

# The Days Just Don't Get Any Shorter

*By Terse*

## Chapter Two

"Spike, my darling little helper, would you care to pass me a pin?"

The young purple dragon nodded, yanking a pin from the pincushion the white unicorn had made out of his tail and lifting it up into the air. The telltale embers of levitation magic, a softly glowing blue aura, surrounded the pin and pulled it away, and he watched it soar towards the spot where the spellcaster sat, poring over a blueprint covered from top to bottom in rough sketches.

"Oh, the galleria will be simply stunned! Crowella will be delighted with the ensemble, and surely shower me with exotic gifts from abroad! Don't you agree, Spike?"

Spike wasn't quite listening, as always, hearts virtually dancing in his eyes as he nodded dumbly in her direction.

Rarity couldn't help but sigh. The little dragon was a treasure, one of the most important gems in her hoard, but his behaviour had been simply atrocious, even for a devoted member of her entourage. Burning Ravenous' tail with his magical breath had been the first of many straws to wither and die inside her that day, and combined with his constant inability to focus for longer than ten seconds, there had been little for him to make himself useful doing besides being a personal stooge. Crass, inarguably, and very much below his capabilities if not her sophisticated stature, and yet something of a regrettable necessity.

Still, she supposed things could have gone worse. A young dragon was a creature worthy of respect in the eyes of most, and to have one serving her made her a valuable ally. It had certainly helped in her negotiations with the merchants of the Eastern Perches. Without Spike's fearsome flames of fury (or, to put it more appropriately, disgusting sneezing habit, a dreadful faux pas in any other social situation) her delicate diplomacy would have fallen on deaf ears. Crows drove a hard bargain, certainly, nearly unmatched in their tireless dedication to the currency of currency; though Rarity had no respect for their money-grubbing avarice, she grudgingly admired their wiles and cunning. Useful skills in any respect.

On the other hoof, her mane had suffered terribly under the harsh pressures of their negotiations. An entire sleepless night, spent in the throes of heated conversation, conducted in harsh whispers and irate shouts! The sort of thing she had someday dreamed of doing when she'd first set out to become a merchant of the finest finery. Now it haunted her, her eyes

sunken and bloodshot, complexion oily and wrinkled, drowning in lethargy and fatigue.

She had to keep working. Nothing could halt her entry to the global fashion scene! She'd be setting trends across the world yet! Positively rolling in riches, gifted to her by fond admirers, auspicious patrons and desirable suitors across the globe!

"Nothing so vulgar, of course," she mumbled, carefully threading a thin string of silk through the eye of a floating needle, suspended in the air by a glowing, cloudy mist.

She couldn't focus. The needle kept shaking in mid-air, and the thread itself refused to bend to her will, despite her most careful ministrations. Around her the ground had begun to quake, backlashes of unrestrained magical energy hammering dents into the cracks of the floor; the mare bit her tongue, closing one eye as she narrowed the other in furious concentration.

"Just a tad further..." The thread slunk forward as the world around Rarity seemed to still in anticipation. With a slight jerkiness, the needle flew towards the thread, in perfect alignment. "Almost have it..."

A loud snort and a tongue of fiery green flame jolted Rarity out of balance, and both the needle and the bolt of silk fell to the floor.

"Sorry, Twilight," Spike groaned, haphazardly waving one arm in the air. It took all of Rarity's patience, and a relaxing inner mantra, to hold back a scream. "...promise...I'll replace it..."

Another snort, a powerful yawn followed by a jet of flame that shook the room around the young dragon, and then he returned to peaceful slumber, a contented smile on his face as he snored away.

Behind him, the frazzled unicorn chomped down on her tongue, desperately willing herself to a better mentality.

Why, oh, why, did she have to put up with such interminable fuss? Would it be so much to ask, to have one day in her career without some sort of dreadful setback?

