

# Half the Day is Night

by AugieDog

## Chapter 15

Completing her third circuit of the throne room without seeing Ory, Rarity felt a touch of panic. After the awful and disturbing spectacle of Night Guard troops leading the weeping Lady Stargazer into custody, if Ory had vanished as well--

Of course, she couldn't show how distraught she was, not with a fair percentage of Canterlot's elite buzzing around the refreshment tables like bees ready to strike. She had to smile sadly, shake her head, and project a confidence she didn't quite feel: "Yes, it's just so dreadful! When Minister Applejack presented Princess Luna and the rest of us with the evidence against Lady Stargazer this afternoon, well! I could hardly believe my ears! It will all be read tomorrow morning in open court, of course, but oh! Such a shock!"

Exhausted upon leaving one particularly unhappy group of unicorns in evening dress, she was on the verge of tears when Applejack sidled up to her and whispered, "Yer smoothing more ruffled manes tonight, sugar cube, than the rest of us put

together, but I can see it's getting to you. So you turn on in any time you need to."

Heartened by the words, she took a breath and said, "I'll be fine." Yes, she could run off all a-fluster looking for Ory or even fold herself into a puddle of misery in a room somewhere, but with loose ends that still needed trimming, frowns in the crowd that she could perhaps turn from angry to thoughtful... So she stayed at it, speaking and listening till the atmosphere became more somber, less threatening.

Soon, couples and small groups began bowing their farewells to the princess, and at last the guards closed the big doors, Princess Luna heading out to see to the night. And while Rarity tried to help the others clean up, after dropping her broom four times in the course of a minute, she felt a nudge at her shoulder and heard Fluttershy say, "Rarity, you're going to bed now, and you're going to sleep."

All her protests were to no avail, and collapsing into a bed she wasn't sure she'd actually used since arriving in Canterlot, she started awake seeming minutes later with Pinkie Pie calling from the doorway, "This five o'clock in the morning stuff is great! I've gotta do it more often!"

Rarity blinked, took a breath, discovered she didn't feel

as much like a balloon about to burst as she had last night.

"When's our promenade?" she asked, her voice hardly cracking.

"An hour or something. Plenty of time!" Pinkie hopped out of sight around the corner, then hopped back into sight. "Oh, and make sure you've got plenty of red ribbons today! I got a flappy-eyelid feeling they're gonna be popular!"

The promenade to the Day Palace did seem a bit more crowded, the Borealis girls right up front, their eyes and ribbons bright as they started the chant: "Luna! Equestria! Luna! Equestria!" Princess Luna nodded quite regally, Rarity thought, something much more ethereal about the princess this morning. The Night Guard troops marching alongside their little group made an impressive display, their dark uniforms standing out well in the gray light of pre-dawn, and they saluted their Day Guard counterparts sharply at the center of the courtyard before she and her friends followed Princess Luna into their keeping, the first time in nearly a year, Rarity realized, that this ceremony had occurred with all the appropriate pomp and circumstance.

Still, she couldn't help but notice the complete lack of Ory anywhere in the vicinity....

Entering the Day Palace to the more-than polite applause of

the Day Ministry workers, she watched with the others as Princess Luna announced the sunrise, then she felt obliged to step outside and observe whether the Night Guards' uniforms really did drink in the sunlight the way she'd hoped they would. The effect was most satisfactory, and the group of ponies that respectfully pressed in upon her with requests for ribbons gave her some satisfaction as well: they were largely earth ponies and pegasi, two groups among whom she'd not had much chance to mingle since arriving in the capital.

She did her best to engage everypony in witty small talk, but it felt more than a little automatic, as if her charm was a machine she had overworked to the point where it gave off a bit of a grinding sound. Tying ribbons in manes and around ankles, she expressed Princess Luna's thanks for their support and Princess Luna's dismay at Lady Stargazer's actions and Princess Luna's assurance that the malefactor would be treated with all due diligence according to Equestrian law and custom. It seemed the right tone to adopt...

By the time she returned to the throne room, Phillipa Stargazer's name hovered in the air, Princess Luna on the dais in consultation with Twilight, Applejack, and the odious Lord Daybreak. Rarity, however, found herself less interested in the

fate of the mother than in the current whereabouts of the son, and not seeing Ory--again!--in the crowd gathering to hear the charges against the former Night Minister, with a rush of determination, Rarity swept from the palace, her dark blue dress simple but elegant enough, certainly, to call upon a friend about whom she was concerned.

The streets of Canterlot bustled with ponies and their carts going about whatever sorts of business ponies with carts did--hauling things, she presumed, vegetables and dry goods and other such sundries as a city this size could not do without--and Rarity was several blocks away from the palace before she realized she didn't know where she was going.

Popping into one of the lovely little boutiques around the edges of whatever park she'd wandered into, she meant only to ask for directions to the home of Lord Daybreak, but, well, she couldn't very well rush off without complimenting the proprietor on the smart line of hats she had on display. One thing led to another--the proprietor admiring Rarity's dress, Rarity admitting that she'd designed it herself, the proprietor brightening, familiar with Rarity's name and work, Rarity tucking a business card into her bag--but some fifteen or twenty minutes later, she was on her way again, heading along the inner

curve of the volcano's crater, the streets wider and less trafficked, the shops dwindling as the residences grew larger and more expansive.

