

(This version is not Twilicorn-compliant. The next draft will be.)

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## PROLOGUE: FRIENDSHIP

The carriage wheels tore up small clumps of sod as they rolled through the cemetery, slowing to a halt before a row of pristine marble tombstones. The unicorn pulling the carriage shrugged the harness over his rich vermillion coat and, with a heavy sigh, let it fall to the ground. His breath steamed faintly in the cool air.

The unicorn ambled to the side of the carriage and opened the door. "We're here, Mom," he said.

"Thank you, darling," came the response from inside. "Help me down, please."

An elderly white unicorn tottered out of the carriage, leaning heavily on her son as she went. Her withered legs were barely thicker than her horn, except for the swollen joints at knee and shoulder. Her mane was the same arresting violet it had been in her youth, but the chemicals Rarity used to maintain its color and shape had left the hairs thin and brittle. She wore a heavy coat and matching shawl against the cold.

On her other side, she was supported by an old friend. Fluttershy's body showed few signs of her age; although her mane had faded to a rose-tinted white, she moved with all the grace and power of a mare of forty.

Behind them, a rolled-up blanket and a wicker basket floated in a nimbus of azure light. Rarity's magic, at least, was as strong as ever. She leaned on Fluttershy while she telekinetically spread the blanket in front of a tombstone. She made her slow way over, supported by the ponies on both sides, before they gently settled her onto the blanket. Fluttershy opened the basket and produced a chocolate cake, a bottle of champagne, and a pair of bright orange party hats.

The younger unicorn stood up. "I'll be at the fountain when you need me." He turned to go.

"Sunstone." Fluttershy put a hoof on his shoulder. "It's so sweet of you to take us out here."

"I know how much this means to Mom. To both of you. I'm happy to do this."

"One of my grandfoals should be helping you, at least."

"They're busy. It's apple bucking season, and they've got to worry about the wedding in a couple of weeks, too." Sunstone wiped the sweat from his brow. "Don't worry about me. I'm not too old to pull a carriage just yet." He trotted off, leaving the two old friends alone.

Fluttershy slipped the garish hat on Rarity's head before putting on her own. "This is the smallest birthday party we've had," she said.

Rarity's teeth were clenched tight. She magically popped open the bottle and poured two flutes of champagne. Two more glasses sat untouched in the basket. "You know Rainbow Dash doesn't like to come here anymore. Not since Applejack died."

Fluttershy nodded. "Still, for Pinkie's birthday... well, I hoped."

"It's her decision." Rarity's voice was firm, but she looked at the ground as she spoke. "I do wonder where Twilight is, though. It isn't like her to be late."

"Oh, that's right. She left this." Fluttershy reached into the basket and produced a scroll. Rarity floated it across the blanket and unrolled it.

*My dearest friends,*

*I'm so sorry, but I'll have to miss Pinkie Pie's birthday party this year, as Princess Celestia has called me to Canterlot. I explained how important this day is, but she insisted. I'm sure she has a good reason. Make sure to save me a piece of cake.*

*In Memoriam,*

*Twilight Sparkle*

Rarity frowned. "The princess had better have a marvelous excuse for this."

"Let's not get angry," said Fluttershy. "Not today."

"I suppose not." Rarity straightened her shoulders. "Shall we begin?"

Fluttershy nodded. She set several candles in the cake and lit them. Rarity looked up at the tombstone. She swallowed once, then again, and began to sing. Softly, Fluttershy joined in.

*"Happy birthday to you  
Happy birthday to you  
Happy birthday dear Pinkie  
Happy—"*

Both ponies pulled back as two bursts of magenta flame sprang into existence before them. The wind whipped the hoof-sized firebursts away, leaving two scrolls to fall to the blanket, one in front of each pony. The messages were sealed with purple wax bearing the mark of a six-pointed star.

The friends exchanged a look, then opened the letters. A quick glance confirmed that the contents were identical.

*I have big news. Meet me at the library as soon as you can.*  
-T.S.

# LAUGHTER

Rainbow Dash flew low to the ground, Twilight's mysterious message still running through her head. She longed to put on a final burst of speed to reach the library door, but fought down the urge. The doctors all said that if she pushed herself too hard, her wing might give out entirely and she'd never fly again. That would be—

She stopped herself. She couldn't even think about it. And so she flew slowly, as though the excitement wasn't burning a hole in her chest. They hadn't gone on an adventure since... Sun and Moon, it must've been fifteen years, at least. It was before Pinkie's grandkids found their cutie marks, anyway.

She banished thoughts of the past as she landed and pushed her way into the library. Rainbow Dash barely had time to notice Rarity and Fluttershy, propped up on cushions in the middle of the room, before she found herself shouting for joy and leaping forward, ignoring the twinge in her shoulder.

Rainbow Dash buried her face in Twilight's neck. "Stars above," Dash gasped. "It's incredible."

Twilight returned her friend's nuzzle. "It is rather a lot to get used to," she said.

"Let me look at you." Rainbow Dash pulled herself away and took a step backwards. Twilight Sparkle had changed. Her mane and coat glistened faintly with an inner light. Her horn was longer and finer, yet it somehow seemed more solid, more real, than ever before. And those wings. Sun and Moon, those *wings*. They were graceful, powerful, sleek... even during her prime, Rainbow Dash would have done anything for wings like those.

Rainbow Dash looked her friend up and down for well over a minute, trying and failing to keep from giggling at the sheer *joy* of seeing Twilight Sparkle looking so incredible. Finally, she spoke. "You got young."

It was true. Twilight's body was strong and lean. She stood straight and tall for the first time in years. The wrinkles were gone from her face, her coat had regained its luster, and the vibrant streak of rose had returned to her mane. More than that, she carried herself with the energy and confidence they had all lacked for decades.

Twilight grinned sheepishly. "Technically it's ageless, not young."

"But, what is..." Rainbow Dash paused, searching for words and finding none. "I mean, *what?*"

"I was just telling the others," said Twilight. "Princess Celestia told me she'd always hoped I'd be ready for this, and that now she's confident I have what it takes, and then she helped me look within myself and find the potential to change, and then... and then this."

Rainbow Dash felt like her grin was going to split her face in two. "Oh my gosh. This is... oh my gosh. I'm so proud of you."

"We all are," said Fluttershy. "You've worked so hard for this."

"So how does it work, exactly?" said Rarity. "Any heavenly powers?"

"I'm not actually sure yet," said Twilight. "There's a lot more that Princess Celestia needs to tell me, but I just had to teleport back and show you girls before anything else. I'll tell you the details as soon as I can."

"Man, who cares about that?" said Rainbow Dash. "What's important is that you're a princess from now on. I mean, you'll be a princess forever!"

"Oh, my," said Fluttershy. "I didn't even think of that. Do we have to call you 'Princess' now?"

"Well, *you* don't have to," said Twilight. "But yeah, it's 'Princess Twilight' to most ponies, I guess."

Rarity wiped away a tear. "Your brother would be so happy if he could see this."

"Heh." Twilight smiled wistfully. "He'd be the only member of the family who wasn't an alicorn." She sighed. "I still miss him. I guess I'll have to get used to outliving ponies."

"That reminds me," said Fluttershy. "We brought back the cake, like you asked."

"What cake?" Twilight shot her a blank look. "Oh, wait. Right. Thank you, I'd love some."

Rarity levitated the chocolate cake out of the picnic basket resting by her hooves. "What about you, Rainbow Dash? Care to join us?"

"I dunno." Rainbow Dash shifted her weight from hoof to hoof. "You guys know this is a little creepy."

"You didn't have a problem with it last year," said Twilight.

Rainbow Dash's head whipped around to face Twilight. "Things were different last year."

"Quite right," said Rarity. "We've always had this little memorial with five of us, before. Going down to four is bad enough. Please don't make it three."

"It's what Pinkie would want," said Fluttershy. "She'd hate for you to be sad today."

"Okay, fine," said Rainbow Dash. "It's still weird, though."

Princess Celestia had been trying to teach Twilight to use her new powers for hours, now. In the days since her transformation, her unicorn magic had become more powerful and easier to use than ever, but control of her alicorn magic eluded her. For what felt like the hundredth time, Twilight focused on the subtly unfamiliar energy within her and, with a mental heave, tried to force it out. Most of the magic stayed stubbornly still. Only a small spark zipped from her horn. Sadly, that made it one of her better attempts.

"It's not working," Twilight said. "I feel like a filly again. I thought I was supposed to be good at magic."

"You certainly are," said Celestia. "Alicorn magic is something of a different skill, though. Using it takes more than just willpower, and it can't be forced. You have to reach harmony with the center of your soul, where the unicorn, pegasus, and earth pony parts of yourself join. That's the focal point of your alicorn self, and if you're in tune with it, then you can guide the magic however you want."

Twilight nodded. "Okay. Harmony. How do I do that?" Despite her frustration, Twilight found herself falling easily into the role of the faithful student. It had been far too long since Celestia last had a reason to tutor her like this.

"I'll have to show you later, Twilight. Right now, I'm needed at the Ministry of Roads." Celestia turned towards the half-open door that led to a spiral staircase and down to the rest of the palace. They were in the study of Princess Twilight's suite, a richly appointed room of dark granite. Princess Twilight had been quite surprised to learn that the top four floors of the Gloom Tower were now set aside for her personal use.

"Can you wait a bit? I've almost got it. I can feel it." Twilight didn't want Celestia to go until her magic made some sort of progress. It felt too much like failure, watching her leave now.

Celestia glanced at the sun's position through the open windows that led to the tower's balcony. "Actually, I'm already running late. I'll be back as soon as I can," she said as she backed out the door.

As soon as Celestia was gone, Twilight began to meditate again. She sensed some sort of force on the edge of her awareness, but every time she tried to focus on it, it slipped through her mental grasp. Her mounting frustration made it more and more difficult to maintain her concentration.

"There you are." Twilight opened her eyes to see Princess Cadence. "I see Celestia's started your training already."

"Yeah," said Twilight. "It's tough, though. I don't think I'm making much progress."

Cadence nodded. "I remember how hard it was when I first learned. Here, come with me. You look like you need a break, and there are other parts of being an alicorn that you need to learn about."

Twilight followed as Cadence made her way to the balcony. "Like what?" she asked.

"Like this." Cadence unfurled her wings and leapt over the railing. She flew in a short curve to face Twilight again, hovering in place. "Come on out here, and I'll teach you some of the basics."

Twilight peered over the balcony's edge. The Gloaming Tower extended past the edge of the cliff that supported Canterlot. She found herself looking down a drop of several thousand feet to the gently rolling hills below. "Maybe I should stay over the balcony." Twilight flexed her wings. "I haven't actually used these things yet."

"Not once?"

Twilight shook her head. "I've been more focused on the magic side of things. My unicorn magic is so much more powerful, and there's alicorn magic to explore, too. I just haven't had time."

"We'll have to fix that." Cadence alighted atop the railing. "The first thing is to make sure you beat your wings in time with each other. If they're not coordinated, you won't stay level. Go ahead, give it a try."

Twilight tried. It took several attempts, and Cadence had to correct her form more than once. Her wings still felt foreign, like they were a part of somepony else's body that had been accidentally loaned to her. Eventually, however, Twilight managed to heave herself off the ground.

"Hah!" she cried. "I'm flying! I'm actually flying!" Twilight hovered perhaps a foot above the



balcony—or attempted to hover. She tilted and jerked from side to side in her fight to stay upright. It didn't feel weightless, like she'd expected; instead, it felt as though she was constantly clawing her way upwards while gravity hauled her down. A heady, invigorating feeling overcame her, like galloping across an open plain and scaling a cliff face at the same time.

"Good job," said Cadence. "You always were a quick learner." She hopped off the railing and hovered in the open air. "Now follow me. I've got plenty more to show you."

"Are you sure? I mean, I'm still new at this. Falling to my death is not part of the plan."

"You'll be fine. You're immortal, remember? I've put myself back together after worse scrapes."

Twilight grinned and flew her shaky way beyond the balcony. Cadence folded her wings and dove. With a whoop of awe and terror, Twilight followed.

Carousel Boutique had changed over the decades. The space was Sunstone's as much as it was Rarity's, if not more so. The mannequins and racks of clothing were joined by glass cases displaying bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and brooches. Rarity's work was still prominent, but much of it was for display, not for sale. Rarity simply wasn't able to keep the hours she once had. Nevertheless, when she worked, she worked with as much passion as ever.

"Turn a little to the left, darling," said Rarity. "No, your left, not my left. Yes, perfect! Don't move." From her perch atop a thick cushion at the center of her boutique, Rarity floated a small arsenal of pins and clips through the air and used them to make a dozen small adjustments to the pure white dress draped over the yellow-gold earth pony before her. "This won't take long. I'm sure you'll look perfect for the big day."

"I'm sure," said Honey Pie as Rarity twitched and tugged at her dress. "It looks wonderful already, really. Are you sure you need to change it?"

"But of course," said Rarity. "Your father asked for some additions to the bridesmaids' dresses, so yours simply must be changed to match."

"Dad!" Honey Pie shot an exasperated look at the earth pony by her side. "Did you have to? Those dresses were fine."

"You only get married once, Honey," said Shepherd Pie. "You should have something better than 'fine.' The new ones will be a much better match for the wedding's scenery."

“But now we have to collect them again, alter them, and get them back to the right ponies! Who knows what could go wrong?”

“Already taken care of.” Shepherd Pie draped a cream-colored foreleg over his daughter. “Have some faith. You asked me to plan this thing, and by the blue sky above, it’s gonna stay planned.”

“He’s quite right,” said Rarity. “You’re lucky to have somepony who’s so talented at coordinating all these details.”

“Yeah.” Honey Pie nodded. “I don’t know how you can keep all that stuff straight, Dad.”

“Hah! You think this is good? You should’ve seen your grandmother in action,” said Shepherd Pie. “I swear she had a seventh sense for that stuff.”

The bell above the front door tinkled, and Twilight Sparkle entered the shop. Honey Pie bowed.

“Do hold still, darling,” said Rarity. “We’re not finished here.”

Honey Pie stared at Rarity with wide eyes. “But, but—princess! Here!”

Shepherd Pie smirked. “Don’t worry, Honey. It’s still Twilight. She doesn’t bite.”

“It’s alright,” said Twilight. “I’m not here for anything official. It’s about my dress for the wedding, actually.”

“Oh?” said Rarity. “I thought we finished that last week. Did you need something changed?”

“Well, yes.” Twilight levitated the indigo gown out of her saddlebags. “Wing holes.”

“Ah, of course! Come to think of it, we can do so much more with your new figure. In fact, I’ll need to start over entirely to do it justice. Drop by this evening so we can get started, if you would.”

“Are you sure? There’s only two days left, and I know you’ve got a lot to do. Altering the dress you just made for me will be more than enough.”

“Nonsense, Twilight. I haven’t made a gown for a princess since after that time we defeated Spike’s mother. I don’t have many chances left to do work like this, and I’m not about to miss this one.”

“But you—”

"I won't hear it. I'll see you this evening."

"Alright, alright," said Twilight. "I'll let you get back to work."

"Oh, one other thing, darling. Will you be stopping by Sweet Apple Acres?"

Twilight nodded. "I'm planning to drop in and see Fluttershy." It wasn't a lie, she decided. She was certainly planning to visit *now*.

"Magnificent. Could you bring her gown when you go? It's the one by the door, there."

"I'd be happy to." Twilight levitated the gown and folded it neatly into her saddlebag. Twilight smiled to herself as she left the shop. It was good to see Rarity staying active in spite of her infirmity.

"Hey, Twilight! Where've you been? I was looking all over for you!"

"Hi, Rainbow Dash." Twilight craned her neck upwards to watch her friend's descent. Rainbow Dash flew in a broad circle, slowly losing speed and altitude until she touched down alongside Twilight. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I was thinking about your alicorn thing," said Rainbow Dash.

"You and everypony else. It's all I've talked about for the past four days."

"I bet," said Rainbow Dash. "It's a pretty big deal. Anyway, how did it actually happen? You said Princess Celestia cast some spell on you, right?"

"It wasn't a spell, exactly," said Twilight. "She did use telepathy to guide my thoughts in the right direction, but it was closer to meditation. She steered me to the part of my soul where my unicorn magic is, and she showed me the pegasus and earth pony parts of my soul that I wasn't connected to. From there, I just had to open my heart to the rest of myself." She bit her lip. "I'm making it sound easier than it was. I think it took hours, although it's all sort of a blur."

"So is this something you could do to somepony else?"

"I doubt it," said Twilight. "It was difficult for me, and I've spent my whole life studying magic. Even with Princess Celestia's help, finding the right state of mind took a lot of determination and patience. For anypony else, it would probably be impossible."

"Probably?"

"Well, I haven't exactly tried teaching somepony else, so I can't be sure. Why?"

"What do you mean, why? So you can do it to us!"

"Oh. Oh!" Twilight nodded. "That would be wonderful, wouldn't it? You, me, Fluttershy, and Rarity... I don't know, though. Immortality is a huge responsibility, and Celestia was pretty clear that it's not for most ponies. I think she would've done that for you already, if she meant to do it at all."

"Come on, Twilight. You can't tell me you don't want us around."

"Of course I do! But I don't know if it's a good idea, or even if it's possible."

"I do impossible things all the time. There was the sonic rainboom, crossing the Arabian Sea, that thing with the sphinxes, outrunning the—"

"I get the idea," said Twilight. "I'll talk to the princess. I can't promise anything, but we'll see what she says."

"Thanks," said Rainbow Dash. "Let me know." She took to the sky and soared away.

Twilight waited until Rainbow Dash was out of sight before spreading her own wings. Her flying was improving fast, Cadence said. In a matter of days, Twilight had learned more than most pegasus fillies learned in six months. As she wove a crooked path through the air, Twilight reflected that being slightly less clumsy than a blank-flanked novice wasn't such a great achievement. Still, the practice would only help, and it was faster than walking. It wasn't long before the verdant orchards of Sweet Apple Acres stretched out below her.

She spotted Crabapple, Fluttershy's son, hard at work bucking trees. Twilight steered her course towards him. As she descended, the wind currents shifted, throwing her off course. Twilight was still moving swiftly when she struck the ground. She stumbled forward several steps before her momentum proved too much and sent her tumbling in a heap.

"Next time aim for a tree," said Crabapple. "You might knock some apples off for me." The pegasus drove a powerful kick into a tree, knocking its fruit loose.

"Hi, Crabapple." Twilight picked herself up and released the shield spell she had hastily conjured around the gown. "I'm looking for your mom so I—hey, do you feel that?"

"No," said Crabapple, "because I don't have a concussion."

"Not that." Like everyone who spent any time around the Apple family, Twilight was used to shrugging off Crabapple's gibes. "It's like there's something radiating from the trees, some sort of... not warmth, but some other kind of energy, I guess? It's comforting, though. Don't you feel

it?”

“Let me check.” Crabapple fluttered his brick red wings. “Nope. Still a pegasus. No earth pony senses here.”

“Of course! *That’s* what it is,” said Twilight. “Wait a minute. How do you know what earth pony magic feels like?”

“Try growing up on a farm. Comes up a lot.”

“Oh, right. I guess it would. Anyway, do you know where your mom is? I’ve got her gown for your son’s wedding.”

“Produce shed,” said Crabapple. “Try not to hurt yourself on your way over.”

Twilight nodded her thanks and set off.

She quickly found her way to the shed, where Fluttershy was combing through the harvest, sorting the good apples from the bad. “Oh, hello,” Fluttershy said. “What brings you here today?”

“Rarity asked me to bring over your dress for Apple Sprout’s wedding. Here, look.” Twilight spread the gown in the air.

Fluttershy examined it closely. “It’s very nice,” she said. “I told Rarity not to bother with the embroidery on the hem, though. She’s too busy as it is.”

“When has that ever stopped her? You know how she gets about weddings. She’s almost as bad as Pinkie Pie was.”

“Mm.” Fluttershy nodded. “I wish Pinkie could be there with us. What was it she called weddings?”

“It was ‘the first day of a party that lasts your whole life.’ Do you remember the celebration she put together when Shepherd got married? I thought it would never end.”

Fluttershy refolded the dress in silence before abruptly looking up and meeting Twilight’s gaze. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” said Twilight.

“What do you think happens to ponies when we die?”

“What? Fluttershy, what brought this on?”

“You’re close to Princess Celestia,” said Fluttershy. “If anypony knows, it’s her.”

“She doesn’t. I asked her once, right after my grandmother died. That would’ve been way back when I was in school. She told me, ‘I don’t know. I’ve never died.’ Much later, I did some more thorough research. If there were answers out there, I would’ve found them, but nopony knows for sure.”

“I like to think we come back as some other type of animal,” said Fluttershy.

“Why do you believe that, if I can ask?” said Twilight.

“There are just so many different types of creatures, and they all live such different lives. If we only got to experience one, I don’t think that would be fair.” Fluttershy shrugged. “But, um, that’s only what I think. What do you think happens?”

“Any sort of afterlife or reincarnation would have to be an enormously complex process with some kind of powerful mechanism behind it. Something like that would leave behind traces of its existence, but nopony’s ever been able to find anything of the sort. Our observations are entirely consistent with the hypothesis that there’s no life after death.”

“You’re saying this life is all there is?”

Twilight nodded. “Put simply, yes. Why the sudden interest?”

“Thanks for stopping by, Twilight. I’ll go put the gown away.”

“This is bad,” said Honey Pie. “This is really bad.” She paced across the bare pine floor of Apple Sprout’s bedroom. “We have to fix this.”

Apple Sprout fought down the urge to grin. His fiancée was adorable when she got like this, but saying so aloud would probably be unwise.

“I’m sorry,” said Granny Fluttershy. “I thought you wanted the red roses.”

“No, no, no!” said Honey Pie. “The red roses are for the entrée. The garlands are supposed to be the *white* roses. Oh, what are we going to do?”

Fluttershy shrank away. "Oh, goodness. I'm sorry."

Honey Pie took a deep breath. "It's okay," she said. "It's not a big deal." The fake smile she put on was enough to reassure Granny Fluttershy, but Apple Sprout could see through it like a window. "You did fine."

"Oh. Good," said Fluttershy. "I'll talk to Rosebud and see if we can fix this before the wedding tomorrow."

"That's alright, Granny," said Apple Sprout. "We'll take it from here."