Idly she wondered whether Twilight had awoken from her slumber. She could use someone to pawn Spike off onto, in no uncertain terms, while she dealt with the complex part of her craft, and she knew where Twilight would be so early in the morning.

Tired, flustered, and deep in thought, Rarity didn't notice the sound of the bell at the door of her magically-constructed workshop jangling, a telltale sign of a visitor, until a voice rang out loudly from behind her, piercing the dawn-time air.

“Hey, Rare, you still up?”

The sudden sound made Rarity jump, practically out of her skin. Spike wasn't fazed, still snoring heavily, a tiny bubble forming at the edge of his lips and popping with every breath.

“Rainbow Dash, the nerve! Knock and announce yourself before you intrude in a dignified lady's household!” Brushing her mane down as best she could with her hooves, the white unicorn turned her nose up at the blue pegasus.

She looked simply too dashing this morning, for lack of a better term. Rarity had spent every day of her life since meeting her idolising Dash's natural beauty, something she envied the pegasus for capturing so easily when she found it so difficult to work towards, and her state could only amplify the gap between them. Dash's rosy, wide-eyed stare, full of shock and disbelief, seemed put on, as though she was mocking her for not having such gorgeous eyes. Her rainbow mane taunted her, unkempt as always, and yet so thick and luscious, shiny and colourful in ways no-

“No!” Rarity took a deep breath. The other mare simply looked puzzled. “No, Rainbow Dash, I will not spend another moment of the greatest day of my life envying your natural beauty. I am simply too exhausted to think straight, that is all.”

“Natural beauty? Huh?” Cocking her head in surprise, the pegasus took a wary step forward. “You okay, Rare? I'm not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Of course you are, Rainbow, but I suppose I will have to live with the interruption.” Uneasily the white unicorn clambered to her hooves. She'd stopped focusing on her work for a moment and the adrenaline had fled her body, leaving her a weak, shattered mess of fatigue and wild neuroses. Dash's intrusion had come at the worst possible time. “What is it? What do you need, dear?”

“Nothin',” Rainbow said, smiling at her with kind eyes. “I came to check on you, make sure you're all right. Uh...” Taking a quick inventory of the room, Dash was momentarily silent, stunned. “You are all right, right? No big explosions or crazy schemes or anything?”

“Fortunately, there has been very little in the way of accidental damage so far,” Rarity sighed back, sitting back on her hind legs. Her forehooves grasped her hair, sweeping it back down her neck and quickly styling it into a loose braid. Dash's awed expression at her finesse and grace was priceless. “Aside from a few tricky situations involving my delightful assistant, things have progressed mostly smoothly.” She paused to scoff miserably, sighing at the pegasus. “Until shortly before your timely arrival, when I hit a complete snag. Oh, Dash, you simply must help me!”

“What? Help?” Once again Dash cocked her head, confused. “How? I'm just a weather

pony, Rare.”

“A weather pony who has shown stunning design sense in the past!” Rarity managed to bite back the addendum of ‘stunningly awful’, albeit with some difficulty. So much so that her teeth had clamped down on her lower lip, now chewing it up with gusto out of nervousness. “Why, it isn’t even design I need from you! Simply a small sum of money for-”

“Whoa, wait a sec there,” Dash cut in, narrowing an eye as she raised a warning hoof. Rarity could feel her last vestiges of hope slipping out of her hooves like grains of sand. “My mom used to say ‘neither a borrower nor a lender be’, Rare, or something like that.”

“Your mother was an aficionado of Shakesteed?” That was a little perplexing. How could someone so rough and uncultured as Dash spring from such noble stock? At least it explained her strong morality, as best such a strange beast could ever hope to be.

“Not the time, Rare!”

Rarity harrumphed grumpily at that, but waved for the blue pegasus to continue.

“Anyway, she told me that money just makes things difficult, and you’re never supposed to give it away because it sours friendships. But it’s good to help your friends in other ways. I never really understood how that worked.”

“So you won’t help me?”

