

Chapter 6

“And all through the night the three ponies kept the fire of friendship alive by telling stories to one another and by singing songs, which of course, became the winter carols that we all still sing today.” The narrator spoke in turn as the action on the stage began to play out to his words. Each of the ponies were dressed in a different attire, each representing the different style of clothing that was worn so long ago. A younger Twilight watched the stage curiously.

It wasn't her first time watching the Hearth's Warming Eve pageant, far from it. It was traditional for many ponies to come and watch the pageant every year. Her parents had taken her in years past and now that she was the personal protégé of Princess Celestia she felt as if there was almost an obligation to go see the play. The filly was sure some parts of the play were exaggerated or kept short for the sake of being produced as a stage play, but still she'd always had a fascination with history and this was one of the few plays that spoke of it.

“Eventually,” the narrator continued his tale, “the warmth of the fire and singing and laughing reached the leaders and their bodies began to thaw. And, it even began to melt their hearts.” The actors on the stage came together hugging one another in their display of friendship. The ice on the stage melted away and the six ponies walked forth, viewing the land before them. “The three leaders agreed to share the beautiful land and live in harmony forever afterwards. And together, they named their new land...”

“Equestria!” The six ponies on stage called out together. Though it was unheard, Twilight had muttered the same thing under her breath in unison with the ponies. The memorized play rolled through her head as she spoke the final words. The crowd around her began to cheer loudly as the curtains quickly came to a close. The crowd continued its loud cheering as the curtains then made their way open once more, the six ponies taking a quick bow.

The loud orchestra behind the stage began to stir, music filling the hall quickly with the familiar notes. Confetti and streamers fired from above the stage, raining the crowd with the party decorations. Bells chimed across the stage and the hall, the six ponies then began to sing alongside the music. The crowd didn't skip a beat and joined along in the song, the air was a wash of joy and friendship. Everypony here was a brother or a sister, it was a time of celebration and union. Every word floated through the air as if caressing the very world around it before being replaced with the next.

*The fire of friendship lives in our hearts,
As long as it burns we cannot drift apart,
Though quarrels arise, their numbers are few
Laughter and singing will see us through, will see us through,*

*We are a circle of pony friends
A circle of friends we'll be to the very end*

Though Twilight sang along, she didn't put her heart into the words. It was Hearth's Warming Eve; all the ponies around her were joyous, cheering their hearts out for the wondrous holiday that they were all on. But for some reason the filly that sang along with them wasn't feeling the normal spirit of the holiday. Something about this Hearth's Warming just didn't feel the same as the earlier years.

The caroling came to an end as the curtains closed one last time on the stage. The crowd broke out into another round of cheers and applause for the incredible play they all had just witnessed.

It took a few minutes of murmuring and chattering amongst the crowd but the ponies slowly began to file out of the hall, going back out into the cold winter air. The sun was getting close to the horizon preparing to set and soon the night sky would bring the familiar frozen nights of the mountain city.

The lavender filly walked out of the hall alongside the crowd, her hooves touching the chilled road of Canterlot's streets. She took a deep breath that cooled her lungs before expelling her hot breath into the air, creating a small cloud of warm air in front of her face. She turned her head to look around her for a moment.

Everywhere around her ponies were in a rush, looking for that perfect last minute gift to give to a loved one, trying to get that last bit of decoration they needed so their display would be perfect, finding friends or family so that they could spend the rest of the night together. Everypony was in a hurry, fluttering from store to store, pony to pony.

Twilight continued to walk through the streets, passing the decorative lights that made the town glow, wreaths hung with care along walls and windows, ribbons tied to every pole and hanging across the streets, several pine trees had been planted throughout the town and decorated completely, and snow covered the streets and ledges of the entire town. It was just like every other Hearth's Warming Eve she had seen before.

The sounds of the bustling streets began to grow quiet as Twilight walked further away from the crowded main streets of downtown Canterlot. She was heading straight home that evening, not wanting to deal with any other pony if she could help it. She wasn't even sure what had compelled her to go see the Hearth's Warming Eve pageant that day. Perhaps it was a feeling of obligation, a feeling of tradition, or even a feeling that she belonged there. Whatever it was, she had wasted her time enough and wanted to get home.

The fresh snow crunched under her hooves as she walked through the frozen town,

quickly reached the quiet street to her home, the female dormitories at Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. The sun had begun setting during her walk and was slowly disappearing beyond the horizon, half of it already engulfed by the shadow of the world. As it set a few clouds over the city began to release fresh snow over the city, no doubt a Pegasus performing their duties unseen above the clouds. The flakes fell softly to the ground below, slowly adding to the collected snow that had already gathered. She'd be home in just a few minutes and she could curl up in her bed with a good book.

"Twilight!" The lavender filly was stopped from her advances by the call of another filly. She recognized the voice, one of her classmates and one of the more popular fillies in her class. She turned and saw the white coated unicorn walking towards her with her wavy crimson hair that graced her head ever immaculately brushed. The blue eyes of hers stood out in comparison to her body, as if flaring out to accentuate how cold the air was.

"Oh, hey Moondancer." Twilight spoke naturally, not having expected her new visitor.

"I'm glad I caught you!" Moondancer came just a few feet from Twilight before stopping, that smile she was always sporting was stuck to her face, the one that seemed to get every colt to swoon to her. "There's a Hearth's Warming Eve party over by the male dorms and everyone was invited. You should come! There'll be lots of stallions there." Moondancer looked at Twilight from the sides of her eyes with that last remark, putting a heavy emphasis on the fact that there'd be stallions. As though that was what Twilight needed right now, a bunch of immature colts swooning over Moondancer and her attractive friends and not even paying attention to the bookish lavender unicorn at the back of the room. Not that Twilight would have ever wanted that kind of attention anyway; if she wanted any stallion in her life it'd have to be a like-minded intellectual.

"Uh... thanks Moondancer, but I've got... things I wanted to do tonight." Twilight skirted around the issue, starting to turn away from Moondancer. "I'm just going to head back to my dorm now."

"Are stallions not your thing?" Moondancer asked quizzically once Twilight had her back turned. This caused the unicorn to visibly flinch, freezing her on the spot. "Is that it? Well there'll be a lot of mares there too if you want. I'm sure there's plenty who are open to that kind of thing." Moondancer put a hoof to her chin in thought.

"This has nothing to do with that!" Twilight quickly turned to face Moondancer again, huffing loudly, a cloud of mist floating past her face from her heated breath. The moment the mist flew past her eyes she realized something was wrong. "I have more important things that I can be doing than going to some silly party." She closed her eyes trying to control the emotions she felt welling inside of her. That wasn't like her; she normally had a studied control over her emotions.

Moondancer just frowned at her response, either from not having expected it or disappointed in what it meant. She had a habit of pushing issues if she really felt they were necessary, but it seemed that this wasn't one of the times to push it.

"Fine." Moondancer finally spoke, starting to turn away from the frustrated unicorn before her. Twilight opened her eyes and looked with surprise at Moondancer. "You can come by later if you want, the party is supposed to end by ten but I'm sure there'll be a lot of ponies still partying long into the night." With that the white coated unicorn turned away and flicked her tail of the snow gathering on it, beginning to head towards the male dormitories.