At Daybreak Court, then, the tidy little cul-de-sac the shop's proprietor had directed her toward, she found herself looking over a picket fence at an immaculately-kept front garden; steeling herself, she pushed the gate open and started up the white stone path toward the house.

Her hoofs feeling heavier and heavier with each step, she started wishing she'd taken an extra hour or two at her toilette. The curve of her mane, the drape of her dress, the placement of each eyelash: it all needed to be exactly right. Of course, it largely was--she wouldn't've left the palace otherwise--but she'd been walking now for some time, had been engaging in commerce as well, and following the walkway between the carefully-placed trees and grass-covered hillocks, she couldn't help but feel the eyes of Canterlot upon her.

Not that anypony in this neighborhood would be so gauche as to stare openly from a balcony or a picture window, and the Daybreak estate itself looked more like its own little town than a part of the city behind her. Still, Rarity knew very well the tingly sensation of being stared at. And she was getting that

sensation right now.

More than that, even, the air itself seemed different here, full of history, the Daybreak family's thousand years of service to the crown as thick as the scent of the narcissus flowers. It got her wondering why the Stargazers didn't have a similar place, why the family had had to come here after Princess Luna had closed the Night Ministry, but by then she'd wound her way through the garden and had reached the front door, a stylized golden sunburst knocker in the center.

The glitter around the edges of the sunburst sent a nice little shiver down her horn--diamond dust, she could tell--and she used her magic to tap it, the door swinging open almost immediately to reveal an old liveried earth pony, his black and white coloring the same as his butler's uniform. "Yes, madame?" he asked in a voice that made Rarity think of Pinkie Pie's chocolate pudding: sweet, rich, and deep.

Knowing that everything rode on this moment, she measured a little extra warmth into her tones and gave him what she felt was the correct amount of smile. "Miss Rarity to see Mr. Stargazer."

"I'm sorry, madame," the butler said. "But Mr. Stargazer does not wish to be disturbed."

She turned up the heat just a bit. "That may very well be, sir, but you and I both know that Mr. Stargazer needs the proper sort of disturbance right now. And I hope you'll agree with me that I am the pony to provide that disturbance."

He gazed imperturbably at her, and for a moment, Rarity was afraid she'd misjudged the situation. But his face softened just a bit, and she could see quite clearly how much the old pony cared for Ory. "Indeed, madame." He stepped back. "If you'll come this way, please?"

"Thank you." She moved into the semi-darkness of the entryway, the walls and floor all natural wood, the ceiling smooth and highly-polished marble. Oddly tasteful, she thought, considering how rude Lord Daybreak had been to her yesterday: perhaps his wife was in charge of the decor...

Shaking her attention back to the situation, she quickened her steps following the butler down the hall. "Is Mr. Stargazer alone, or are his sisters with him?"

"The Miss Stargazers have all gone en masse to the palace for the reading of the charges against Lady Phillipa." The butler turned right down one corridor, then left down another, Rarity getting mere glimpses of other elegantly decorated rooms as she passed them. "Mr. Stargazer did not feel up to the



task." He stopped before a doorway and turned, his eyes wavering. "Thank you for coming, Miss Rarity."

She touched his hoof. "Thank you for caring about him."

The butler nodded, drew in a breath, tapped the door, and pushed it open. "Miss Rarity, sir."

"What??" came Ory's voice from inside. "Confound it, Mandrake! I said I wasn't to be--!"

"Ha!" Rarity put on her determined face and pushed past Mandrake into a spacious sitting room, light filtering through the curtains at the far end. Bookshelves lined the walls, a few closed doors situated among them, the floor a random scattering of cushioned lounges, tables, and piles of pillows. That the space was being shared by several ponies became obvious to her at once from the stacks of magazines and the distinct scents of five different types of perfume, but the only figure currently in residence lay wrapped in a well-worn robe across one of the lounge chairs in the far corner of the room, Ory's expression all glaring eyes and flaring nostrils.

Rarity took a stance, glared back at him, and said, "Ha!" once more. "That I should live to see one of Canterlot's most cultured gentlecolts leave a party without bidding good night to the hostess! It's simply unfathomable!"

His glare melted into a stare. "Bid her good night?" A twitch pulled his cheek, and he waved a hoof wildly. "As she'd just arrested my mother for treason, I rather felt my continued presence in the hall might not be entirely welcome!"

"Nonsense!" She stomped forward. "Your mother's actions were her own!" Activating her horn, she pushed the curtains open, a lovely view of a hillside elm grove outside. "I can't think of one pony in Equestria who would hold you at all responsible for--!"

"Her actions??" A dark flash to her left, and she turned to see him leap from the lounge, his horn pulsing to cast shadow around him despite the late autumn sunlight. "Endangering the public after devoting her life to their welfare?? Trying to kill me?? Trying--" His voice broke, and his eyes squeezed shut. "Trying to kill you..."

"She wasn't." Rarity stepped toward him, used the magic of her horn to brush the tangles of his mane back from his forehead. "She was angry at both princesses and afraid for your future, and while that certainly impaired her judgement, I'm inclined to believe her when she says she planned everything with an eye toward creating mayhem, not injury."

Ory started back, surprise blossoming into his scent.