“Of course I’ll help, Rare!” Dash looked appalled at the mere thought of leaving her to her own devices. At least there was that. “What is it you even need anyway? I’m the best around, I bet I can have it done in ten seconds flat!”

“Oh, Rainbow, darling, you’re always so supportive,” the white unicorn sighed, dramatically heaving a heavy breath. “I intended to employ a delightful young group of foreign ponies that have been loitering around aimlessly for the past few hours, bring a few extra hooves into this ever-so-complex operation. Perhaps a horn or two if I am so lucky. But without the funding I find myself overwhelmed by the demands of high society fashionistas! Oh, the horror!”

Lifting a limp hoof to her brow, Rarity leaned back, paling. Dash lurched forward as though to catch her, but the white unicorn steadied herself, panting ever so slightly.

“Dash, my most loyal friend,” the white unicorn sobbed, “won’t you help me? I need these workers! I must, must, must have their assistance if I am to accomplish my dreams!”

“Uh,” mumbled the pegasus.

“Was that a yes?” Rarity exclaimed, bouncing to her hooves to stare her friend in the eyes with vigour.

“I...” Dash was completely stupefied. What could she possibly say to that?

Rarity’s lower lip wobbled a bit, quivering as tears welled up around her eyes.

“...fine,” Rainbow sighed, eyes narrowed as she glared unamusedly at the now-smiling white unicorn. Rarity bounced to her feet, squealing with unrestrained glee; Dash watched her work her magic around the room, setting things in order as, completely without warning, a line of ponies flooded in from all corners of the room.

“Ah, there you are, fillies, gentlecolts,” she sang, clearing a small space on her desk to accommodate the sheets of blueprints she was laying down. “No, no, Frederico, please let’s not start that fuss again. Oh, dear, Espada, you look particularly glum, has something happened to the missus again?” Dash couldn’t help but grimace as she watched her friend scoot around the room, hurriedly fussing over the ponies that swarmed around her like flies, buzzing in languages the rainbow-maned pegasus couldn’t place. “Simple Sail, please be careful, I don’t want another broken vase-”

Smash. The sound of shattering glass hit her ears with force, and as it tinkled into silence, Dash groaned, hanging her head. Next to her, the young dragon roused, stretching his stubby arms behind his head to scratch the back of his neck.

“This is gonna cost me, isn’t it,” she sighed.

“Yep,” came Spike’s reply.

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Meanwhile, in the gardens, a youthful yellow pegasus tended to a small flock of sheep, shepherd behind them chewing on a stalk of discoloured hay.

“Oh, I don’t suppose you’d happen to have any more of that delicious sautéed grass, would you?” One of the sheep had taken to asking her that question every couple of minutes, seeming to forget the answer every time; Fluttershy was grateful for her easygoing nature, because she was sure that by that point, any other pony would have lost her temper. She only sighed, smiling benignly at the creature whose upturned eyes gazed into her own.

“I’m sorry,” she said, carefully manoeuvring the sheep towards their pen. “Maybe I can bring you some more later on?”

“That would be most delightful, miss...” the sheep’s look turned from pleased to

confused, as it struggled to find her name. Fluttershy couldn't help the giggles that rose in the back of her throat. "Miss..."

"Fluttershy," she cooed back, laughing.

"Yes!" The sheep grinned. "Miss...Shutterfly, was it? It would be most delightful, most delightful indeed!"

With that, the small crowd of sheep gathered close together, huddled up inside their pen, and Fluttershy shut the door behind them. They, much like the rest of the castle garden's residents (livestock, she reminded herself grimly), were eager to avoid the chaos and confusion that had settled itself over Canterlot. Leagues beneath their feet, Bottomtown's residents had just begun to stir, whether in the outdoor shanties or the subterranean slums, and with them came the sounds of life and cheer that usually buzzed around Canterlot in the daytime. Next the middle rings would come to life, and then Topside City last of all - the castle itself, stretching base to peak through each section of the city, never really slept. A pony at its foot could rise to its tallest tower in the space of a single day and never find a moment to catch her breath.