Twilight hesitated, watching Moondancer walk away. She felt another compulsion rising in her gut, yet another action she would normally have under control and wouldn't have acted upon. Yet she found her mouth opening and calling out to the white unicorn that was quickly retreating.

"Moondancer!" The white unicorn stopped, turning in surprise to look at Twilight from over her shoulder. "I just wanted to say... thank you for the invitation." A smile came to Moondancer's face.

"Anytime Twilight." Moondancer waved quickly, her bright smile returning. With those parting words Moondancer quickly walked down the rest of the path, disappearing from sight before too long. The lavender unicorn just stood on the bridge, having watched Moondancer walk out of sight. Once she was gone she tried to go over the conversation they'd just had in her head and why she had acted the way she had. The whole day had been one big, confusing mess of mixed feelings and right now wasn't any better.

"Stupid Hearth's Warming..." Twilight spoke softly to herself, watching her hot breath mist in the cold air. "It's messing with my head." It was the only logical conclusion the book-orientated unicorn could come up with. With this logic firmly put in place in her mind she was finally able to get hooves moving again.

The unicorn shivered as she suddenly realized that snow had been accumulating on her mane and back as she had just stood there. She shook herself free of the specks that had started to melt and wet her fur. Now she really was cold, a breeze blowing by to accentuate the point that she needed to get inside. She picked up the pace and began to run, no longer feeling like walking through the frozen night air.

She hadn't noticed it, but the sun had set during their conversation and the starry sky was shining overhead once again. The stars brought the chilled night air with them, as though they blew the cold air across the lands. The wisps of her breath flew past the unicorn's face as she ran, her body slowly losing its heat.

Her building came into view quickly, the decorated and snow covered dorm that she

called home now. The spiral staircase that wound around the building lead her to her door, just as the wind and snow began to pick up. She pushed against her doors and they quickly swung open, letting the cold air into the darkened room. She shut the door behind her, cutting off the tundra outside from entering her sanctuary anymore and the world fell quiet once more.

Twilight shook her mane, trying to get as much snow and water off of her body as she could. While she got a lot, she needed a proper towel. Perhaps even some blankets and a cup of hot cocoa. That would certainly warm her up and get her feeling more like her old self.

“Spike!” Twilight called out to the dark room. “Could you start up the fire?”

Her calls were met with her own, an echo bouncing through the large empty room before returning to silence. Twilight blinked in confusion at the sudden lack of sound, not used to being so alone in the room before.

“Spike?” She called out once more, again only being returned by her echo followed by silence. “Spike, where are... oh.” Twilight stopped herself, having remembered the conversation she’d had with Spike yesterday. He’d be staying with Princess Celestia for Hearth’s Warming. The Princess was his guardian after all. Though Spike had started living with Twilight recently he still looked up to Celestia like a mother. That meant that Twilight was by herself. It wasn’t even that she had forgotten that she was going to be alone that night; she had just pushed it to the edge of her mind and hadn’t wanted to think about it.

But there she now stood, cold, in a dark room all by herself with no one around. There were many nights where she wished to be alone, just curl up with a book and read the night away. However, something stirred in her chest and she suddenly didn’t feel like being alone. She wanted Spike to be there with her but she couldn’t pull him away from time spent with the Princess, she wasn’t cruel. She’d also already turned down the invitation to the party; she couldn’t bring herself to go there now.

The lavender unicorn shook her head and focused magic into her horn. The lights around the room brightened and banished the shadows to the recesses of the corners once more. Her magic then connected to the heater in her room and lit the kindling inside of it. Soon a fire was roaring within the red machine and began to send out waves of heat into the chilled room. Twilight moved across her living room, glancing out the large window that separated her from the frozen snow outside, before making her way up the stairs to her second floor.

Several shelves of tall books scoured this room, several ladders placed against them to make access to the books easier. This was her favorite part about her dorm and one of the benefits she had to being the Princess’s personal protégé. She didn’t want to take too long in deciding her reading material for the night so her horn lit up and grabbed several books from the historical section without looking. She then proceeded back downstairs where the room was starting to warm up considerably now.

The unicorn quickly approached her bed, pulling the covers back and nestling into the sheets. They were cool for the moment but they would heat up soon enough. She propped up her pillows and rested her back and head against them, finding herself now neatly bundled in her bed. She grabbed the first book she had pulled from the shelf and read the cover.

"The Basic History of the Pre-Classical Era." Twilight opened the book and began to read to herself. "Cobblestone Moor was the first stallion to discover that by mixing broken stones with certain types of sand and water it was possible to create a material that would weld rocks together. This discovery allowed for the faster creation of ancient buildings as well as more stable homes for ponies to live in. The inventor decided to name his creation 'Mortar' after himself."

The normally book-loving unicorn blinked in confusion as she felt herself stiffen. It wasn't from the fact that the history was boring; in fact she found the creation of such material quite fascinating. However something just didn't feel right. She couldn't find herself wanting to read much more. She tried to force her eyes down the rest of the page, but her mind just blocked out the rest of the words.

She growled in frustration and closed the book, moving to the next one. She opened the book and began to read again. Her eyes scanned across the first few sentences before the same feeling hit her. She just wasn't interested in reading what it had to say just yet. She pushed that book aside and grabbed the next one.

For every book she had grabbed from upstairs she found herself hitting the same wall. She just did not care to read tonight. In her frustrated fit she grabbed the books and tossed them to the floor, letting them fall scattered. She glared at each of the different colored tomes that lay on her floor, shifting all the blame of her inability to read onto them. The books must have been doing something wrong after all; she loved reading and couldn't get enough of it.

The unicorn grabbed her covers and wrapped herself tighter in her sheets trying to figure out what was going on in her mind. This wasn't like her at all. She just wanted to read and pass the time before going to bed. It would be Hearth's Warming tomorrow, she'd get to see the Princess, Spike, her parents... they'd all have gifts for her and she had a few gifts wrapped up waiting to be given to them as well. This was a day to celebrate, to enjoy and be happy.

Yet she found herself cold, alone and miserable.

Her eyes drifted to her window as she saw the snowflakes falling from the sky, dancing to the wind in the moonlit night. They scurried back and forth, never alone, always together in their collective dance. It was as if they were all synchronized to each other's disorganized chaos. Her mind drifted away as she watched the snow falling.

"I... just had a bad day..." Twilight murmured to herself, her horn lighting up as the magic reached out for the various lanterns around her house and turned them off, then it cranked the heat up a little more to help warm the room faster. "That's all it was. Tomorrow I'll see my family... I'll see Spike and the Princess... and everything will be better." She closed her eyes, trying to force herself to get some sleep.

"Everything will be better tomorrow."

Water. That was the first sensation she felt as her mind slowly came back to her. It was cold and refreshing. She could tell her body was craving it, wanting more as it was gently poured into her mouth. It flowed quickly down her throat and just as she wanted more it stopped. It felt as though she was being teased out of getting something she needed.