"If you say so," said Fluttershy. "I'll bring the flowers over, so you can figure out what to do with them." She left the room.

The moment the door closed, Honey Pie dropped her calm façade like a hot coal. "This is bad, Sprout. We have to fix this." She tugged at her mane.

"Relax," said Apple Sprout. "It's just flowers."

"It isn't! It's our *wedding*! It's supposed to be perfect!"

"Hey. It will be." He laid a hoof on her withers. "We're getting married, right? I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you. It doesn't get any more perfect than that."

"I know." Honey Pie leaned against him. "But there's still the ceremony, and there's so much that can still go wrong!"

"So what if it does?" Apple Sprout sat on the floor and pulled Honey Pie down beside him. "I don't care if the whole town catches on fire, I am still going to marry the stuffing out of you." He poked her in the ribs.

"Hey!" Grinning, she slapped his leg away. "Watch those hooves!"

"How's this?" He wrapped her in a loose embrace.

"Mm. Better." She shifted into a more comfortable position, resting against his side.

He held her close, listening to the soft sound of her breathing. Neither of them moved.

They didn't notice when Fluttershy came back. She cracked open the door and saw the two of them locked in their silent embrace. Carefully, quietly, she shut the door, deposited the basket of red roses beside it, and backed away.

Twilight Sparkle cantered down the red-carpeted hallway of the palace. She had managed to track Princess Celestia here, halfway up the Radiant Spire. She was just in time, too. She found Celestia leaving the office of some minister whose name eluded Twilight. "Princess!" Twilight called. "Excuse me, Princess?"

Celestia stopped walking and turned. "Yes, Princess? What is it?"

Twilight blushed. "Oh, right. Still getting used to that." She couldn't quite wrap her mind around the fact that she was technically Celestia's peer, now. She still felt like the faithful student. "Anyway. I wanted to ask for your help."

"Always, Twilight. Come, walk with me."

"Right. So. I was thinking about my friends." Twilight fell into step beside Celestia and set off towards the enormous open windows at the end of the hall. "I remember what living without them was like, before I came to Ponyville."

"That was a long time ago. Is something wrong?"

"I don't want to live like that again. I don't want my friends to die. If there's any way to turn them into princesses, too, then I'd like to do it. They don't have my training, though. I don't know if it's possible. I was... I was hoping you could help them?"

"I see." Celestia's expression grew distant, the way it had when Twilight once asked her about the Mare in the Moon, back during her school days. "We talked about this, Twilight. You know Equestrian society would collapse if we elevated our friends like that. You know that most ponies aren't prepared to handle immortality."

"I know, I know. But I thought, well, my friends aren't most ponies. They're the Elements of Harmony. They've saved Equestria eleven times, by my count. Twelve, if you count the Volcano Sisters separately. And they taught me everything I know about friendship. That counts for something, right? We want ponies like them around forever. If anypony's earned this, then they have."

"Is that what you believe is true?" asked Celestia. "Or is it just what you want to be true?"

Twilight looked at her hooves. "Honestly, I'm not sure." When she first spoke with Celestia, Twilight had agreed with the implacable logic of letting nature and mortality take their course, but that had all been abstract. Applying the same logic to Rarity and Rainbow Dash was painful.



A part of Twilight was refusing to face that, she knew. She had the unclean feeling that came with trying to argue her way to a foregone conclusion instead of trying to find the truth. "I think maybe it was." She forced herself not to shrink away from the logic. Such weakness would have been embarrassing in the best of circumstances. In front of the princess, it made her feel like a filly who had forgotten to study for a test.

Celestia gave her a bittersweet smile, the one that always appeared during lectures that started with *I expected too much of you*. "Your friends are very special ponies, Twilight. They're good-hearted, and wiser than most ponies can imagine. They wouldn't make good princesses, though. Being a princess is not a favor to be given to those you love. It is not an award to be given to the worthy. It is a solemn duty and a terrible burden, and it must only be given to those with the will to endure it and the talent to steward Equestria for all time. Ponies like that are extremely rare, and we are always trying to find them. We can't act unless we're completely sure, though, because making somepony an alicorn is something that can never be undone. Cadence and I had our eyes on you since you were very young, but even with everything you've done, it's only just recently that we were sure." Celestia reached the end of the hallway and its enormous open window. Without breaking stride, she unfurled her wings and launched herself into the vacant space beyond.

Twilight barely hesitated before following suit. After a week and a half, flying wasn't a challenge anymore. It was only slightly nerve-wracking, hanging in the air a dozen stories above the unforgiving ground. "You mean Cadence was thinking of this when I was a filly?"

Princess Celestia banked towards the Argent Tower, a shorter turret on the other side of the palace gardens. "The Princess of Love doesn't foalsit for just anypony."

Twilight blinked. "Wow. I had no idea."

"I hope that gives you an idea of how seriously we take this," said Celestia. "These decisions are permanent, not just for a lifetime, but for *all* lifetimes. We can never, ever make a mistake. Very few ponies have the strength to watch their friends and family die, generation after generation, and still care for the ponies who come after. Even fewer have the compassion, wisdom, and raw talent it takes to guide Equestria. Finding a pony with both, like you, is a rare and special thing."

"I understand," said Twilight. "So that fortitude you're talking about, that's necessary to becoming an alicorn, right? I mean, apart from whether it's a good idea."

"Not quite. Your friends *could* become alicorns if they had the right teacher. They just *shouldn't*."

"But how do you know that? Did anypony try transforming a pony who wasn't ready?"

"That's not my story to tell," said Celestia. "Do you understand why you can't try, though?" She

landed gently on the terrace atop the Argent Tower.

Twilight touched down beside her. "It's not what I wanted to hear, but I think I really understand, this time. I just don't like the idea of leaving my friends behind." Of course Celestia was right, as always. "I know what I have to do, but part of me still wishes there was another way."

"I know. Believe me, I know. Did you know that you weren't my first student? There were others, long ago, who came so close..." Her mouth tightened. "Letting go hurt, but it had to be done." Celestia looked Twilight straight in the eyes. "I'd like you to spend half an hour and think of all the ways society could fall apart if we tried any other way. We went over the descriptions, but I want you to picture it. Imagine trying to become a respected scholar in a world where Star Swirl and Owlbright are still alive. Imagine how crowded Ponyville would be with a thousand years' worth of alicorns. Imagine how bored an average pony would become after three or four centuries of life. To you, this is all just words, now. You have to understand with your heart as well as your mind." Celestia walked into the tower, leaving Twilight alone with her thoughts.

The wedding was in full swing. The Apple clan, nearly a dozen strong even excluding the ponies who had left the farm, had transformed the largest of their fields into an outdoor banquet hall. Over a hundred guests milled around as the ceremony approached.

Fluttershy scanned the crowd. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't see her."

"She said she'd be here this time," said Crabapple. "Element of Loyalty, my tail."

"Wedding ain't started yet," said Big Macintosh.

Fluttershy nodded. "She could still show up."

"She better," said Crabapple. "I've got one kid and he's got one wedding. If Auntie Dash misses it, I don't aim to let her live it down." He glared at nothing in particular.

"You should try to calm down," said Fluttershy. She leaned over and nuzzled Big Macintosh's neck.

"Calm down, Ma?" said Crabapple. "I did mention that this is Sprout's *wedding*? Hey, careful, there!" Crabapple darted over and restraightened Macintosh's bow tie where Fluttershy had knocked it askew. "Great. Now the collar's all wrinkled. You look like a vagrant."

"It's just a shirt," said Big Macintosh. "Ain't nopony gonna notice a shirt today."

“Look,” said Fluttershy. “Here comes Rarity.” She pointed to where Sunstone was entering the field, pulling Rarity’s carriage behind him. He was chatting with an older unicorn stallion who walked alongside. Fluttershy waved, and Sunstone changed direction to approach her.

Macintosh nodded at the guests as they arrived. “Center Stage. Sunstone. Howdy.”

“Hey, Big M! Glad to be here,” said Center Stage. “One moment, let me get the wife.” He opened the carriage door and helped Rarity ease her way out.

Despite her slow, painful steps, Rarity was beaming. “Congratulations, everypony. This is such a fabulous day for all of you.” She looked to Fluttershy. “I can’t even imagine how proud you must be.”

“Everything should be set up alright for you, Miss Rarity,” said Crabapple. “If you’re too broken to get around, let us know.”

“I appreciate your... *concern*, darling, but I’ll manage just fine.”

Macintosh frowned dubiously at that. He glanced to Fluttershy, who nodded and began scanning the crowd.

“C’mon, my jewel,” said Center Stage. “It’s a long walk to the pavillion.”

“Then we’d best get started,” said Rarity. “I’ll see all of you there.” She began hobbling towards the heavy canvas tent at the far end of the field, leaning heavily on Sunstone as she went. The middle-aged stallion sagged a bit under the burden.

“Apple Breeze!” Fluttershy reached out and stopped a passing colt who was only a couple of years past getting his cutie mark. “Would you please help Miss Rarity get to the pavillion?”

“Aw, but Granny, I—”

“No buts,” snapped Crabapple. “Do as you’re told.”

“Yes, Uncle Crabapple.” Apple Breeze took Sunstone’s place supporting Rarity. Sunstone breathed a sigh of relief.

Rarity smiled at Fluttershy as she tottered away. “Thank you. It must be wonderful to have grandchildren around.”

Sunstone rolled his eyes. “Subtle, isn’t she?”

Center Stage poked him in the ribs. "Well, hurry up and get us some! We're not getting any younger."

"*Dad!* I swear, I can't take you anywhere." Sunstone's voice faded into the general hubbub as they left.

A voice came from behind Crabapple. "Hey, guys. Did I miss anything?"

"Auntie Dash!" Crabapple whirled and threw a hug around Rainbow Dash. "I was afraid you weren't coming."

Rainbow Dash returned the hug. "Like I'd miss Sprout's wedding. Wild horses couldn't keep me away."

Crabapple took a step back and cleared his throat. "Yes, well, it took you long enough. This'd be a lot easier if you'd move back to the farm with the rest of us."

"Yeah, no thanks. Too many memories here." She turned to the rest of the group. "Hey, Fluttershy. Hey, Macintosh. Uh, what's wrong with your collar?"

"See?" said Crabapple. "You see what I mean? You'd think—" He paused as he caught sight of a passing pony. "Goldie! Hey, Golden Apple! Get over here!"

The pegasus made her way over. "If it isn't my darling brother. What is it now?"

"What do you *think* it is? Did you find where Sprout left the rings?"

"I asked Apple Breeze to look for them," said Golden Apple. "I'm quite busy enough overseeing the preparations for the banquet."

Crabapple rolled his eyes. "Why, is looking for stuff not glamorous enough for a fancy Canterlot pony? Well, no big deal, it's only the galloping *wedding rings*. As it happens, your son got sidetracked."

"Wonderful. Well, I can look for the rings, or I can look for the red roses, whichever you prefer."

"Stick to your flowers. I'll track down the rings. I never should've trusted this to anypony else." Crabapple stomped away. Golden Apple kissed Rainbow Dash on the cheek before hurrying off to her task. The remaining three ponies were left in an island of calm amidst the chaos of the surrounding wedding.

Big Macintosh turned to Rainbow Dash. "Crabapple was right."

Rainbow Dash looked up. "Huh?"

"About living with us," said Fluttershy. "You should come back to the farm. I don't like thinking of you all alone in that cloud house."

"Hey, I'm fine on my own."

"Ain't right for a pony to be alone," said Macintosh. "Not at our age."

"You have a family here," said Fluttershy. "I know you first came to be with Applejack, and I know you never had children of your own, but you've been here since before the kids were born. You're part of their lives, and you always have been. You saw how excited Crabapple was to see you."

"Yeah. I know." Rainbow Dash pawed at the ground. "It's just, without AJ, it doesn't feel right. Everything around here reminds me of her, you know? Like, right there, that's the fence I helped her fix after the thing with the jackalopes. And we were standing right here when she told me about her fight with Crabapple. The big one, I mean. You remember how mad she got?" She gasped a high, shuddering breath. "I can't live with all this. It's too much."

Fluttershy nuzzled her friend. "You miss her."

Rainbow Dash squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in Fluttershy's shoulder. "So much."

Big Macintosh cleared his throat. "Ladies."

They looked up. A mound of perfect white silk was approaching on four legs, accompanied by a young stallion in a tuxedo. Rainbow Dash hurriedly composed herself.

Fluttershy stepped forward. "Congratulations, you two!"

"Thanks, Granny," said Apple Sprout, giving Fluttershy a quick embrace.

"Hi, Fluttershy," came the voice from behind the veil. "Guess I'd better get used to calling you 'Granny,' too."

"Oh, it isn't such a big change," said Fluttershy. "You're almost family already. Your grandmother was like a sister to me."

"Yeah, Dad told me about it," said Honey Pie. "I wish I'd been old enough to really get to know her before she died. I mean, we were close, but I was still a kid."

"She would've been so proud of you," said Fluttershy.

Apple Sprout nodded. "I wish we—" His gaze jerked up to the sky. "Oh, stars above, it's true!"

Twilight Sparkle soared above them. Ponies throughout the orchard pointed and stared. Her new wings barely moved as she swung above the milling guests in a broad, lazy curve. Twilight scanned the ground until she caught sight of the bride and groom. She dove downwards, then spread her wings at the last moment, catching the air and halting her fall. The downdraft scattered stray leaves and stalks of grass as her hooves touched the ground.

Honey Pie bowed. "Princess."

"Oh, none of that." Twilight neatly folded her wings. "Today is supposed to be about you, not me."

Big Macintosh frowned. "Then there weren't no call to come flying in like that."

"You kidding?" said Rainbow Dash. "If I had wings like that, you'd never catch me on the ground."

"No, Macintosh is right," said Twilight. "I shouldn't have let myself get so caught up in it. I'm sorry."

"Think nothing of it, Princess," said Honey Pie.

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Seriously, stop that."

"At once, Princess."

Shepherd Pie bustled up to the group. "Honey Pie, what on Equestria are you two doing out here?"

"I'm mingling, Dad! It's my wedding. I'm supposed to mingle."

"Not right now, you're not. The ceremony starts in fifteen minutes."

Honey Pie cast a panicked glance at Apple Sprout. "What? But what about the rings?"

"Golden Apple has them," said Shepherd. "Don't ask me where she found them, but she did."

"See?" Apple Sprout nudged Honey Pie. "You see what I mean? Everything's under control. It's all gonna be fine."

"Yes, yes." Shepherd Pie rolled his eyes. "Move along, you." The two of them galloped away.

Shepherd chuckled. "Kids, right? Everything's so important to her. Five years from now, she'll be laughing about all this." He gave Twilight an exaggerated bow. "Princess Sparkle, Your Highness, might I request the honor of—"

"Don't even think about it," said Twilight. "The princess treatment is bad enough coming from regular townspies. I won't let my friends start with it, too."

Shepherd grinned. "Oh, let me have some fun. But seriously, the wedding's about to start. Get your royal personage to the pavillion."

# HONESTY

Beneath the white pavillion, a three-piece string band played while Lyric Heartstrings called out the steps to a lively square dance. Revelers pranced to and fro in a constantly shifting formation. Macintosh and Fluttershy stumbled through the steps with more enthusiasm than grace. The groom's young cousin Apple Crumble leapt along to the music, hoof in hoof with a blushing colt from the Carrot family. Crabapple stalked about the sidelines, glaring at everything and nothing.

At the center of it all, Apple Sprout and Honey Pie were in their own private world. The bride's veil was gone, and they each wore a slim gold ring over a front hoof. The two of them never broke eye contact as they wove between and around the other couples.

Twilight Sparkle stood on the sidelines and watched three generations pass before her. These ponies were the closest thing she had to a family. Her parents were long gone and her brother had died childless. Twilight's own years had been spent in study, research, and adventure, leaving no time for marriage or children. No, that wasn't quite true, she hadn't *wanted* any of that. Watching her dearest friends raise their families had been—still was—more than enough.

A memory sprang unbidden to her mind. *Immortality means watching your friends and family die, generation after generation*, came Princess Celestia's voice.

It was a bitter thought. Crabapple, Honey Pie, and the rest were supposed to be the legacy she would leave behind after her own death. Outliving them had never occurred to her. She tried to picture Apple Sprout growing old and withering away, like Rarity. Twilight's prodigious imagination failed her. He looked so impossibly lively, wearing that expression of intense, impetuous infatuation particular to young lovers.

Another partnerless pony sidled up beside Twilight. "You look distracted," said Rainbow Dash. "Whatcha thinking about?"

The song came to an end. Lyric fell silent as the band moved into an airy waltz. The dancers broke formation and moved closer to their partners.

"You know," said Twilight. "Life. And age."



"I hear you. I mean, look at Crabapple. I remember changing his diapers. Now his kid's just about ready to have kids. How did we get so old?"

"The same way everypony else does," said Twilight. "Except me, I suppose."

"About that." Rainbow Dash lowered her voice. "Did you talk to Princess Celestia?"

"I did," said Twilight. "It was... not what I expected."

Rainbow Dash's eyes lit up. "Does that mean you can do it?"

"It's more complicated than that. I think it would work if I tried, but I can't. Immortality is a huge responsibility. It's not something I can just go handing out."

"But think about it! You, me, Fluttershy, and Rarity, together forever!"

"I want that. You know I do. This is bigger than we are, though. Princesses are an immensely powerful force in Equestrian society, and what's more, we're eternal. The effects of our rule are much, much more important than our individual lives. Princess Celestia can't take chances by adding to our ranks unless she's certain beyond the shadow of a doubt. If elevating ponies so freely were really a good idea, don't you think Celestia would be doing it already?"

"I don't know what the princess thinks. I know you told me you wanted to live with your friends forever."

"You don't realize the importance of what you're asking," said Twilight. "Turning you into an alicorn would be more significant than anything I've done in my life."

"You're trotting right it would," said Rainbow Dash. "I know exactly what I'm asking for, here. It's a big deal, I get that. I just don't get why that's *bad*. Come on, I'm not asking for anything that you don't already have."

"Is that what this is about? Are you just jealous?"

"Of course I'm jealous. I'm going to *die*. You're not. I'd be crazy not to be jealous of that."

"I can understand why you feel that way," said Twilight. "That's not a good reason to make you immortal, though. I'd be happy to talk about your feelings, but you need to start by accepting that death is a part of life."

"It doesn't have to be! I'm not okay with dying, not if there's actually something we can do about it!"

"*Can* doesn't mean *should*!" Twilight shook her head. "Immortality sounds a lot nicer than it actually is. It gets lonely, watching everypony you know die. Most ponies aren't cut out to handle it. Remember how hard Applejack's death hit you. I couldn't put you through that again and again."

"Excuse me, girls," said Fluttershy as she made her way over, "maybe now isn't the best time for you to have this talk." She glanced meaningfully at the surrounding ponies, many of whom were staring.

Rainbow Dash ignored her. "So how is it okay for you to be immortal? I mean, if that sort of thing would make all this bad stuff happen, then why do you get to do it?"

"You know exactly why!" said Twilight. "A rare few ponies have the skill to help guide Equestria and the fortitude to handle immortality. Celestia chose me to be one of them. If you'd just listen for one—"

"Right, so all your friends have to die so that you can feel special," said Rainbow Dash.

Fluttershy cleared her throat. "Maybe we should—"

"Hey!" said Twilight. "Don't make this about me, Dash."

"Yeah," said Rainbow Dash, "I guess I should leave that to you and the princess. You'll have plenty of time to practice while the rest of us are rotting in the ground."

"Oh, that is *it*!" said Twilight. "I've had just about enough of—"

"Girls." Fluttershy fixed them with a look like an oncoming train. "Not here."

"Fine." Twilight nodded. "You're right. I don't have to stand here and take this, though." She beat her wings and took to the air. The crowd began to mutter as she climbed and soared away from Sweet Apple Acres.

Fluttershy fixed her glare on Rainbow Dash. "There was no need to do that."

"What?" said Rainbow Dash. "She was the one who—"

"We'll talk about this later," said Fluttershy. "I'd like to celebrate my grandson's wedding now, please."

"You have to focus," said Princess Celestia. "You won't be able to call up your magic if you're this distracted."

"I'm trying," hissed Twilight. She sat facing the red-gold light of the setting sun where it streamed into her study. "It's not easy, after what happened at the wedding today."

"Oh? Is everything okay?"

Twilight sighed. "Rainbow Dash was being a jerk about my transformation. She's jealous and she's lashing out. I can understand that, but it's just... she's really *good* at lashing out. I don't want my new status to change our friendship."

"What did she say?"

"Can we talk about this later?" said Twilight. "I kind of wanted to get my magic under control today."

"Very well, but it won't be easy. You have to reach harmony with your inner self, and you can't do that while you're struggling against your emotions."

"Am I supposed to just ignore how I feel, then?" Twilight wasn't sure if she could do that.

"That's the last thing you should do. I know you can access unicorn magic by shoving your emotions aside, but alicorn magic doesn't work that way. These thoughts are a part of you, right now. You have to embrace them, good and bad. Ignoring them won't make them go away, but acknowledging them is the first step to working through your problems. I'm asking you to get in touch with your true self, not your idealized self. Think about Rainbow Dash. Focus on your fear and your frustration. Don't exaggerate it, but let it in to your mind."

Twilight grimaced. "Okay. I've got it."

"Hold on to that. Now, recall how much you care about each other. Remember all the sacrifices she made for you. Remember everything you accomplished together. Make sure you've got all of that in your mind."

Twilight shut her eyes and concentrated. She had to struggle to keep both her friendship and her anger with Rainbow Dash in the forefront of her mind, not because the effort was mentally taxing, but because she didn't want to think about how scared she was of turning her friendship into something else. She forced herself not to shy away from the painful thought. There was an ache deep inside her soul when she contemplated the too-real possibility of losing one of her oldest, dearest friends. Sitting there, deep in meditation, Twilight Sparkle resolved to repair the breach, no matter what it took.

"Now," said Princess Celestia. "Focus on your magic."

Twilight felt as though a dam had burst within her. There was the familiar sensation of power coursing through her thoughts, but it felt suddenly whole, as though some key piece of her magic had been missing her whole life and she had never noticed. She was used to magic as a force to impose her will on the world, but this was different. She felt in tune with reality, able to weave new patterns across the surface of a tapestry that had suddenly snapped into focus. She opened her mouth to shout her triumph, but all that came out was an unprincesslike squeal of joy.