The beautiful yellow pegasus herself wasn't quite sure what she wanted to do with her day. The persistent, nagging curiosity she'd been feeling towards the foreign visitors that would be living in the castle for the day was the only reason she'd decided to hang around, but even that had fled her by then, a careful sort of retreat that left her feeling nothing but a roiling sense of dread in the pit of her stomach. Certainly nothing nice, and not something she wanted to put herself through any longer than she needed to.

The sun was beginning to rise above her head, a quick, jagged movement markedly unlike its usual smooth motion. She couldn't help but wonder why.

"Thanks again for your help, missy," the old colt wheezed, smiling. She still couldn't quite place his thick accent, but she smiled back nonetheless, bobbing her head ever so slightly. Then she turned, flapped her wings, and flew away, out of sight.

Returning to the train of thought she'd been distracted from, her eyes caught the sun again. It had stilled, mostly, slowly edging towards its apex through the morning clouds, but the way it burned so cruelly was a little scary. Well, a lot scary, but she'd resolved to make herself less fearful after the whole business with Discord, and she meant to keep that promise.

A nearby sundial read seven twenty three, which meant Twilight would probably be up. Fluttershy missed her friend a little. It had only been a day, but they'd separated in the late evening to chase up their own business, and she'd been stuck on her own in the big city, paralyzed by her own fear. She wanted to find a familiar face.

Walking through the palace gardens, she couldn't help but stop and examine the statues

she found there. One was Victory, the most ancient and venerated symbol of ponies: a legendary heroine that had struck out against Discord and helped defeat his awful regime, thousands upon thousands of years ago. It was claimed by some more knowledgeable ponies that she was mother to the Twins, the gods that had felled the tyrant at his greatest. Fluttershy didn't know what to think of that, she was no historian, but the look of sorrow in her eyes, tempered by a fierce determination, told her that, if not a mother to the Princesses, Victory had been a mother to someone. She recognised that look from her own mother.

Next came Pride, far out of the way of the labyrinth in which they'd been defeated by Discord, the one that still gave her nightmares. Fluttershy didn't know how to feel about Pride. He had been the first pony to rise up against Discord, but not out of any great love for others; no, Pride had been driven only by narcissism, a deep, primal urge to prove himself the greatest creature of all. He had slain creatures great and small, saved countless lives, and brought his battle to Discord himself, very nearly winning against the chaotic spirit's greatest lieutenant at the Everfree Forest, but it had all come to naught. In the end, he had been beaten by his own arrogance. With nary a true friend in the world and naught but his own strength to rely on, Pride had fallen, and in honour of him, they had raised a great statue and a cautionary tale, an adage that spoke of none falling harder than giants.

It was all very deep. Fluttershy preferred to think of it as just being one pony needing to be a bit nicer to others. Apparently, Pride had been very much a horrid little worm.

Then came the Three Brothers, Pizazz, Panache and Flair - each had strove to outdo the others, and each had risen and fallen higher than the last, mercurial creatures whose feats had made them worthy of preservation and immortalisation forever in the gardens of the Princesses. A ways beyond, she found the intertwined statues of the Pretenders, Solaris and Lunes, both of whom were covered in the accumulated mess of thousands of years of bird droppings, the only statues not cared for. Some said Celestia and Luna had sealed them together forever in a passionate embrace, brothers who dared profane their sacred names; others said Solaris and Lunes were the true gods, who had known the truth of the Princesses' existences and sought to root them out. For their troubles, they had been branded as traitors. Shortly after them, around a corner and hidden in the shadow of a tall, gnarled oak tree, whose flowering branches stretched out towards Fluttershy like fingers, hid the Strange: no one knew anything about the Strange, but someday it had simply appeared in the castle, a welcome addition to the ornamentation. Around its feet spread tendrils of woven gold, poking through the crevices in the dried, cracked ground. Some called it Midas, though Fluttershy didn't know why.