She tried to move her body but she didn't feel anything to move. It was as if she was surrounded by a dark abyss in her own mind in which she couldn't even contact her own body. She wanted to raise a leg, open her eyes, listen to the world around her, ask for more water but nothing came of it.

However, she was finally able to pick up a faint sound. It was a dull beating sound from inside of her head. Was it inside of her head? Wherever it was coming from it was slow, rhythmically beating. It took her a few moments to realize what the beating was.

It was her heart.

If she could hear her heart she knew she was still alive. When she realized she was alive the last moments before she found herself in this abyss came back to her mind.

A white blaze of rage, that broken alicorn-like creature, Rarity being put into danger, that strange world she had found herself trapped in. It all came back like a torrential flood, overwhelming her with the memories. She didn't know where she was anymore or how long she had been knocked out for. She needed to wake up; she needed to make sure that Rarity was okay. Twilight had seen the sword going through her body, but she didn't know how serious the damage was. It had to have been serious, a wound like that could very easily take a pony's life.

Her body was coming back to her. She could feel the dull senses returning to the tips of her nerves. She opened her mouth and she consciously took in a breath of air, feeling the excess air fill her lungs. She tried to open her eyes, but closed them as soon as the piercing light attacked her, burning her vision. Her ears turned back on next, first hearing a dull buzz that might have passed for noise before what sounded like something moving around. She tried to

concentrate harder, making out that it was shifting things around in the world.

She tried to open her eyes again. The searing light returned, forcing her to close them once more. This time she forced herself to keep her eyes open to adjust to the light. Through squinted eyes the burning pain of the light slowly began to fade, her eyes still sensitive to the sensation of being in a lighted room. As her blindness faded she could slowly make out a ceiling, a brownish gray ceiling, looking as if it belonged to an old building long since abandoned. Imagery she'd long since began to expect from this world.

She gently turned her head to where she could hear the sounds of things being shifted. She could see the backside of a pony, particularly the striking dark red hair of its tail and what seemed to be an amber coat. Her eyes were still adjusting to seeing once more; unaware of just how long she'd had them closed. With a pained breath she finally managed to get words to escape her throat.

"Hello?" It was barely anything more than a raspy whisper, but it seemed that it caught the pony's attention. The pony turned around, so his face was within her view. She tried to discern if she knew the pony as it walked closer, giving her a better view. As the pony grew closer she was able to discern its identity.

"Lance?"

"You're awake..." Lance's voice was deadpan, though it had that hint of snarky surprise his voice always seemed to carry. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. This world has that effect on ponies."

"Lance..." The lavender unicorn groaned, trying to move, only to have her efforts stopped by pain shooting through her shoulder. She was bed-bound for the moment, but more importantly she just wanted answers. With her whispered, raspy voice she tried to talk. "What... w-what hahhh..." her voice cut out as she tried to speak. Her mouth and throat were dry, she felt so dehydrated. "Whah... ter..." she managed to gasp.

"Of course." The amber Pegasus nodded his head, knowing exactly what the unicorn wanted. He quickly walked over to a bucket near the ground and picked it up, carrying it out of her sight. She wasn't sure where she was, but with him leaving her vision it gave her a chance to look around. Her vision was finally coming back to her and she could see that she was in what looked to be a hotel room of some kind. She was on the bed, she could spot a bed-side table with a lamp turned on, a dresser for keeping clothes or items. There must've been a bathroom within the room, typical of a hotel, as she heard a tap turn on, Lance filling his bucket with water.

It wasn't long before Lance returned and placed the bucket down next to the bed. He then took a smaller bowl and scooped up water from it before pressing it gently against the

unicorns lips.

"I need you to drink slowly. I know you're thirsty, but just take a little bit at a time." He tipped the bowl as the unicorn understood. She opened her mouth and felt the cool water flow into her mouth. She slowly gulped, feeling the refreshing water coat her throat once again. Lance must've been giving her water to drink while she was asleep, likely to try and keep her hydrated.

The two of them stayed quiet for a while, Lance dipping his bowl into the bucket several times and returning it to her lips so that she could gulp the water down. She wished she could just take the whole bucket and pour it into her stomach, but she could already tell the water she was drinking was churning in her stomach. If she drank too much she'd be sick.

Lance placed the bowl against her lips once more, though this time the unicorn tilted her head away a little, signaling she'd had enough. Lance understood and moved the bowl away, placing it on the nightstand.

"Think you can talk now?" He asked curiously, examining her face for a reaction.

"I... think so..." The unicorn wheezed lightly, finally feeling moisture returning to her mouth and throat, even if it was temporary. "What happened Lance?" Was the first question that sprung from her mind.

"I was hoping you could tell me." Lance furrowed his brow in slight frustration. "I found you in the hotel lobby, face down and bleeding to death. You'd already lost a huge amount of blood by the time I found you. I honestly figured you were dead from how much I saw. But a quick check saw you still had a heart beat so I patched you up and brought you here." He looked down at her body. "It has to be this place. Your wounds weren't mortal, but your blood loss was. And it's likely you'll never have use of your right foreleg again."

The lavender unicorn's eyes widened as she tried to lift herself up, feeling a backlash of pain strike her body. She grit her teeth through the pain and tried to sit up. Lance saw what she was trying to do and raised his own hooves to help her. He carefully got her to a sitting position and she finally got a look at her body.

Around her shoulder and down most of her right foreleg was covered in bloodied bandages. The sight made her queasy, thinking that this had actually happened to her body. She tried to move the leg and felt nothing but searing pain assault her body. She whimpered and grimaced from the pain, tears forming at the edges of her eyes. She never thought something like this would ever happen to her. She tried to take her attention away from her leg, survey the rest of her. She had other bandages wrapped around her legs and flank, but those cuts were shallow, they'd heal. Her leg might never.

"I... I see..." Twilight managed to choke out, her words catching on a lump in her throat. The tears began to spill from the edges of her eyes, a mixture of pain and sorrow overwhelming her. "How's... how's Rarity?" She had to ask, she had to know how her friend was doing.

"...Rarity?" Lance asked with a strange tone to his voice. "What do you mean?"

"Rarity!" The unicorn shook her head, looking at him with a glare. "She was right there with me! In fact she was likely hurt worse than me! You should've helped her first before helping me!" She was ready to bite his head off for not being direct with her, for not having helped one of her friends in their time of need.

Lance just sat there quietly, looking at the fuming mare before him with a look that mixed confusion and understanding. His face slowly shifted into a very firm, yet harsh look. His mind had been listening to every word and had already come to a realization that the unicorn before him was desperately trying to avoid. She didn't want to hear the truth, but the words escaped from Lance's mouth before she could stop him.

"Twilight, you were the only one I found. If your friend was actually as injured as you claim, I would have found a second blood stain if she had wandered off or been dragged away." Lance shook his head. "I found you and you alone, with only enough blood to have come from you." He looked into the mare's face as it fell, knowing the weight of the words he just told her. "I'm sorry, but your friend's fate is now in the grip of this world."

"No..." Twilight felt herself losing strength in her body. Her body slid back down onto a laying position as she stared at nothing. Her mind didn't want the reality to be true, if only one of them was saved why did it have to be her? Why couldn't Rarity have been the one to be saved instead? Was this some kind of cruel joke being played on her?