"You've spoken with her?"

"My friends have." Fluttershy and Applejack had spent most of the night talking with Lady Stargazer in her cell, had given their reports while breakfasting before this morning's promenade, and--

And the idea that struck Rarity then made her knees weak, it felt so right. "But as soon as you've tidied yourself up," she said with a nod, "we shall both speak to her."

He did some more blinking. "You...you expect me to--?"

"I do." Rarity glanced around at the various closed doors among the bookcases. "I assume that one of these is your room and that you have appropriate clothing?"

A bit of his earlier anger flitted across his face. "And what would you recommend for visiting one's mother in prison?"

Already close to him, she moved closer, and without allowing herself to think, she touched her lips briefly to his, felt the sweet, sweet shock of it and saw that same shock rattle through him from his ears to the tip of his tail. "Something nice," she murmured. "Not too formal, however, I think."

His chest rose and fell, and when he swallowed, Rarity could hear it. "Very well." He cleared his throat, turned, and headed for one of the doors.

She couldn't help shelving a few books and stacking some of the magazines while she waited, but the door finally reopened, Ory emerging in a cravat and jacket that were perhaps a bit on what Rarity would have considered the formal side. Still, she was never one to underestimate the power of the proper outfit in a trying situation. If these were the clothes he needed, then that was all there was to it.

Mandrake, the butler, seemed to approve as well, intercepting them in the hallway as they neared the front door. "Going out, Mr. Orrery?"

"Yes," Ory said shortly, then he sighed, turned to the older pony, and bowed his head. "Mandrake, I...I must apologize for being so beastly to you this morning." His eyes narrowed, his gaze sliding over to Rarity. "I can honestly say that I'm already paying the price for it."

The subtlety of the butler's smile made Rarity hope she would have a chance to better make his acquaintance. "I cannot think of a more delightful burden, sir."

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All in all, Rarity reflected afterwards, once more in the front hall of Daybreak House, the visit had gone quite well. The presence of Ory's sisters had been an unexpected plus, nine

fillies ranging from slightly younger than Rarity to perhaps Sweetie Belle's age swinging their heads around as the jailer had opened the door to a well-lit and spacious cell, their dark coats and manes declaring them to be Stargazers.

The brief awkwardness, however, had quickly dissolved into tears all around, Ory hugging his sisters and his mother, but when Rarity had tried to make a discreet exit so the family could be alone, Lady Stargazer had not only insisted that she stay but had gone on to offer such a heartfelt apology for her recent actions that Rarity had found herself more convinced than ever of the lady's repentance.

More tears had followed, only a knock at the door finally breaking the cathartic scene up, a unicorn stepping in and introducing herself as Limpid Dewdrop, the psychologist who would be treating Lady Stargazer. Then had come tearful farewells and promises of daily visits, and walking with the Stargazers back to the Daybreak estate, Rarity had done rather well, she thought, distracting Ory's sisters with talk of the latest fashions and the tale of her and Ory visiting Lace Brocade's workshop the previous day.

She'd so lightened the mood, in fact, that now, standing in the front hall with the Stargazer girls surrounding her, she

found herself unable to depart: "Oh, do stay, Miss Rarity!"  
Urania, the youngest of the fillies, was saying. "It's almost  
time for tea!"

"Ummm..." Rarity looked at Ory.

"Actually," he began, stepping forward, "Miss Rarity has  
many other duties in the princess's service that she must--"

"Duties?" Melpomene, the next eldest after Ory, pushed out  
her lips to make smooching noises, and Rarity felt her ears heat  
up.

A gentle clearing of throat, and she looked past the girls  
to see Mandrake standing in a doorway. "Excuse me," he said,  
"but your aunt asks if it's not too great a burden that her  
nieces attend her at this time."

The girls went wide-eyed, turned, and nearly galloped down  
the hall. Rarity blew out a breath, inclined her head to the  
butler, and smiled at the bow he gave her before he followed the  
Stargazers out of the hall.

She heard Ory chuckle behind her. "Auntie's not one to be  
kept waiting."

Turning, she cocked her head at him. "Will you then be  
hurrying off as well?"

He gave a rakish smile. "Oh, she's long since despaired of

me. She doesn't care for the trombone." A seriousness came over him that sent a lovely little tingle down her spine. "But thank you, Rarity, for...well, for everything, I suppose. I don't know what the girls and I would've done without you." He coughed a laugh. "Actually, I'm fairly certain I would've sat here brooding for a week, growing all the while more resentful and grotesque. But now, I almost feel up to asking you to lunch."

"I should hope so." She tossed her head. "We'll need to visit a number of establishments, after all, if you're to gather a sufficient ensemble for this evening."

He blinked at her, then smiled. "I'm beginning to think I should simply make it my regular practice to assume a befuddled expression when in your company."

She sighed in mock exasperation. "Tonight's party at the Night Palace. I told Pinkie Pie I had made the acquaintance of a local trombonist and that I would prevail upon him to supply music of an appropriate nature."

"Ah." His ears folded. "And this is something you only thought to mention now?"

It took some work, but Rarity managed to look innocent. "Surely it can't be that great a task to track down a group of

musicians talented enough to perform before the reigning monarch of Equestria at what is likely to be the social event of the season in the, oh, four or five hours before sundown."