"Excellent!" Celestia beamed. "I can feel the power flowing from you. Now, try to reach out with your magic. Let's see if we can find out how your special talent manifests."

"My special talent? Why would that change?"

"I'm sure it will be similar, but you're more powerful now," said Celestia. "Back when I was a pegasus, my special talent wasn't raising the sun."

Twilight tentatively extended her awareness. Immediately, she felt a comforting presence enveloping her from all directions, like a thick blanket on a winter morning. She pushed her mind against the presence, and was overwhelmed by—

Distance. Calm. Piercing white light. A brisk, invigorating chill. And, somewhere out there, two minds that were not her own. Twilight snapped her awareness back to her own body. The sensation was overpowering, if not quite unpleasant.

"Oh, my." Celestia jerked up straight, as though somepony had poked her in the ribs. "I can't say I'm surprised, but I certainly wasn't expecting you to find it that *quickly*."

"What?" said Twilight. "What was that?" She glanced around, as if expecting to find that strange presence hiding in the shadows.

"You just touched the sky," said Celestia. "I felt you on the border between day and night. You can control the heavens, Twilight."

"I can?" Twilight reached out again, touching the new presence more gently. She could sense the sun sinking towards the horizon and the stars struggling to emerge into the night. "I can!" In all her years of studying, Twilight had taken for granted that the one thing Princess Celestia could never teach was the skill of guiding the skies. Now, they would share even this. She was grinning so hard her face hurt.

All this bowing and fawning was becoming a problem, Twilight decided. In Ponyville, it was a mere annoyance, but here in Canterlot, ponies were serious about their royalty, to the point where Twilight could barely move about in public. Right now, she was just trying to drop by the spa to see Fluttershy's youngest daughter, and she had already spent a quarter of an hour enduring the gushing of the doormare, the receptionist, and two especially forward customers.

"—we here at Soothing Rein would be happy to accommodate you however we can." The receptionist was a unicorn by the name of Velvet Sheen, and he had been going on like that for some time. "If there's anything we can do, don't hesitate to—"

"Enough," said Twilight, cutting short Velvet's babbling with a raised hoof. "No. Thank you." Twilight was trying to emulate Princess Celestia's infinite patience, but she could tell she fell far short of the mark. "I'm here to see Golden Apple, if she's not too busy."

"I'll fetch her at once," said Velvet. "She'll be up front in a moment, you have my—"

"I'll just go find her. I remember the way." Twilight brushed past the front desk, rolling her eyes once she was past. Velvet had known her by sight for years before her transformation, and still he saw only a princess. Twilight made her way through a short hallway and to Golden Apple's office. The door was propped open, revealing pastel-colored walls decorated with a full-length mirror and several posters of ponies who Twilight assumed were Equestria's trendiest models.

Golden Apple's voice came through the door. "If she can't be there, then we'll have to find somepony else to come in." If Twilight hadn't known, she never would have guessed her friend was born on a farm. Golden Apple spoke with a Canterlot accent, with the flawless pronunciation that no native would have taken the time to perfect. "Oh, hello, Twilight." She looked at a schedule spread across her polished mahogany desk, then back up at the eager young unicorn she had been speaking to. "I'll have to cover the second half of her shift myself, it would seem. See if Gallantry can manage the first half."

Twilight stood back as Golden Apple finished her conversation. Being ignored was strangely refreshing. She felt as though she were a regular person, rather than a pony-shaped mass of fragile nobility.

Eventually the unicorn finished her business and scurried off. Only then did Golden Apple turn to embrace Twilight. She was a middle-aged pegasus with a vibrant green coat and an intricately braided mane the same brilliant gold as her predictably apple-shaped cutie mark. "Twilight! I haven't seen much of you, lately. I suppose you've been rather busy."

"That's putting it lightly," said Twilight. "How have you been?"

"You wouldn't believe it. I leave this place for three days to go to my nephew's wedding, and the whole thing starts falling into chaos! It's enough to drive a mare mad." She shrugged. "Oh, well. It's always something. I presume you came here about your mane?"

"No," said Twilight, reflexively looking into the mirror beside the desk. "Why? I've always worn my mane this way. It's fine."

"Precisely. It's fine. That was well and good when you were archmage. No pony expected you to be the height of fashion, then. Now you're a princess."

"Right," said Twilight. "Where can I get the conditioner to turn my mane into a nimbus of ethereal starstuff?"

"Hah! I'm afraid you know more about that sort of thing than I. But until you figure out that trick, you'd better let me fix things up. Let's try little a less Auntie Applejack, a little more Princess Cadence."

"What's wrong with keeping it Twilight Sparkle?" she said, too quickly.

"Well, you're hardly the same Twilight Sparkle, are you?"

"I..." Twilight's legs buckled, and she sat down, hard. "I don't..."

"Oh, dear." Golden Apple crossed the room and shut the door, then sat on the floor beside her. "We're not talking about your mane at all, are we?"

Twilight swallowed. "I miss the old Twilight Sparkle. I like her. Princess Twilight seems like a nice pony, too, but I don't want to lose who I was."

"Is it really that bad?"

Twilight nodded. "Yeah. It is. Everywhere I go, I'm always the princess. Everypony acts like the ground I walk upon is holy, and it gets old. There aren't many ponies left who will let me just be me."

"But surely that doesn't apply to your friends? You still have me, and Ma, and Auntie Dash, at the very least. We're still here, just like we were before."

Twilight decided not to correct her about Dash. She didn't need to burden Golden Apple with *all* of her problems. "It helps," she said. "Still, it's hard. And if this can happen in a couple of weeks, how much will things change in twenty years?" Or two hundred, she added silently.

"I'm hardly the pony I was twenty years ago." Golden Apple reached up and plucked a framed photograph from her desk. It showed a younger Fluttershy and Macintosh, no more than sixty years old, holding a tiny, beaming foal. "That was even before my daughter was born, in fact. Becoming a parent was a big change. Probably as big as becoming a princess, I imagine. I'm quite different as a result, as you well know, and I don't regret a single bit of it."

"You're saying I shouldn't be afraid of change," said Twilight.

"Essentially. You will always be Twilight Sparkle at heart, even if the outward trappings are different."

"Well, it's good to hear I'm still the same pony in your eyes." Twilight stood up. "Still, I don't think I'll be changing my mane anytime soon."

"Rainbow Dash?" Fluttershy knocked on the door of her friend's house, softly but insistently. "Are you home?"

As she waited for a response, Fluttershy glanced around at the porch and frowned. When Rainbow Dash had first left Sweet Apple Acres, she made a point of keeping her cloud house scrupulously clean, a remnant of habits Applejack had drilled into her over the decades. Now, however, the fluffy white balcony was streaked with a buildup of brownish haze.

Fluttershy knocked again, louder this time. Again there was no response. She pushed open the door and went inside. "Rainbow Dash?"

The house was nearly unfurnished. Fluttershy walked through a full-sized living room that was empty save for a single couch covered in a thin layer of undisturbed dust.

Rainbow Dash stuck her head through a doorway. "Hey. What's up?"

"There you are," said Fluttershy. "I've been trying to find you. I came to ask if you're coming to Crabapple's birthday party next week."

"I thought he'd be angry with me, after what happened at the wedding." Rainbow Dash came fully into the living room, closing the door behind her before Fluttershy could see inside her bedroom.

"Oh, he's furious. I haven't seen him this mad since Apple Bloom missed Apple Sprout's cuteseañera. He still wants you there, though. You're family. Besides, this is your last chance to

see Apple Sprout before his honeymoon. He'll be away for a month, you know."

"I guess," said Rainbow Dash. "Well, thanks, but... I dunno."

"What's going on? No pony's seen you since the wedding, and that was five days ago. What have you been doing all this time?"

Rainbow Dash leaned against the couch's arm. "You know. Thinking about stuff, I guess."

"Oh?"

Rainbow Dash sighed. "I think Twilight's alicorn thing is getting to me. I can't stop thinking about dying. She could stop it from happening if she wants, but she just... isn't."

"Why is this different from how it was before Twilight was a princess? We were always going to die. It's not Twilight's fault."

"It kind of is. I mean, for the longest time, I was okay with knowing I was gonna die. It was scary, yeah, but I thought it was just how things were and nothing could change that, so why worry, right?" Rainbow Dash started pacing across the room. "And now it turns out that dying is actually a *choice*! Except it's Twilight's choice, not mine, and she's choosing wrong and there's nothing I can do!"

"Death is a scary thing," said Fluttershy. "I know you're still hurting from when Applejack died."

"That's not it. I mean, yeah, it still hurts. I don't think that's ever gonna stop. That's not what's different, though. Now I keep thinking about how it's going to happen to me. How it's going to happen to Rarity, and to you." Rainbow Dash swallowed. "Sun and Moon, Twilight can't really let that happen, can she?"

"I don't know," said Fluttershy. "This sort of thing is too much for me. Maybe you're right. It's not worth having a big fight with Twilight over it, though. It's Princess Celestia's decision, and I don't think she'll change her mind." She paused. "You'll feel better about it if you get out some instead of brooding in here so much. Please come to the party. I'm worried about you."

"Well, I guess—" The house shook with the mild tremble that came when a pony landed outside. "Huh," said Rainbow Dash. "Wonder who it is."

The two of them made their way to the balcony. Rainbow Dash opened the door to find Twilight Sparkle prodding the surface beneath her with a hoof and peering at the way the spongy cloud twisted and warped under the pressure.

They watched her poke at the ground. "Um, Twilight?" said Fluttershy. "What are you doing?"



Twilight looked up. "Oh, hi! Sorry, I was examining the cloud formation. It's positively uncanny. It has some fascinating properties that I wasn't able to experience before my apotheosis."

Rainbow Dash blinked. "Say what?"

"Clouds are weird," said Twilight. "I'm not used to all this pegasus stuff." She cleared her throat. "Sorry. I didn't come here to talk about clouds."

Rainbow Dash stiffened. "Then why did you come?"

"I came to apologize. I was thinking about what happened at the wedding, and I can see how I was being insensitive. I don't want my new status to come between us."

A grin split Rainbow Dash's face. She stepped forward and nuzzled Twilight. "Oh, Twilight. I should've known better. I don't know why I was so worried."

"Heh. I was worried, too. I guess we can both overreact, sometimes."

"We sure can," said Rainbow Dash. "So when are you gonna show us how to do this alicorn thing?"

"Oh." Twilight bit her lip. "I think you misunderstand. I didn't change my mind about that. I just... I was too harsh before, and I wanted to try to be nicer about it."

"The problem isn't that you weren't *nice* enough, Twilight."

"Okay," said Twilight. "Can we try to talk about it calmly, though? I really don't want to fight."

"I can do calm," said Rainbow Dash.

"Maybe I'd better let you two sort this out in private," said Fluttershy, spreading her wings. "I'll see you at the party, Rainbow Dash."

"Sure," said Rainbow Dash. "Fine." Fluttershy gave her a brief smile before taking to the air.

Twilight pawed at the cloud. "So," she said.

"Yeah," said Rainbow Dash. "I guess you'd better come in."

Rainbow Dash led Twilight inside and pulled herself atop the couch, sending up a puff of dust. "Right. So. How's the alicorn thing working out for you?"

"I'm finally figuring out how alicorn magic works." Twilight sat down beside her friend. "It's like... like seeing the universe fit together in a new way. So many things make more sense now, and the whole thing is just beautiful. Also, I found my special talent."

"Isn't magic your special talent?"

"I guess alicorn special talents are bigger. I have dominion over the heavens during dawn and dusk, now."

"What, like controlling the stars?"

Twilight smiled shyly. "Pretty much."

"Wow," said Rainbow Dash. "That's... wow. I guess you're a princess for real, huh? That's awesome. Whatever else happens, this is great."

"That means a lot." Twilight let out a breath. "To be honest, I was worried you were upset about my transformation."

"No way. I like it when good things happen to my friends, and becoming a princess is, like, the best possible thing. It sounds like it's even cooler than I imagined, and that's not easy. I couldn't be happier for you. It's just... if it's that great, shouldn't Fluttershy be able to have it, too?"

"I wish she could," Twilight said carefully. "You know that. I don't know if she's cut out to go hundreds of years without her friends, though."

"So don't make her! It wouldn't be lonely with the four of us together."

"Gah!" Twilight massaged her temples. "I can't just go around doing that to all my friends. How would that be fair? Besides, do you think Fluttershy wants to be around when her kids die? Then she'd eventually have to bury Apple Sprout and the rest... it wouldn't work."

"So? You could make her family immortal too," said Rainbow Dash.

"What are you even saying? Do you realize where that would lead?" Twilight's voice was edging towards hysteria. "Do you want to make everypony in Equestria immortal?"

Rainbow Dash froze. "Oh my gosh," she said. A grin spread across her face. "I didn't even think of that. Oh my gosh. Twilight, you're a genius! We totally could!"

"What? No! No, we couldn't! That would totally destroy Equestrian society as we know it!"

"In a good way! You can get rid of death forever!" Rainbow Dash climbed to her hooves, unable

to keep still. “You just... it’s like you don’t actually care that the rest of us die, now that it won’t happen to you.”

Twilight paused long enough to count to ten before responding. “I did ask Celestia about transforming everypony, but she wouldn’t allow it. You have no idea what a world full of alicorns would be like. No pony does. It could be a disaster, for all you know. Pony minds aren’t built to live forever and stay sane, and we’d have to feed and house a population that only increased, and who knows what other problems we’d run into? The princess has a point. And besides, she’s the princess.”

“No, Twilight, you are the princess! You don’t have to do what Celestia says if you don’t want to.”

“I have to live with her for the rest of eternity,” Twilight said with forced calm. “I don’t want to start things off by making her angry.”

“Oh,” said Rainbow Dash. “Oh, I get it. Impressing your teacher is more important to you than saving your friends’ lives.”

“What is your *problem*? I came here to try to get over our fight! I’m going out of my way to keep things civil, and all you can do is throw it in my face!”

“You’re killing your friends, Twilight! I’m sorry if I’m being rude, but I can’t smile along with this, no matter how nice about it you are. What happened to Applejack was the worst thing in the world. I won’t sit around while you let it happen to Rarity and Fluttershy, too.”

“That’s what this is really about, isn’t it? It’s all about Applejack. You’re still broken up about her death, and now you’re blaming me, somehow.”

“What?” Rainbow Dash frowned at that. “Of course I don’t blame you. You didn’t even know there was another way, back then.” Rainbow Dash’s face darkened. “I blame Princess Celestia.”

“How can you even say that? Do you have any idea how much Celestia does for us? How much she did for Applejack?”

“Look, if Celestia wanted Applejack to be alive, she’d be alive. Applejack is dead. Say whatever you want about that.”

“That’s insane,” said Twilight. “By that logic, you could say she’s responsible for killing every pony who ever died.”

“Yeah,” said Rainbow Dash. “Yeah, you could.”

Twilight stood up. “I can’t do this. It was one thing when you were insulting me, but I won’t listen

to you talk about Princess Celestia like that. I'm leaving now. You're scared and you're lashing out. I can't talk to you again until you get yourself under control, for both our sakes."

"Scared? You're the one who's running away!" Rainbow Dash rose into the air above Twilight. "Watch who you call scared."

"What, are you joking?" said Twilight. "Everything you've ever done, you did because of fear. When we were young, you were terrified somepony would think you weren't awesome enough, so you did everything to prove how cool you were. Remember your meltdown at the Best Young Flyers tournament, when you thought you'd fail and ponies would see behind your mask? Then you spent decades clinging to Applejack like a drowning sailor because you were scared of what would happen if she looked away from you for one minute. And, and now you want to tear apart all of Equestria and destroy our friendship because you're too scared to face your own death!"

Rainbow Dash landed with her muzzle inches away from Twilight's. "Don't you talk about me and Applejack," she said in a voice taut like a steel cable. "You have no idea. No idea! You've never been in love, never helped raise kids, nothing! You've just been sitting in your empty tree and those shiny towers in Canterlot while the rest of us have been out there *doing* things! It's like you started hibernating the same time Spike did. The difference is someday, he's going to wake up. You, probably not." She stepped back, out of Twilight's face. "I don't know why you're the one who decides who lives and who dies. You've never even lived."

"That's enough!" Twilight stalked towards the exit. "Let me know when you're ready to deal with this like an adult."

Breathing heavily, Sunstone pulled open the farmhouse door and helped his mother inside. A pegasus and an earth pony looked up from their conversation as the two unicorns entered.

"Oh, good," said Fluttershy. "You're here. Let me help you to the sofa." Despite her age, Fluttershy easily took Rarity's weight from Sunstone.

As the two friends made their way across the room, Sunstone tried to remember where he had seen the other mare before. She was familiar enough that Sunstone was sure he'd be expected to know her name, but his mind refused to cooperate. She was a reddish pony, roughly his own age, with a short yellow-green mane and a thick, muscled body. Her flank marked her as part of the Apple clan, but Sunstone was sure he hadn't seen her around the farm. She looked at him with a politely puzzled expression that matched his own.

"You must be thirsty from bringing Rarity all this way," said Fluttershy. "Why don't we get you some cider?"

Sunstone broke off his impromptu staring contest. "Thank you, Miss Fluttershy. That would be wonderful."

Fluttershy nodded. "Honeycrisp, you remember Sunstone, right? Why don't you take him out back and get some cider for the both of you?"

"Of course!" Honeycrisp visibly relaxed. "Sunstone. You were a couple or three years 'fore me in school, right? Sweetie Belle's class?"

"That's right." The memory clicked in his mind like two magnets snapping together. "You were the one who tried to tunnel your way out of the schoolyard in second grade." He remembered Fluttershy's child as a lanky blank-flanked filly, not this powerful mare, but it was unmistakably her.

"That was just the once," said Honeycrisp. "This way." She led him towards a rear door.

"I think you'll find you have a lot in common," said Fluttershy.

"You two have a good time!" called Rarity.

Sunstone found himself in the sprawling field behind the farmhouse. Honeycrisp started towards one of the numerous outbuildings, rolling her eyes as she went. "Sorry about that. I swear, she does this every time I come home."

"I think I'm missing something," said Sunstone. "Who does what every time?"

"My ma. Yesterday she was telling me all about Rarity's son, Equestria's best jeweler, and did you know he's not married? Well, like that, except subtle. And now we just happen to find ourselves out on our lonesome."

"I see," said Sunstone. "My mom was probably in on it, too. It's the sort of thing she does."

"I bet. Moms, right?"

"Yes," said Sunstone. "Moms."

They walked in silence for a while.

"So where have you been?" Sunstone said at last. "I haven't seen you in, what, thirty years?"

“Exploring, mostly. Just got back from six years mapping the wilds beyond Haydrian’s Wall. We got further than anypony before us ever did. I’m just stopping here for a few days on the way over to Baltimore to catch a ship. I know some folk who are putting together an expedition across the Arabian Sea.”

“Wow,” said Sunstone. “That, uh, that’s something.”

“Something, huh? Come on, what were you really gonna say?”

“That’s completely insane,” said Sunstone.

“Ain’t it just! But I wouldn’t give it up for anything. Nothing in civilization is half as exciting as being out there with just your wits and a handful of good ponies.”

“Exciting is nice when you’re young. By the time a pony is our age, though, you need something more tangible to hold onto.” The two of them reached their destination, a small, well-kept shed.

Honeycrisp raised an eyebrow. “You sound like Ma. You sure you ain’t married?” Honeycrisp led the way into the shed. The interior was clean but dim, and rows of casks stacked ceiling-high left little room to maneuver.

“I almost was, once,” Sunstone said as Honeycrisp fetched a pair of mugs and began filling them from a tap. “Didn’t work out. There are other things, though.”

“Like what?”

“For a long time it was my work. Mastering a trade and running a business takes a lot of time and energy. Meeting ponies wasn’t a priority, so it didn’t happen. I eventually slowed down and ran into somepony, and for a while we thought we’d be together forever, but, uh, obviously it didn’t happen. Then my mom got sick, and between taking care of her and keeping the shop open, there hasn’t been room for much else.”

Honeycrisp handed Sunstone a mug full to overflowing. “Ever wish it had gone different?”

Sunstone drained half the mug in one gulp. “Honestly? No. If I wanted a family that badly, I would’ve gone out and got one. I mean, if it works out someday, that’d be nice. If it doesn’t, well, the lack has never bothered me.”

“I hear you,” said Honeycrisp. “Some colt and couple or three kids wouldn’t be bad, but it ain’t worth giving up everything else.” She paused as she saw Sunstone’s smirk. “What?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just, when your mom was hoping we’d have something in common, I don’t think this is was she had in mind.”

“Hah! Sure ain’t.” She took a long, slow drink. “You know, you’re not half bad, for a townie. What say we meet up in Ponyville before I head out? I could use some company that ain’t named Apple.”

“I think I’d like that,” said Sunstone.

“Alright, I think I’m prepared. Is it ready?”

“Indeed. Proceed in thy own time.”

Twilight Sparkle nodded and began to focus. This was the first time she had tried any major magic while flying. She had been hesitant, but Luna had insisted that even the tallest turret in the palace wasn’t close enough to the sky. The two princesses hovered far, far over Canterlot while the day came to an end. Twilight could feel Celestia’s presence above, guiding the sun to its resting place. As the sky dimmed to sapphire blue, Twilight sensed Celestia’s link to the heavens weakening and her own connection growing stronger.

“Okay,” said Twilight. “Here goes.” She let her wings continue to beat automatically while she stretched out her awareness, found the psychic location her mind insisted on thinking of as the place behind the sky, and pushed. An otherworldly tingle passed through her brain.

Above, a glowing point of light streaked through the sky, throwing off shining sparkles behind it. Another appeared beside it, and another, and another. By the time the first had faded, the meteor shower had begun in earnest.

“Well done!” said Luna. “I can scarcely do better myself. Verily, I trained for years before I could achieve such effects. Thy mastery of these abilities is most impressive.”

“Thanks,” said Twilight. “I guess it’s pretty neat.”

“Thou art not pleased?”

“No, no, this is wonderful,” said Twilight. “It’s magic on a whole new level. Flying is great and mastering my earth pony senses is great, but controlling the sky is... it makes me wish I’d learned to paint or something, just so I’d be prepared for this sort of artistry. This night is perfect, really.”