She buried her face in her pillow and with her good leg held it to her face. She just let out as much as she could into her pillow. The stress of the world she found herself in, the disbelief that she couldn't save one of her dearest friends, the fact that she may never be able to walk the same again, she let it all out into the pillow. She didn't know how long she did it for, time seemed frozen to her in that instant.

She'd killed living creatures that day, things she had called monsters that had wanted to hurt her, but they were still alive. She'd left Spike in the hands of a pony she barely knew who now seemed to have a connection to this world, even if it was a conclusion jump. She'd lost her leg and she'd lost one of her dear friends. All for what? What had been gained from all of this? Who benefitted from this horror story that had made itself real?

She let it all out until there seemed to be nothing left to let out. Her throat was dry again and she seemed to be out of tears. Her pillow wasn't all that wet, she couldn't be surprised though, she was dehydrated. She raised her head and rubbed her face, trying to dry it of the

tears. She looked at Lance, who was holding out another bowl of water for her. She bowed her head softly in thanks, turning to accept the water.

With another bowl downed she took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. She didn't want to be the one to start the conversation back up; she didn't know where to take it. Reality was stinging deeply right now and she wanted some shred of comfort, some reason to give her hope for their situation.

"It's possible she's still alive you know." Lance broke the ice first. Twilight looked up at him in shock. "After all I found you. I'm not sure how you got separated from her, but it's possible she was found by somepony and was patched up as well."

"But... but you said..." Twilight sniffed, rubbing her face once more.

"I know what I said." Lance almost barked, his abrasive nature still showing through during his bedside manners. "But your friend is only dead if you let that be the inevitability. There's always a chance she could still be alive and if she is then she needs you to believe in her and find her." Lance closed his eyes. "Once you've given up on somepony then there is no chance of saving them."

The mare was stunned into silence for a moment. She couldn't help but think his words over as she lay there, injured beyond what she ever thought she would be. But he did speak the truth, if she gave up on Rarity then there was no chance she could be alive somewhere. She had to have faith that her friend was still alive; it was the only thing she could rely on in this cruel world.

"...Thanks Lance." Twilight smiled, trying once more to sit up, only to be rocked with the pain of her shoulder wound. Lance reached out and helped her to sit up once more. "I... I have to go look for her... but... but I don't know how I'll be able to do anything with my leg like this..." she bit the bottom of her lip, looking down at her arm. Somehow she expected it to be in constant pain, but it appeared to only hurt when she tried to move it. Otherwise she could just feel a dull throb coming from it.

Lance thought about this for a moment before walking towards the drawers in the room. Twilight watched him curiously, not quite sure what he was doing. He opened the drawer and rummaged through it for a moment before pulling out a brown bottle that Twilight recognized. He carefully brought it over to the bed.

"Now, I normally would never offer this stuff as a type of medicine." Lance grunted, as though the very idea of what he was about to offer offended him. "As far as I know there is no medical backing to this stuff, and might as well be snake oil somepony slapped a label on and managed to call it a miracle drug. I'm convinced that in the normal world all this does is give patients false hope. However..." Lance glanced around the room wearily. "In this world, it seems

to actually be a great medical boon. And I found it near your body, so I think you should drink it.”

Lance gripped the bottle with his hooves and brought his mouth down to the cap. With a quick twist the bottle was opened and he held it up to her lips. Twilight was hesitant to drink the strange medicine, but Lance was a doctor and Fluttershy’s dad, he wouldn’t do anything to purposely hurt her. Even if he came off a little harsh she knew he was a good stallion. She opened her mouth and let the strange liquid enter her mouth.

It was certainly bitter as she expected the medicine to be. It tried to mask the flavor behind some artificial strawberry flavoring, though it didn’t seem to help the bitter mess sliding down her throat. She didn’t think she’d be able to stomach the whole bottle, but before she knew it she had swallowed every last drop. She wasn’t quite sure what she was supposed to be feeling after drinking it though.

Then it hit her. It felt as though her energy had returned to her, the pain in her shoulder began to numb, and she was suddenly alert. She could even feel her magic reservoir getting a kick into high gear. She suddenly got the feeling as though Lance had just drugged her.

“It’s weird, I know.” Lance said placing the empty bottle on the nightstand. “As I said, I’m certain this is nothing more than snake oil with a fancy label. But for some reason in this world it’s more than that.” He looked her over, noticing Twilight lift herself up a little more with her renewed energy. “Your wound is still severe, it might open if you strain it, but I think you should try standing.” Twilight gave him a look of utter shock. “I know, I’m right here so if anything happens I’ll take care of you right away, just please try this for me.” He asked as best he could, though his gruff voice made it seem like a demand.

Twilight hesitated for a moment, but Lance held out his hooves to help. With her good hoof she took his and scooted towards the edge of the bed, with very slow, careful movements. Her back hooves touched the floor first before Lance helped hoist her up, getting her to stand on her three good legs, the bandaged hoof hanging loosely in the air.

The unicorn expected to have no energy, to fall over and find herself in pain, unable to escape the floors grip until Lance put her back on the bed. Yet there she was, standing on her three good legs. Even her bad leg, as beyond repair as it should be, was only giving her a dull ache. It just refused to move when she gave it orders, but she could walk again.

“It’s just as I thought.” Lance grunted in a strange mixture of annoyance and relief. “Years of medical knowledge flushed down the drain by some world that thinks it can make up the rules as it goes.” Lance placed a hoof against the injured mare’s good shoulder, testing her reaction to the touch. “How do you feel? The pain should be debilitating, but I suspect it’s not.”

“Y-Yeah...” Twilight murmured. His hoof on her shoulder felt just like any other time a pony had touched her. “It’s a dull throb at best...” she tried to move the arm and winced, pain

rocketing through her shoulder. "It only really hurts when I try to move it."

"Makes sense." Lance put his hoof back to the floor. "There's not much I can do to help that as we are, just don't move it much." He nodded his head before turning to his bag, organizing the things in it once more. Twilight noticed it was the same purple bag with strange stitching he had brought to the wedding. He then pulled out a long cloth with a large pad attached to it. He brought it over to her body and before she could protest he was already slinging it around her neck.

"I'm going to put your leg up in a sling, which means I need to move your bad leg for a moment." Lance grunted, knowing he was about to hurt her. "So try and deal with the pain for now, alright?" The unicorn gulped, realizing his words before nodding. Lance then took a deep breath and gently grabbed hold of her bad leg and began to position it in the sling. Pain soared through Twilight's mind as the torn nerves in her shoulder refused the idea of moving. She grit her teeth and clenched her eyes just trying to push her way through the pain.

Then as soon as it began it was over. Twilight let out a breath she had been holding in as her shoulder shot several throbs of pain to her mind, before slowly fading back into a dull throb. It had been an agonizing procedure, but she could now feel her leg resting comfortably against her body. She'd be able to walk more comfortably now, though maneuvering on three legs would still be difficult. Once he'd finished with the sling and made sure it was comfortable on her body he turned back to his bag and made sure everything in it was organized.

