighed. "I don't really know what else ta say. Before all that happened... he 'n' I sorta said a few things ta one another that I wish I'd been able ta say sooner..."

Nopony said anything for several moments. Then, Lockwood shook his head and patted Applejack's hoof. "I can't say I'm surprised he did what he did. I'm not angry," he said, his mouth curling into a small smile. "In fact I'm actually sort of proud. It makes me proud to hear that he did what he does best: protect the ones he cares about. All the way to the end..."

Applejack frowned and looked around the room. "Say... uh, where're the others? Gadget 'n' Crossfire?"

Lockwood shook his head again. "After the engine exploded, the Thunder crashed. Gadget and Crossfire... protected Blackburn and me, got us off the ship beforehoof." He paused to look at Blackburn, who had become pale and slumped in her chair. "They didn't make it either..."

"Then Briarthorn as well..." Blackburn sighed. She pushed herself away from the table and cantered over to the nearest window. "Gadget, Crossfire, Briar... gone. Decision to help has cost me dearly. Beginning to wonder if this is worth it..." She turned her gaze to Lockwood, and shook her head. "I should not have forced you and Flathoof to come."

"Don't start blaming yourself," Lockwood said, "This isn't your doing, it's that... that *thing*." He turned to Tick Tock and Twilight, and nodded. "If this isn't proof enough that that psychopath is working with Nihila to keep you all here, I don't know what else is. I, for one, am convinced now more than ever that we need to get you home."

A long silence fell over the room for several moments, until it was broken by a knock at the door. Twilight cantered over to the door and cracked it open.

A pitch black unicorn, a knight, was on the other side. "Allo? Am I disturbing anyzing?"

“No... not at all,” Twilight said, eyebrow rased. “Is there something wrong? We’re not being too loud or anything are we?”

The knight shook his head. “Ah, non, I ‘ave been sent to retrieve you for your meeting viz Varden Mémoire.”

“Oh? Oh! Well, that’s great news!” Twilight turned to the others. “You hear that girls? Time to get things taken care of. We’re almost home!”

The knight held up a hoof. “Ah, un moment Lady Sparkle. I ‘ave been informed by zee Varden zat zee only ones ‘e will admit are... ah, pardonnez-moi.” He reached into his helmet and pulled out a small note. “Euh... Ladies Tock, Sparkle, Rarity, Dash, Pie, Fluttershy, and Applejack.”

“You mean, we can’t come too?” Lockwood asked as he gestured between himself and Blackburn. “That’s strange. We brought them all this way and were even here when they signed in, and nopony told us we wouldn’t be allowed in.”

The knight shook his head. “Zat is zee Varden’s orders, and ‘is vord is law in zee temple. Zee city and zee temple grounds are free to use while you vait, zough.”

“Well... I suppose that’s not *too* big of a problem. You girls can always tell us what happens, right?”

“Would appreciate a report if unable to personally attend,” Blackburn said.

“Well of course we’ll tell you guys,” Twilight said. “You’ve helped us out so much, not including you would be just... well, wrong. I don’t know why you can’t come with us, but if the Warden’s orders say no, I don’t see how arguing the point will help any. Like Tick Tock said, they have a reason for everything.”

“I sure don’t mind not bein’ included in whatever it is y’all’re doin’,” Fireburst said with a smile. “I’ve still got business ta attend to ‘round the city, an’ I wouldn’t be on that list anyhow.” She nodded to Applejack. “AJ, I’ll catch ya later. Well, if y’all’re still *here* later, anyway.”

“Yeah, sure thing Fireburst,” Applejack said as Fireburst trotted out the door. She turned back to guard, and pointed an accusing hoof at him. “Hang on a sec, y’all said *my* name was on that there list y’all have. I wasn’t here ta sign up fer nothin’.” She turned to her friends. “Did you girls put me on the list?”

Rarity shook her head. “Well... no, we didn’t. They only let us sign in with the ponies here, so... actually, this *is* rather odd.”

The knight shrugged. "Lady Applejack's name is on zee list. Zee Varden 'as been expecting 'er. I do not question such zings."

"Oookay... uh, yeah, that's definitely weird," Rainbow said.

"We'll ask the Warden about it when we meet him," Twilight said. She gestured for the others to follow. "Come on, everypony, let's get to it."

There had been a number of expectations Twilight had for the innermost place of worship for a goddess such as Harmonia. She expected perhaps to see a multitude of objects of worship or depictions of what the ponies who worshipped her to believe she was capable of. She expected stained glass windows and lavish rugs, not unlike the hall of her dream, as that was how even Princess Celestia's throne room was decorated. Perhaps Harmonia, as a goddess of the light, should have some manner of representation of that fact here.

The inner sanctum was none of these things. If anything, it appeared to be a library. The walls circled around them, lined with rows upon rows of books, far more than she cared to count though she was able to get a rough estimate in the tens of thousands. Tomes of all sizes could be seen, and all of them appeared to be in mint or near-mint condition. Some of the titles jumped out at her: *A History of Deepgrove, Volume I*; *Pony/Zebra Relations in Our Modern Era*; *Founding: The Origins of Utopia*; *Whatever Happened to the Gryphons?*

She took notice that there were only a scant few texts that seemed to have anything to do with the northern continent. A few texts here and there seemed to detail the landscape and the current status of Pandemonium, but without properly perusing the entire collection she couldn't tell if anything would have informed these ponies about the events that Gilderoy had shown her. How could they not know?