“And yet thou art distracted.”

"I suppose," said Twilight. "I'm running into some trouble with one of my friends. Well, she's not exactly acting like a friend, lately. It's hard to stop thinking about it."

"Ah," said Luna. "My sister spoke of thy troubles with Rainbow Dash. These friendships of thine have weathered storms time and again. I have no doubt that this one, too, shall pass."

"Well, I can't help wondering if I'm the one who's wrong, here. She wants me to turn her into a princess. Part of me knows that I can't, that I need to put the good of Equestria before the good of my friends, but... but how can anything be more important than friendship? That flies in the face of everything I've ever learned. I don't know."

"I see. Fly with me, Twilight Sparkle." Luna dove, trading altitude for speed, with Twilight close behind. They were still well above the towers of Canterlot when Luna leveled off and made for the mountains behind the city. The peaks rose beneath them as the princesses flew on and on. Twilight heard nothing but the wind and the sound of her own wings. It was nearly an hour later that Luna alighted at the top of the highest mountain. It was well and truly night, and Twilight felt control of the sky passing to Luna. From here, the lights of Canterlot could have been another cluster of stars. Those of Ponyville, even more distant, blurred together into a single fuzzy galaxy.

"Thou thinkst granting immortality to a common pony would be a great kindness," said Princess Luna.

"For that one pony, yes, of course it would. No pony wants to die."

"Thou art wrong. Few have the fortitude to endure eternal life. Most ponies would suffer from such a fate."

"But how do you know? Has anypony ever tried?"

"Once," said Luna, "long ago. The first alicorn was a pony who discovered how to achieve apotheosis through meditation, and her teachings are what allowed the chosen few to follow in her hoofsteps. It was she who created our system of carefully choosing new alicorns, but that was not her first instinct. Indeed, it was a hard lesson. In the excitement immediately after her discovery, the first princess taught her younger sister the secret, that they might live forever side by side.

"They were happy for a time, but it did not last. The older sister had discovered the path to immortality with her strength and wisdom. The younger sister was strong, but not strong enough, and so as her friends and family died, she grew lonely. She was wise, but not wise enough. Ponies paid little heed to her words, preferring her sister's counsel, and she grew jealous. Dost thou recognize this story, Twilight Sparkle?"



Twilight nodded mutely.

"I scarce endured a hundred years before I went mad," continued Luna. "I lacked a princess's temperament, but I had an alicorn's power. The battle was a near thing, as I remember it, although my sister disagrees. Perhaps she has the right of it. I was hardly lucid at the time." She shrugged. "The details are unimportant. She banished me to a thousand years of solitude.

"A thousand years, Twilight Sparkle. I doubt whether thou canst truly understand what that means. When I learned what was to become of me, I begged my sister for death. Had she the power, she would have granted it. Alas, immortality is a fate that cannot be revoked, although it would have been a great mercy."

"Are you sure?" said Twilight. "I mean, I don't doubt that it was horrible, but you're much better now. Would you really rather be dead?"

Luna gave her a look. "Hast thou lived a long life?"

"I guess so," said Twilight. "I certainly feel old."

"How old art thou? Eighty years?"

"Seventy-four."

Luna's voice was flat as a desert plain. Behind her, the stars burned cold and white. "All that thou hast done, every thought and every lesson and every joy, does not come to a twelfth part of the time I spent in exile. For every day thou spent laughing with thy friends, or watching their children grow, or learning from my sister, or mourning thy brother's death, I spent a fortnight in a barren wasteland with no companion save my own madness. When I returned, I was a sad and broken thing. Were it not for thee and the Elements of Harmony, my mind would be shattered still. My life now is pleasant enough, and I have reason to hope it will remain so, but it was not worth it. Nothing could be worth that."

It had been decades since Pumpkin Cake had built the patio outside Sugarcube Corner, but it was still a recent addition in Rarity's mind. Regardless, it made for a wonderful place to meet a friend. It was a perfect day: Sunstone was off with that Apple girl, finally, and Rarity was meeting Twilight Sparkle for the first time in far too long. Once Tea Cake brought their lunch and the two friends had some privacy, Rarity spoke up. "I heard what happened between you and Rainbow Dash. I'd hoped the incident at the wedding would be the end of it, but this... well, it's a terrible

shame.”

Twilight’s eyes narrowed. “How did you find out about that? This is stressful enough without it becoming public knowledge.”

“Oh, don’t worry, darling. Rainbow told Fluttershy what happened, and she told me. No pony knows but us girls. And Center Stage and Macintosh, of course. And Crabapple overheard some, but not very much, I don’t think.”

“That’s not entirely comforting.”

“Do relax, Twilight. It’s not as though the tabloids have their hooves on this,” said Rarity. “It was almost two weeks before I heard of it. If it took me that long, you can be certain news isn’t spreading.” She sipped her tea. “Well? Go on, tell me everything.”

Twilight sighed. “It’s frustrating. I went over there to try to patch up our disagreement, but she just wouldn’t leave it alone. I mean, she was completely out of control. She’s Rainbow Dash, so she tried to hide how upset she was, but she’s Rainbow Dash, so it was pretty obvious. The things she said were just so crazy and so hurtful.”

“Mm. I hear you weren’t exactly blameless, yourself.”

“I didn’t say anything that isn’t completely true.”

“Really? Oh, dear,” said Rarity. “This is worse than I thought.”

“Okay, you lost me. Telling the truth is a bad thing, now?”

“Come now, Twilight. Cruel truths hurt far more than cruel lies. If you had simply insulted her, then you could take it back. On the other hoof, if you said something you earnestly believe, well, that can’t be undone. Now she knows what you think, and it may change your relationship permanently.”

“Maybe I was a little harsh with her,” said Twilight. “I tried to stay calm, I really did, but she just kept pushing and pushing until I couldn’t help but push back.” A magenta aura appeared around Twilight’s napkin and crushed it into a ball.

“That does sound like Rainbow Dash.”

“This whole thing is infuriating. My transformation is supposed to be a cause for joy, not something to pick a fight over.”

“I know, darling, and I’m sorry. It must be quite the disappointment. So, what are you going to do

to set things right?”

“Nothing,” said Twilight. “I tried that, and Rainbow Dash made it clear that she’s not interested. I can’t force her to make peace. When she’s ready, I’ll be happy to talk to her. Until then, all I can do is keep my distance. She obviously needs her space, and I just can’t deal with her while she’s like this.” Twilight’s magic tore tiny shreds from her crumpled napkin, letting them fall to the table one by one.

“That’s a shame,” said Rarity, “but it’s understandable. I’ll try to talk to her. The rest of us aren’t long for this world, and this fight shouldn’t mar your last years with Rainbow Dash.”

Twilight stared at the sky. “Do you think I’m doing the right thing? Would it be wrong to turn all of you into alicorns?”

“That’s not my decision,” said Rarity. “Things like that are up to you and the other princesses.”

“Sure, but if you were a princess and I wasn’t, would you make me an alicorn?”

“Of course I would, Twilight, how can you even ask that?” Rarity paused as she realized what she had just said. “I mean, that’s not to say you’re doing anything *wrong*, exactly, it’s just that I’d do things *differently* if it were me, but of course it isn’t me and so—”

“It’s okay, Rarity. If I just wanted somepony to agree with me, I’d talk to the other princesses. Well, actually, I already did that. It did help, in a sad sort of way, but now I want to know what you think. Why would you do things that way?”

Rarity shrugged. “I suppose I don’t see the point of having a gift like that if you can’t share it.”

“It’s more complicated than—”

“I know that, darling. You don’t have to convince me. It really *is* your decision, and I imagine you were chosen in part because you’re able to make decisions like that. Yes, I’d like to be a princess. I’d like to live forever. I won’t, though, and that’s okay. I’ve had a good life. That’s enough.”

Sunstone came into view, cantering down the street and searching frantically in every direction. There was no sign of Honeycrisp, Rarity noted with disapproval.

Her son caught sight of her and rushed over. “Mom, there you are! I was with Honeycrisp when I heard, and I thought you’d want to know.”

“Know what?” said Rarity.

"It's Fluttershy," he said. "She's in the hospital."

"What?" said Twilight. "What happened?"

"I don't know! It's bad enough that they sent somepony to find Honeycrisp right away!"

The two mares shared a worried glance. "That's not good," said Twilight. "We should see what's going on."

Rarity nodded. "Thank you for finding us, Sunstone. Twilight, if you would?"

There was a flash of magic, and the two mares disappeared.

# LOYALTY

Rarity and Twilight arrived at the hospital only minutes after the doctors managed to shoo Fluttershy's children out of the patient's room. The scene proved far less chaotic than either of them had expected. They quickly gathered that the doctors had prepared for Fluttershy's arrival in advance. This had not been a surprise to them.

"I do wish you'd told us earlier," said Rarity. "How bad is it?"

"Bad," said Macintosh. He sat beside Fluttershy's hospital bed. She was tucked into the snow-white sheets from the neck down.

"It wasn't always this bad," said Fluttershy. "It was only a matter of time, though."

The door flew open, and Rainbow Dash rushed inside. "I came as soon as I heard," she said. "What's the—oh." She stopped as she caught sight of Twilight. "I'll come back later."

"Please stay," said Fluttershy. "I don't have much time left with you two. I'd rather you didn't spend it fighting."

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth to say something, then thought better of it. She edged her way into the room. "So what's even happening?"

"They say it's my kidneys," said Fluttershy. "They've been getting worse for months, now. I wanted to stay on the farm as long as I could, but now..."

"So how long are you stuck here?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"Weeks," said Macintosh. "Maybe months." His eyes never left Fluttershy's.

"Until the end," said Fluttershy.

"What, you mean you're not even trying to fix it?" said Rainbow Dash.

"They can't," said Fluttershy. "The doctors said there's no way to fix a dying kidney. All they can do is make me comfortable."

“Why didn’t you say something?” said Rarity. “We would’ve been there for you.”

Macintosh looked up for the first time. “Weren’t nothing y’all could do.”

Fluttershy nodded. “I don’t like everypony worrying about something you can’t change. We wanted to keep it to just the two of us for as long as we could. This way, I got to live a normal life for a little longer.”

“Twilight,” said Rainbow Dash, “you could turn—”

“No.”

“But if—”

“Let’s not do this,” said Twilight. “Not here, and not now.”

Rainbow Dash stared at her for the space of a long breath. She turned and left, slamming the door behind her.

Twilight sighed in frustration. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” said Fluttershy.

“No, it isn’t,” said Twilight.

“No,” agreed Fluttershy. “It isn’t.”

“I’m going to miss you,” said Twilight. “You already know that. I don’t know what to say. I thought we’d have longer together. I hoped that... I guess it doesn’t matter. I’m here for you, though. Until the end, I’ll be here for anything you need.” Twilight tried to swallow the lump in her throat. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“You girls remember what Pinkie said, right before she left,” said Fluttershy.

Rarity nodded. “I remember. ‘Don’t be sad I’m dying. Be happy I lived.’”

“That helped me a lot, when she was gone,” said Fluttershy. “Please don’t forget it.”

Twilight closed her eyes and tilted her head upwards, letting the sun’s warmth wash over her

face. The hedge maze of the Canterlot gardens was in full bloom, nearly overpowering her earth pony senses. It was warm and bright beneath the noontime sun.

"You picked a good day for this," Cadence said. She was curled up on the sweet grass, not far from the remains of the lunch they had shared.

"Celestia outdid herself this time," Twilight said.

"She's always impressed me, the way she can make each day fresh and beautiful."

Twilight nodded. Now that she could appreciate the skill and power it took to control the sky, Celestia's talent was more awe-inspiring than ever. "Did you ever learn to control the heavens?" she asked. "I've never seen you do anything like that."

"No." Cadence stood up and stretched. "My talents are different. You cosmic princesses have never been able to do what I do, either. Even Celestia can't control or understand love the way I do." She walked to the hedge and plucked a lustrous yellow blossom.

"Then maybe you can help me. How do you handle it when somepony you love is dying?" Twilight opened her eyes and went to Cadence's side. This was the real reason she had asked Cadence to come. "I've watched a lot of ponies die, and it's never easy, but this is different. I'm not just watching, this time. I could save Fluttershy. I feel responsible for what's happening."

"You aren't," said Cadence. "Ponies die, eventually. You can't stop every bad thing from happening, and it wouldn't be good if you did. It's like being a parent, in a lot of ways."

"Wait," said Twilight. "I thought you didn't have children."

"Not for a very long time. You wouldn't know of them, probably, although you may have heard of Nocturne Sonata."

"*The Nocturne Sonata*? Founder of Flankashire and father of Starswirl the Bearded?"

"He had three other children, too," said Cadence. Her gaze was fixed on her flower. "They were all special, even if they don't have books written about them."

Twilight stepped away from the hedge. "How old *are* you?" She had always assumed that Cadence was roughly her brother's age, but in retrospect Twilight wasn't sure where that idea had come from.

"I was born during King Sombra's reign. I don't make a habit of telling mortal ponies. It puts too much of a barrier between us. I couldn't live apart like that, the way Princess Celestia does."

“And Princess Luna.”

Cadence grimaced. “I don’t think that sort of distance is good for Luna. I’ve talked about it with her, but you know how she is. Her sister’s doing it, so she’s doing it, too.”

“But we *can* reproduce. I was wondering. Except our offspring are mortal, and so we’d outlive—oh. Oh! I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’re talking about the happiest decades of my life.”

“But still, at the end... I mean, I’m having a hard enough time watching Fluttershy die.”

“I won’t pretend it didn’t hurt.” Cadence turned, putting her back to the hedgerow. The white and yellow blossoms made a sharp contrast with the brilliant green foliage. “You know how much it hurts when somepony you love dies, and of all the deaths I’ve seen, nothing comes close to my own children. I have to be... very careful. It’s been a century and a half since I last gave birth, and I still don’t feel ready to go through all that heartache again just yet. The hurt fades, though. You remember what you were like when Shining Armor died?”

Twilight nodded. “I was a wreck. Dash and Pinkie had to drag me out of the library just to get me to the funeral.”

“I wasn’t much better,” said Cadence. “I’ve lost five husbands, but never anyone quite like him. How does it feel now, though?”

“I miss him when I think about him,” said Twilight, “but mostly I’ve moved on.”

“Exactly,” said Cadence. “It’s no different now that you’re immortal. Ponies you love will die, and it will hurt, and you’ll recover, and you’ll find new ponies to love. Mortal or not, that’s what life is.”

“Does it ever get any easier?”

“No. It doesn’t. Every time it happens, I remind myself that the good times outweigh the pain, and that there will be more ponies in the future. It’s true every time, but... well, you can guess how much that helps in the moment.”

“In my experience, the only thing that really helps is time.”

“Yes,” said Cadence. “Time. We have a lot of time.”



“Hey, Rainbow Dash!” The distant pounding on her front door went on and on. It had been going on for some time, and ignoring it didn’t seem to make it go away. “I know you’re in there, Aunt Dash. You don’t have anywhere else to be.” Rainbow Dash grumbled to herself and curled up tighter on her bed.

There was the sound of a door opening, and hoofsteps approached through the house. “Stars above,” came Crabapple’s voice. “You *live* in here? It’s like an empty warehouse.”

Rainbow Dash hauled herself upright and made her way out of the bedroom, blinking against the afternoon light streaming into her living room. Crabapple was staring at the solitary couch that was the room’s only decoration. “This must be where furniture comes to die.”

“Hey, Crabs,” said Rainbow Dash. “What’s going on?”

“You’re pulling your disappearing act again,” said Crabapple. “Ponies down in the world are starting to worry.”

“*You’re* worried about me?”

“Pa is. He doesn’t have wings, though, so guess who has to come after you instead? Unless you wanna head down and talk to him, that is.”

Rainbow Dash sighed. Flying all the way down there to have a talk like that was not her idea of fun. “Today’s not a real good day for it, Crabs.”

“Thought so. That means you’re stuck with me, then.” He plopped himself down on the couch, frowned, and tried to shift into a more comfortable position. “Stars and snails, what is wrong with this thing?” He kicked a throw pillow to the floor and curled up in the newly vacated space. “Look, I don’t do subtle. Get your tail down there while Ma’s still alive.”

“You don’t even care why I’m staying up here.”

“You want compassion, go talk to Pa. Better yet, talk to Ma. All I care about is that you’re busy wallowing in something or other while Ma is down there, dying. You’re not gonna do this to her.”

“Did she say anything about me not being there?” said Rainbow Dash.

“Are you joking? Of course not. You could set the lady on fire and she still wouldn’t complain. She’s noticed, though, believe me.”

“Alright,” said Rainbow Dash. “I’ll go visit sometime.”

“Sometime? Sure, no rush. She’s got all the time in the world, right?”

“I said I’d go. You’re being a jerk about this, even for you.”

“You can’t expect somepony with a name like Crabapple to be a popular pony, now, can you?” Crabapple settled himself more firmly on the couch. “I’ll just stay here until you go visit. That should be no problem, since I’m sure you were planning to go real soon.”

There had been a field, she remembered, and birdsong, and flowers. She had been walking alongside... alongside someone she loved very much, she didn’t remember who. She remembered contentment. Everything had been perfect.

It didn’t last. She drifted towards wakefulness, and the dream tore into wisps of half-remembered comfort. The complaints from her failing body grew more insistent. It wasn’t quite painful, at least not yet, but the pervasive sense of weakness never left her limbs and chest, and her stomach teetered constantly on the brink of nausea. She was bearing it well, growing accustomed to the symptoms almost as fast as they worsened, but she knew it was only a matter of time before she would have to give up and go to the hospital, never to leave.

She tried to hold fast to the last shards of her dream, to clasp them to her breast forever. She lay there, in that half-aware state on the border of sleep, for how long she didn’t know. The dream was nearly gone, but she was warm and comfortable. After a minute or an hour, a hoof gently shook her shoulder.

Fluttershy blinked her eyes open. These walls were unfamiliar, and this bed was not her own. She recognized only the face of the pony before her, but that was enough to set her at ease. “Where are we?” she asked.

“The hospital,” said Macintosh.

“Oh.” The memory clicked into place. She had been here for two weeks, almost. “That’s right.”

“Good dreams?” asked Macintosh, as he had every time she woke up here.

“Maybe. I don’t remember.”

“Somepony here to see you.”

“Who?” Fluttershy pulled herself into a sitting position. “Oh. Hello, Rainbow Dash.”

“Hey.” Rainbow Dash was half-leaning on the doorframe. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay,” said Fluttershy. “I’m more worried about you.”

“Sun and Moon, you mean it.” Rainbow Dash made a sound that was three parts laugh and one part sob. “Even now, you’re still gonna watch out for us. If you put half as much work into taking care of yourself...”

“That wouldn’t do much good, now.” Fluttershy’s ever-present headache started to assert itself, but she refused to acknowledge it. “Thank you for coming by.”

“Yeah. Sorry it took so long.” Rainbow Dash went to Fluttershy’s bedside.

“You’ve been hiding again.” It was a statement, not an accusation.

“Hey!” Rainbow Dash puffed herself up. For a moment, Fluttershy thought she was going to argue, but Rainbow Dash quickly deflated. “I guess. Yeah, I kinda was. I don’t really like all the...” She waved a hoof, encompassing the entire hospital room. “You know.”

“I know. It’s hard for everypony. You don’t have to deal with it alone, though. Your friends are there for you.”

“Well, Rarity’s there,” said Rainbow Dash. “Twilight? Not so much.”

“Don’t have to be that way,” said Macintosh.

Fluttershy nodded. “I don’t like seeing the two of you fight like this. Can’t you forgive her?”

“Honestly?” said Rainbow Dash. “No. Not while she’s gonna stand by and let you die.”

“Please don’t do this because of me,” said Fluttershy. “I lived a long time. I just watched my grandson get married. Dying is okay, now.”

“Is it? If Twilight came through that door right now and said she’d turn you into a princess, wouldn’t you be happy?”

“I’m not afraid of dying. I know this life isn’t the end for us. It can’t be.” She rested a hoof on Rainbow Dash’s shoulder. “What’s happening now is natural. What you’re feeling is also natural, but it’s not Twilight’s fault. Please don’t take this out on her.”

Rarity levitated the wine bottle and filled her glass for the second time. “Are you sure I can’t pour you a cup, darling?”

“Yep,” said Center Stage. In the dim candlelight, she could pretend they were the only two ponies in the world. “Doc says I’m not supposed to touch the stuff. I swear, it’d be easier if she just gave me a list of things I *can* still eat.”

“In that case,” said Rarity, “I shan’t have any, either.” As delicious as it was—and it was a deliciously dry chardonneigh—there wasn’t much point if she couldn’t share it.

“Don’t even think about it. Maybe I can’t drink anymore, but they won’t stop me from watching my wife enjoy herself.”

“Dinner is served.” Sunstone came in from the kitchen, levitating two plates of a light floral salad, and set them on the small oaken table between his parents. “Happy anniversary, you two.”

“Oh, yes.” Center Stage inhaled deeply. “Smells great. What would I do without you?”

“Learn to cook, probably,” said Sunstone. “I’m just sorry I couldn’t let you two have the night alone. I was supposed to be out with Honeycrisp, but she needs to take care of her mom. Anyway, I’ll leave you to it.”

“See?” Center Stage called at Sunstone’s retreating back. “We were right! You two do have a lot in common!”

Rarity sighed. “Please, darling. What’s happening to Fluttershy is no laughing matter.”

“Everything is a laughing matter!” Center Stage spread his arms with a dramatic flourish. “Either you laugh—”

“—or you go insane,” Rarity finished for him. She had heard him say it often enough. “Maybe I need to go a little mad, this time.”

Center Stage’s grin faltered. He put his hoof on Rarity’s. “I’m going to miss her, too.”

Rarity stared at her plate. “You’d think I’d be accustomed to this sort of thing by now, but I just wasn’t expecting to lose Fluttershy, as well. Considering my health, I didn’t think I’d live to see this.” She poked a fork at her salad, holding it with her magic rather than move her aching legs. “I’m sorry. Tonight is supposed to be a happy night.”

“Can I be happy that you *did* live to see this? The world is a much nicer place with you still in it.”

Rarity felt a smirk tugging at the corners of her lips. “I must say I prefer it this way, too.”

“Yeah! Plus, if you were gone, I’d have to make my own suit for the Summer Sun Celebration, and we both know how badly *that* would go. How’s that coming along, anyway?”