Twilight watched him quietly, before he closed the bag and placed it on his back. "Alright, when I found you I also found a few things laying around your body. I left them in that drawer." He said pointing to where he had pulled the Health Drink from.

The unicorn looked to where Lance was pointing, slowly making her way over to it. She lit the drawer up with her magic, pulling it open and scanning the contents inside.

The first thing her eyes fell upon was the handle of her broken, rusty sword. She levitated it up, looking at it. Much of the sharpened, pointed end of it had broken off, not surprising considering the battle it had just survived. The edges were as dulled as ever, the weapon was slowly becoming more and more an edged bludgeoning device rather than a sword, or even a dagger. The steel was stained with dried blood, no doubt a result of the battle as well. She let out a soft sigh and closed her eyes, feeling around in her magic reservoir and opening up a space within it. The sword disappeared into the hole, holding on to it for her till she needed it again.

The next thing she noticed were the several notes and papers she'd been gathering since she'd left the library. She levitated each of them up and inspected them, seeing if anything had changed. Many now bore smeared blood marks, a clear indication they'd landed on the ground after she'd passed out. She was still able to read the text on most of them and even

found the note that had the distorted scribbles on it, the one she'd used to wipe the blood from her face. Only one note stood out from them, the one that Spike had found within the library. She read the words again to herself, a chill running down her spine.

When all is lost, when the darkness is its strongest, when all is cold and bleak, you'll find the light.

The note unsettled her. She'd already seen the darkness, things seemed cold and bleak. Could they really get worse than this? She'd lost her friends, her mentor, Rarity was severely injured somewhere and she almost lost her leg completely. How could she find the light in a world like this?

She shook her head, trying to get the negative thoughts out of her mind. She had to stay focused. If things were going to get worse, she just had to remain strong, look out for herself and keep her head held high.

She placed these within her reservoir as well, compelled to hold on to them. They didn't take up as much space as most of the other items did, so she could comfortably hold on to them for the time being. Though she was going to be more careful about how much magic she expended from now on.

Next she saw the Canterlot Archives pendant, the rune she had found still clipped on to the string. The purple aura surrounded the pendant and she checked the crystal at the end of it, the light turning on in the drawer. She still had a way to illuminate dark areas without having to cast her light spell. She silently thanked Celestia she still had that as well before placing it around her neck.

The last thing at the bottom of the drawer was the last thing she expected to see. There were three books, two with covers that she recognized and one that was now blank. She levitated the three books up, reading the covers of the two she recognized, 'The Old Widow' and 'Heaven's food'. That meant the blank book had to have once been 'The Cat Who Married a Mouse'.

"How did these get here?" The unicorn murmured quietly to herself, examining the tomes. "I left these behind..." She opened the blank book, flipping through several of the pages. It was completely empty now, not even a trace that it had once contained text. She closed the book and just stared at it. She knew it had text originally, she still remembered the basis of the story. She placed the empty book back down in the drawer. If it was empty she didn't need to bring it with her. However, she made a hole in her magic for the other two books and soon they found themselves in her reservoir as well.

“Are you ready?” Lance asked in that usual gruff manner. Twilight wasn’t sure what to make of it, but for the time being shrugged it off.

“Yeah...” She answered quietly, turning around to face the stallion. “Do we know where we’re going though? I mean... I’d like to go back to where you found me, see if I can’t find any trace of Rarity...”

“Well, I found you in the lobby and we’ll pass through there on our way out.” Lance explained quickly, “As for where... I’m not sure. As far as I can tell wandering leads to answers and staying in one place for too long is a bad idea.” Another wave of various emotions seemed to run across Lance’s face, as though he was considering something very seriously. Twilight blinked in confusion, before a look of determination hit Lance and he stepped closer to her. “Twilight, I need you to understand something.”

“W-What is it?” She asked hesitantly. There was something about the edge of his voice that was unsettling her.

“Before we head out, I need you to be absolutely sure. If I wasn’t here, could you continue on by yourself?” He seemed to glare, though the glare seemed unnecessary for the context of his words.

“I-I’d have no choice right?” Twilight hesitated for a moment with her answer. “I can walk just fine... I admit it’s a little awkward on three hooves, but you’ve helped me a lot...”

“Good.” He closed his eyes with a grunt, “Because it’s more than likely we’re going to be separated. I’m not going to be able to take care of you when we are and I need you to be able to take care of yourself.”

“Huh? Why would we be separated?” Twilight’s ears flattened at his words. “We’ve found each other, let’s stick together, we’ll be able to survive better-“

“It’s not that simple!” Lance barked, glaring at Twilight causing her to nearly jump out of her skin. “This ‘world’ around us, this place that isn’t Ponyville, or even Equestria, this world that is its own being, it has a mind of its own. And it doesn’t like ponies being together.” He drew closer to Twilight, the unicorn finding herself backing up into the drawers. “It separates us, divides us and makes us fools for its own amusement. You can’t trust anyone here Twilight. I brought you in from the lobby, healed your wounds and waited for you to recover. But it’s very possible you’re not really Twilight, but rather this world’s sick imagining of her.”

Twilight was afraid. She fell to her haunches, just staring at the Pegasus before her who was bearing down on her, unable to move or disobey him.

“The same goes for you. You can’t believe I’m Lance, or that I helped you with good

intentions. This world is cut throat and won't hesitate to mess with your heart and spit in your face! Just when you think you've figured it out, it'll smack you and make you start all over again. Do you understand? That's the kind of world we've found ourselves in. And does it have any RIGHT to be messing with our heads?" Lance growled and grit his teeth, his nose pressing against Twilight's as his eyes bore into her. "What right does this world have to do that to ponies? Who thinks they can mess with the dead and make a mockery of them!? Who thinks they can disrespect my Posey!" He yelled, finally closing his eyes as he grit his teeth.

The spell Twilight had been under broke at that moment and she could finally breathe, perspiration rolling down her neck as she gulped down a lump that had formed in her throat.

"L-Lance..." Twilight tried to speak, to get the stallion to stop yelling at her for things she couldn't control.

Lance's eyes shot open in sudden realization at what he'd just done. He took a few steps away from Twilight, cursing at himself under his breath several times. Twilight put her good hoof to her chest, trying to calm her racing heart. She couldn't explain what just happened to her. Lance had just simply looked her in the eye and suddenly she had found herself deadlocked in fear, unable to do anything.

"Forgive me Twilight." Lance continued to curse himself, "This world is playing with my mind..." He cut himself off as if refusing to say anymore. He took a deep breath and turned to face her, his eyes much calmer now, his face still rough around the edges but proving a calming look. "I'll stay with you as long as I can, as long as this world permits me. My words still hold true though, you can't trust me and I can't trust you." He let out a long sigh as he closed his eyes, "...but I can't just leave my patient once I've started treating them."

It took several more second for Twilight to try and stand. She mentally willed her legs to stop shaking and once they did she was able to stand properly again. She swallowed once more, trying to calm herself. It wasn't that Lance was mad at her, she understood that. She could see past his anger. It wasn't directed at her, but at the world, she'd just been unfortunate to be in the way when it had come to a head.