Whatever the case, she was confused as to why the inner sanctum was a library. Nothing in the rest of the temple seemed to hint that Harmonia had a particular fondness for books. The raised platform at the end of the sanctum had a desk and seating accommodations for a large number of guests, larger even than their current group. All it needed was a clerk and the illusion would be complete. Perhaps the Warden served that purpose?

Twilight's thoughts were placed aside when the small door on the other side of the platform opened.

Harmonia's current Warden looked every bit like the freshly-constructed statue of him out in the main hall, though obviously more colorful than the sleek white marble. Mémoire was an indigo pegasus with a thin frame and a modest wingspan, not at all the physical specimen some of the prior Wardens had been. He wore a white cloak, and he kept the hood up so as the cover

his brown mane; from what Twilight could see, even she would admit it was messy. The cloak bore the same insignia Twilight had seen all over the hall, that of the city of Utopia: a silver cross emblazoned over a turquoise heart.

“Pardonnez-moi for zee vait, I vas seeing to zee last preparations I must make for you,” he said. “Aimez-vous ma bibliothèque—my library?” he asked, gesturing out to the abundance of books. “You are zee first guests I ‘ave ‘ad zat ‘ave seen zee projet achevé.”

“Oh! Um... hello Sir Mémoire.” Twilight blinked, taken aback by the Warden’s forward friendliness. “Well, I certainly think you have a robust selection here, sir. You say this is *your* library? As in, *private* library?”

“Oui, c’est—” Mémoire paused, then chuckled. “Oh, excusez-moi, I am letting my personal matters come before business!” He trotted into the center of the platform and, to Twilight’s surprise, bowed down low to greet them. “C’est un plaisir to finally meet you all.”

Twilight hesitated, then met his bow with one of her own, as was considered polite. “It’s good to finally meet you too... I suppose?”

Rarity followed Twilight’s example first, then the rest of her friends. “You speak as though you were expecting us,” she said.

“Oui, I ‘ave been expecting you,” Mémoire said as he walked over to the desk and placed a trio of envelopes upon it. “Or razer, milady ‘as been expecting you. I am sorry zat ve made you vait, but Applejack ‘ad not arrived yet. I am glad to see zat she arrived so quickly. Milady was vorried.”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “So y’all were waitin’ for me? Y’all knew I was comin’?”

“Bien sûr.”

“An’ y’all didn’t tell no pony so that they knew, either?”

Mémoire smiled and shook his head. “It would ‘ave taken from zee reunion between you and your friends, n’est-ce pas? Milady would not rob you all of such bonheur.” He lifted a hoof. “Ah, mais ce n’est pas le moment for talking of zese zings. At least, not viz me.”

“Right, we can worry about that later,” Tick Tock said. “We have more important matters to discuss.”

Mémoire nodded. “Oui, zat we do, Chronomancer.” Tick Tock made to speak again, but Mémoire lifted his hoof to stop her. “Ah, but you vill not be discussing it viz me, but viz milady ‘erself. She vishes to speak viz you all quite dearly, and directly.”

“You mean... talk to Harmonia?” Twilight asked. “Can we do that? We were led to believe she and Nihila couldn’t take physical form.”

“Non, she cannot, and zat is not what is ‘appening ‘ere. But I ‘ave vasted enough time; milady vishes to speak viz you all. Un moment s’il vous plaît.”

Mémoire took a deep breath and closed his eyes. After a moment, his body began to glow with a dim white light that radiated throughout the room, bathing the mares before him in a comforting warmth. The warmth felt familiar to Twilight, as though out of a dream. A moment passed and the glow surrounding Mémoire dissipated, then he at last released the breath he’d been holding. When his eyes opened, a bright white light shone forth from them.

He gave the group of confused mares before him a bright smile, and spoke to them in a voice that was not his own, but a soft-spoken, velvety, feminine voice that seemed to flow and echo about the room, entrancingly slow and beautiful. The glow from his eyes spread softly out around the room, and in the light there appeared a pearly-white outline of a pony, larger than all of them, with both wings larger than his own, and a horn visible.

“I welcome thee, mine ardent little ponies. It gladdens me to finally greet thee at once, together. I am Harmonia, and mine inimitable nature tarries to the title of Goddess, with mine assumed divine domain as Equality. The beauty of that which is balance ringeth in my veins, thus deny it I cannot. It is why I thrill with our meeting, as thou art familiar with such things.”

Twilight looked to her friends, eyebrow raised, then cleared her throat and nodded. “We’re glad to finally meet you as well... uh, Your Highness.” She turned to Tick Tock. “Is that the proper way to address a goddess? This is new territory even for me.”

Tick Tock pointed at herself and shook her head. “I don’t know, Twilight,” she said in a fluster. “I’ve never met a goddess before either. We’re not supposed to go explaining things to divine beings. There aren’t exactly many protocols on this sort of thing.” She dropped her voice and added: “At least, not many considered reputable.”