"You're serious." Ory's eyes seemed to be quivering in their sockets. "And since it's for the princess, as you say, I imagine the pay would be somewhat higher than the average nightclub gig..."

Rarity could quite literally smell his excitement. "Well, of course! But the honor of performing before royalty would surely be enough to entice--"

"The best players in town." His voice had gotten quiet. "Rarity, I could get...this could be--" He spun for the door. "We haven't a moment to lose!"

And while it took her a few more hours to finally get the lunch he promised, the places she visited with Ory that afternoon made the wait worthwhile: out-of-the-way bistros and basement-level clubs that even in the brilliant sunlight of that autumn afternoon still seemed dark, mysterious, and intimate. And the music, while not entirely to her taste, was quite lovely when the musicians slowed down and concentrated on the melodies.

The day simply flew in Ory's company, and by the time evening was drawing in, he'd contacted everypony he'd hoped to



and had rounded up a few more, all of them just as excited as he was about performing at the party. "This is going to be my dream band, Rarity!" he was gushing as they headed back toward the palace. "We'll have to stick to standards and the classics, I suppose, since we won't have any time to practice, but this is going to be a sound the likes of which Canterlot has never heard before!" His eyes met hers, and the lustrous glow in them made her catch her breath. "Once again, I find that I owe everything to you..."

And as much as she wanted to lose herself in those eyes, she forced a laugh, tossed her mane, began approaching the subject she'd been dreading all afternoon. "Well, we'll have to invite your sisters, then, and Mr. Mandrake." She shook her head. "Though I suppose that will bring your aunt and uncle into things, and I'm not sure he likes me much."

"Uncle Daybreak?" Ory's mouth went sideways. "Oh, he likes you. It would be politically unwise of him not to, and uncle never does anything politically unwise." He sighed. "Living with Aunt and Uncle while Mother's in treatment will do the girls good. I just wish--" He stopped and snorted. "Well, as Father used to say, 'If wishes were fishes, we'd all be gasping for breath.' I never understood what he meant by it, but it's

about all he left us, so..."

Rarity just cocked her head, hoping that would be enough prompting, and it was. "Father sold the family estates, y'see, when I was just a colt. We all lived in the Night Palace anyway, hardly ever visited our acreage on the other side of the valley, so why keep it?" A trace of bitterness came into his voice. "It's not as if anypony would possibly dissolve the Night Ministry after a thousand years of service and kick us all out into the streets! How could that ever happen??"

Rarity touched her shoulder to his as they walked, and he gave another sigh. "Lord and Lady Daybreak aren't even really that closely related to us, but they've been kindness incarnate during all this. My sisters could have much worse guardians than them."

Not wanting to say the words but knowing she couldn't live with herself otherwise: "I can think of a much better guardian with no effort at all."

His gaze was focused on the street at his hoofs. "Taking them with me on the road is out of the question." He darted a glance at her. "Perhaps once I've settled down in Ponyville, started getting work, begun making a name for myself, I can send for them and--"

"Ponyville?" Stop talking! she told herself. Don't get him thinking thoughts he doesn't want to! That I don't want him to! But-- "Where there are no bistros like we've visited today? Where there are no musicians like we heard today? Where we've had the same mayor for as long as I've been alive and none of the politics you were born and raised to? Where there's not--?"

"There's you," he said simply, his shoulder brushing hers, and Rarity squeezed her mouth shut, tried to make herself believe he meant it. But the set of his ears, the furrow to his brow, the way he turned his attention back to the street again, it all spoke volumes to her, volumes she once again didn't want to hear...

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They parted in the courtyard, Ory continuing at a gallop to the Night Palace to check on the progress of the band's arrival and set up, Rarity making her way at a more leisurely pace through the hallways to the Day Palace throne room. Dusk was starting as she ambled in, the others already gathered at the foot of the Day Throne, Princess Luna descending, the starlight-silver flow of her mane even more exquisite than it had been this morning.

Rarity nodded to her friends as she took her place, but the looks she got in return confused her a bit: Twilight more serious than usual, and Fluttershy seemed almost on the verge of tears! She began wondering if she'd missed some important development while out and about with Ory, but she couldn't image what. Lady Stargazer and her accomplices were in custody and beginning treatment, so what else--?

She couldn't ask, of course, as the music began at that very moment, the Day Guard troops forming up around them, Princess Luna leading the regular procession from the throne room out into the courtyard. More ponies filled the space than at any time since that first morning when Princess Celestia had walked with them, and Rarity nodded and smiled to those whose eyes she caught: the Borealis family right up front again in their evening clothes and red ribbons; the strawboss from Lace Brocade's delivery service, a strapping younger version of himself shifting uneasily from hoof to hoof; several of the ponies Rarity had spoken to this morning, the ribbons she'd given them proudly displayed as they chanted, "Luna! Equestria! Luna! Equastria!"

All went exactly as it should have, the Night Guard troops waiting at attention for them, saluting appropriately, their

uniforms so very much the way she'd imagined them in those long hours in front of her sketch pad two nights ago that Rarity couldn't keep a bit of a strut from her step. And as they all moved into the Night Palace's main corridor, the music that greeted them was a lovely old piece she remembered her mother and father singing, something about meeting one's true love beneath the light of the blue moon.