Rarity felt herself relax as she started talking about her latest project. Center Stage always knew how to cheer her up, even when Rarity knew exactly what he was trying to do. The wine was excellent, the salad was better, and the company best of all. The evening was every bit as magical as Rarity had hoped.

It lasted for hours, but it seemed like no time at all before it was over. Soon enough, the two of them were making their way upstairs, towards their bedroom and rest.

They had only gone up four steps when she fell. One moment she was leaning on her husband as they climbed, the next her hooves were sliding out from under her. Her chest slammed into the hard wooden lip of a stair, sending a lance of pain through her body. She tumbled down the rest of the short fall and landed with her right hindleg twisted under her. Rarity’s world shrank to a small lump of agony.

When she regained her senses, Sunstone and Center Stage were standing over her. “...said they’d go get a doctor,” Center Stage was saying. “She should get here soon. I hope.”

The line of burning pain across her chest worsened every time she drew breath. Her hip hurt even more. Looking down, Rarity saw her leg sticking out at an unnatural angle. She tried to ask what was happening, but all that came out was an incoherent moan. Center Stage knelt down beside her. “I’m sorry, my jewel. I’m so, so sorry.”

“It’s my fault,” said Sunstone, pacing back and forth. “Sun and Moon, I should’ve been there.”

“Nopony expects you to watch her every moment,” said Center Stage. “It’s not as though you’re her mother.”

“Not your fault,” Rarity croaked. “I fell.”

“I dropped you, you mean,” said Center Stage.

“Not your fault,” Rarity repeated.

“Can you move at all?” said Sunstone.

Rarity tried to put her hooves under her. A stabbing pain ripped through her rear hip. “Aaah!”

“Probably not, then.” Center Stage put his forehooves on her shoulders, gently holding her in place. “Hold still. Help will be here soon.”

Crabapple was in the hospital when the princess arrived. He was a real sweetheart, Fluttershy knew, even if no one else saw it. For all his gruff words, he spent almost as much time at Fluttershy’s bedside as his siblings. Her son was all bark and no bite.

The princess appeared in a burst of incandescence that made the antiseptic hospital room glow like the dawn for half a moment. Crabapple hopped back and Fluttershy froze momentarily, but Macintosh only blinked as Celestia materialized.

“Oh!” said Fluttershy. “Hello, Princess.”

Celestia beamed. “Good evening, my little ponies. It’s so good to see all of you.”

Crabapple recovered himself quickly. “Most ponies knock,” he said.

Celestia half-turned towards him. “Oh, I *like* this one.”

“You’ve met,” said Macintosh.

“Have we?” said Celestia.

“We have?” said Crabapple.

Fluttershy nodded. “You were two years old when I took you to visit the palace.”

“Oh!” Celestia smiled. “I remember. You bit my sister, as I recall.”

Crabapple blinked. “I bit a princess.”

Celestia nodded. “She thought it was adorable. Eventually.”

“Hah!” Crabapple shook his head. “I bit a princess. Priceless!”

Fluttershy would have loved to listen to them go on, but she knew that wasn’t why Celestia had come. “You’re here to say goodbye,” she said.

"Yes. We've had some wonderful times together, Fluttershy. Equestria is a better place because you were in it. I'll be sorry to see you go."

"Oh. Thank you. It's been nice." Fluttershy took a moment to steady herself as a wave of nausea washed over her. They were coming more and more frequently, but this one passed quickly. "I'm so tired, though. It will be good to rest."

"Not just yet, you won't," said Crabapple. "There's still some life in you."

"If there's anything I can do for you, while there's time," said Celestia, "you've more than earned it."

"Just take care of my friends, is all. They're going through a hard time."

"Of course." Celestia nodded solemnly. "Taking care of ponies is what I do."

"Twilight, too," said Fluttershy. "I know she's a princess now, but she's still the same Twilight."

"I'll watch out for her. Don't worry."

"Good," said Fluttershy. "That's good. Now... excuse me, Princess, but I'm very tired. I think I need to rest."

"Hi, Honeycrisp." Sunstone was standing before a workbench covered with fastidiously organized rows of pliers, files, and the like. He was working on a bronze hoop of just the right thickness to slip over a pony's foreleg. It was studded with settings for jewels, although only a few had been fitted with lapis stones so far. The order was overdue, thanks to the time he'd spent at his mother's side in the hospital, but Miss Bon Bon had been very understanding. The doctors said Rarity should be able to leave the hospital in a few weeks, although it was anyone's guess whether she would walk again. "I wasn't expecting to see you today. What's the occasion?"

Honeycrisp nodded a greeting. "I came to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Sunstone gave her a blank look. "I don't understand. I thought you were enjoying this."

"Oh, I did, believe you me. Next time I'm around, reckon I'll drop by and see if you're still available. Still, it's time I was moving on. I got a ship to catch, and it ain't gonna wait for me

forever.”

“What, you mean you’re leaving town?” Sunstone went from confused to incredulous. “With your mom the way she is?”

“I don’t plan on waiting around for her to die. The rest of the world ain’t stopping. I’m glad I got to see her when I did, but I ain’t built to stay in one place. Ma understands.”

“Does she?”

“As well as she ever understood me.” Honeycrisp shrugged. “Some apples fall further from the tree, is all. Anyhow, I just wanted to let you know.”

“Right.” Sunstone set down his tools. “I can’t convince you to stay, can I?”

“You know better than that.”

“I guess I do. Well, I enjoyed the time we had. It was,” he searched for the right word, “fun.”

“It sure was.” Honeycrisp grinned. “You oughta have fun more often. There’s a big world waiting for you out there, you know. Anyway, I need to get moving. My train leaves before too long.”

Sunstone watched as Honeycrisp walked out of his shop and out of his life.

Twilight Sparkle gazed into the depths of the heavens. She was using the same reliable telescope that had sat on the library’s balcony for a lifetime and more, but she was seeing nuances that had been invisible to her eyes before. It reminded her of the grandfather clock in her childhood home. It had always been a thing of beauty, and as a foal she had spent hours entranced by its hands’ steady motion. One day, her mother had taken the clock apart to show Twilight how it worked. The two of them went over every spoke and gear before putting the clock back together. Twilight’s love for the old device had doubled on that day. Thereafter, every time she looked at its face, she imagined the harmonious choreography of its inner workings. She looked at the night sky in the same way, now.

There was a knock at the front door, far below. Twilight looked up, still suffused with the peace of the stars. She teleported downstairs with an idle thought, opened her door, and froze. Her calm drained away in an instant.

“Twilight.” Rainbow Dash stood outside, bouncing from hoof to hoof as if she wanted nothing so



much as to turn tail and run. Her eyes were red, although she had wiped away the tears.

Twilight scowled. "No. I can't do this again." She pushed the door shut.

Rainbow Dash's leg shot forward. She winced as her hoof was caught between door and frame, holding it open. "Twilight, please! I have to talk to you. It's about Fluttershy. Please. It's important."

Twilight hesitated. She had never heard anything like the plaintive note in Rainbow Dash's voice. Seeing her friend... seeing her former friend looking so broken should have made Twilight feel superior, but instead it just felt wrong, like the time Pinkie Pie had refused to attend her own fortieth birthday party.

She relented, releasing the door and letting Rainbow Dash push it open. "Okay then, for Fluttershy. What is it?" She kept one hoof on the door, ready to slam it shut again.

"You know what it is! She's dying! Please... please don't let her die."

"You know better than that," snapped Twilight. "That gift isn't for everyone."

"I'm not asking you to do it for everyone!" Rainbow Dash was shouting, suddenly. Her wings quivered as she fought the urge to flare them outwards. "I'm asking you to do it for Fluttershy! Please!" Her voice broke. "Please. Just Fluttershy. Only her. She doesn't deserve to die."

Despite herself, Twilight felt her heart soften. "I'm sorry," she said. "I really am. I can't do that."

"You can! You have to!" Rainbow Dash sank to her front knees. "Please. You were right. About everything. It really is for the best, and I just didn't want to die. You're right. I'm selfish, I'm a coward. You should, you should let me die. But please, not Fluttershy. Not her, too."

Twilight looked away. "Get up," she said. "You look like a fool." There weren't many ponies outside the library at this time of night, but the few passers-by had stopped to stare at the spectacle. Twilight thought she spotted Crabapple among them.

"And what does Fluttershy look like? You've seen her, Twilight. It's much worse than..." Rainbow Dash's voice choked off. She took several deep breaths before she could speak again. "It's much worse than this. You can save her. Please."

"You know I want to—"

"Then do it!"

"If I start down that road, I'll never be able to stop," said Twilight. "Pretty soon we'd have dozens

of princesses, maybe even hundreds. How would we rule Equestria then? It would be chaos. That's more important than any one pony."

Rainbow Dash crawled forward and clutched Twilight's foreleg. "Please, Twilight. I'll never ask you for anything again. I'll do whatever you want. I'll tell everypony you were right. I'll leave Equestria, you won't ever have to see me again. I don't care. Anything. Just, please. This is *Fluttershy* I'm talking about. Don't let her die. You can't let her die."

"What about my duty to Princess Celestia? What about my duty to all of Equestria?"

"What about your duty to your friends?"

"That's ENOUGH!" Twilight's voice rose to a shriek. She couldn't take this anymore. "You know how this works as well as I do! I can't do everything I want to!" She seized Rainbow Dash in a telekinetic grip and shoved her away. The old mare fell to the grass in a tangle of legs and wings, letting out a sound that was half shout, half wheeze. "I have responsibilities now that are bigger than us! This is what has to happen!" Rainbow Dash lay gasping in the dirt. The crowd had grown beyond a dozen ponies. "Now get out of here before you disgrace yourself any more than you already have." Twilight slammed the door.

It had been only a few days after Honeycrisp left that Fluttershy's condition had taken a turn for the worse. Golden Apple stood vigil beside the bed where her mother dozed fitfully. Macintosh sat next to her; Golden Apple hadn't seen him away from his wife's side since coming back to Ponyville. The sun was almost down, so Golden Apple was expecting Crabapple to arrive any minute and take her place. They were making sure at least one of Ma's children was present at all times, just in case. The doctors didn't think she had much time left.

The door flew open, but it wasn't Crabapple who came through. "Aunt Goldie! How is—"

"Hush, dear. She's asleep."

"Sorry." Apple Sprout had the grace to look abashed. "How is she?" he asked, quieter, as Honey Pie came in and shut the door.

"Not good," Golden Apple whispered. "She's not awake very much, anymore. I'm glad you've come. I know this isn't what you wanted to do with your honeymoon."

"There's nowhere we'd rather be, right now," said Honey Pie. "I was so worried we wouldn't make it in time."

Fluttershy's eyes flickered open. Macintosh leaned in and nuzzled her. "Good dreams?"

"Good morning, dear." Fluttershy smiled up at him.

Golden Apple leaned in close. "Ma. Guess who's come to see you."

"Is Honeycrisp back?"

Golden Apple froze with a brittle smile on her face. She wasn't sure how to answer. Disappointing her mother at this stage just seemed cruel.

Apple Sprout stepped forward. "Hi, Granny." He carefully embraced Fluttershy's fragile body.

"Oh, Sprout. It's so good to see you. I hope you didn't come all this way just for me."

"We have news for you," said Honey Pie. "You're going to be a great-grandmother."

Macintosh coughed. "That was fast," he said. Apple Sprout blushed, but his grin didn't fade.

"That's so wonderful." Fluttershy fought a yawn. "I wish I could see her."

"You will." Apple Sprout clasped her hoof with both of his own. "It won't be too long. You will."

"Oh," Fluttershy said vaguely. "Good." She settled back into the bed. Her family watched, unwilling to disturb her, as Fluttershy drifted back into sleep.

The day of the funeral was warm and bright. Puffs of cloud speckled the noontime sky. Birdsong filled the air in the lush green meadow where the mourners had assembled. At the center, a lightless hole gaped open like a wound in the world. The coffin sat unmoving in the darkness.

Twilight stood beside the pit, her stomach a riot of grief and guilt. Fluttershy's absence burned like a hot coal, but she could not cry. She had spent too long anticipating this, she realized. Twilight had argued that Fluttershy's death was necessary, and now that she had convinced herself, the cool, logical core of her mind refused to mourn. Twilight could not forgive herself for that.

Beside her, Macintosh had no such problem. He was sobbing silently, his face a portrait of the heartache Twilight was unable to let herself feel. He looked lost, even dazed, as though he

could not quite understand what was happening.

Twilight laid a comforting hoof across Macintosh's withers. "I'm sorry this had to happen," she said. The words felt hollow and inadequate, but she made herself say them anyway.

"Ain't your fault," Macintosh said. Twilight felt like he had read her mind. She glanced to the edge of the crowd, where Rainbow Dash still lurked on the fringes, as she had throughout the funeral.

Reluctantly, Twilight walked from the grave, making room for the next of the many mourners. She looked back to Rainbow Dash, who was watching with a face like an unmarked tombstone. Twilight turned away, then changed her mind. She felt like she had lost two friends, lately, but one of them could still be regained. Twilight changed course and went to Rainbow Dash, steeling herself to withstand the accusing glare.

"I'm sorry," Twilight said. "I haven't been a good friend. I walked away when you needed me most, and... and..."

Twilight trailed off, transfixed by Rainbow Dash's glare. Twilight had gazed into the mad eyes of Discord and beheld Nightmare Moon's leer with all its jealousy and spite. She had faced down the boundless rage of the First Dragon and the changeling queen's all-consuming hunger and the emotionless void that was the King With No Face. None of that prepared her for the contempt she saw in Rainbow Dash's eyes right now. Twilight stood transfixed, too shocked even to step away.

The two of them stayed that way for half a minute. Finally, Rainbow Dash broke the stillness. Without breaking eye contact, she spat at Twilight's hooves. Rainbow Dash turned her back and stalked away, leaving Twilight Sparkle alone with the crowd.

# GENEROSITY

Sunstone looked up as Twilight Sparkle entered the sterile hospital room. She was wearing a somber black gown; she must have come straight from the funeral. Twilight's eyes went immediately to the bed where Rarity lay unconscious. "How is she?" she asked softly.

"Better," said Sunstone. "The doctors don't think she'll walk again, but the pain is less than it was." He paused. "And Miss Fluttershy?"

"It's done." Her voice was firm. "I need to talk to your mother. Is it okay to wake her up?"

"I don't think you'd be able to. She just took her medicine, so she'll be out of it for a while." Sunstone was thankful for that. Rarity's hip was improving, it was true, but her joints had been bad enough before the fall. Now, the medicine was the only thing keeping her pain bearable.

"Oh." Twilight hesitated. "Well... would you tell her goodbye for me? I'm going to Canterlot for a while. A long while."

"Princess business?"

"Not really. I just... Ponyville's getting too complicated. I need a little distance."

"Oh. Huh." Sunstone wasn't sure what to make of that. Mom would be disappointed, for sure. "Well, I'll tell her you stopped by."

"Thanks. I should get going." Twilight turned to go, paused, looked back. "Sunstone? If I could keep your mom from dying, do you think it would be the right thing to do?"

Twilight was trying far too hard to keep her voice neutral, Sunstone noticed, and she wasn't meeting his eyes. "That's not hypothetical," he said quietly, "is it?"

"Not entirely, no."

Sunstone looked at Rarity's sleeping body. She had lost so much weight that her outline was almost lost among the heavy blankets. She looked peaceful, as she so seldom did. He sighed. "I don't want her to die, but that's selfishness." His voice was soft and steady. "Her time is almost done. Keeping her around like this would be cruel. Letting her go is the right thing for her, no matter how much it hurts."

"Okay. Right. You're a good pony." Twilight swallowed. "You're a good son. Tell her I love her, okay?"

Sunstone nodded.

"I should get going," Twilight said again. She hurried out.

Macintosh had watched the farmhouse grow as generations passed. There were enough wings, annexes, and outbuildings that the original structure was almost hidden from the outside. Despite the additions, most of which Macintosh had helped build with his own hooves, the house was crowded. Children and grandchildren, both his own and Apple Bloom's, slept two and three to a room. It was impossible to go down a flight of stairs without bumping into a familiar face or three.

Tonight it was the loneliest place in the world.

Macintosh shifted in his bed. He couldn't get comfortable—there was too much space for just one pony. He had been lying there for hours, alone with Fluttershy's absence. Gray starlight outlined the clock at his bedside. It was just past three o'clock in the morning.

There was a noise from the balcony. Apple Bloom had built it for Fluttershy when she first moved in so that the pegasus could come and go by air. He had heard the thump of his wife landing there hundreds of times. A moment passed before he realized this was not—could not be—her.

Still, Macintosh could hear small movements. Somepony was definitely out there. He forced himself upright and opened the door. Beyond, Rainbow Dash turned away from the sky to look at him with surprise. Age and the colorless light of the stars bleached her mane a dull gray.

He nodded a greeting. "Whatcha doing out here?" he asked gently.

Rainbow Dash blinked. She opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again.

Most ponies would have said something about how terribly late it was. Macintosh had never seen the point in stating the obvious. Ponies used so many words to say so little, but the important things usually couldn't be said with words at all. He stepped onto the balcony beside her and sat. After a moment, Rainbow Dash followed suit. The stars hung above them like cold ashes.

He rested his head on her shoulder. She wrapped her wing around his back. "She's really gone," said Rainbow Dash. Macintosh could only nod. They leaned into each other, sharing their warmth and their pain. Afterwards, Macintosh couldn't say how long they sat like that before he fell asleep.

Twilight Sparkle's eyes followed the steady motion of her grandfather clock's pendulum. She sat unmoving on the polished granite floor of her chambers in the palace. According to the clock, she had been sitting here for two hours, sixteen minutes, and nine seconds.

Moving the clock here from her home in Ponyville, where it had rested since she inherited it from her mother, had been bittersweet. Thanks to her nearly limitless magical power, it had taken her only moments to transport, but the emotional toll was greater. It was an admission that her home was now in Canterlot, not Ponyville. The ties that bound her there were being severed, one by one. Most of her friends were gone, and she found it difficult to care for those who remained. When she visited Rarity in the hospital, it only reminded her of seeing Fluttershy in the same position. And so she was here, watching the clock as it ticked steadily in a perfect, unchanging circle.

A soft knock on the door snapped Twilight out of her reverie. She turned her head and pulled the door open with her magic, revealing Starberry, her valet. "Excuse me, Your Highness," she said. "Princess Celestia is here to see you."

"Thank you," said Twilight. "Show her in." Starberry bowed and left. Twilight stood and stretched, working out the kinks that hours of stillness had left in her limbs. She felt almost normal by the time Celestia arrived.

"They tell me you haven't left these chambers in four days," Celestia said without preamble.

Twilight nodded. "I need some time. I've had a lot to think about since the funeral." As much as she always loved to see Celestia, this wasn't a conversation she wanted to have right now.

"You know this isn't healthy." Celestia walked forward, her shimmering mane trailing behind her. "You need your friends now more than ever. I thought you learned that lesson after Pinkie Pie

died.”

“That was different.” Twilight’s eyes followed Celestia’s advance, but the rest of her was still. “I’m okay now, really. I was still mortal when Pinkie died. Her death was a tragedy, not a part of the plan.”

“It can’t be both?”

“No! No it can’t! If Fluttershy’s death was a tragedy and I let it happen, then... then... it isn’t, okay?” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “It isn’t.”

“You have to mourn, Twilight. Otherwise you’ll never be able to move on.”

“I’ve never seen you mourn. I can be strong, too.”

“You’ve never seen me barricade myself in my chambers, either. I’ve had lifetimes to learn how to handle grief. You haven’t, yet, and pretending otherwise will only hurt you.”

“But how can I be sad about it when I chose for it to happen?” Twilight asked plaintively.

“You had to do it. That doesn’t mean it was easy. It’s only natural to be sad, Twilight. You know that. What are you running from?”

“I...” Twilight swallowed. “I don’t know. It’s just... at the funeral, the way Rainbow Dash looked at me, like I didn’t even deserve to be there. And, and she was right. I know I did the right thing, letting Fluttershy die, but I still let her die.” She was talking quickly now, voicing thoughts she had not dared to think. “I don’t have the right to be sad about it now. I gave that up when I put the greater good before my friend’s life.”

“Twilight Sparkle, look at me.” Celestia stood to her full height. “What I am about to tell you is unspeakably important. It may be the most important thing I have ever told you.” She leaned in close. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Twilight crumpled. “It was,” she bawled. “It w-was. I could have s-saved her and I didn’t.”

“Shhh. It’s okay.” Princess Celestia wrapped Twilight in her wings, enveloping her in an alabaster shell. “I know it hurts. Let it out.”

Twilight clutched Celestia and buried her face in her mentor’s shoulder. She tried to speak, but her words were overpowered by great shuddering sobs. She gave up and melted against Celestia, weeping into her shining coat. Twilight wasn’t sure what she was feeling, where all this helpless sorrow had been buried, but she was unable to stop it from bursting forth. She stayed that way for some time, heaving and gasping until she had nothing left inside.



“You’re a good pony, Twilight,” said Celestia. “You want to help the ones you care about, but usually the best way to help ponies is to do nothing at all. There’s a big difference between *causing* something and *not stopping* something. One makes you responsible and one is just nature taking its course. Some things have to happen, even when it’s hard, even when it means giving up the things that mean more to you than anything.

“You’re not the only pony making a sacrifice, though. Every pony who lives and dies is giving an incredible gift to the future. They’re agreeing to take their turn and then move on, letting their children have the world to themselves, and then their children, and their children. It’s a noble thing, and beautiful in its way. Fluttershy gave away everything. She died for Equestria, and even if she wasn’t facing down some monster, it was still heroic. She wasn’t upset, and she didn’t blame you, because it wasn’t your fault.

“It’s okay to let it hurt, though. You may be a princess, but you’re still a pony. You don’t have to go through this alone. Your friends want to help you as much as I do. You deserve their help. Please, visit Ponyville. You need those ponies, and they need you.”

Twilight sniffled. Her forelegs were beginning to ache with the effort of clinging to Celestia, but she couldn’t bring herself to relax her grip. “Okay. I, I think I can do that. But what do I do when the last of them dies, and I don’t have anypony left?”

“That won’t happen. You’ll make new friends. Life goes on, the good and the bad.”

Twilight looked up. “Princess. Are you happy?”