“Thou may simply callest me ‘Harmonia’, Twilight Sparkle, if thou wishest,” Harmonia said, her ethereal voice ringing with a subdued pleasure, as though laughing at an untold joke. “I care little for the title I am given, though many of the ponies whom I care for chooseth to bequeath a title upon me anyway. We are equals here, one and all; I shall treat thee and thy friends as such.”

“If that’s the case, why can’t our other friends be here as well, if you don’t mind my asking?” Rarity asked. “I feel awful leaving them out of this, as Lockwood and Queen Blackburn have sacrificed much to get us here. Surely they should be included.”

Harmonia's light frowned, then nodded, causing her Warden to do the same. "Please, givest them mine eternal regards in even parts valor and sorrow on thy next meeting, as I regret mine inability to include these who I would not consider merely thy friends, but heroes of this world, in these proceedings. Communicating directly with ponies other than mine own Warden places great strain on us both. The more ponies present, the greater the strain, thus the more I must persist so as to keep me with thee. Thus, for the sake of my treasured Warden, I must lessen the burden upon him.

"As for thee, Tick Tock," she added with a glowing smile as she turned to Tick Tock and gave her a tiny nod, "thy status as Chronomancer is adequate cause for thee to participate, as thy possession of such... *specific* knowledge of the art of Chronomancy shall be, by simple posit, of great import. Incidentally, it is truly an honor to meet one of thy profession again. I counted amongst my dearest friends one of thy predecessors, the good Master High Noon."

"I'm afraid he was well before my time, even my mentor's time," Tick Tock said. She cleared her throat and bowed. "Harmonia, with respect, I do believe that time is of the essence. If we could continue with our agenda here?"

"To commune with thy group at all, I must be given the time we sorely lack, though I am aware of our lack thereof," Harmonia said, turning Mémoire's body to walk towards the nearest window. "However, there are other matters at hoof that bear such strong feelings that I must address them as the first of many. I know that mine elation for meeting you all was not met without confusion."

She turned and smiled again, directing it particularly at the three ponies in the center of the formation: Twilight, Rainbow, and Applejack. "At the least, three of thee hast most pressing questions, is it not so? Please, hast no fear in asking."

Twilight looked between Applejack and Rainbow, then back to Harmonia. She wasn't sure what exactly the two of them had to ask, but she knew *she* had questions, certainly. For example: "This might sound strange, but, well, I don't know why, but the magical energy that I can sense around you is just so... familiar. I can't place where I've felt it before, but I definitely recognize it."

Harmonia nodded. "Thou art a powerful unicorn indeed, if thou canst sense mine aura though I be incorporeal at present. Its familiarity to thee is because thou sharest a connection with me, due to thine own connection to thy world's 'Elements of Harmony'." She smiled when Twilight raised an eyebrow. "I know more than thou givest me merit, Twilight Sparkle. For this, thy friend Rainbow Dash doth carry responsibility."

Rainbow pointed at herself and took a step back. "Me? What'd I do? I've never met you before... uh, ma'am... goddess lady."

“Ah, but thou hast indeed been in my presence before. Thou madest me aware of thine existence, and the existence of thy friends, through thine actions in days past. The Belt of Tranquility hath many dangers within, doth it not? It gladdens me to know that my light was of help to thee.”

“Light... wait, you mean—” Rainbow’s eyes widened. “The light in the water, that was you?” She shook her head and took several steps forward, her face alight with eager anticipation. “And my reflection, was that you too? ‘Cause I’ve been getting a total sense of déjà vu here.”

“What are you talking about, Rainbow?” Twilight asked. “What light? What reflection?”

Rainbow scuffed her hoof on the rug. “Well, I didn’t tell you guys all the details, but when I went into the Belt to try and get through, I sort of... didn’t make it. I crashed into the water, and into some sort of dry strip of land between the two halves of the ocean... or something.” She scratched her head, apparently at a loss for how to describe whatever had happened. “Look, it was weird, okay? But that’s where I had... a realization, because I was arguing with myself—my reflection, actually—about what I’d done and what I was doing.”

She shook her head and looked at Harmonia, confusion in her eyes. “I thought you felt familiar... but I couldn’t place it. You’re the one who guided me there and helped me realize what I was doing? Why?”

Harmonia shook her head. “Guided? I was there to see the questions inside thee, because thou were aglow with a part of myself; this is still so. It is so for all of thee. I see the pieces that muster within me; the love I have for balance, for equality, for *harmony*. What could I do but try to ask the questions that thou were too hurt to ask? What wouldst thou have done if thou had seen thyself in such a state, outside thyself? I did what thou wouldst do, what was in thy heart. And, how wouldst thou speakest to thyself if not *as* thyself? I provided a place most safe for thee to learn that the feelings that forced thee to depart from thy friends were not entirely of thine own soul, but due to another’s influence.”

“Right... you helped me realize what Grayscale had been doing to me.” Rainbow sighed and turned to look over her friends, stopping to smile at Pinkie. “I wish I could’ve realized it earlier, is all. I could’ve saved them a lot of hurt.”

“So, y’all showed Rainbow a light ta guide her ta safety, or somethin’?” Applejack asked as she stepped forward. “Then... that was you too, that guided me outta that there ocean?”