"It's... it's okay Lance." She spoke more trying to convince herself than the stallion before her. "You're mad at the world... not me... we need to look out for each other... e-even if what you say is true." The unicorn gulped, really hoping it wasn't true.

Lance simply nodded, not wanting to risk opening another can of worms on the unicorn. He simply walked over to the door and placed his hoof on it to open, before stopping a moment. He turned to look at the injured mare.

"You ready?" He had to make sure before he opened the door.

"Yeah... yeah I'm ready." Twilight nodded her head slowly, falling into line behind the stallion. Lance nodded his head in confirmation and swung the door open. He stepped out into the hallway beyond the room and the unicorn followed carefully behind him. Stale air hit her nose first, just as she began to examine the hallway.

The hallway was decaying, just as Twilight figured it would be. The walls were stained with what appeared to be water and mold, parts of the ceiling were hanging loose, as if torn apart by something, and the carpet beneath her hooves was dry, hardened to almost a bristled state. Each step let out a quiet crunch on the ruined carpet.

"This... isn't where the room was before." Lance glared at the hallway, "I brought you into a room near the lobby. This is a new hallway."

"Its... playing tricks on our minds?" Twilight gulped down her words.

"I'm certain of it. Let's try and find out way back to the lobby, stay close to me." Lance said looking around before heading down the hallway, in a direction that looked like it might lead somewhere. Twilight followed after him, taking a look at the doors that lined the hallway. Most were either boarded up with wood, broken, or paved over with cement. Twilight couldn't understand the meaning behind it, what purpose did boarding up the doors serve?

There was silence between them as they walked; a silent understanding between them that they needed to keep their wits about them. The world wasn't going to spare them any mercy, something they both seemed to have learned from experience. They just listened to the crunching of the carpet under their hooves.

As they were getting closer to the bend at the end of the hallway, a noise began to play that caught both of their ears. Twilight looked down at her rune, hearing the familiar buzzing emanating from the device. Then a loud 'thud' could be heard overhead which caught their attention next.

"GET BACK!" Lance shouted, turning around as fast as his body could manage. A loud crash echoing through the hallway as the ceiling in front of them caved in. Dust and debris flew around them as the wind rushed and pushed them down the hall. The two ponies found themselves pushed back, coughing as the dust attacked their mouths. The both of them looked in the direction of the fallen ceiling, seeing what had caused the collapse.

There was an orb, as though it was made of shadows pulsing in the middle of the debris. The air around it was distorted, warping the very world around it. From the middle a head began to form, pulling away from the shadows, a black-skinned pony head with a long snout. It opened its eyes, containing nothing but the whites of its eyes. It tried to open its mouth, but the lips were sewn shut, just letting out a guttural growl of pain and anger. Two hooves appeared from the oozing darkness, shackled by chains to the darkness itself.

The creature let out a growl that echoed through the hallway, almost as if it was shifting the air with its voice alone. Lance was instantly on his heels, pushing against Twilight who had fallen into a stunned daze staring at the creature.

“MOVE!” He yelled, snapping her back to her senses. She turned on her hooves and began to run, tripping at her awkward coordination and finding herself planted against the ground. The creature let out a loud wail once more, Lance putting his hooves on Twilight to try and get her back to her legs.

Wood loudly cracked and began to splinter; the ponies looking back at the creature as a large black ribbon suddenly appeared from the center of the black mass, breaking straight through the walls in the hallway. Twilight scrambled to her hooves, Lance trying to push against her as they moved.

Lance cried out in sharp pain, slamming to the ground as the ribbon came crashing down onto his back. Twilight gasped in shock, her brain trying to process everything being thrown at her. The black ribbon quickly began to wrap around Lance, his eyes widening as he realized what was happening.

“LANCE!” Twilight cried out, grabbing hold of his hooves as the ribbon suddenly became taught, pulling back straight towards the creature. Lance let out a horrified cry of pain, coughing as he felt his body being yanked in two directions. Twilight’s hooves scraped across the floor as she tugged, trying to free the Pegasus from the monsters grip. Its cry echoed through the hallway once again, overbearing the buzzing of her medallion.

The unicorn was being dragged, the carpet not giving her much room for grip. With only one hoof grabbing Lance she didn’t have much strength to bear. She had to go with what she had. Her horn lit up, the purple aura now surrounding Lance. She pulled with everything she could muster, both physical and magical, trying to free Lance from the grip.

A loud growl came from the monster, unhappy with this development. From the darkness that made up its body, a second ribbon burst out, racing across the hallway. Twilight’s eyes opened in horror as she saw it coming, unable to move out of the way in time. The ribbon crashed into her body, her hoof letting go of Lance.

Her whole body was carried, sailing clean through the air. The ribbon pressed down on her, sending her hurtling straight for the side of the hallway. Another loud crack issued through the hall as she was slammed straight into a door. Twilight struck the room’s floor and tumbled, coughing loudly as her body screamed out in pain. She grimacing, opening her eyes to look at the door she’d been thrown against.

“TWILIGHT!” The horrified loud yell of the Pegasus came. She tried to get to her hooves,

only to have the black ribbon entering the room coming for her. She grit her teeth, quickly summoning the blunt dagger from her reservoir. She didn't have any time for aim and just sent the dagger sailing through the air as hard as she could throw it. The metal struck the ribbon, piercing straight through it and lodging itself in the ribbon. Blood splattered against the wall from where the dagger had impaled the cloth.

The ribbon seemed to shriek as if in pain at the intrusion of the metal into it. It flailed across the room in rapid movements, as if no longer sure of what it should do. It came rushing back, slamming against the door it had slammed Twilight into. It gripped against the edges of the wooden door before pulling back into the hallway, slamming the door shut with it.

The medallion instantly grew quiet and the world was silent. Twilight was breathing heavily, staring at the door, unable to believe that had just happened. She struggled to stand, her shoulder crying out in agony at the abuse she was sustaining, but she forced herself to push it aside. She managed to stand, her legs shaking underneath her body. She lit her horn with magic and grabbed the handle of the door, trying to force it open. She had to go back out and help Lance.

The door didn't budge, refusing to open as though it were jammed. Twilight grunted in displeasure, hopping over to the door and pressing her hoof against the handle. She tried to force the door to open, but the only thing she got for her efforts was an incessant 'clicking' noise telling her it was jammed.

"LANCE!" Twilight yelled as loudly as she could, resting her chest against the door before banging loudly against it with her good hoof. Silence only returned her knocks. She couldn't hear anything out there anymore. No breaking of wood, no stallion screaming in pain, not even the echoing growl of the creature. She smashed her head against the door, letting out a pained cry.

She was JUST with Lance! She could've done more to save him! But the moment that creature showed up she had frozen in place. She couldn't believe she'd done that. Lance didn't stand a chance against that monster on his own and it was her fault for having frozen up.

Was it because she was injured? Was she scared that she wasn't going to be able to protect herself? Not that she could anymore; she'd just lost her weapon AGAIN.