She kept finding herself being reminded that what she knew, she knew because of Twilight's lectures and a few encounters with other avid scholars in the castles. She wanted to learn more, but lacked the means. It was quite sad, in truth.

Others, some she recognised, some she did not, passed her in a whirl of sights and sounds. Birds chirping, flowers blooming, the wind blowing, and above it all, the indistinct,

ambient chatter of a world coming to life in the morning. It soothed her, just a little bit.

“Hey, Fluttershy!” A voice cried behind her, and along came her pink pony pal, tackling her with a great big hug that brought her peace and quiet crashing down.

The pink-maned pegasus didn't mind, though. She preferred Pinkie's brand of silence anyway.

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“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear,” came the castellan's voice, high-pitched and squeaky. “I don't quite know how to react, Princess Luna. You say the Princess Celestia is ill?”

“We do,” Luna grouched, silently wishing to herself that this doddering old fool would run along and do whatever it was he intended to do to fix the situation. A thousand years ago the castle's administrator had been an imposing pony, resourceful, cunning and quick; he had cut a sharp figure, one she had respected immensely, that never failed to get the job done. All in all, he'd been worthy of his position among his great forebears.

In the time since, it seemed, Celestia had taken to running things herself, and employing others based purely on meretricious things like appearance. This old pony, clad in a frayed tweed robe and thick, horn-rimmed glasses, fogged with mist, looked absolutely nothing like the ponies that had guarded her in her day. Instead he seemed more fit to run a library in the middle of nowhere.

Inwardly she longed for Twilight Sparkle, who would have had no difficulty dealing with the situation. *Aside from her neuroses, of course*, she added to herself, chuckling.

“And you say that she will not recover until the day is out?”

“Her Grace shall remain bedridden until we see fit to release her,” she replied, biting back scathing words. She'd lost her patience long ago.

“And you say that-”

“We say,” came the voice of the younger Princess, in the traditional booming Canterlot manner, “that it is time you left us to our royal devices.” She was seething inside. Who was this inept, useless husk of a pony to question her, she wondered as he fled the room, barely able to keep himself from ruining his lovely tweed robe. “And perhaps you should consider wearing undergarments to match that finery of yours in future, if you are so intent on soiling them.”

There would be no audiences from within Equestria that day, thankfully. The only audience Luna would take would be a great gathering of creatures from across the globe, all of



whom only wished to hear the Princesses speak. They would not have that unless things turned for the better, sadly, but the least she could do would be to give them the reception they deserved.

“Oh, Luna, what have you gotten yourself into?” her eyes, half-lidded in dismay, scanned the throne room around her. Celestia’s personal audience chamber, decorated in the garish whites, yellows and reds so favoured by the Sunlight Of The World, and it felt alien to her. She hoped it didn’t show in her face.

She would have much preferred a few muted blues here and there, maybe a black, some purple if they had any dye on hand. But, alas, on such short notice such things could not be sent for without causing alarm, and she didn’t wish to put any undue stress on her castle’s staff. Most of them looked like they couldn’t handle any more. Half had already snapped.

Tap, tap, tap, sounded the rhythmic beating of hooves on the marbled floors of the audience chamber, and Luna rose to her feet, eyes immediately honing in on the source.

At the entrance to the room, a zebra leaned on the wall, smirking with unreserved confidence as she tapped out a melody. Luna recognised her from somewhere, and then her eyes widened as realisation hit her.

“Zecora!” she cried, leaping from her cold, iron throne on the dais, down the steps, towards the zebra that practically exuded a cocksure sort of comfort. Luna had never been more pleased to see a friendly face as she threw her forelegs around the zebra’s withers. “It’s so good to see you again!”

“Ahem,” a voice coughed behind her, clearing its throat, and she quickly drew back, reeling.