Celestia blinked. “You mean right now?”

“In general. At all. Outliving everypony.”

“Of course I am. You know how much I enjoy playing Go with my sister, or flying over the palace at noon, or watching you grow. You’re not sad because you’re immortal, Twilight. You’re sad because somepony you love just died, and being a princess has nothing to do with it. Those feelings won’t last forever, but you will. When you’re feeling better, you’ll find the rest of the world is still there to make life worth living.”

Twilight wiped at her eyes. “If you say so.”

“Twilight, let me be blunt. You’re making me worried. What you’re doing now reminds me of how Luna was acting, a decade before she snapped.”

Twilight gaped. “You think I’ll turn evil like Nightmare Moon?”

“Not quite like that, no. She wasn’t willing to talk to me, but you are. That’s encouraging.” The tiniest line creased Celestia’s brow. “Although I don’t usually have to push you to open up like that.”

“I’m sorry,” Twilight whispered.

“Luna’s weakness was that she couldn’t bear to be neglected,” said Celestia. “Yours is that you can’t bear to watch your friends suffer. I’m afraid you’ll act on that someday. Your heart and your head don’t agree, and nopony can ignore their heart forever, nor should they. I know you *understand* what you have to do, but you haven’t *accepted* it yet.”

“Well, what if there’s another way? What if I can help them without turning them into alicorns? My magic is so powerful now. Maybe an age spell! If I continually recast it before it wears off, I could keep Rarity young.”

“Even with your heightened powers, an age spell will only last a couple of hours. Sooner or later you’ll have to sleep.”

Now that her mind had started looking for a solution, Twilight couldn’t shut it down. “I could prolong the effect with a temporal dilation spell. No, no, time spells don’t combine well. Maybe I could link her morphic field to something more stable and anchor the spell to that, keep it working longer. I’d need something stable enough to last but also mutable enough to—”

“No.” One word was enough to shred Twilight’s gossamer hopes. “You’re still trying to meddle in things best left alone. If Rarity stays around forever, when will Sunstone become his own pony? What will happen to the next young fashionista who tries to make a name for herself? Rarity already had her time in the spotlight. I think she’d agree it’s time she gave that role to somepony else.” Celestia paused. “And incidentally, age magic works by suppressing and overwriting the morphic field. Stabilizing the field would negate the spell completely.”

“Oh. But... even if staying around so long is bad, it doesn’t sound as bad as dying.”

“Dying happens once, and then it’s the end. Or perhaps it isn’t the end, after all. Who can say? But if ponies don’t live up to their potential, not just once but over and over and over...”

“I guess that doesn’t sound fair to younger ponies.”

“I think you should spend some time with these younger ponies. You need a reminder that life and beauty will still be out there, even after the other Element bearers are gone. I know there are ponies you care about, both in Ponyville and here in Canterlot. They can give you so much. Please, let them.”

“Okay.” Twilight nodded. “Okay, I will.”

Apple Sprout cantered across Sweet Apple Acres, towards the distant figure of Rainbow Dash. She had taken Granny Fluttershy's death hard, Sprout knew, but this was worrying. And, he admitted to himself, more than a little bit silly. Of course, none of that was a surprise, coming from his great-aunt.

"Auntie Dash!" Apple Sprout called when she was close enough to be heard. "What in the hoof are you doing?"

Rainbow Dash adjusted the harness, pulling the straps tight across her chest. "What does it look like I'm doing? Now that I'm back, I figured I should help out." A heavy chain trailed from the harness and wrapped around a gnarled stump. The tree had fallen a couple of weeks ago, and while Apple Sprout and his cousins had chopped the trunk into firewood, they hadn't made time to remove the stump just yet. They were hard workers, but a task like that was more than enough to give them pause.

Apple sprout pulled to a stop beside Rainbow Dash. "That's awfully thoughtful," he said. "How about you help me pull down the rest of the leaves? Let us kids handle this one."

"You saying I'm told old for this?" Rainbow Dash pulled herself to her full height.

"Auntie Dash," Apple Sprout said, "My dad is too old for what you're doing. Remember when he tried, and busted up his knee? Weren't you the one who took him to the hospital?"

Rainbow Dash snorted. "First you guys wanted me back here. Now I'm back and you don't want me helping."

"Dad wanted you back here so you'd take care of yourself. This is not taking care of yourself. You'll just hurt yourself trying to do the impossible."

"It's fine, kiddo. I got this. I do impossible things all the time."

"Sure, but if—"

"Kid." Rainbow Dash fixed him with a glare like a wounded animal's. "I said back off."

Apple Sprout faltered. "Alright," he said. "Just be careful, okay?"

"Sure. You know me." Rainbow Dash gave the chain an experimental tug. "Careful."

Rainbow Dash had never felt at home inside Rarity's boutique. That sort of frilly stuff always put her a little off-balance. Still, even if the place wasn't comfortable, it had at least been familiar. Now, though... now it was different.

Not that she disliked what Sunstone had done with the place, Rainbow Dash thought as she followed the stallion past cases of gleaming jewelry. The kid had talent, and his stuff looked good. Better than Rarity's dresses, actually, although she'd never say so out loud. The gold and silver and diamonds were bright and colorful without being all fancy. Still, she missed the dresses now that they were almost all gone. The shop was no longer Rarity's in anything but name.

"I'm glad you stopped by, Miss Dash," said Sunstone. "Mom needs a friend now. It's been tough ever since she got back from the hospital."

Rainbow Dash nodded at the kid as she went past him, to the back of the storefront, through a short hall, and into the parlour. The room smelled of medicine and too much incense. Rarity lay on her chaise longue, which had been fitted with sheets and a pillow. Of course; her bedroom was upstairs, and she was in no shape to climb. (Neither was Rainbow Dash, really—she had uprooted the stump, eventually, but her whole body was still complaining from the ordeal.) Under the thin sheets, she could see the lump made by the cast immobilizing Rarity's hip. Her face was sallow and weary, but her smile was as bright as ever.

"Hey, you," said Rainbow Dash.

"Rainbow Dash! You'll have to forgive me if I don't get up. Come here, please."

Rainbow Dash made her way to Rarity's side and embraced her. "It's so good to see you."

Something in her tone must have tipped Rarity off. "Are you quite alright, darling?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good." Rainbow Dash looked at everything but Rarity. "I just feel like it's down to only the two of us, right?"

"I understand completely. I haven't seen much of Twilight since, well. You know."

"How are you holding up?"

"Oh, well enough, I suppose," said Rarity. "It's good to be back here, if nothing else. The hospital

staff were such dears, but it wasn't home. The immobility is frustrating, I'll grant, but I wasn't exactly in my prime before I fell."

"I don't know how you stand it." Rainbow Dash shook her head. "Staying in one place like that, I mean."

Rarity shrugged. "It's not as though I have much choice. It's not so bad, really, although I was ever so sorry to miss the funeral."

"Yeah. I really wish you could've made it. I think Fluttershy would've wanted you there." In her mind, Rainbow Dash still saw Twilight standing by the grave, acting sad now that it was too late to matter. The image sat in her gut like a rock. "I mean, *I* needed you there, you know? Are you sure there was no way for you to get there?"

"Quite sure," said Rarity. "Sun and Moon, Rainbow, I was still in the hospital!"

"Yeah, sure, but you could've figured something out!" Rainbow Dash found herself pacing back and forth. "They could've found a way to get you there and back."

"I don't—"

"Seriously, how could you *not* go? You coulda got a wheelchair or that carriage of yours or, or something. I mean yeah, maybe it's hard, but come on! You're supposed to be her friend! That's what friends *do*. It's not right."

"If there had been any way to—"

"But there was! You just... you just didn't care enough to make it happen!"

The door clicked open behind her. "I heard shouting," came Sunstone's voice.

Rainbow Dash glanced at his worried expression, then back to Rarity. Her friend was stunned, she saw, and fighting back tears. Rainbow Dash faltered. She wasn't sure where that outburst had come from. "Look, all I'm saying is—"

"I think you'd better go," Sunstone cut in.

"Just a minute. I—"

"Miss Dash." The grim determination looked out of place on Sunstone's normally easygoing face. "You're upsetting my mom."

Any other time, Rainbow Dash would have been able to face him down. Right now, she wasn't

sure. “Yeah, okay.” She made her way towards the door. “Hey, Rarity? I’m sorry.” She hurried out without looking back.

Twilight paced before the door of the Sweet Apple Acres farmhouse. She knew she had been avoiding the ponies inside for too long, but that didn’t make facing them now any easier. She raised a hoof to knock, then hesitated. Maybe she should go talk to Rarity first. Yes, that sounded like a great—

The door opened. Twilight found herself looking into the wide eyes of Honey Pie. “P-princess! I wasn’t expecting you! Please, come in. Have a seat. Can I find you anything to drink?”

“It’s fine, Honey Pie. Calm down.” Twilight stepped inside. The house smelled of baking pastry and brown sugar. She saw Honey Pie had put on a light jacket. “Were you heading out? Don’t let me keep you.” There was something else, a queer sensation...

“Oh, it’s nothing that can’t wait, Your Highness. Here, let me get you something to eat. I just finished some lovely tarts.” She hustled off towards the kitchen.

The strange feeling grew weaker as Honey Pie grew distant. It was a tingling in the part of her brain that felt her new earth pony senses, but that made no sense. The earth pony senses reacted to life, and she was—

Oh. Oh, wow.

Honey Pie returned with a small apple tart atop one of Granny Smith’s china plates. “Let me know if there’s anything else you need, Princess Sparkle.” She bobbed from hoof to hoof. “Can I ask why you’re here? Is there anypony you’d like me to fetch?”

“You’re pregnant,” said Twilight.

“Oh, dear. Is it showing already?”

“No, it’s... you’re pregnant!” Twilight felt herself grinning like a fool. Princess Celestia had told her, but she hadn’t listened. *Life goes on*. Celestia hadn’t meant Twilight’s own life. Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie were dead, yes, but soon enough their great-grandchild would come into the world. Twilight couldn’t wait to meet that pony, to watch her learn and grow and have foals of her own. She wanted to help that pony make her way through the world, to be there for the continuation of the story her friends had started. “This is wonderful!”

“Thank you, Princess. We’re very excited.”

The door opened behind her, letting in a gust of air that made her shiver. “Twilight.” Rainbow Dash’s voice was flat and cold. Rainbow Dash came in from outside, covered in sweat and bits of leaf. “I thought I saw you landing.”

Twilight blinked. She had known she would have to face Rainbow Dash eventually, but she wasn’t expecting to see her now. She wasn’t ready. “Rainbow? What are you doing here?”

Her eyes never left Twilight’s. “I live here. This is my home.”

Twilight returned the level stare. Like it or not, this conversation would have to happen now. “Honey Pie, can you give us the room, please?”

“O-of course, Your Highness, at once.” A door slammed, and they were alone.

Twilight broke the silence. “I’m glad you’re living here again. You—”

“I want you to leave.”

“Rainbow, wait. Listen to me, first.”

“Yeah?” Rainbow Dash sneered. “You mean like you listened to me at the library?”

Twilight winced. “I deserve that. I’m not proud of how I acted. I was still figuring out a lot of things, and I took my confusion out on you. I’m sorry.”

Rainbow Dash stepped forward. “You think you can just say sorry and put everything back like it was? You made your choice already.”

“I know. We can’t go back to what we had, before.” Twilight’s voice rose. “But that doesn’t mean things have to stay like this between us! I know you’re hurting because of what I did, and I want to make things right.”

“I’m hurting?” Rainbow Dash shot her an incredulous look. “You think *that’s* what matters?”

“Um. Yes?”

“I can’t believe you! You smug, selfish know-it-all!” With an effort of will, Rainbow Dash almost managed to steady her trembling hooves.

“What did I do now?”

"You mean you don't even—" Rainbow Dash took a deep breath. "No. No, we're not doing this." She turned her back on Twilight and walked deeper into the house.

"Rainbow Dash, wait." Twilight hurried to follow. "At least tell me what's going on."

"Fluttershy is *dead* and you think the important thing is how *I* feel!" Rainbow Dash stomped up a flight of old wooden stairs. "What about her? Do you even care?"

"Of course I care," Twilight said with forced patience. "But she's dead. She doesn't feel anything."

"That's right! She doesn't!" Rainbow Dash stopped dead in her tracks. "She could be here right now, helping with the autumn or arguing with Crabapple or whatever, but she isn't. She won't ever. She'll never meet Sprout's kid. She's never going to be happy or proud or frustrated, not ever again. She could be happy right now, but, but she *isn't*, she isn't *anything*, she's just... she's just..."

"You don't know that for sure," said Twilight. "We could be wrong about what happens when we die. Maybe it doesn't just end."

"That's all you have? So *maybe* she's watching us now from somewhere up above, or *maybe* she's back as a fluffy bunny or whatever, or *maybe* the griffons are right and she's wandering Tartarus forever because we didn't burn her body, or *maybe* the thing that used to be my friend is *rotting* in a *box in the ground*. If that's the best you've got, then we have nothing to talk about." She turned to face Twilight. "Every day, for the rest of forever, you're going to wake up to a world that doesn't have Fluttershy in it. Every day, I want you to remember that it's your fault."

Twilight fought back the burning sensation behind her eyes. "She was my friend, too," she said.

"She was my *family*." Rainbow Dash stalked forward, forcing Twilight back down the stairs. "I shared her house. I raised her kids. Don't you pretend to understand that."

"What, you think you're the only one who knows what family is?" Twilight stood her ground. Rainbow Dash bumped into her, then stood glowering from her higher perch. "I had a brother. Or are you going to tell me that you're different because of the foals?"

"You're trotting right I am." Rainbow Dash's breath was hot on Twilight's face.

"That's a load of fodder! There's Mother's Day and there's paintings about motherhood and poems about motherhood, but I've never seen anything celebrating *aunthood*. You're not a mom, Rainbow Dash!"

Rainbow Dash's face darkened. "The point is that I have ponies I care about. All you have is



Princess Celestia, and you'd rather watch every one of us die than ruffle one feather on her wing. That's not a family. That's some kind of messed-up obsession."

"That's not fair," said Twilight. "I never—"

"Fair?" said Rainbow Dash. "*Fair?*" She reared up and spread her wings. "Little miss immortal princess goddess wants to talk about *FAIR*? Is that why you came here, to tell me how *unfair* it is, being young forever?"

"You—"

"I want you to leave. Now."

"Just—"

"*Leave!*"

Twilight Sparkle left.

"Good evening, my jewel." Center Stage swept into his wife's makeshift bedroom. "You had a relaxing day, I trust?"

"Yes. Relaxing." There was only a trace of bitterness in Rarity's voice. As she turned her head towards Center Stage, the light around her horn flickered out and the novel she had been reading dropped against her pillow. "That's one way of putting it. I've been looking at these four walls all week. And yourself?"

"Just the opposite. I've had enough excitement for two ponies, today." Center Stage sat at the foot of Rarity's chaise longue. "You remember Searchlight, from our production of *Dray Miserables*? She's back, and she's up to her old tricks."

"Oh?" Rarity settled in to listen. "You've certainly been having an eventful time."

"I know! If you figure out a way for us to trade places for a bit, let me know. I could use a break." In truth, Center Stage had been dramatizing all of his life's minor gossip. Now that Rarity was too weak even to see customers, she had little enough contact with the world outside their house. He tried to give her some vicarious excitement, at least. Rarity could tell what he was doing, he was sure, but as long as they both pretended, it would help keep her from going stir-crazy.

Center Stage launched into his tale. Before he was too far along, however, his eyes fell on the end table beside Rarity's pillow. On it, a perfect china dish held a simple hay sandwich. It lay exactly where Center Stage had placed in the morning.

He paused. "Have you eaten anything today?"

"I don't know," said Rarity. "Probably. I'm not hungry, at any rate. Please, continue."

"No, wait. If you're even turning down my masterful cuisine, then we have a problem. Really, when was the last time you ate anything?"

Rarity pondered. "I believe it was last evening, when Shepherd brought over those lovely tarts."

"That was two days ago." Center Stage stood up. "I'm worried, my jewel."

"It's no trouble. I'm not hungry, really."

"That's what worries me." He found himself pacing. "We need to get you to the hospital."

"So soon?" Rarity pouted. "But I just left."

"Hey, you wanted to get out of the house, right?" He forced a grin. "I'll be right back with some help. Don't go anywhere."

In the weeks since her homecoming, Rainbow Dash had fallen back into the familiar rhythm of the farm. There was always work to be done, and she found herself helping with a zeal that would have horrified her younger self. Now, with the harvest finished and the last of the leaves removed, it was time for winter.

Rainbow Dash was spreading frost. She made her way across the fields with a pony-sized cloud in tow, molding the cloudstuff into frozen crystals which she scattered across the ground and the trees. It was easy work, if tedious, and Rainbow Dash had always insisted on doing it alone. It gave her time to think. She needed that now. Today would have been Applejack's birthday.

In all the months since Applejack's death, Rainbow Dash had been unable to think of her without feeling as though her heart had been ripped out through her chest. Now, though, her pain was... not gone, but different. Her mad grief had spent itself, leaving behind a wistful nostalgia. For the first time, sorrow was tinged with happy memories of the time they had

shared. It made her feel strange, and even a little unfaithful.

The sound of hoofbeats snapped her out of her reverie. Rainbow Dash turned to see the last pony she expected to find here. The Princess of the Sun approached, free of her crown and regalia, her breath steaming in the chill.

"Princess." Rainbow Dash didn't pause in her work. She had lost most of her reverence for Equestria's ruler.

"I'd like to talk," said Celestia.

"Yeah? Why? Did Twilight ask you to?" Rainbow Dash glanced up, then turned back to her cloud. She kicked it, knocking loose a puff of vapor, which she grabbed and began kneading with her forehooves.

"No. She doesn't need to. I know her too well. That, and Sunstone's last friendship report made some things very clear. I'm worried about where this path will take you."

"Look, Princess, this isn't gonna work. I guess thanks for coming, but I know what you're gonna say and Twilight already tried it."

Celestia's smile was bittersweet. "You think you're angry with me."

Rainbow Dash stepped forward. "Of course I'm angry with you!"

"Just like you were angry with Rarity?"

Rainbow Dash stopped her advance and half-turned away. The shame sat in her gut like a rock.

"That wasn't the only time you snapped at somepony who didn't deserve it, I'll bet."

She had nothing to say to that.

"You weren't angry at Rarity then," said Celestia. "You're not angry at me now. You're just angry. I understand and I don't blame you, but you're taking it out on other ponies. You know better than that, Rainbow Dash."

"So, what? I'm just supposed to sit back when my friends die?"

"Grief is never easy, but there are good ways to handle it and this isn't one of them. If you're honest with yourself, I don't think there's a single pony who you're truly angry at."

"There is, though." Rainbow Dash's face darkened. "I'm mad at Twilight."

"I suspect you told her as much, and none too gently."

Rainbow Dash nodded. "She deserved everything I gave her and more."

"And did lashing out at her make you feel better?"

"Honestly? Yeah. It kinda did."

"That surprises me. You've always been so loyal to your friends."

"I guess that's the difference between me and Twilight," said Rainbow Dash. "When it came down to it, I chose loyalty to my friends, and she chose loyalty to you."

"This doesn't have to be a competition. Why are you making it into one?"

"I don't think I did," Rainbow Dash said slowly. "I think that was you."

"Does that matter? Look where this approach has brought you. Whatever you think you feel towards Twilight, I know you don't want to hurt Rarity. I'm even more worried about what you'll do to yourself, if you keep this up. No matter how much you tear yourself apart, you won't help Fluttershy."

Rainbow Dash opened her hooves. A forgotten puff of frost spilled out and drifted to earth.

"Twilight could've helped her, though. You could've."

"I don't want to have that argument with you. Like you told me, Twilight already said everything there is to say. You don't have to agree with me, but I like to think I've earned your trust. Can't you trust that I'm doing this for good reasons?"

"I want to." Rainbow Dash leaned against her cloud. "I'm so tired of being angry, you know?"

"So stop."

"What, just like that?"

"You can work towards it, but you have to mean it. When you're ready, talk to me or Twilight. I know you've hurt each other, but your friendship is strong. You can repair it, but only if you want to."

Twilight Sparkle led the way down a tunnel made of solid crystal. Her horn's pure white glow spread across the violet floor and walls, creating whorls and eddies of light that shifted with her every step. It was unlike anything Golden Apple had seen. She tried and failed to keep from gawking at the splendor that surrounded her. "Oh, my," she said. "This place is absolutely stunning." She kept her voice low—it felt only right, in a place like this.

"Isn't it?" said Twilight. "Every time I come here, I can barely believe it's real."

For a while, they walked in silence, save for the sound of hooves on the polished amethyst floor and a distant rushing sound. Despite the beauty, Golden Apple couldn't shake a vague sense of unease. Right after her transformation, Twilight had made a big show of friendship. Then, at Ma's funeral, she had been aloof in a way that reminded Golden Apple of Princess Celestia. She hadn't seen Twilight at all in the weeks since then. She had no idea what to expect, now.

"However did you find these caves?" Golden Apple said to break the silence. "Was it part of one of your adventures?"

"Yeah. It was at my brother's wedding, during the first changeling attack." Twilight had a faraway look in her eyes. "I've been back a few times. The most recent was when your mom and I settled the dispute between the Diamond Dogs and the Emperor Mole."

"Ma was down here, too? I never even knew this existed, until you teleported us."

"It's a special place. Celestia keeps it a bit of a secret," said Twilight. "It's easy to get lost down here if you don't know the way. It even connects to the Undercaverns." She had to raise her voice to be heard over the rushing noise.

"Ah." Golden Apple paused. "I'm sorry, but I have to ask. What is that noise?"

"Come see." Twilight ducked down a side tunnel that opened into a wide, low cavern. Golden Apple followed her, then stopped, frozen to the spot.

Along the far wall was the source of the sound. A narrow river had carved its path through the cavern floor, but instead of water, gleaming jewels coursed along its length. Hoof-sized emeralds, topazes as big as her eye, sapphires no larger than pebbles, all flowed faster than a pony could walk before disappearing around a bend in the gemstone wall. The tumbling stones glowed with inner fire, casting a whirling kaleidoscope of color over every surface.

"Oh," Golden Apple managed at last. "Oh, my."