“That I was, Applejack,” Harmonia said as she turned her gaze to the earth pony. “Did my directions assist thee well? It saddens me that I could not carry thee to safety myself, but such beeth the limits of an immaterial form.”

Applejack nodded. "Well, y'all sure got me outta the water. And y'all do feel familiar... kind like this weird feelin' I had in the back o' my head the whole way here. Kinda warm 'n' fuzzy, like a happy memory. Was that you too?" At Harmonia's nod, Applejack smiled. "Well then, thank ya kindly for all yer help. Y'all got me out of a mighty fine pickle."

"So you helped to unite us, twice," Twilight said. "First by helping to spur Rainbow to come back, and then by guiding Applejack here. I... I don't know what to say. Thank you, Harmonia." Her eyes widened. "Wait, they were guided to safety by a bright light. A bright light... my dream. That's where I recognize you from! You were in my dream last night!"

Harmonia nodded. "Thy dream was clouded with fear, something I possess no love for, for it goes against my very nature to inspire or desire such a thing. I did what I could, so that thou couldst rest, for thou hast not slept well in many moons."

"I see. Thank you for that, Harmonia. You certainly put my mind at ease."

"What did y'all dream about?" Applejack asked.

Twilight sighed. "You, actually. I dreamed about losing you, forever. I've... never lost a friend before. You all are my first friends, after all, besides my brother of course. But, Harmonia told me you were coming back to us. I'm glad she did."

Harmonia smiled. "Thy mind still bubbleth over with questions for me, does it not? I can sense thy trepidation, Twilight Sparkle. 'Tis a pressing matter, then?"

Twilight nodded. "Yes, I did have something I wanted to ask, actually, in regards to the past rather than our future. I've seen an awful lot of depictions of one of your former Wardens around the temple, Sir Silvertongue. Well, while we were up north, we visited the last of the gryphons, Elder Gilderoy. He showed us a lot of things, about ourselves and about your world."

"The last of the gryphons?" Harmonia's voice, for the first time, seemed puzzled. "What dost thou speakest of, 'last' of the gryphons?"

"Sir Silvertongue, after he built the Beacons, apparently betrayed you and became the Warden of Nihila," Twilight explained. "He massacred the entire gryphon race using a plague called the Red Death, and only one, their Lorekeeper, survived. I am certain that Elder Gilderoy would want us to tell you what transpired up north, since by looking around here, you're unaware of your former Warden's actions."

Harmonia's light flickered for only an instant, but remained silent for a long moment before shaking her head. "'Tis a pleasure that thou hast confirmed for me my former Warden's fate. Once the Beacons were completed, I could no longer contact him, no longer address him as my Warden. I found myself wondering, time and again until now, what became of him. It

pained me greatly to replace—" She hesitated, then sighed. "Burden thyself not with Sir Silvertongue, my little ponies, as such a concern shalt be nothing more than a distraction, and thou still hast much ahead of thee before thy journey is complete."

Tick Tock interrupted. "Forgive me, Harmonia, but that's the second time you've said that. I have been led to believe that you could open a portal to help send my friends home. Don't tell me this has all been a waste of our bloody time." She slumped to the floor. "*Please* don't tell me this has been a waste of our bloody time."

Harmonia frowned and shook her head. "I could open a portal for thee, certainly... were that still within my power." She looked amongst the mares, her smile returning for a brief second, before turning back to Tick Tock with a frown. "It saddens me to speak of mine own shortcomings, but mine abilities as of late hath waned to far lesser levels than I imagined possible. I am not as powerful as thou believest me to be, not anymore."

"Your powers are weakening?" Tick Tock asked. She shook her head. "Forgive me for saying, but that simply doesn't sound possible. You and Nihila are supposed to contain incredible amounts of power. How could you be losing power in the first place, let alone fast enough that you're no longer powerful enough to open a portal?"

"I do not wish to sound as though I am casting blame, but..." Harmonia turned and nodded to Twilight Sparkle. "Those who doth wield these 'Elements of Harmony' art the cause of mine abating strength, at least to the degree that it doth abate at currently."

Twilight balked. "Us?"

"Whilst I only possess a fragment of the whole story, I also possess great knowledge on the workings of harmonious magicks. The connection between thee and these 'Elements of Harmony', if I am not mistaken, filleth thee with power that only thou dost possess. Hence why thou canst use them to perform great feats, though I can only guess. I am this world's equivalent, and as such, thou now drawest thy strength from me. As I possess greater powers than the Elements of Harmony, thou drawest even more power, and this power doth manifest in mysterious, extraordinary ways, doth it not?"

"You mean the superpowers we got?" Rainbow asked.

Twilight shook her head. "I thought that we were able to use these powers because this world has more ambient magicks to draw from, and that anypony who puts in the time and effort can use magic too? We've seen some of our friends use incredible magicks that in our world would simply be impossible."

"Yeah, that creepy zombie thing used some weird magic that let him slip 'round through the walls 'n' shadows," Applejack pointed out. "Ain't no pony back home that can do that."

Tick Tock shuddered. "Don't remind me."

"Thou art absolutely correct, 'tis the way this world's magicks doth function. But, thy connection with these Elements in thy world, and thus thy connection to me, allowed thee to acquire thine abilities more quickly." Harmonia sighed. "'Tis an unfortunate coincidence that it drains me so, but I am certain that thou dost not regret possessing the powers thou hast acquired."