“Ah, we mean,” she stuttered, but the voice behind her was laughing too, now, and Zecora herself couldn’t have looked any more amused if she tried, struggling to hold back her own laughter. Luna shut her eyes, and sighed, entirely unhappy. “We mean that it is a pleasure to once more share your company. Come, sit with us.”

“The majestic plural, you need not use,” Zecora said, stepping forward and shedding the roughspun brown cloak she’d been wearing. Behind her, two guards fought to catch it and take it, eyes both firmly glued to the zebra. Luna envied her good looks. “Or your temper, you are sure to lose.”

“Don’t I know it,” she muttered in a huff, teleporting in a flash of sparks to stand beside the pony who, moments beforehand, had stood behind her.

Madeleine Mare, more commonly known as Mayor, had been a long-standing servant of

Celestia, leading the small, rural town of Ponyville ever towards a brighter day even through some of the greatest crises the world had ever faced. Apparently, Celestia had chosen and nominated her to a position of power in that backwater little hole in order to bring about a great destiny that laid dormant there, perhaps the greatest destiny Equestria had ever known, and had not disappointed - the Elements of Harmony had united there, as prophecy foretold, and in doing so, the greatest magic of all had been restored to full, glorious power. Now her role was slowly diminishing to make way for a new era of democratic elections, and she was preparing for a comfortable retirement as learned vizier and counsel to the Princesses. Few had quite so broad an understanding of Equestrian politics or law, and even fewer had her storied history.

Zecora, on the other hand, had been an entirely unexpected factor, but not unwanted, not at all. *No*, Luna thought to herself, *she is perhaps the most valuable ally we have*.

Luna had been extremely shocked to find a descendant of the First Druids in the middle of the Everfree Forest, the first time she'd truly had opportunity to explore, and further investigation had only deepened the mystery. Nothing she learned made sense, and even less fit the puzzle that had been put in front of her; all she knew was that there was something about Zecora, something old, grand, and wise, that cloaked her in shadowy secrecy even her own magic could not pierce.

Together they sat down together, at a table, to break the morning's fast, sup on a light meal, and talk of tidings brought. Luna found herself in need of companionship, and her only regret was that she had not yet found time to call Twilight Sparkle to her side.

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In her bed, Princess Celestia tossed, turned, and dreamed of dreaming.

Her mind was haunted by visions of a future she was sure they had managed to delay, if not outright deter. In every writhing flame, she saw the face of a foe they'd beaten and sealed, laughing the same maniacal laugh he had the first time they had met. Each inky black void captured her inside itself and twisted her into something new, horrific, dangerous, to join hooves and hearts with the corrupted monster they had defeated so long ago, with the mane of stars and the soul of ice. Spelled out in the cosmos, she could see a thousand more threats, each more dangerous and vicious than the last, named and unnamed alike. And behind it all, within and without, she felt the guiding hand of something so inexplicably vast and terrible that merely to ponder it was to cross the precipice of insanity, a brink she could not afford to leap.

She awoke sweating, demons leaving her with a pounding headache, and she reached out with her magic, haphazardly grasping a nearby cup. The steel, specially reinforced to withstand excessive magical pressure, bent underneath the force, crushed into wrought iron. It seemed her magic was restoring itself far more quickly than she could have hoped.

What were those dreams?

She rested her head on the pillow, groaning. It wouldn't do her any good to think overmuch while she laid sick in her bed, incapable of doing any good. Luna wouldn't like that, and it'd just make things worse in the long run.

But at the same time, how could she ignore what she had seen?

A darkness so infinitely great and terrible that to know it was to know despair. A gaunt, malformed hand, wrapped in thin, weak flesh of peach tones, thick red blood coursing through pulsing blue veins. A smile, crooked white teeth bared like those of a wolf. And most of all, magic. The smell of magic, the scent of it overpoweringly sweet, sickly like a rotting corpse, crowded around one figure and draining away, as though the force of it were a sieve in the world's fabric. What did it all mean?