"I know, right?" Twilight Sparkle walked along the riverbank. "I've seen a lot of things in my time, but nothing quite like this. I haven't made time to come here in years."

Golden Apple reached into the stream and caught an apple-sized diamond between her hooves. It was remarkably cold to the touch, and slicker than she expected. "Why now?" she asked. "That is, if it's been so long..."

"I was kind of in a dark place for a while." Twilight dipped a hoof into the river. Jewels flowed around her leg, sending ripples outward. "I needed to remember how much beauty there is in the world. After your mom died..."

"I do miss her, Twilight, but it was her time."

"Can we not?" Twilight said quickly. "I mean, thank you—and let me point out in passing how weird it is that *you're* comforting *me* about your mom—I do appreciate it—but let's not do this just now, okay? Please?"

"Okay." The diamond slipped from Golden Apple's grasp, leaving a thin film of water on her hooves as it clattered to the cavern floor. "Hold on. Is this thing *melting*?"

"Of course," said Twilight. "They're ice crystals. Without the stream's magic, they don't last long."

"Oh. Ice crystals. Of course." Golden Apple poked at the strange jewel.

"How are your kids?"

Golden Apple looked up at that. "Well enough. Apple Bough just made the varsity polo team, and she couldn't be more proud. Apple Breeze is having a bit of a tougher time. Filly problems, I think, but he won't talk about it with me."

"How old is he now? Twelve?"

"Fourteen."

"Already? Sun and Moon." Twilight laughed softly. "Who let *that* happen? It doesn't seem so long since *you* were that age."

Golden Apple chuckled. "Listen to yourself. You sound like a grandmother."

"I feel like a grandmother. I get to watch all these kids growing up around me. Only it's better, because I'll get to see their whole lives, and their kids... I don't know whether I feel old or young."

They lay in the twisting light of the gems. Golden Apple gazed at the shimmering river, unable to tear her eyes away. It was some time before she spoke again.

"Why did you take me here?" she asked. "Not that I'm ungrateful, mind you, but I have to wonder."

"Because I can," said Twilight. "Because there's not much point in coming here if I can't share it. And because you're my friend."

"No," said Sunstone. "No, there has to be something we can do."

"Sunstone, please," Rarity said from her hospital bed. "Don't do this to yourself. The doctors said they don't even know what's wrong with me."

Rainbow Dash was pacing back and forth across the tiled floor. "So, what, that's it, then?" she said. "You're just gonna give up?"

"I'm not *giving up*," Rarity's voice was quiet and hoarse, but there was still passion behind her words. "I'm trying to accept what's coming. It's been four days since I've even been able to keep down food."

"Yeah." Rainbow Dash stopped next to the bed, sagging slightly. "I get it. If there were anything to do, we'd do it, but there's not."

Sunstone shook his head. "The doctors haven't given up." He started pacing where Rainbow Dash left off.

"My body's all but coming apart at the seams," said Rarity. "Even if they figure something out, I doubt if I have very long."

"So how are you dealing with everything?" said Rainbow Dash. "Looks like you're handling all this pretty well."

Rarity smiled a brittle smile. "I'm terrified. I try not to be, but I think the most I can do is take this gracefully."

A hoof knocked on the door. "Rarity?" came a soft voice. "Are you awake?" Rainbow Dash stiffened.

"Come in, Twilight," said Rarity. The door swung open. Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash locked eyes for half a heartbeat before both of them looked away. Twilight hesitated, then

stepped inside.

She went straight to Rarity's beside. "Um," said Twilight. "Hi."

"I'm so glad you came, darling."

Twilight looked down at her friend. Rarity looked even more brittle and withered than she had before Twilight fled to Canterlot. Her limbs were thin as sticks and all but immobile. There was pain in her eyes, but the light behind them hadn't dimmed.

"Celestia said she's going to visit tomorrow," Twilight said. "I thought you'd want to know. If you want me to help you look your best for the princess..."

"I think the time for such things has passed." Rarity laughed. Twilight couldn't tell if there was bitterness under it. "It will be enough to see her. I'm afraid even I can't do much to make this old body presentable."

"It doesn't have to be that way." Sunstone's voice was barely above a whisper as he turned to Twilight. "You said you could save her life."

Twilight looked at him in surprise. "I thought you agreed it was her time." Rainbow Dash was studying the walls intently, she noticed.

"You think I care about that now?" Sunstone advanced on her. "My mom is dying and you can help her! How can anything else matter?"

"Sunstone, please," said Rarity. "The princesses have already decided. I'm sure they know best."

Twilight nodded. "I'm afraid she's right. The consequences would be dire."

"You're supposed to be her friend!" Sunstone was shouting, now. Twilight forced herself not to shrink away. "Do something!"

"Hey." Rainbow Dash draped a wing over Sunstone. "It's no good. She won't listen."

"But," Sunstone sputtered, "but, but..."

"Come on, kiddo. Let's get some air." Gently, Rainbow Dash guided him towards the exit. He looked dazed as he let himself be led away. Rainbow Dash nudged him through the door, then turned and looked back. Her gaze wasn't accusing, wasn't angry. It was just sad. Somehow, that was even worse.



"I have to let this take its course," said Twilight. "Just listen for once."

Rainbow Dash held her gaze until Twilight looked away, then shut the door, leaving Twilight alone with Rarity.

Twilight exhaled sharply. "I wish you didn't have to see that. Not now."

"Don't blame Sunstone," said Rarity. "He's having a difficult time."

Twilight smiled ruefully. "I know what that's like. It's okay. He's a good kid."

Rarity laid a hoof on Twilight's shoulder, wincing as she forced her swollen joints to bend. "Twilight Sparkle, you were a truly fabulous friend. I'm so pleased to have known you."

Twilight covered Rarity's hoof with her own. "You mean so much to me. I'm going to miss you." She swallowed. "I never know what to say at times like this."

"Say you'll remember me fondly. They say you're not really dead as long as somepony remembers you. I'd like to live forever, through you."

"Of course I will." Twilight's friends had molded her into the pony Celestia had chosen for the highest honor in the world, she reflected. She would never be able to forget them. "I wish I could make you live forever for real. I wish I could keep you by my side."

"So do I. It would be such fun to stay. There's so much more I could still do, so many things left to see, and I could watch what becomes of Sunstone..." She sighed wistfully. "Still, this is how it goes. Lots of ponies have lived and died and it seemed to work well enough for them, on the whole."

Twilight looked away. "A couple months ago, you said that if our positions were reversed, you would've made me immortal."

Rarity frowned. "Are you second-guessing yourself?"

Twilight bit her lip. "A little."

"Don't. What's happening isn't your fault. It's just part of life."

"Technically, it's exactly the opposite."

"You know what I mean," said Rarity. "It's acceptable, is what I'm trying to say."

Despite the brave words, Twilight could see fear in her friend's face. "You really think that?" she

asked. "Even now?"

Rarity nodded. "No matter what I want, it's not worth going against Princess Celestia. I know how much her esteem means to you. It's what you've always wanted, and you've worked so hard to earn it. I wouldn't take that away from you, not for anything in the world."

Twilight blinked. "You'd give up your life for me."

"Stars and sapphires, it's not as though I'm jumping in front of a train."

"Still. I get to live forever and you don't because you're more giving than I am?"

"Maybe that's why she chose you and not me. Because you can see the big picture, and I can only see ponies."

"Ponies," Twilight echoed. "That's all there is, isn't there? Equestria is just ponies."

*Life goes on*, Celestia had said, but for whom? Certainly for Twilight. Certainly not for Rarity. Had Celestia meant ponies like Honey Pie and Apple Sprout and their unborn child? What was Equestria, if not them and ponies like them? Their lives would go on, true, but only for a time. Would Equestria be better off for their loss? Twilight couldn't bring herself to believe that, not while she was here, at her friend's deathbed.

"Twilight?" Rarity was watching her face nervously. "Are you quite well?"

"You're right," Twilight said. "It's only ponies. There's no special ingredient that turns a bunch of ponies into a bigger whole. Equestria is nothing but individual ponies." She couldn't help Equestria by sacrificing Equestrians. The idea didn't even make sense.

"What are you saying?"

Twilight felt her jaw clench. "Close your eyes," she said. "Take slow, deep breaths. Focus on your magic, but don't gather any power. Turn your mind inwards. This is going to be about exploration, not force." As she spoke, Twilight gripped the fabric of the world and began weaving a mind-merge spell. "I'll be there to guide you."

Rarity gaped. "Twilight, I... you know I don't want to die, but this is bigger than I am! Doing the right thing is more important. Think about what you're doing!"

"I am. This is right." Images swam through her mind's eye. Twilight saw Applejack chase Rainbow Dash through a storm of scarlet leaves. She saw a kite, pulled from her grasp by the wind, only for her brother to catch it. She saw Fluttershy holding a tiny, squalling Crabapple.

She saw herself a thousand years old, sculpting the sky with easy familiarity. She saw Rarity at her side, watching in silent appreciation. She saw Princess Celestia—

No. Not now. The important thing now was Rarity. Twilight banished the phantoms from her mind. “Close your eyes and focus,” she said in a voice hard as granite, “before I change my mind.”

Rarity closed her eyes and focused.

# MAGIC

"Auntie Dash? You'd better come outside." Apple Sprout's voice had a strange quaver to it.

"Yeah?" said Rainbow Dash. "What is it?"

"Rarity's here to see you."

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. "What's she doing out of the hospital?"

Apple Sprout opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Fine, be that way." She brushed past Apple Sprout and made her way out of the farmhouse.

What she saw outside took her breath away. Rarity was galloping among the leafless apple trees on lithe, muscular legs that shone whiter than the thin crust of snow beneath her hooves. She wore an expression of gleeful abandon that Rainbow Dash hadn't seen on her face since, well, ever. A pair of sleek marmoreal wings were tucked neatly against her sides.

Rainbow Dash squealed with joy and darted out to meet her. Rarity turned towards Rainbow Dash and let out a whoop. Her gait was shaky from disuse, but put she on a burst of speed regardless.

As they came together, Rainbow Dash leaped forward to throw a wild embrace around her friend. Rarity lost her tenuous balance, and the two of them tumbled to the ground. Rainbow Dash clutched Rarity with all her might and buried her face in her shoulder, laughing until tears ran down her cheeks. The two of them rolled in the half-frozen grass, shrieking and giggling like foals. It was several minutes before they disentangled. Rainbow Dash picked herself up carefully while Rarity bounced to her hooves. Her radiant coat was streaked with dirt and snow, but for once Rarity didn't seem to care.

"Wow," Rainbow Dash managed. "You look... wow."

"I know!" said Rarity. "Did you see me run? Stars and fishes, I can *run*!"

"Running's alright." Rainbow Dash grinned. "Have you tried flying?"

“Teach me how!” Rarity hopped from hoof to hoof. “Show me show me show me!”

“There’s nothing to teach! You just flap your wings and, y’know, fly.”

The words had barely left her mouth before Rarity was off, hooves kicking up snow as she picked up speed. She spread her wings and leaped for the sky.

Her flight was short-lived. She beat her wings once, but that only sent her into a wild roll. Moments later, Rarity crashed shoulder-first into the earth.

Rainbow Dash rushed to her side. “Whoa! You okay, there?”

“Yes! I’m okay!” Rarity laughed aloud. “I fell down but I’m okay!”

“Flying takes some getting used to,” said Twilight. Rainbow Dash did a double-take; she had been so focused on Rarity, she hadn’t even noticed Twilight until she was right beside them. “It’ll come to you soon enough.”

“Oh,” said Rainbow Dash. “Hi.”

The two of them faced each other. Rainbow Dash started to speak, then cut herself off. Twilight’s gaze flicked between Rainbow Dash’s face and her hooves. Finally Rainbow Dash broke the silence. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re up next,” said Twilight.

Rainbow Dash was taken aback. “You’re sure?”

“Well, that’s why we came here right after Carousel Boutique. But if you’re having second thoughts—”

“No way!” said Rainbow Dash. “I’m just surprised. I thought, even if you did this, you’d be taking it slow, right?”

Twilight sighed. “There’d be no point. If I’m wrong about this, it’s way too late to turn back.”

“You’re not wrong,” said Rainbow Dash. “C’mon, Twilight, just look at her.”

Rarity stood and shook herself, sending out a shower of ice and dirt. “I’ll warn you, the transformation is no easy task. We were at it for quite some time.”

Twilight nodded. “Nineteen hours, to be precise.”

“Well then,” said Rainbow Dash, “I guess we’d better get started.”

Minutes later, Twilight Sparkle stood by the side of Rainbow Dash’s bed. The door was firmly shut, and Rarity was standing watch to make sure none of the Apples disturbed them. Rainbow Dash lay flat on the bed with her forelegs dangling over the side. Twilight searched for a way to break the silence and found nothing.

“I gotta ask,” said Rainbow Dash, “why do this for me? I’m super glad, don’t get me wrong. I just thought you’d be pretty mad at me.”

“Well, I am,” said Twilight. “I reached out to you over and over, and every time you just used it as a chance to take another shot at me. When we have time, I plan to spend a while being very loud and telling you what an awful pony you are. I just don’t hate you enough to want you, y’know, dead.”

Rainbow Dash nodded. “I get that. For what it’s worth, thanks.”

Twilight didn’t want to think about this. “Let’s just focus on our task, now, alright? Close your eyes and breathe deeply.” When Rainbow Dash did, Twilight went on. “Try to stay relaxed. Center your mind on your pegasus magic, the part you use to manipulate weather and all that.”

Rainbow Dash’s wings twitched once, then again. “I’m focused,” she said. “Now what?”

“Now I use the mind-merge spell. I’ll show you how to follow your magical channel towards the source, all the way until you reach the center of your soul. Then you’ll have to merge the three parts of your soul into a unified whole. I don’t know how much I can help with that part. Are you ready?”

A grin split Rainbow Dash’s face. “Ready.”

“Okay,” said Twilight. “Here goes.” She wove together the mind-merge spell, binding her own consciousness to Rainbow Dash’s. She brushed the shell of the other pony’s mind—a taut, flat facade of determination and hope—and plunged beneath.

Twilight reeled back. Immersing herself in the contempt broiling beneath the surface of Rainbow Dash’s mind was like plunging into a pool of lukewarm mud. She nearly broke the connection on sheer reflex, but managed to hang on. Her task was too important to let herself slip. As Twilight reoriented herself, she realized that she was herself the target of Rainbow Dash’s disgust. She

had known Dash was unhappy with her, but the depths of it... Twilight had never disliked another pony half that much in her life.

Twilight tried to put that out of her mind. She had a job to do. She focused on her wings and the magic within them, then followed that magic towards its source at the core of her soul. She felt Rainbow Dash following suit through their connection, albeit even more slowly and shakily than Rarity had. She also felt Rainbow Dash's barely-repressed contempt still spilling through. Twilight had learned the technique of integrating all her emotions into her magic, but that proved useless on assimilating somepony *e/se's* emotions. She sensed Rainbow Dash sensing Twilight's own discomfort. Rainbow Dash tried not to think about her disgust, but predictably, that only brought it to the front of her mind. Twilight couldn't stop herself from focusing on Rainbow Dash focusing on Twilight focusing on Rainbow Dash's rancor. Her control wavered, and she lost the thread of her magic.

Twilight opened her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said. "I can't do this. The, uh, the way you feel about me is too distracting. You'll have to get Rarity to lead you through, I guess."

"I get it," Rainbow Dash said. Sweat beaded her face. "If I were you, I guess I wouldn't want to see inside my head either."

Twilight swallowed. "I had no idea you felt so... heated."

Rainbow Dash looked at everything except Twilight. "Look, I want to be nice to you right now. You just saved Rarity, and you tried to save me. That's important. Like, real important. But if you're already reading my mind, then yeah. You killed Fluttershy. You're right, I feel *heated*." From what she saw of Rainbow Dash's face, Twilight was glad she wasn't looking her in the eyes.

Twilight changed the subject. "It might take longer, with Rarity teaching you instead of me, but she should be capable of it. The transformation isn't something you forget how to do, and she'll have no trouble with the mind-merge spell now that she's an alicorn."

"Cool." Rainbow Dash pushed herself into a sitting position. "Thanks for trying, I guess. I'll ask her tomorrow, once she's a bit settled in."

Twilight stood on the frost-covered grass, watching her friends soar overhead. Rarity bobbed and tilted as she followed Rainbow Dash through the air, matching the old pegasus's speed, if not her grace. Rainbow Dash had insisted on being the one to teach Rarity to fly, and although her tutelage consisted of pure example with no actual instruction to speak of, Rarity seemed to

be learning. More importantly, both ponies were having the time of their lives, judging by the shouts and laughter that came from the skies.

A riot of color appeared in Twilight's peripheral vision as Princess Cadence stepped up to her side. "Oh, Twilight Sparkle." Her voice was heavy with disappointment. "What have you done?"

"Something I should've done a long time ago." Twilight couldn't tear her eyes away from her friends' play. "I'm surprised you're in Ponyville." Somehow, she managed to keep her voice level.

"I was planning to visit Rarity in the hospital. When the doctors told me what happened, I didn't want to believe them."

"I'm sorry," said Twilight. Then, on second thought, "No, actually, I'm not. Everypony should have this. You can't look at how happy she is and tell me this was a mistake."

"This was a mistake," said Cadence. "Mistake doesn't begin to cover it! This is the biggest mistake anypony has made in a thousand years. You know better than this, Twilight. You know things aren't as simple as you want them to be. I have no idea what I'm going to tell Celestia."

Twilight winced. She had been trying not to think about Celestia. "Please don't," she said softly. "She should hear about this from me."

"Then why haven't you told her?"

"It's hard. Please, just give me time. I want to do this the right way. Trust me."

Cadence dug a rut in the snow with a forehoof. "We trusted you with the future of Equestria, and you went and did *this* behind our backs. I shouldn't trust you again." She exhaled through her nostrils. "Shining Armor also trusted you, though. For his sake, I'll give you this chance. I'll wait until tomorrow, then I'll tell her, whether you're ready or not."

"Thank you." Twilight couldn't think of anything else to say.

Cadence stared at her for long seconds with her mouth half-open. "Sometimes I forget how young you are," she said. Cadence set her jaw firmly, then disappeared in a flash of magic.

Twilight looked up. Her friends had been too engrossed in their acrobatics to notice Cadence's arrival, it seemed. They were spiraling higher and higher. Twilight tried to go back to watching them, but her thoughts kept turning to Celestia. How would she ever explain this? She had to make Celestia understand. If not... if not...

"Woo! Way to go, Rarity!" Rainbow Dash's voice was suddenly close. "Twilight! Hey, Twilight!"



Rainbow Dash swooped low and hovered before her. "Did you see that?"

"What?" said Twilight. "No, sorry."

"Aw, man, it was great! Rarity can already dive faster than I can. I mean, she's faster than *me*! She's making this look easy."

Rarity descended, hovering more or less beside Rainbow Dash. "Looks can be deceiving, darling. I feel like these new wings are about to fall off."

"I'm pretty tired too," said Rainbow Dash. "Let's pick this up tomorrow, after you make me a princess."

"Wait a minute," said Sunstone. "Mom's changing her into a princess?"

Princess Twilight nodded. "Your mom will be busy with her for a while. The transformation could take as long as a day, maybe more."

Center Stage stood speechless. Things were changing so fast, he could hardly keep up. He still found it hard to believe his wife was a princess. A princess was supposed to be a distant paragon of wisdom and grace, not a pony who pretended to like his cooking and snored like a sawmill.

"Okay," said Sunstone. "She's changing *Miss Dash* into a princess?"

"Yes." Twilight's brow creased. "Is that a problem?"

"Well," said Center Stage, "she doesn't seem like the princess type. I can't quite picture her wearing a tiara and holding court."

Twilight shook her head. "That's not the point. This is about immortality. I want to make sure she doesn't die, and that's all."

"All?" said Center Stage. "The eternal youth seems pretty good too."

"You know what I mean. This is about the physical and magical transformation, not her social position. And because of that, I don't plan on stopping with Rainbow Dash. I'll transform anypony who wants it. Starting with you two."

Center Stage's brain tried to process that, and failed completely.

"What," said Sunstone.

"You heard me. You'll be like Rarity and me. You can live forever, and so can the rest of Ponyville. The rest of Equestria."

Sunstone looked puzzled. "What made Princess Celestia change her mind about that?"

"Um." Twilight rubbed the back of her neck. "I may not be doing this with her blessing, exactly."

Sunstone blanched. "You didn't."

"I did! I had to! I thought you *wanted* me to do this."

"I guess," said Sunstone. "I don't know! I'm glad you saved Mom. But... every pony, everywhere? That's going too far."

"Why? Everypony is somepony's mom or son or sister or *something*. How can it be right for Rarity but wrong for you?"

Sunstone paused to think. "It feels like it should only be for special ponies. Mom was one thing. She's the Element of Generosity. Me, though? I'm just a regular pony."

"Huh," said Center Stage. "For some reason, I never thought you as just a regular pony."

Twilight sighed. "I don't want to force you to do anything. The option's there if you want to take it."

"Well," said Center Stage, "I just might."

"Dad!" Sunstone shot him a sharp look.

"Hey, it's worth thinking about, at least," said Center Stage. "It's not every day you get an offer like this."

Rainbow Dash lay on the chaise longue in Rarity's parlour. The cushions were uncomfortably soft, and the room still had an antiseptic hospital smell to it. Rainbow Dash remembered how weak Rarity had been, the last time they had met in this room.

“So what’s it like, turning into a princess?” Rainbow Dash asked. “Twilight told me what to do, kinda, but she didn’t say how it feels.”

“It’s hard to put into words.” Rarity didn’t stop pacing as she spoke. Rainbow Dash hadn’t seen her stand still for more than a minute or two since her transformation. “Getting there takes a lot of hard work, but once the transformation happens, it just feels right. The process was long and frustrating, however. It will be easiest for me to show you how through the mind-merge spell.” With Rarity’s family and Twilight outside, the two of them were alone in the overdecorated parlour.

Rainbow Dash nodded. “So you can use that spell, now that you’re all princessed up?”

“That and more. My magic is perhaps as versatile as Twilight’s used to be. Now, if you’ll permit me?”

“Yeah. Let’s get this done.”