Rainbow frowned and looked at her hooves. "Well yeah, I'm glad I've got these powers now. Without 'em, I don't think we really could've been able to get through the fights with those nutcases all those times. But I didn't think we were draining them from anyone."

"So our powers stem from you, but we're draining your strength in order to use them?" Twilight asked. "Does that mean that when we leave, we'll lose these powers?"

Harmonia nodded. "In a matter of speaking, thou art correct. It may taketh place over a long period of time, but the gifts that thou hast received whilst on this plane shalt one day diminish. Thou shalt still possess thy connection with the Elements of Harmony, but as they did not granteth thee these abilities before, they shalt not granteth them in future."

"So, long story short... you can't send us home?" Pinkie asked, tears welling in her eyes. "Aww... we were so close! How are we gonna get home *now*?"

Harmonia smiled and shook her head. "Hast faith, Pinkie Pie, thy friends and thee needest not worry. I still possess the ability to cast open a portal, but I can no longer accomplish such a daunting task by my lonesome. I shall require thine assistance if I am to return thee to thy home, to thy friends and families."

"Whatever it is, we'll do it," Twilight said with a stomp of a hoof. "We've come too far to give up now. What would you have us do?"

Harmonia paused, then shook her head. The light of her figure began to flicker. "Forgive me, my power doth wane even as I speak to thee, and my Warden groweth weak as I maintain the connection. I must conserve my strength if I am to help thee to depart from this world and return to thine own. My Warden shalt—"

The white glow in Mémoire's eyes flickered and died, and with it the glow surrounding his body.

Twilight lifted a hoof. "W-wait! What are we supposed to—"

A bright flash filled the room, and Mémoire's body slumped forward to his knees with a

groan.

“-do. Oh dear...”

Mémoire remained still for several moments, save for his heavy breathing, before at last he shook his head and clamored upright. “Ouah... I vill never get used to zat...”

He frowned and looked over the group of mares, who were all looking at him with dejected frowns. “Fear not, mesdemoiselles, milady ‘as not left me vizout zee plan,” he said, tapping his head. “She merely vished to speak viz you directly, to let you know zat she vill vatch over you as long as you are ‘ere in zee souzern continent. À présent, ve ‘ave much to discuss.”

“Okay then, what’s the plan?” Tick Tock asked. “I remind you that we are on a very strict schedule here.”

Mémoire trotted to his desk and retrieved the trio of envelopes there. “I am avare of your schedule, Chronomancer, and milady and I ‘ave done much to prepare for your tasks. Though it may seem strange zat milady is sending you on zese errands, I assure you zat she ‘as ‘er raisons.”

Rarity had to admire the work that must have gone into making Utopia the flawless masterpiece of architecture it was. Every sector of the city had its own unique thematics that influenced the building designs, the decorations, even the roads. The Market District that she and her friends had entered through the day before had been quite obviously designed to be wide open to allow for any number of booths and stands to display their wares, and very few permanent structures seemed to exist there. The Harmony Guard sector of the city had been delightfully uniform and spotless, colored with primarily whites and silvers.

She easily noticed when they’d passed into the Little Zeb’ra’den sector. The colors and materials abruptly changed from white marble trimmed with silver to black obsidian trimmed with gold. The buildings had a more modern design—by Rarity’s standards, anyway—that was much more reminiscent of the Canterlot she knew and loved. The street she, Twilight, and Lockwood were walking on had almost instantly changed from a slightly bumpy cobblestone to a ridiculously smooth road of obsidian-laced stonework.

The starkest change, of course, were the ponies, or rather, the zebras. Rarity had a certain expectation of how zebras looked and acted, though she admitted that having such an opinion of an entire race based on just the one member of it she knew was perhaps in poor taste. Gilderoy, for example, had been a drastically different individual than either Gilda or Gustave Le Grand.

The zebras here were quite different from Zecora. Nearly all of them, both stallions and mares alike, wore leathers and furs—*real* leathers and furs, nothing like the faux ermine on Rarity's cape—mostly colored in browns, whites, and grays. That fact alone disturbed Rarity, as it meant the zebras were killing animals and wearing their hides. The stallions wore their manes and tails unkempt, and many of them had great beards or mustaches that would put any stallion at home to shame. The mares kept their manes and tails in braids or buns, though a few here and there left theirs long and unkempt like the stallions.

Rarity scrunched her nose as she walked by a gathering of stallions hooting and hollering in a huddle around two stallions engaged in a sparring match. The stench of sweat was so strong that she had to fight the urge to gag.

"I am beginning to wonder if perhaps it would have been better for me to go with Applejack and Pinkie," she said. "These zebras are a confounding bunch! Their architecture is so elegant and refined, yet they themselves are so... brutish. Barbaric, even. I certainly hope we aren't assigned some uncouth *ruffian* as our guide."

Lockwood chuckled. "I for one wouldn't mind having a down-to-earth type as our escort. I think it'd be a refreshing change of pace from the rest of the guides we've had."

Rarity snorted. "I don't know why we even *need* an escort. Twilight, surely you could direct us to the south pole without any issue, yes?"