Entering the throne room then, Rarity smiled at the changes Pinkie had made during the day, a dance floor now in front of the low stage where Ory and the band sat, the decor making her think more of a party pavilion than the camp ground of last night. Ory waved a hoof at the musicians, and they immediately slid into something more sprightly and danceable, Pinkie visibly bouncing in her place beside Rarity. Princess Luna was bobbing her head as well, and the shuffle of hoofs behind her made Rarity realize the crowd was filing right in after them, tonight's party apparently beginning now.

She kept with her friends, trailing the princess to the foot of the Night Throne, and the hall filled quickly, ponies tapping their hoofs to the music. Seeing--and hearing--Ory wield his trombone for the first time astonished her; he was good, of course, but his playing didn't impress her half as much

as the way he led the group, the musicians watching and responding to his prompts in a way that created a lovely balance to the sound. It was hard to believe they'd never performed together before.

The tune ended, ponies whistling and stomping, and Princess Luna raised her voice, every head turning to focus on her:

"Welcome, one and all, to the Night Palace and to the second of what I hope will become regular get-togethers here to celebrate that half of the day we call the night. I'll be the first to admit I'm not the most social of ponies, but watching my inestimable Minister of Laughter, I think I've picked up a few pointers."

Pinkie's eyes opened wider than Rarity thought she'd ever seen them, and she slung her pack off, began rooting around in it, the usual cascades of streamers and glitter pouring out.

"I've gotta write that word down so I can get it printed on a card!" She sat back and spread her front hoofs. "The Inestimable Pinkie Pie!" she announced.

Laughter scattered through the crowd, and Princess Luna smiled. "I've been doing a great deal of watching the past several days," she went on. "More watching, possibly, than I've done in my entire life. And one thing I've seen--and not just

seen but also taken to heart, I think--is, well...is all of you." She stopped, and Rarity heard not a single breath in the entire throne room. "For so long, my world consisted of Celestia, a small group of retainers, and my job. It was all I knew, and upon my return last year, I immediately sought the familiarity of that same situation. But--"

Again she stopped, and for just a moment Rarity caught a glimpse of the little lost pony she'd first seen cowering in the ruins of the Pony Sisters' Palace that fateful day a year and a season ago. But then Princess Luna raised her head, her mane an aurora every bit as regal as her sister's. "But it was that isolation that fueled my break-down, I now see. I didn't know you before, didn't understand you, and therefore didn't know or understand myself. It's taken the unfortunate events of the past few days to show me how wonderful the world can be when one enters into it, and how few things are more awful than a relationship gone sour and broken."

She turned a smile toward Twilight. "Celestia quoted a phrase to me from one of your dispatches, Minister Sparkle: friendship is magic, you told her. And I've come to see how true that is." The princess looked back out at the crowd. "Since I was uninterested in any bonds of friendship between

myself and the House of Stargazer--broke those bonds, really, before they could begin to form--well, I can't help but think how much better things might have turned out had I acted differently. Which is why--"

And suddenly, the air seemed to thicken around Rarity, everything slowing to a stop--except Princess Luna, her neck a dark fluid flexing, her gaze fixing on Rarity's, her voice appearing soundlessly in her head: "Rarity, I'm so, so sorry."

Rarity couldn't even blink until with a snap she could feel, the whole world sprang back to normal, Princess Luna looking at the bandstand and saying, "Orrery Stargazer, I would ask you please to become my Night Minister and recreate the august body that I so precipitously dissolved."

The words went through Rarity like a sewing machine needle--sharp, quick, and painful--and across the crowded room, she saw Ory's whole body react as if somepony had kicked him in the ribs. "For Sister Celestia and I truly are not Equestria," the princess was saying. "All of us together are Equestria, every earth pony, pegasus and unicorn here tonight, every pony in Canterlot and Ponyville and Cloudsdale, in Manehattan and Fillydelphia and all points north, south, east and west. If I had seen this a thousand years ago, had seen that the night was



not mine alone but belongs equally to all of us who stand and gaze upward in the dark, again, how much better things might have turned out."

Anguish filled Ory's gaze, and staring into those eyes, Rarity knew that all she had to do was say one word for him to turn the princess down, leave Canterlot for Ponyville, and--

And be miserable for the rest of his days. Oh, he'd pretend he wasn't, gentlecolt that he was, would be as gallant and charming and attentive as the princes she had always dreamed about. But--

Feeling the weight of her Element of Harmony necklace around her shoulders, Rarity closed her eyes and nodded.

"Tonight, however--" Princess Luna's voice rolled around her. "I'll begin the process of laying aside all my 'might have's and 'should have's. Tonight, with your help, we can open a new chapter in the history of Equestria, the first chapter of a story more wonderful than any we've yet known."

Excitement quivered the air, but Rarity couldn't open her eyes, could only listen as Ory spoke smooth and perfect from the other side of the room: "Your Highness, the House of Stargazer is honored at this sign of your forgiveness and trust, and I promise--" His voice broke, then went on as clearly as before.

"I promise to fulfill my duties as Night Minister to the utmost of my ability."

"Whoa!" Pinkie exclaimed from somewhere behind her.

"Didn't see that one coming!"