"I'm sorry Lance..." The mare muttered under her breath, hoping that the stallion would be alright. She had no way of guaranteeing his wellbeing, but it was just as he had told her. If she assumed he was dead then there'd be no way she could help him at all. Though she was kicking herself she just had to figure out what to do next. She had to keep her mind calm and realize that if she did nothing but panic; she'd get nowhere and fast.

Twilight took several deep breaths with her forehead pressed against the door, trying to

calm her racing heart. Once she felt sufficiently calmed, she stood on her three hooves and turned around to examine the room she now found herself locked in.

The mare gasped, clapping her good hoof over her mouth as her eyes fell upon the body of a white unicorn with fiery red hair that had been nailed to the wall, her forelegs spread wide and her back legs pinned below her. She was in the same pose as Winter had been, her blood now seeping down the wall and onto a desk right below the body that had a picture frame sitting on top of it.

“M-M-M-M-MOONDANCER!” Twilight cried in shock. She sprung to her hooves and ran to the body of her old friend, staring in horror at the wounds all over her body. She was covered in lacerations, just as Winter had been, her blood was still fresh and wet, dripping down the wall. “Moondancer! Please! Tell me you’re okay!” Twilight cried out. Her magic lit up and tried to grab the nails that were imbedded into Moondancer’s legs. Her magic refused to catch onto the nails, as if something was repelling the magic.

“T-Twilight...” The lavender unicorn froze as she heard the voice, snapping her head to look straight into Moondancer’s face. The white unicorn was looking back down at her, the fire-red hair covering one of her eyes, the other staring soullessly back at the mare before her. “The... picture...” Moondancer spoke in a quiet, harsh voice that Twilight was only barely able to catch.

“The... the picture?” Twilight looked down at the desk Moondancer was hung above. Just on the edge of the desk, about to touch the blood, the small square picture frame stood there, showing a half burnt picture of Twilight as a filly. Twilight blinked in confusion, raising her hoof to touch the strange picture. Suddenly light burst forth from the picture, causing the lavender unicorn to yelp and cover her eyes with her hoof.

The sound of reels rolling hit her ears and she could suddenly hear the shuffling of hooves. She moved her hoof away from her eyes to see that the picture was now projecting light, a film was being played on the wall opposite of Moondancer. The rest of the room had grown dark, only illuminated by the light of the projection. The unicorn stared in disbelief as the gray and torn static images rolled across the screen. Displayed inside the images was a younger Twilight staring out a large window in Canterlot. The hoofsteps of her mentor approached from behind.

“What’s the matter Twilight?” The tall white alicorn asked, stepping up to the filly, her voice coming out as a distorted part of the movie.

“Oh... it’s nothing Princ-, I’m so-ry if I tro-ed you.” Filly Twilight said, her voice cutting in and out as she got up to return to her work.

“Are you sure? I haven’t seen you look this down before.” Celestia looked concerned,

walking over to her pupil. "You can tell me anything Twilight, I promise." The little filly hesitated, turning the page in her book before looking up at the Princess, unsure if she'd get in trouble.

"I... I g-ss... I'd k- of like a... a s-y -ner..." Filly Twilight spoke up quietly, the film distorting her voice, shaking the scene being shown.

"Well why don't you ask one of your classmates? I'm sure they'd love to study with you." Celestia smiled comfortingly at her.

"Oh... no I co-n't, -ey all ne- to study ha- just li- I do. I'm sure I'd just get in their way." Twilight fumbled with her words, looking up pleadingly at the Princess. Celestia thought about her words for a moment, before realizing something.

"I know just the perfect partner for you." Celestia smiled happily, turning her head and calling out. "Spiiiiike! Spike, could you come here real quick?"

The filly opened her mouth to speak, but before any sound could come out the film began to skip, before tearing apart, breaking apart the movie playing. The light faded and the light of the room returned with it.

"Moondancer... what did that..." Twilight turned to look back at the mare hanging from the wall, before letting out another gasp. The mare hanging from the wall was no longer Moondancer. This new mare had a violet mane with a magenta coat, lacerated the same way Moondancer had just been. It took Twilight a moment to realize who the mare was, before she covered her mouth in horror.

"Sparkler..." She murmured quietly. She didn't know what happened to Moondancer, but Lance's words came to mind. The town was just playing tricks on her mind again. Moondancer never had been there... but now Sparkler was.

"Please... please be another illusion." Twilight begged to the silent air around her. Her horn lit up as she cast her magic, hoping the magic would once again be repelled by the nails and she could prove that Sparkler wasn't actually dead.

Her magic caught the nails and pulled them out. She gently levitated Sparkler's body to the ground in front of her, trying to hold back the tears at the edges of her eyes as she placed her ear to Sparkler's chest. She sat there, trying to listen for the faintest trace of a heartbeat, something to tell her she could possibly save Sparkler. One never came.

Twilight grit her teeth, not wanting to believe this was true. But this was exactly the same thing that had happened to Winter. It couldn't have been a coincidence that she'd been thrust into this room, it couldn't have been a coincidence that she'd found Sparkler like this. The world was trying to give her a message.

The message a crucifixion carried, warning that if you stepped out of line, if you offended the wrong pony, that if you did something objectionable... it was punishable by death. The world and its twisted ways, with its mind games, monsters, and rules, was telling her she had to obey... or be killed.

"Sparkler... Derpy... I'm sorry..." She whispered to herself, feeling the heat of her tears rolling down her face once more. She knew about Sparkler. Derpy had adopted her almost a year ago. They'd had a tough time adjusting to the life, Twilight had watched them have fights, reconcile over family time, enjoying each other's company, laughing and playing...

Everypony knew they weren't having the easiest of times, Derpy was a single mother with a job that paid moderately and was paying for two kids. But she was that type of mare, the type who would do anything for her foals. Who couldn't wake up in the morning without seeing the bright smiling faces of her two beautiful daughters.

And there laying before Twilight was one of them. No longer able to smile, no longer able to laugh or play with her mother or sister. All so that she could be displayed as a message to Twilight.

"You were right Lance..." Twilight quietly wiped her face as she managed to calm herself. "This place messes with your mind... disrespects the ponies that live here..." She looked down at Sparkler. She knew she had to do something for Sparkler. Some memorial, some grave for her to be remembered.

But to do it right, she'd have to make her way out of the hotel. She still had to make sure Lance was okay as well. She had to go back out into Ponyville and find her friends, and Princess Celestia. Twilight steeled her nerves once more, standing up looking down at Sparkler's body.

"Sparkler... I promise I'll be right back for you... I'll give you the burial you deserve... I'll let your mom know what happened to you." Twilight ran her hoof across her face one last time, sniffing as she managed to stand up. She approached the door and raised her hoof to it and pressed against the handle. This time it clicked open, creaking slightly as it opened to the world outside of the door.

Beyond the door appeared to be a hotel lobby. The lavender mare would've been surprised if she hadn't expected the change in location by now. The lobby was just as decrepit as the rest of the hotel, the carpet a dulled brown, the reception desk rotted, broken, and long since disused. There were several doors lining the lobby and she could clearly see two hallways that extended further into more rooms, but couldn't see down them just yet. In the middle of the floor Twilight could spot a rather sizeable dried bloodstain, likely the spot where Lance had found her.