"Woonna," the white alicorn yawned, drool hanging from her mouth as she closed her eyes again. "Where are you, my Woonna..."

On the nearby mantelpiece, the gem embedded in her torc blazed with light, glinting even in the shrouding darkness of the room...but Celestia never noticed, once more in the throes of a deep, now-dreamless sleep.

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Twilight awoke with a pounding migraine and a head full of stars. Above her, a small crowd of curious creatures milled about aimlessly, some carrying medical supplies, others straining their necks over the rest to see - Twilight couldn't quite tell who was just rubbernecking and who was actually trying to help her, but honestly, it didn't truly matter, in the end.

Her body ached incessantly, and every move she made ended with her nerves screaming for her to just stop bothering it, Celestia be damned, and lie still, for the rest of time if necessary. Her side in particular, where the pegasus had hit her, burned like a sun. An appropriate comparison if ever there was one, considering the morning sun's rays were beating down on her like a pony's kicks and no one had seen fit to move her into the shade.

The pegasus responsible was nowhere to be seen, but she could feel something underneath her, desperately struggling to lift her into the air.

"That hurts, you know," she mumbled, horn flaring. "And I'm not that heavy." Concentrating as best she could, in spite of the pain that wracked her body, she pulled herself up off the floor, magic beginning to knit her bones back together where she was sure they'd broken. The pain slowly dulled, eventually enough to let her stand unaided. By the time she was restored to full function, the pegasus that had been trying to lift her (the same one from earlier)

had been thoroughly emasculated, standing on tip-hooves in apprehension as a crimson blush spread across his cheeks.

“Dreadfully sorry, madam,” he said, wincing, and Twilight took a good, long look at him. Enough to make him retreat into himself in fear.

As it turned out, he wasn't so stocky after all. His armour was far too big for his frame, and it made him look bigger and stronger than he could possibly be. A gangly, long-limbed pony, with mismatched ears and a lazy eye, who shook every few seconds as though he couldn't stop shivering in the cold weather. His armour was brass, totally unlike the rest of the guardsponies she had seen in Canterlot all her life, and it looked dented in places, scratched in others, as though forged by an incompetent and then put through its paces by somepony even more so.

Most of all, his flank was entirely uncovered, and plastered on it like a rash Twilight could see a Cutie Mark that looked like a misshapen anvil and a broken hammer.

She knew this pony. Too well.

“Smithy Smith?” she asked, cocking her head to one side, and the pony brightened, standing at attention with a proud, if incorrectly executed, salute.

“Sir, yes, sir!” he cried. Then he second-guessed himself. “Uh, I mean, ma'am! How may Smithy Smith assist you today?”

“Smithy, it's me, Twilight Sparkle,” she laughed, settling down on a nearby bench. The stall at which the vulture was perched, closely guarding it with a single, unmoving eye, was now being attended to by a donkey barely tall enough to reach the middle shelves. She could wait. “You remember me? We were in class together when I studied smithery.”

“Ma'am!” he cried again, still rigidly frozen. “I am afraid I am at a disadvantage! I know no Twilight Sparkle!”

“Oh, that's right,” she replied, “Bronzeforge used to call me Sparky, didn't he?”

Moments passed in silence. Ponderously, the ugly pony's expression transformed into one of realisation; he sat down on his hindquarters, rubbing at the side of his head with a shoed hoof.

“Sparky?” His voice was hesitant, full of disbelief. She didn't find it hard to see why. No one had known who she was when she'd sat in on the class of unicorns, earth ponies and pegasi learning the ways of the furnace - it had been a purely extracurricular pursuit, and Bronzeforge, the master of the classroom and one of the most celebrated blacksmiths in Canterlot, had been careful to be just as demeaning and cruel to her as he had been to the rest

of the class. Or maybe not careful at all. The pony had always been something of a monster. "Is it really you?"