A bright aura popped into being around Rarity’s horn. For the second time today, Rainbow Dash felt another mind join hers. Rarity’s thoughts and emotions were as accessible as her own, to the point where it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. Twilight’s mind had been a tangled knot of nervous determination, but Rarity was a sparkling field of joy, still reveling in her sudden health.

Rarity turned her thoughts inward and meditated. Rainbow Dash wouldn’t have imagined Rarity to have such powerful focus, but her skill was impressive. Rainbow Dash followed her mental example. Such competent meditation would normally have been beyond her, but by copying the techniques she felt Rarity using, Rainbow Dash was able to keep up. Some time later—whether minutes or hours she couldn’t say—Rainbow Dash felt herself in a state of calm, focused awareness.

“Well done. That’s the first step.” It took Rainbow Dash a moment to realize she was hearing Rarity’s actual voice. The words came half a heartbeat after the concepts formed in her head. “Now focus on your weather magic. We shall follow that channel to the very center of your soul.”

Rainbow Dash felt Rarity’s focus shift to her wings and tried to follow suit. It proved difficult; Rarity grasped her own magic with an ease and strength that Rainbow Dash had never realized was possible. Despite a lifetime of practice, Rainbow Dash felt like a novice by comparison. It took several tries, but eventually Rainbow Dash achieved a degree of focus that Rarity must have found acceptable, for she felt a wave of approval through their connected minds.

Rarity’s mind slipped deeper, following her magic to blaze a trail into the depths of her subconscious. Rainbow Dash did the same, but her magic was weaker than Rarity’s and her

awareness less keen, and she soon lost the trail in the churning bedrock of her mind.

“Not bad,” came Rarity’s voice. “Try again.” Rainbow Dash sent her focus back to the beginning and tried again, and again, and again, following Rarity’s patient guidance. Over countless attempts, Rainbow Dash was making progress. The path slowly became clearer, and she was able to follow it further and further before losing track. She lost track of time as her world shrank to her own magic and Rarity’s awareness. It would have been frustrating, but the calm and determination spilling into her mind from Rarity’s kept Rainbow Dash focused.

Eventually she followed her magic far enough that she sensed its source, a bright shining beacon at the core of her self that radiated a feeling of perfect wholeness. It took her another eight or ten tries before Rainbow Dash approached that source closely enough to focus on it completely. When she did, her awareness shifted.

Rainbow Dash found herself facing two copies of herself, one an earth pony, the other a unicorn. She wasn’t certain where they were. Perhaps it was a rumbling train car, or a starlit orchard, or maybe a bank of clouds. Somehow it didn’t seem important.

“So, what,” said Rainbow Dash, “are we supposed to magic ourselves into one pony now?”

“I dunno,” said Unicorn Rainbow Dash. “I’m not sure I want to be part of *you*.”

“Huh?”

“Well, we’re supposed to be Loyalty, right? But you’ve been nothing but trouble for Twilight lately. That’s not what I want to be.”

“Hey,” said Rainbow Dash, “I’ve been as nice to her as I can, since she princessed Rarity.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Unicorn Rainbow Dash. “That’s just tolerance, though. That’s not love. That’s not *friendship*.”

“Oh, come on,” said Earth Pony Rainbow Dash. “Loyalty doesn’t mean being nice to everypony ever. It means staying true to ponies who deserve it. Twilight gave that up when she killed Fluttershy. I’d rather we stay loyal to Fluttershy.” She stomped a hoof. “Twilight earned what we gave her.”

“Fluttershy’s dead, though,” said Unicorn Rainbow Dash. “There isn’t anypony to be loyal to. Twilight’s still around.”

“So?” said Earth Pony Rainbow Dash. “We still have to stay loyal to what Fluttershy *was*. That doesn’t include buddying up to the pony who made her die.”

“Whoa there,” said Rainbow Dash. “I’m mad at Twilight, but I dunno if that’s loyalty talking. Fluttershy told me—told us—me—whatever, she said not to get mad at Twilight. Maybe she was wrong, but that’s what she wanted.”

Earth Pony Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Fluttershy never looked out for herself enough. The way I see it, that just makes it more important that we stay loyal to her. I mean, she wasn’t gonna do that for herself, so somepony’s gotta.”

“Well, what about Rarity?” said Unicorn Rainbow Dash. “Doesn’t it matter that Twilight made her immortal? I don’t know if anything can make up for letting Fluttershy die, but saving Rarity comes close.”

“Hold it,” said Rainbow Dash. She was thoroughly confused by now. “How am I supposed to combine with *both* of you if you’re telling me opposite things?”

Unicorn Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Dunno. I’m you, remember? I don’t know anything you don’t.”

“Yeah,” said Earth Pony Rainbow Dash. “Maybe you’re supposed to pick which one of us is right.”

“No.” Rainbow Dash paced before her counterparts. “You’re both right, kinda. I can’t leave Twilight behind. Maybe I hate her, but I guess she’s still my friend. No way I could hate her this much if she weren’t. If I ditch my friends when things get tough, then I’m no better than Twilight. I have to stay faithful to Fluttershy too, it doesn’t matter if she’s dead. That’s obvious. I just don’t know *how*.”

“Well,” said Earth Pony Rainbow Dash, “what would Fluttershy want, if she were here? That’s about as good as we’re gonna do.”

“She wouldn’t want me to take revenge. That’s pretty much the opposite of what Fluttershy was about. If I’m gonna stay loyal to what Fluttershy was, that means I gotta focus on kindness. And I guess that means I even have to forgive Twilight for what she did.”

“Whoa whoa whoa!” said Earth Pony Rainbow Dash. “Let’s not go crazy. There’s no excuse for what she did. I mean, killing Fluttershy? Forgiving that is... is... it’s impossible!”

“So?” said Rainbow Dash. “I do impossible things all the time.”

“It wouldn’t be forgiving her if it weren’t for something unforgivable,” said Unicorn Rainbow Dash. “That’s what forgiveness *is*.”

“Yeah.” Rainbow Dash set her jaw. “What’s right for Fluttershy is also what’s right for Twilight, so

that's what we're gonna do." Rainbow Dash felt a queer sensation in the back of her mind, like a harmonious pressure growing stronger and stronger.

"Okay," said Unicorn Rainbow Dash. "But out of curiosity, is this what's right for *us*?"

The other two Rainbow Dashes shot her twin looks of incredulity. "Who cares?" said Earth Pony Rainbow Dash.

"There's no difference," said Rainbow Dash.

"Yeah." Unicorn Rainbow Dash nodded. "Okay, yeah."

They looked at each other. "So, uh." Earth Pony Rainbow Dash pawed at the ground. "That's settled. How do we do this soul-merge thing?"

"I feel kinda funny, actually," said Rainbow Dash. "I think maybe we just did."

The pressure in her head reached a crescendo. There was a surge of rightness and peace, and then she was looking through three sets of eyes. "Whoa," her three bodies said in unison. "Weird." Rainbow Dash stretched her pegasus body's wings, watching the movement from her other two perspectives.

The three Rainbow Dashes edged closer together until they were close enough to touch. Pegasus Rainbow Dash laid a hoof on Unicorn Rainbow Dash's shoulder. A jolt ran through her from her tail to the tips of her wings. Somehow she had never noticed the magic in the world all around her, but now it was so obvious. She closed her eyes. Magic hung in the air like mist, it covered the ground like moss, it suffused her body and gathered around the base of her horn.

Wait. Horn?

Earth Pony Rainbow Dash stepped forward and touched Pegasus Rainbow Dash. She felt stable, dense, powerful. She felt her heart pumping, her blood flowing, her liver working. She felt every part of herself acting in harmony to keep the whole alive.

When Rainbow Dash opened her eyes, Rarity was beaming down at her. "Congratulations, darling."

Twilight was in the storefront of the boutique, admiring Sunstone's designs. Before long, Rainbow Dash's transformation would be complete, and the three of them would have to figure

out what to do. Until then, though, she could stop thinking about how to steer Equestria's fate. Until then, she could just be a pony looking at pretty things.

Rarity pranced into the room. "Guess what, Twilight! We're finished!"

"That's impossible," Twilight said. "You've only been in there for three hours."

Rainbow Dash followed her in, bearing a six-colored horn. "What do I keep telling you ponies about impossible things?" Her body had regained the sheen and grace of youth, but kept the strength and bulk that decades of farm work had given her.

"What? But how?" said Twilight. Rarity's transformation had taken a whole day, Twilight's nearly as long. Twilight wasn't jealous, she was just confused. Okay, maybe she was a little jealous.

"I don't know," said Rarity. "I was showing her what you showed me, and it was so much clearer than before, as if something were leading me. It was... oh, this is going to sound silly. It reminded me of when I got my cutie mark."

"That could be it," said Twilight. "I don't really understand alicorn special talents, but they can be powerful. Maybe yours is making other alicorns."

Rainbow Dash gave Rarity a friendly nudge. "Hah! Not bad for generosity."

There was a booming knock at the front door. Before Rarity could reach it, the door swung open. Princess Celestia stalked in with fury blazing across her face. "Twilight Sparkle! What is the meaning of this?" Her coat shimmered with white-hot light, and smoke rose from her throat with every word. At her side came Princess Luna, cold and unblinking.

Twilight's mouth worked soundlessly. She felt as if her insides were trying to crawl out through her throat. Finally she found her voice. "P-Princess Celestia! I meant to tell you, really I did. I, um, I had to do this."

"I never expected such weakness from you."

"This isn't weakness! This is exactly what I meant to do. I remember everything you said to me, before. I know you don't think my friends can handle this. You, you..." Twilight hesitated. It had been hard enough to consider the thought, but saying it to Celestia's face went against everything Twilight had ever been. She said it anyway. "You're wrong."

Celestia's mouth was a taut line. "I thought you had more respect for my teachings than that."

"You were the best teacher I could've asked for. I've never done anything but try to live up to that. You taught me that friendship is the most important thing in the world, that I should always

be there for my friends no matter what.” Twilight’s voice was soft and tremulous. “I remember when the Crystal Empire reappeared. You taught me that doing the right thing is more important than doing what I’m told.” She faltered, but recovered herself quickly. “More important than whether you love me.”

“What wilt thou do now?” If Luna was angry, her face gave no sign of it. “Surely thou dost not expect to return to Canterlot, after this.” Twilight looked to Celestia, who confirmed her sister’s words with a nod.

Twilight forced herself to stay steady, although it felt as if her world were crumbling around her. “I don’t... I guess I’ll have to stay here for a while. There are lots of other ponies I have to transform.”

“No,” said Celestia. White-orange sparks crackled from her mane. “You’ve gone too far already.”

Rainbow Dash stepped forward. “Sorry, Princess, but you can’t stop us.”

“I can.” Celestia’s eyes never left Twilight. “I banished my own sister for less. I should do the same to you three.” Celestia’s horn glowed, and the air grew warmer. Twilight sensed reality grow strained as Celestia gathered magic about herself.

Twilight saw Rainbow Dash tense for a fight, but she couldn’t bring herself to follow suit. She wasn’t *that* far gone. Twilight looked down and tried to brace herself. “At least we’ll still be together.”

“It will not come to that.” Luna stepped between Celestia and Twilight. “We will not interfere. Thy decision is made, Twilight Sparkle. Thou wilt watch as the ponies thou would save are crushed beneath the burden thou givest them. Thou wilt know that their madness was thy own doing. Thou wilt live with the consequences of thy choice.” She turned to Celestia. “Thy student is more like thee than thou knowest.”

“I don’t think my friends will go mad,” Twilight said slowly. “I think that happened to you because you were alone and grieving and trying to fit into your sister’s horseshoes. My friends aren’t going to do any of that. They just want to *live*. Even if they do go crazy, we’ll be able to help them. With so many princesses around, one rogue alicorn won’t be such a huge threat that we’d have to banish her.”

Celestia set her glare on Luna. “You see? If we leave them be, they’ll destroy our entire civilization.”

“I know. Nothing short of banishment will deter them, and I would sooner see them succeed at their mad quest than force even one pony to endure a thousand years of that.”



Celestia ground her teeth. "Fine. I suppose I owe you that." She turned back to Twilight, and her voice sank to a growl. "But if you three are going to spit on everything my reign stands for, then you lose the right to my protection and guidance. I want you out of Equestria proper. You have two days to say your goodbyes, and then you will leave for the Everfree Forest or the Undercaverns or wherever you choose. If anypony is mad enough to join you, I will not stop them. I won't have you meddling with the heavens anymore, either."

The exile hurt less than the wrath Twilight saw in Celestia's eyes. "I hope you'll change your mind," she said. "My way is what's best for Equestria. I know it is. What you said before, about how ponies living forever would make it harder for younger generations to make their mark... it's not wrong, it's just less important. Maybe I never would've been made Archmage if Mom were still in that position, but I'd be happier if she were still alive."

"Please listen to me. I know I'm not going to convince the other princesses. Luna's fixated on what happened to her, and nothing I say will change that. Cadence... well, she refused to transform her own children. I can imagine what that must be like. If I'd done that, I'd never be able to admit it was wrong, not without completely destroying myself. She's backed herself into a corner, there."

Celestia gave a bitter laugh. "You think you can imagine what it's like to lose a child?"

Realization dawned. "Cadence wasn't the only princess who had children," Twilight said slowly. "You were—"

"Be careful, Twilight Sparkle," said Celestia. "Be very, very careful."

Twilight stood silently, trying to think of something to say that wouldn't make the situation even worse.

"This is pointless," said Luna. "Thou wilt not listen. We are done here." She faded from view as the stars fade at sunrise, and then Celestia stood alone.

Twilight took a cautious step forward. "Princess—"

Celestia vanished in a swirl of flames, leaving behind oily smoke and the smell of sulfur.

"Oh," said Twilight. She backed away from the spot where the greatest, most important pony in the world had stood only moments before.

A hoof touched her withers. Twilight flinched. "You okay there?" said Rainbow Dash. "You're shaking."

"One can hardly blame her," said Rarity. "The princess was positively awful."

“Well, don’t worry,” said Rainbow Dash. “She’s gone now.”

“She is, isn’t she?” Twilight sat down heavily. “She’s gone.”

The hut felt as welcoming as it ever had. Zecora had lived to the age of ninety-nine, and in the few years since her death, nature had done only superficial damage to her home. With the aid of Rarity’s magic, it only took a couple of hours to restore the hut to its former condition. It still felt like Zecora’s space, making it far less lonely than anywhere else in the forest.

“There,” said Twilight. “That should do it. I almost expect to see her come back and start mixing up a potion.” She ran a hoof along the newly cleaned lip of Zecora’s cauldron.

“Quite,” said Rarity. “The accommodations should be more than adequate.” In truth, the hut’s decor wasn’t at all to her taste, but it was only temporary. They needed somewhere to live and work until they could build something bigger. “Just one more thing, and I’ll be all set.” She strode out into the shade of the Everfree Forest.

Twilight followed. “The hut’s pretty small, though. Do you think we can fit everypony inside? Do we need to conjure another house or something?”

“That would depend on how many ponies Rainbow Dash brings with her, of course.” While they were setting up lodgings, Rainbow Dash was gathering up anypony who wanted to become an alicorn. Today was the day their exile began, and once Rainbow Dash left Ponyville, none of them would be going back. Rarity was trying to stay upbeat and focused on the task at hand, more for Twilight’s sake as her own. As much as Rarity would miss Ponyville, she had made her peace with leaving it behind when she was in the hospital.

Rarity focused on a fallen tree trunk and gathered her magic. She hadn’t yet used the alicorn magic Twilight had told her about, but her unicorn magic was far stronger than it had ever been. The trunk transformed into a canopied featherbed. “Perfect,” she said. “Twilight, be a dear and teleport that inside, if you would.”

“Are you sure we have space? The hut’s small, and that’s a pretty big bed for one pony.”

“Two ponies,” Rarity said. Center Stage was the only pony who had decided for certain to join them. “Anyway, if it’s too large, I’ll just transfigure it into something smaller.”

There was a rustle of hooves in the underbrush. “Hey, guys,” came Rainbow Dash’s voice.

"We're here." She emerged from the forest, followed by three ponies. First was Crabapple, wearing his familiar scowl. Behind him was Angel Cake, a light pink earth pony with a yellow-white mane who was even younger than Apple Sprout. Rarity felt a brush of the familiar guilt that she didn't know the Cakes' offspring as well as she meant to. Finally, Center Stage puffed along at the rear. He went to Rarity's side, and the two of them nuzzled each other.

"Crabapple?" said Twilight. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Huh? Why?" said Crabapple.

"Well, you sort of hate everything. Why would you, of all ponies, want to live forever?"

Crabapple shrugged. "Life stinks," he said, "but it beats the alternative."

"What about the rest of the folks?" said Rainbow Dash.

"Sprout's interested," said Crabapple. "The kid's smarter than he looks. It's that wife of his that's holding him back. I swear she's jumpier than Ma was."

"Angel Cake," said Twilight. "You're one of Pumpkin Cake's kids, right?"

"I'm Pound Cake's daughter," said Angel Cake. "His youngest."

Rarity bit her lip. "Are you quite sure she's old enough for this, Twilight?"

Angel Cake scowled. "I'm eighteen," she said. "I can do what I want."

"And why did you decide to come here?" said Twilight.

"Well." She looked down. "I've always dreamed of being a princess. Living forever, having all that magic... who wouldn't want that?"

"Is that all?"

"Not quite." Angel Cake grinned sheepishly. "There's also this boy, Toffee Twirl. He always looks past me, you know? Like he never even notices I'm there. But he was thinking of becoming an alicorn, too. If I do, he'll have to notice. They all will, even if I'm way over here in the forest."

Rarity rolled her eyes. "You see what I mean."

"So her reasons are kinda silly," said Rainbow Dash. "She still wants to do the right thing."

"Hey!" said Angel Cake. "My reasons are fine! It's mostly the first one, anyway."

"This decision can't be undone," said Twilight. "If you go through with it, I don't think Celestia will ever let you back into her realm."

"I understand," said Angel Cake. "I'd rather be an alicorn here forever than an earth pony back there for fifty years."

"Just so long as you know what you're getting into," said Twilight. "It's your choice."

"To start with," said Rarity, "let's get everypony settled in. I'll show you the house. There should be enough room for six of us, if we squeeze a bit." She set off towards the hut, and the others followed.

"So this is where a bunch of immortal demigods choose to live," said Crabapple. "An abandoned shack in the woods."

"Oh, hush, you," said Rarity. "It's charmingly rustic."

Rainbow Dash laid a hoof on Twilight's chest, holding her back. The others filed inside, leaving them alone in the forest.

"We didn't really have a chance to talk, since I turned into this," said Rainbow Dash. "I want you to know that—"

"Could you please save it, for once?" said Twilight. "I know you don't like me. That's fine. I don't like you either. There's too much else going on, though. Can't we just stay out of each others' way?"

"No!" said Rainbow Dash. "Augh! I'm trying to forgive you!"

Twilight blinked. "For what?"

"For everything. For Fluttershy, mostly."

"Now you forgive me? Now that I finally agree that it was wrong?"

"Look, you're my friend," said Rainbow Dash. "This is what friends do. Maybe I should've done it before, but... well, it was harder. I was trying to get you to change your mind, and I needed to be mad to do that."

"Oh, come on." Twilight rolled her eyes. "You weren't trying to persuade me. You were trying to hurt me. And you know what? You did a very good job."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"And should I take that any more seriously than you took *my* apologies? Or do you think you can buy my forgiveness with your own?"

Rainbow Dash looked down. "I dunno. I'm just saying I hurt you, and I did it on purpose, and it was wrong. Do what you're gonna do. You've always been better at figuring out this stuff than me."

"Ugh." Twilight rubbed her forehead. "Well, thanks, anyway. I need to think about this. To tell the truth, though, you're not the pony whose forgiveness I really need."

"Then who is?"

"I don't even know," said Twilight. "Myself, maybe. Fluttershy." She hesitated. "Celestia."

Cadence had expected Princess Celestia to be in conference with one of her innumerable aides or advisers or assistants. Instead, Cadence was surprised to find her alone in her private chambers. Celestia was curled up on a plush carpet in front of the fireplace, with a mug of hot cocoa on one side and a stack of parchments on the other. Celestia was always bringing some report or petition with her when she ought to be relaxing. Now, she was ignoring the parchments to gaze at the fire with an expression of beatific calm.

"Cadence. How good of you to come." Celestia hadn't looked up at her approach. In all her centuries, Cadence had never figured out how she managed that trick. "I assume you're here to talk about Twilight Sparkle and her little band of dissidents. I could use your opinion. My cabinet isn't sure what to make of this."

"I'm worried about that," Cadence said, "but no, that's not why I'm here. At least, not directly. I'm also wondering about you. I know how close you and Twilight were."

"That's very thoughtful of you." Celestia levitated one of the parchments before her. She scanned it before tossing it into the fireplace, where it blackened and curled before igniting. "Twilight's betrayal hurts, I'll admit, but it's nothing I can't handle. Now that I'm past the surprise, I'm more disappointed than anything else."

"Are you?" Cadence was of two minds about Celestia's familiar stoicism. It was admirable enough, but when she took it this far, it was a little bit frightening. "You sound like you're taking it well."

"I have to. My ponies need me, now more than ever. I can't get distracted by anything else."

"Feelings aren't a *distraction*, Celestia."

"You're right. I said that poorly. Still, Equestria comes first." She sent another parchment into the flames.

Curious, Cadence stepped closer and magically lifted the top parchment.

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*I am happy to report that the dragon has departed our fair country, and that it was my good friend Fluttershy who convinced him to go. This adventure has taught me to never lose faith in your friends. They can be an amazing source of strength, and can—*

Celestia's magic snatched the parchment away. Before Cadence could react, Celestia flung it into the fire, followed moments later by the rest of the letters. The flames blazed high, sending sparks and ashen flakes spiraling upwards, then just as quickly faded back to a warm glow.

Cadence stared in shock. "But those were—"

"They were." Celestia's face was as serene as ever.

"You collected those for decades!"

"Fifty-six years, yes. But look what that brought us. I want no record of it."

Cadence laid down on the carpet beside Celestia. "You can't just erase a lifetime of friendship."

"I have to." Celestia looked into the distance. "This isn't the first time I've needed to be strong for Equestria. I doubt it will be the last." Her eyes snapped into focus. Cadence flinched away from the white-hot determination she saw there. "Feelings for Twilight Sparkle could interfere with my judgment. Therefore, I feel nothing for Twilight Sparkle."