"Well, if you really want to, I suppose I could. I could always attempt to detect the electromagnetic field around the planet and use that to navigate since we've got such a specific destination," Twilight said. She shook her head. "Still, it'll look better if we arrive at Zeb'ra'den with an actual zebra with us, won't it?"

"Ugh... I just hope not *all* zebras are this barbaric." Rarity huffed. "How much further is the embassy anyway, Twilight? I'm not seeing any sort of signposts to direct us."

Twilight hovered the envelope that Mémoire had given her in front of her nose and read the note scribbled on the back. "According to this, it should be—"

They trio rounded the corner of a building and stopped as a large structure came into view at the end of the street. It wasn't so big as to tower over the rest of the buildings nearby, but large enough to be impressive. The building's walls were decorated with more gold than the surrounding structures, reflecting so much sunlight that it appeared to glow.

"-right around the corner," Twilight said, completing her sentence. She shook her head and cleared her throat. "Well, come on, what are we standing around gawking for? We've got an ambassador to meet."

Twilight led Rarity and Lockwood the rest of the way along the road to the embassy and stopped at the great silver gate that surrounded it. A pair of burly zebras guarded the entryway, and both wore horned helmets colored the same black and gold as the buildings. They each also carried a weapon: one carried a large pike and a round shield, the latter of which was strapped to his leg; the other, a battle axe much larger than his body. Both weapons appeared too heavy to wield without magic, yet both zebras drew their weapons and used them to bar the way of the approaching ponies, somehow holding them aloft with their hooves.

The left one spoke first, his voice deep and surly, though he appeared nervous: "Halt where thou standest, little ponies."

"State thy names and purpose, please," finished the other, whose voice was less abrasive, but who was just as nervous.

Rarity noticed the two were barely keeping from darting their eyes at her, and were trying to keep their eyes instead on one of the other two ponies. Were they nervous because of her? Twilight went to take a step forward, but Rarity lifted a hoof to stop her.

"Allow me, Twilight. If I am to help with negotiations, I'd like to have a little practice, hmm?" She turned to the two guards and cleared her throat. "Greetings, my dear zebras. I am Lady Rarity, and these are Lady Sparkle and Sir Lockwood. We seek an audience with your ambassador, Zamindari."

The two guards shared quick glances with one another, then turned back to the trio of ponies. The right one spoke first this time: "Presentest thy proof of admittance."

"Or else we bid thee good riddance," finished the other. The first one gave him a sharp glare and nudged him in the ribs with the handle of his axe, eliciting a cough from the second. The second cleared his throat. "Begging thy pardon, no offense intended."

"'Twas a difficult rhyme with which my line was ended," finished the first.

Twilight smiled. "Well, at least they share something in common with Zecora, right Rarity?" she whispered as she passed Rarity her envelope. "I'm impressed that two separate individuals can rhyme together so well."

"Yes, I suppose I should be glad there is at least some degree of familiarity. They sound like some bizarre amalgamation of Zecora and Princess Luna." Rarity took the envelope and presented it to the two guards, careful not to let them touch it as she showed them the seal on the back. "As you can see, my companions and I are here on official business for Warden Mémoire. It is urgent that we meet with your ambassador as quickly as possible."

The zebra on the left looked over the wax seal, then nodded. "It surely is the Warden's

Seal.”

The other nodded in turn. “It doth not appear to be unreal.” He stood up tall and replaced his great axe on his back. “A pleasure to meet thee, Lady Rarity.”

“May our master granteth thee his charity,” finished the other as he did the same with his lance.

The pair of zebras trotted back to the gateway, unlatched the lock, and pushed it open before bowing low and permitting the trio of ponies entrance.

As Rarity led Twilight and Lockwood through the embassy grounds towards the building itself, she noticed that the zebras here were cut of a totally different cloth than those outside the gate, besides the two guards. Granted that their fashion was not of any sort of improvement, nor was their smell or grooming, but they were certainly polite and knew how to treat a lady.

She could not remember the last time she’d walked into a room and had everypony stop what they were doing to look in her direction, but the zebra soldiers were doing exactly that. She could not resist giving some of the soldiers little waves as she passed, and enjoyed the flustered attention she earned. She felt as though she had wandered into a congregation of hormone-addled schoolcolts.

“I have changed my mind, Twilight,” Rarity said with a smile. “These zebras aren’t quite as brutish as I once thought. They *certainly* are making me feel welcome. Even the Harmony Guard ponies weren’t quite this friendly.”

“They don’t seem to be paying the same attention to me or Lockwood,” Twilight noted with a shake of her head as she watched several soldiers hustle out of Rarity’s path. As they passed, the soldiers were most definitely pointing in Rarity’s direction, not hers.

Rarity chuckled. “Aha, Twilight, don’t tell me you’re *jealous*. I didn’t think you’d be the type to desire the rapt attentions of such a collection of sweaty, muscular—”

“*No*.” Twilight pushed ahead of Rarity and headed up to the embassy door. “As if I’d be interested in- ugh, nevermind. Come on, we have to meet Ambassador Zamindari. Can we try not to get distracted when we’re this close?”

Lockwood leaned over to Rarity. “Seems you struck a nerve,” he whispered.