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The late autumn sun wonderful along her back, Applejack drowsed, stretched out on her stomach in the palace garden, and tried not to think about the work going on back home, getting the orchards ready for the first snowfall and all.

It helped that a postcard from Princess Celestia had arrived while they were all gathered at breakfast this morning, Rarity edgy as a plowshare after last night's party--Applejack could still hear the sweet and melancholy song about flamingos flying that Ory had dedicated to 'the rarest jewel in all Equestria' as the shin-dig was ending--but Rarity was trying so hard not to show how broke up she was that Applejack had pretended not to notice. Spike had just brought her a mug of hot chocolate when his face had screwed up like he'd bit into a windfall apple and he'd coughed up a gout of green fire and a scroll.

Twilight had laughed after unrolling it, the purple glow of her magic setting a photo on the table: Princess Celestia

wearing a big floppy hat and dark glasses, a turquoise sky behind her and the words 'Wish You Were Here' swirling over it in glowing letters.

And if Princess Celestia could actually take some time off, well, Applejack figured she could, too. Now that all the hoo-roar was settled, at least...

A scuffle in the grass, and Princess Luna's voice: "Please don't rouse yourself, minister. I just wished to thank you personally for your efforts here this week."

Applejack couldn't help it; she got to her hoofs and bowed before sprawling back into the grass. "Glad we could all help, your Highness."

The princess gave a breathy laugh. "I shall certainly miss your straight-forward approach to things."

That made Applejack laugh. "Folks always says that, but I reckon you're the first I've heard who's meant it." She opened one eye, fixed it on the princess standing above her. "But you got some good ponies hereabouts. You really listen to 'em when you wants advice, and you'll do OK. And anytime you're in Ponyville, you got a standing invite to chow down at Sweet Apple Acres."

Princess Luna smiled. "I'm honored, minister."

"Ah, shucks, ma'am." Applejack pulled her hat down over her eyes. "Y'all can just call me AJ."

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Since the dinner had been her idea, Rainbow Dash explained to a slightly suspicious Pinkie Pie, she felt she had to be there. "Besides, the Night Palace party'll still be going on when I get back, won't it? I mean, the last two went on till, like, oh-dark-thirty! So one boring dinner, and I'll be here quicker'n anything!"

Of course, she didn't mention that, as much as she loved the food the Day Palace chefs prepared, nothing she'd ever had in her life so far had been as great as that first dinner at the Citadel. In fact, she was so looking forward to the dinner itself that it wasn't until she landed in the courtyard with Captain Custard, two pops behind her signalling that they'd been joined by Commander Foxfire and Commander Blueblood--and Dash was still a little peeved at Custard for promoting Blueblood to take Rigel's place, but when she'd been venting about it earlier, Applejack grunting the word "Politics" was all it took for Dash to decide she didn't want anything else to do with it--that she started wondering if this might not be a little more tense than she'd thought.

Since maybe Captain Destrier, standing at parade rest in front of them, might still consider himself the real captain of the Night Guard and all...

The dinner, though, went really well, everypony saluting without arguing about who was supposed to go first, Des introducing his commanders to Custard and her doing the same even though Dash was sure they all knew each other. Polite small talk drifted around the head table, and Dash got to bring them all up-to-date on what was happening with Lady Stargazer and with Ory and the Night Ministry and everything. And the food? Even better than the first time!

Then she and the captains and the commanders all headed into the next room--"the library," Des called it even though it looked a lot bigger and more organized than Twilight's place back in Ponyville--and over another chocolate dessert that Dash could've eaten five more servings of, Captain Destrier asked, "So, Minister Dash. What exactly was it you wanted to discuss with us?"

Dash swallowed her mouthful. "Well, mostly, I thought maybe you two captains oughtta talk about what happens now that you've each got a princess to protect."

A startled look crossed his face, then he cocked his head.

"That's true. I'd just been assuming you all would retake your places in the Day Guard and we'd return to the old rotation, but--"

"Exactly." In her silver and black uniform, Captain Custard looked less chubby than solid, more muscular than chunky. "We're neither of us really the Night or Day Guards anymore, it seems to me, sir. After all, someone needs to be guarding Princess Celestia while she sleeps, and since we're out with Princess Luna in the Night Palace at that time--"

"Yes." Des was looking at Custard like he hadn't really seen her before. "So we would each have a day shift and a night shift, but our duties would be toward Princess Celestia while you all would see to Princess Luna."

Custard nodded. "It'll take some reorganizing on both our parts, a certain reallocation of resources." She lapped at her dessert, her eyes never leaving Destrier's. "We'll need off-duty space here in the Citadel while you'll no doubt want some of our barrack space to keep a force in the palace complex at all times. That sort of thing."

Des smiled slowly. "That's a discussion I look forward to having, captain."

Dash couldn't stop a grin. Yeah, these two were gonna get

along great together.

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Fluttershy trotted down the street in the light just after dawn, absolutely amazed. Ponies were going in and out of shops, calling to each other, eating their breakfasts, setting up their market stalls, and she was just walking along, looking at it all and hardly even feeling nervous!

In fact--and this amazed her the most of all--she kind of enjoyed it!

And yes, she was only a block from the palace, and yes, her heart was pounding against her ribs like a squirrel against a particularly tough nut, but she'd been out walking all on her own through the streets of Canterlot now for five whole minutes!