"Of course it's me, silly," she laughed, giving him a kind look that she hoped he couldn't tell was more appraising than caring. "Don't you recognise my Cutie Mark?"

"No," the white pegasus sighed, "I don't remember much these days. My memory's failing me, for some reason. I don't know why."

Twilight sighed at that. Back in the days of her youth, she'd saved Sparky from bullies once, and tried her best to protect him afterwards; in return he dogged her around constantly, a useless devotee she didn't need. He'd always been useless, of course, it had been part of his destiny, but she couldn't help the pity, the sympathy she had. What if she'd been in the same position?

"What are you doing here, Sparky?" The purple unicorn was honestly curious.

"Oh!" he cried, again, jumping to his hooves in panic. "That reminds me, I gotta go! Master Bronzeforge needs me on an errand!"

That confused Twilight slightly, but by the time she raised a hoof to question further the pegasus had already zipped off, darting madly through a crowd of creatures at the foot of the steps, by the Royal Sisters Fountain. The crowd around her had dispersed a while ago, so she stood herself, trotting over to the stall she'd been so dedicated to checking out earlier.

"Excuse me," she said, and the donkey turned to her, smiling.

"*May I help you, madam?*" was the response, spoken in the melodic tongue of the Far East. That explained the vulture, then - crows took a peculiar interest in raising other, less intelligent birds to positions of stature. If the vulture owned the donkey as a servant, or a slave, that would not honestly surprise her, though she took personal offence at the idea of slavery.

"*I was just curious about all these staves and robes you have here,*" Twilight replied, deftly switching to his own natural language. It would make him more comfortable, and Twilight had no real issue speaking it - again, if anything, she were something of an omniglot. That had been part of why she was such a necessary ambassador. "*They look so exotic. Can you-*"

"Hush, milady," the donkey whispered softly in husky Equestrian, casting a trepidatious glance at the vulture a few metres up in the air. It didn't seem interested in them, staring determinedly ahead at the zebras across the way; they were making faces and laughing, juggling fetishes around like toys. "My master, he is, how do you say, vindictive. If he is to hear what I am to tell, he will be most maddened indeed."

“Wow,” she said, stupid grin spreading across her face. He was even more exotic than the merchandise! She couldn’t help the tingle that spread through her chest at that. “Okay, what is it?”

“All these items,” the donkey’s words were still eerily quiet, as he swept a foreleg across the shelves, “are fake. Frauds. Cheap imitations meant to scalp the unwary and the foolish. A beautiful mare such as yourself,” and then he knelt to kiss her hooves, which made her heart leap into her throat, “does not deserve such a fate.”

“Oh! Oh. Oh,” was all she could think to say, unable to grasp any words more poignant or meaningful than ‘oh’. This dashing donkey had saved her purse from falling into the claws of a charlatan. Oh, what a gentlecolt!

“You need not repay me,” he crooned, eyes still downcast in true gentlecolt’s fashion. “All I ask is a favour from milady. A boon, if you will.”

Twilight was too busy being charmed (starstruck, even) to question this turn of events.

“What is it? Anything, anything!”

“Dine with me upon the evening’s tide.” That was enough to make the purple mare swoon. “Meet me tonight, at the Blue Sky’s Inn, at the marina on the riverfront. Bring nothing but your beauteous charms and a small token of respect for the innkeeper. There, we shall romance.”

“Of course, of course!” This was enthusing. Who knew such a gallant young donkey would take interest in her? Perhaps this was to be her romantic adventure, like the ones Rarity so often jabbered on about!

“Then I look forward,” he finished, bowing, “*to our next meeting, beautiful lady.*”

And with a puff of smoke, he was gone, egressed elsewhere. The vulture next to her looked down bemusedly, and she stuck her tongue out at it as she walked away. No silly bird would get in the way of her love!

*Starcrossed lovers*, she mused to herself in glee, as behind her, the stall folded away and disappeared.