“Oh, she’s just being difficult,” Rarity said as she flicked her mane. “She knows we’re close to finally going home, so she’s going to be extra diligent from now until we get there. She always gets like this when she’s finally gotten a breakthrough in a project, if you can even consider this a project.”

Rarity and Lockwood followed Twilight into the embassy, where they were directed down one hallway towards the ambassador's office. Rarity noticed that the interior of the building was even more richly decorated than the exterior, with some décor that was easily comparable if not superior to anything she'd seen in Harmonia's temple or even in the Royal Palace back home. Rich reds and golds of varying shades colored rugs and banners, most of which bore the Zeb'ra'den emblem: a raven clutching a sword in one talon and a shield in the other.

The guard at the ambassador's door verified their proof of admittance, then permitted them to enter behind him. "Presenting Ladies Sparkle and Rarity, and Sir Lockwood!" he called, stomping one hoof on the floor and doing the same with the shaft of his large pike. He turned to the ponies and nodded. "Enter now, if thou would... st," he finished with a fluster.

Lockwood chuckled. "Maybe you shouldn't have put me last. Better luck next time, eh?"

Ambassador Zamindari, an aging zebra with long gray locks instead of the blacks and browns of the other zebras, stood from the seat of his desk in a gesture of polite introduction. Rarity noticed he was missing his right eye, judging by the scar that stretched from his forehead to his cheek. He thankfully wore a patch over it, a flat obsidian shard with the Zeb'ra'den emblem painted on it. Like the soldiers, he wore leather and furs, though his were more abundant and were clearly of higher quality. His were dyed white and trimmed with gold.

Zamindari spoke as he trotted over to them:

"Goodness, what a pleasure on this fair day.
If thou art pleased, thou art welcome to stay."

He gestured towards the trio of chairs before his desk. Twilight and Lockwood seated themselves first, but Zamindari made it a point to assist Rarity with sitting in her chair.

Rarity giggled as the aged zebra gave her a deep bow and kissed her hoof. "Such a gentlecolt, thank you."

Twilight rolled her eyes at the display, then cleared her throat to draw Zamindari's attention to her. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ambassador Zamindari," she said. "I guess you know why we're here? We were told you'd be expecting us."

Zamindari sighed and shook his head.

"Quite much there is that I do not yet know
It is thy wish to cross through ice and snow?"

He nodded and placed his hoof upon the desk.

“As for the letter, I would like to view,
that I will then know what I need to do.”

Twilight passed the envelope with Mémoire’s letter over to Zamindari. The zebra opened the envelope and placed the letter on his desk to read it. He didn’t take long to do so, and when he was done, he leaned back in his chair and placed his hooves together in thought and remained that way for a long moment.

“An audience with the king is thine end.
Many rules I am being asked to bend.”

Zamindari called out to the guard at his door:

“Zodiac, come! I have a task for thee.”

The soldier trotted into the room and saluted. “Any task assigned, it shall be done.”

“Thou art to sendest Sir Zircon to me.”

The soldier nodded. “The knight thou seekest, yes I know the one.” He galloped off in an instant, leaving the three ponies behind with Zamindari.

Lockwood chuckled. “Times like this make me wish I’d studied poetry back in school. I might be able to help us fit in a little better.”

Rarity chuckled and patted Lockwood’s shoulder. “Oh I’m sure you’ll do just fine, dear. You’ve yet to fail us before.”

Zamindari hummed, loud enough to draw the attention of the three ponies.

“I wonder, good Sir, how it came to be,
that thou received the injuries I see.”

“Hmm?” Lockwood placed his hoof to his own eyepatch. “Oh! Well, I don’t really have much to say, they’re no big deal. I did something really boneheaded trying to do something noble, kind of misjudged the situation.”

Zamindari shook his head and gave a loud laugh.

“It is expected of most pegasi.
’Tis fortune that thou didst not simply die.
Pegasi are often found weak at heart,

‘specially those ill-equipped as thou art.’

Lockwood huffed and cross his forelegs over his chest. “Ill-equipped? What’s that supposed to mean? I’ll have you know I’m considered very well-equipped by my—”

Rarity cleared her throat and patted Lockwood on the back. “Don’t sell yourself short, dear.”

“That’s exactly the *opposite* of what I was doing.”

Rarity slapped Lockwood’s back hard enough to nearly knock the pegasus out of his seat. “*What I mean is*, you earned your injuries defending Fluttershy from those gruesome creatures, and I have never thanked you enough for it. If saving her life was a ‘boneheaded’ move, then may we all perform such boneheaded acts in the future.”

Lockwood blushed and adjusted his hat. “Maybe so, but I didn’t really—”

“Your wing was injured during that whole battle as well,” Twilight added. She leaned over and whispered: “Just play along, okay? These zebras seem to have a thing for battle and fighting, so having a ‘battle-hardened warrior’ on our side can’t hurt our diplomatic success.”

“I’m still convinced Blackburn would have been more help to you,” Lockwood whispered back. “She’s got a scar, she would know more about zebra culture, not to mention she looks like she’d be able to beat the stuffing out of any one of these zebras. I know full well what he meant by ‘ill-equipped’. Look at me, I’m a joke.”