Which was just about enough. Touching a hoof to the pavement of the intersection so she could say she'd gone two blocks, she turned, almost leaped into the sky to get back to the palace quicker, but seeing Rarity gazing forlornly into a shop window down the street she'd just reached stopped her.

"Rarity?" she asked.

Her friend started and blinked at her for a moment.

"Fluttershy? Are...are you lost, darling?"

"No." She waved at the buildings, tried not to notice how

there were a few more ponies on the street now than she really cared for, kept her brave face on, and smiled. "I was just out doing the town."

Rarity blinked some more, so Fluttershy went on. "But I thought you'd be helping Ory and his sisters move back into their rooms in the Night Palace."

The way Rarity's eyes drew shut, Fluttershy realized she'd hit a sore subject. But she couldn't understand why. Unless-- "You and Ory are still friends, aren't you?" she asked in sudden alarm.

"Yes, of course we are, darling!" Rarity said quickly and forcefully enough that Fluttershy believed her. "But he's not...we're...we're not--"

"Is he moving to another part of Equestria?" Fluttershy asked. "A part so far away, you'll never see him again?"

"He's staying here," Rarity muttered. "And for all that I know it's the best thing for him, for his family, for Princess Luna, for all of Equestria, really, I still wish--" She stopped and coughed a little laugh. "But Ory said something amusing the other day about wishes not being fishes, though I'm not quite sure what point he was trying to make..."

Fluttershy shook her head. "It's not that far from



Canterlot to Ponyville, you know. You could visit each other all the time."

Rarity looked at her hoofs. "It wouldn't be the same."

"But it would be something!" Fluttershy thought perhaps she was shouting, but since no one was staring at her, it seemed more likely that it only felt that way. "And wouldn't you rather have something than nothing??"

That seemed to catch Rarity's attention; she looked up, at any rate, the expression on her face much more like what Fluttershy expected to see there. "Yes," she said, a sudden sound of decision in her voice. "You...you're absolutely right, Fluttershy!"

"Then come on!" This time, several passing ponies did look at her, and Fluttershy immediately reined herself in, continued in more reasonable tones: "We'll go and see if your friend Ory needs any help moving."

"Yes." Rarity beamed, and Fluttershy felt warm and nice all over. "That's exactly what we'll do!"

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Dancing, dancing, dancing: oh, how Pinkie wished it could go on forever!

But, she reasoned, sticking her face into a nice cool bowl

of chocolate pudding, if she danced forever, it would be just like walking, wouldn't be special anymore.

"Which is why," she said to anypony who might be listening--though she realized they might find it hard to understand her since she was licking pudding from her face at the same time, "I don't walk anywhere. Because ev'rything is always so much more specialer than that!"

She looked around, but no ponies were nearby to answer her. So she answered herself: "It sure is!"

The few other ponies still in the throne room were all gathered around the other tables where the new Night Palace chefs were setting out breakfast, and Pinkie realized that she'd done it, had created the absolute masterpiece of her career, the legendary and--as far as she knew--never before attempted thirty-six hour party! Starting at dinnertime, then going all night to breakfast, then keeping on all day through lunch to dinner again, then another night till right now, the next day's breakfast!

Unable to contain herself, Pinkie scrunched up her face, leaned forward, and whispered in her best Fluttershy voice, "Yay!"

And sure, she was the only pony who'd stayed through the

whole thing, but that was the magic of it! Ponies had partied, danced to whichever of the twenty-six bands was on stage at the time--including yesterday afternoon's longest conga line in the history of Equestria--then had gone home, slept, and come back, all of them having such a good time that they hadn't been able to stay away! She could feel the party atmosphere spread over the whole city like butter on toast, sinking into every nook and cranny exactly the same way as the coming dawn soon would! It was perfect in every way!

A tap on her shoulder, and she turned to find her face suddenly full of warm soapy washcloth. "Hey!" she shouted.

"Hold still," she heard Twilight Sparkle say. "Princess Celestia will be home in a few minutes, and I don't think you'd like pudding dripping from your mane for that."

Pinkie stopped squirming to think about that, and by the time she realized she agreed with the idea, a towel had finished drying her off, her eyes, clear now of the chocolate film, showing her Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, Fluttershy and Dashie all standing there in the special "last day" dresses Rarity had made, her own dress floating like a cotton-candy cloud in the glow of Rarity's horn. "Then we did it?" she asked, glad for once she would have somepony else to answer.

"One week." Twilight nodded.

Shadows swirled behind her, and Princess Luna stepped out.

"And as far as I can tell, the city's still standing."

"Standing?" Pinkie stared at her, grown into such the perfect dream of a night princess that Pinkie hated to point out the obvious. "Well, duh, your Highness! I mean, where would they get enough chairs for ev'rypony in Canterlot??"

Dashie rolled her eyes, and Twilight blinked. But Princess Luna threw back her head and laughed, as wonderful a sound as Pinkie thought she'd ever heard. "Minister? As I also lack a chair at this time, I stand corrected." She gestured toward the big main doorway to the throne room, and Pinkie saw the seven of them were alone. "But sister'll be back shortly, so, as long as we're all standing, perhaps we can walk over to the Day Palace and greet her."