The unicorn quickly walked over to the bloodstain in the middle of the carpet, inspecting it carefully. Just as Lance had said, there was only one spot of noticeable blood, meaning it was likely she had been the only one there. Rarity's body, or even her blood, was nowhere to be found.

"I'm going to have to take that as a good sign..." Twilight muttered to herself looking around the lobby again. "She was right there with me when I passed out. If her blood's not here... then maybe she's somewhere else and safe. She has to be." She said it to herself not to convince herself, but to reinforce her will.

She quickly looked around for any other sign she could find. A clue as to where Rarity went, any sign of what had become of that strange alicorn she had fought, of any indication that this had been the same place she had passed out in. Her search turned out empty though. She let out a reluctant sigh but moved on quickly to one of the hallways. She figured Lance had to be down one of those corridors, it only made sense.

Coming around the bend of the hallway she was stopped at the sight of a massive pile of debris that blocked off the hallway. No doubt the same hallway that the strange creature had crashed in and attacked them at. Her medallion wasn't buzzing and she couldn't hear a single sound coming from the other side.

"Lance!" Twilight called out, trying to find an open spot in the debris to get a look at what became of the scene. "Lance are you there?! Answer me if you can hear me!" She yelled loudly, not caring if she attracted the monster back out of hiding, she needed to know if the Pegasus was alright or not. She waited a moment or two, waiting to hear back from him. Silence only returned. She called out for him one last time, but when the silence continued she realized she wasn't going to get a response.

"Lance, I really hope you're okay." Twilight murmured to the air, turning away from the hallway. If the path was blocked there wasn't any way she was going to be able to get to him. Her magic didn't obey her in this world and she just had to face the reality that she needed to move on. If helping Lance was out of the question then her next objective was to give Sparkler the proper burial she deserved.

Returning to the lobby she was able to spot the double doors that looked like an exit. She quickly walked over to it, expecting the door to be locked and her being sent on some round about puzzle all over the rest of the hotel just to get a key to open the door. However, the door simply creaked open, revealing the fog filled world outside. Ash was still falling from the sky, creating a thin layer on the ground everywhere. It seemed that night had fallen at some point during the town.

"Night..." Twilight murmured looking up at the darkened foggy sky. "It's nighttime... does

that mean Luna raised the moon? Is she aware of what's going on here in Ponyville?" She wondered aloud, not sure what to think of that. "I wonder if she knows what happened to Princess Celestia..." Various thoughts ran through her mind at that moment, none of which seemed to fully pan out in her mind. At some point she figured Luna would notice what's going on, or that her sister was missing.

The unicorn shook her head and took a deep breath calming herself again. She had to go through this one challenge at a time. She quickly walked back through the lobby and opened the door to the room she had found herself in. Sparkler's body still laid there serenely, waiting to be given the proper send off. The aura of purple magic soon found itself wrapped around that mare's body, lifting it ever so gently into the air.

With the grace she deserved, Sparkler was carried out of the hotel and into the dark night of Ponyville. The purple aura gently placed the magenta mare down on the ash covered grass. Twilight concentrated her magic and once more made a shovel appear from thin air. She quickly struck it down into the earth and began to dig a hole. Each scoop brought more dirt up from the ground, creating a bigger and bigger hole.

Suddenly the shovel struck something hard, the magic holding the item together growing unstable and shattering it into nothing once more. Twilight cursed under her breath and looked into the hole, spying the rock that the shovel had hit on its way down. She levitated the rock out of the hole before carefully reforming the shovel from magic.

It wasn't long before Twilight was satisfied with the hole she had dug. She gently lifted Sparkler's body with her magic and laid it to rest at the bottom of the hole. Then she lifted the pile of dirt she'd dug up and placed it in the hole, making sure it was flat and even before being satisfied. Then she created the final piece, forming a block of wood into the shape of a tombstone. Upon its surface she wrote the words 'Here lies Sparkler, a wonderful daughter, a loving sister and a beautiful mare.' She fixed the gravestone at the edge of the grave, marking it as Sparkler's resting place.

Once the grave was finished she sat at the foot of it, watching it quietly. A breeze blew through the silent town, sending a short shiver down her back. The temperature had dropped it seemed, though it wasn't as cold as the snow that had littered the ground when she had gone to sleep for the night it was still a stark contrast to the muggy air that had resided before. She tried to pay it no mind though, closing her eyes to give Sparkler a moment of peace.

"I should probably say something huh?" The lavender mare asked quietly to the grave. The wind blew the bangs in front of her eyes as she pondered over her words. "I'm sorry you had to die this way Sparkler..." her words were soft, almost lost to the gentle breeze around her. "I wish I could've been there to save you... don't know how I would have, but I wish..." she grit her teeth remembering Winter's body, remembering Lance being dragged away, remembering Rarity being impaled by that alicorn's sword, "I wish I could've prevented all of this from

happening. I wish I could protect every pony..."

"I still... I still remember when your mom decides she was going to adopt you, you know that?" Twilight chuckled softly to the grave, moving a hoof to her face to wipe it gently. "It was kind of a shock to everypony who knew your mom. She already seemed to be having a hard time raising her daughter as it was... and then she suddenly adopted you. She didn't tell anypony why... and I can't say that I was able to understand the thinking. But..." The smile on her face showed the fragile nature of the memories she could remember and why they were so precious. "...I could see on her face, when she was with you... she was happy. She loved you Sparkler and... I know that if she could do anything to have you back that she would do it. That's the kind of mother she was." The mare lifted a hoof and gently placed it on top of the flat soil before her. "Please rest in peace... I'm going to put an end to this nightmare and I'll make sure that... your death wasn't in vain."

The pony stood, the wind tossing her mane, the flakes of ash falling on her body. She turned to the road the hotel was connected to. She looked around, spying the particular set of trees and plant life that was slowly turning white around it. The bumps of the road, the familiar placing of the geography...

She knew where she was. She'd been down that path many times before, it was forever etched into her mind now.

This was the road to Fluttershy's house.

"Fluttershy... Rainbow Dash..." Twilight murmured, looking down the path into the darkness. She couldn't see their house from here, on a normally clear day she likely could have. She had been at their wedding just yesterday. She could still remember watching the ceremony unfold, organizing the event, how beautiful Fluttershy had been in her dress, the love she felt between them when they spoke their vows...

...How they said they were going to leave for their honeymoon the next day, to rest from the excitement of the celebration and to have all their friends see them off.

They had to be stuck in this world as well, being tormented by these monsters, their heads being toyed with like this was all some game, watching as the ponies they cared about got hurt or killed...

In the distance Twilight could hear something echoing through the town. It reverberated low across the air and over her coat. She knew the roar of the creature that had come from. It was the dragon that had attacked her in the middle of town.

The mare grit her teeth in frustration. She gazed at the darkness, resolve hardening inside of her and a glare directed at the misery that was the town. She was going to protect her

friends, she was going to find the Princess, she was going to bring an end to this misery.

Striking the ground, she ran as fast as her legs could carry her to the cottage where two of her friends now lived.