“*And* she’s also more occupied helping Rainbow and Fluttershy, because *you can’t fly*,” Twilight interjected. “Which was the result of being injured in *battle* saving Fluttershy’s life. Modesty suits you, Lockwood, but in this case you might want to be a little more boisterous, hmm? Try to emulate Rainbow.”

“I... suppose I could give it a shot. This really would have suited Flathoof so much better...” Lockwood cleared his throat. “Yes! Well, it may have been a boneheaded decision, but only because I charged in to fight off those abominations while unarmed and outnumbered. Just to give them a chance, I say.”

Zamindari hummed and stroke his chin.

“Thou sayest thou wast injured in a fight?
For thy sake, Sir, I hope that thou art right.
If those be unearned souvenirs of war,
thou knowest not what trouble lies in store.”

The guard from before returned, making his presence known when he marched into the room and stomped his hoof and pike, then announced: "Presenting Sir Zircon, Knight of Black Flame! May Harmonia bless his name."

Another zebra strode past the guard and into the room. He wore a stark white fur cloak over his gold-dyed leather armor, and carried a massive sword strapped to his side that was as large as he was and had the room been any smaller, probably wouldn't have fit. The impossibility of him even being capable of wielding it perplexed Rarity to no end, but she'd seen the soldiers at the gate carrying weapons nearly as large without issue. The stallion's black, shoulder-length mane was not terribly messy, but it wasn't very neat either; if he cared to style it, he'd actually look rather dashing. As it was, Rarity found herself admitting he was simply ruggedly handsome.

The newcomer, Zircon, trotted up to the ambassador's desk without glancing sideways to look at the seated ponies, and bowed before Zamindari.

"My Lord, thou hast a task for me;
ask, I shall perform it for thee."

Zamindari gestured for Zircon to cease bowing, and spoke:

"Sir Zircon, rise, there's no time for chatter.
We must quickly oversee this matter.

He passed the letter over to Zircon to read while continuing to speak:

"These ponies here, though now they be at rest,
must soon embark on an important quest.
I have summoned thee, for thou art to show,
these ponies three the way through ice and snow."

Zircon quickly read through the letter, then delivered a short bow.

"Ambassador, I shall not fail,
to take them through the frozen veil."

He turned and bowed to the trio of ponies, who stood and bowed in turn to greet him.

"Greetings, all, I am Sir Zircon.
By my Lord's will, I am thy pawn.
Through ice and snow, against all odds,
we shall travel through—"

He lifted his head and stared straight at Rarity. His eyes widened.

“By the gods...”

He knelt before Rarity, bowing far lower to her than he had even to Zamindari, and without missing a beat, reached out and took one of her hooves in his and kissed it.

“’Tis a sign that foretells success,
to gaze upon such a goddess.”

Rarity cocked her head to glance at Twilight and Lockwood, both of whom watched the spectacle without hiding their amusement. Rarity chuckled and nodded at the zebra knight. “A pleasure to meet you as well, Sir Zircon. You really are too kind; a goddess? I’ve never been called a *goddess* before.”

Zircon did not divert his eyes from hers when he spoke:

“Fools, all, if they did not compare,
thine mien to Harmonia’s fair.
Thy coat doth shine as though of silk,
thine eyes like jewels, unlike thine ilk.
Thy mane and tail, though not of blue,
glow brighter than amethysts true.
And though thou lackest silv’ry wings,
I find them not important things.”

Rarity’s face grew redder with every line, and when Zircon was finished she let out a tiny giggle. “Oh my, such a *charming* fellow.” She turned to Twilight and smiled. “On second thought, Twilight, I don’t think I mind having an escort to the south pole at all. I approve wholeheartedly of having Sir Zircon escort us.”

“Wonderful, I’m glad to *finally* have your approval of our mission. I think I see now why Warden Mémoire insisted you come with me.” Twilight shook her head. “Well, all the flattery aside, we’re awfully pressed for time. If we can get moving, Sir Zircon?”

Zircon still did not divert his eyes from Rarity, but nodded and replied to Twilight all the same:

“Of course, my Lady, never fear,
thou dost not need to be austere.”

He kissed Rarity’s hoof again, and led her—and Twilight and Lockwood, by proxy—towards the door.

“Come now, we depart for thy goal,
through the veil to the southern pole.
But first, good sir and ladies fair,
warm clothes for thee we must prepare.”

Zamindari interjected:

“Before thou departeth, my good sir knight,
I remind thee of the end to their flight.
His Highness, they hath requested to meet.
Thus, thy presence with them is no small treat.”

Zircon gave a half bow before responding:

“Audience with mine uncle? Yes,
‘tis no trouble, but I digress.
Thus, we must depart, must take flight,
lest we travel long through the night.”

“Well things sure are shaping up nicely, wouldn’t you say?” Lockwood said. “Warden Mémoire wasn’t kidding when he said he and Harmonia were taking care of everything. I’m going to need to brush up on my dealings with royalty.”

Rarity giggled. “I know I, for one, am certainly looking forward to this,” she said, giving Zircon another quick once-over. Just a few words from him had changed her opinion of zebras everywhere. If all their nobility was this debonair, then meeting their king was looking to be quite an interesting experience. “Yes, I am very much looking forward to this indeed.”