"Now that," Pinkie said, scampering over to where her dress awaited her, "makes sense!"

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Twilight fretted quietly every step of the way during that last procession. What if Phillipa had been lying this whole time and had accomplices still at large? Or what if some other pony with a grudge had been waiting to spoil things at the last

minute and make them all look bad in front of Princess Celestia?? Or what if--??

But the crowd, though bigger than even during that first dawn--was it really only a week ago?--remained boisterous but happy, the chant this time, "Luna! Celestia! Equestria! Luna! Celestia! Equestria!" The Night Guard troops, the red crests on their helmets echoed by the red ribbons she saw everywhere, marched them along at a brisk but stately pace, but this time, she noticed, Captain Destrier and the Day Guard troops weren't waiting at the halfway point to meet them.

Twilight's hackles rose, and she started looking around, ready for the attack this no doubt presaged, but a nicker from Rainbow Dash drew her attention. "Don't panic, Leader Girl," Rainbow whispered with a wink. "Part of the plan."

And in fact, Twilight saw now, two Day Guard ponies stood on either side of the entry arch into the Day Palace, the two groups of guards saluting each other smartly as the princess led them all into the corridor, the music and banners somehow even brighter than before. More Day Guard troops lined the hall, and in the throne room, they stood along the walls, the spaces between them just large enough for one Night Guard soldier to step nimbly into as Princess Luna continued toward the throne,

all the Ministry workers on their hoofs, the Day Ministry in white and gold mixed with the new Night Ministry workers in black and silver, Ory looking quite becoming, she had to admit, in his frock coat beside Lord Daybreak, all the ponies stomping, whistling, cheering--though glancing back quickly, Twilight was happy to see Fluttershy nodding and smiling rather than passing out...

Princess Luna reached the throne, then, turned, and raised her head, the entire assembly falling silent in an instant. "My friends," she said, her voice resonant and lovely, "if there's one thing we all know about Sister Celestia, it's that she's always on time. And since today's sunrise is scheduled for five seconds from now, I think I can safely say that she will be gracing us with her presence--"

Sunlight blossomed from the eastern windows of the throne room, and Princess Celestia sailed down its beams, her wings dazzling, her mane and tail the perfect pastel rainbow. She landed with a dainty skip, and seeing the two princesses there together, both tall and regal, each the exact compliment to the other, Twilight felt like her heart was going to burst.

She bowed herself down to the floor, saw everypony in the room doing the same, and a voice above her, a voice she could've

sworn was Princess Celestia's, whispered, "Oh, sister! Welcome home!"

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Then speeches were made and medals were placed around necks, good-byes were said and promises were made. And at last, several hours after dawn, with her friends heading back to the Night Palace to gather up their things before Princess Luna transported them home, Twilight made herself stop in the doorway of the study Princess Luna had been using in the Day Palace, the two princesses having risen from their cushions to bid them farewell.

Princess Celestia cocked her head. "Something else, Twilight?"

"It's just--" And as much as she didn't want to, Twilight looked her teacher in the eye and said, "You knew this would happen, didn't you?"

The princess's smile faded, and she looked at the floor. "I hoped it wouldn't."

"What?" Princess Luna, looking a little bleary-eyed at this point in the morning, took a step back.

Twilight nodded. "But you knew it would."

Princess Celestia puffed a sigh. "Phillipa Stargazer had

brought her complaints to me, but I told her the night was no longer my department. If she had comments--" She looked over at Princess Luna. "I told her she needed to bring them to your attention."

"But--" Her brow wrinkled, Princess Luna blinked several times. "But you could've told me, sister!"

Princess Celestia kept her gaze focused on Princess Luna. "I should live her life for her? I should live yours? No. If Phillipa wasn't willing to address you directly, to bring her problems into an open forum where they could be discussed and debated, then, well, it's not my place to force anyone to do anything." She sighed again. "But by leaving and putting you in charge, I hoped Phillipa would choose the constructive path rather than..." Her voice trailed off.

"But," Princess Luna said again, and Twilight nearly gasped at the plaintive tone behind her words. "You could've told me I was making a mistake! You could've--!"

"You weren't making a mistake, sister!" Princess Celestia stepped forward. "You had made an informed decision as to how you wanted to run the night! It was a perfectly reasonable decision, and for the most part, it was working quite well. If there was any mistake here, it occurred when Phillipa Stargazer



refused to talk to you. Everything else followed from that."

Princess Luna's eyes wavered, and Twilight stepped toward her as well. "She's right, your Highness. You said yourself when you reinstated the Night Ministry that you didn't understand how much you needed the Stargazer family. Well, Phillipa certainly knew how much she needed you, but she apparently didn't make any effort to reach out and tell you."

"I--" Her silver mane flickered, and Princess Luna closed her eyes. "I need to think about this. And I need to get some sleep." She drew in a breath and smiled at Princess Celestia. "I'm so glad you're back, sister." She turned that smile toward Twilight, and the warmth of it wrapped around her like a comforter on a winter night. "And I'm so very, very glad for your friendship, Twilight Sparkle." She leaned forward and reached her horn down.

Twilight stretched her neck, touched her horn to the princess's. "And I for yours, your Highness."

"Oh, yes," came Princess Celestia's voice. "That reminds me. I wanted to ask what those red ribbons were all about."