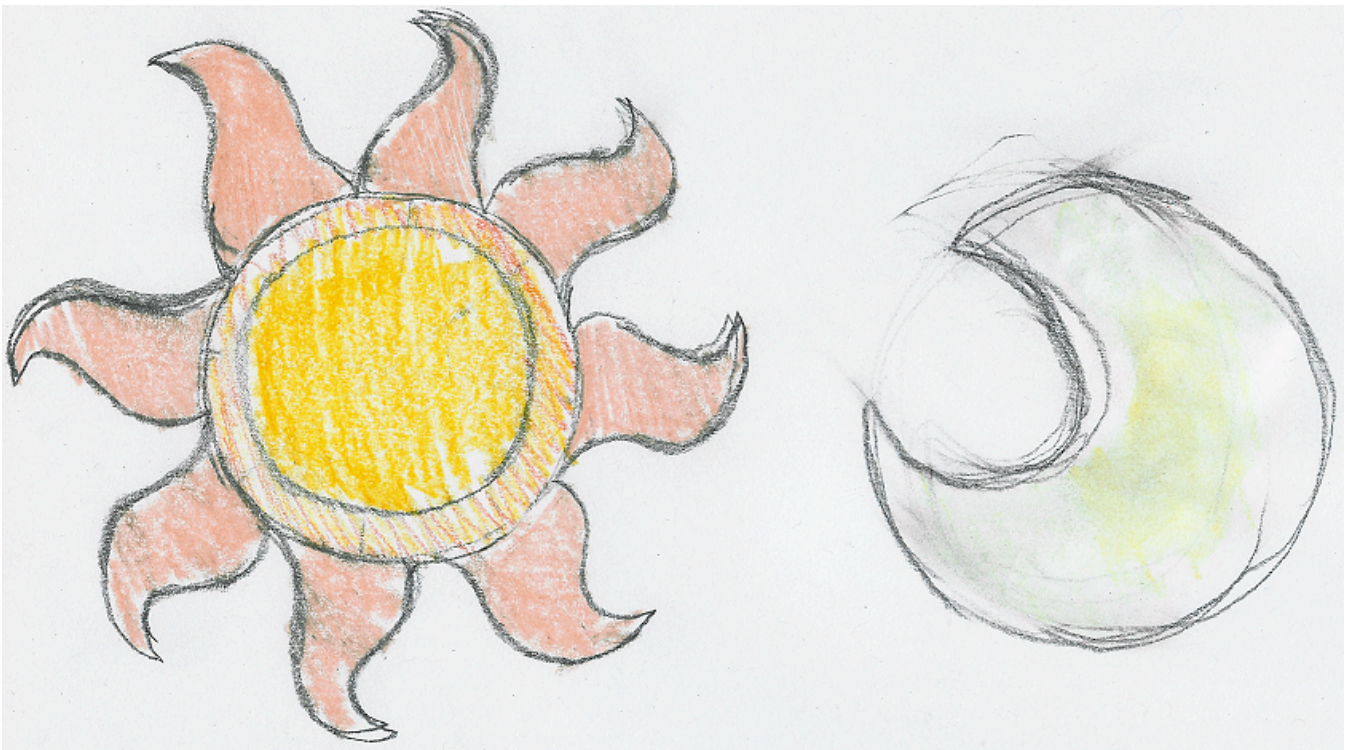


Darkest Before Dawn

by Sessalisk

Chapter Two



The school was empty. Twilight supposed the three of them were probably among the

first to arrive. There were some papers stuck to the walls with arrows leading off down a hallway. “New students please follow,” they read.

“Those probably go to your dorm,” said her father, gesturing at the signs. “Would you like us to walk you there?”

“No, I should be fine.” Twilight told them, wanting to be away from... everything... as soon as she could. The worst part wasn’t that they were angry, or even “disappointed”. Her parents had accepted what she’d done. Accepted it like you accept the mud that gets on your hooves, like it was unfortunate, but it couldn’t be changed. There was no point in getting mad at mud, because the mud didn’t care. “I can take it from here.” In Twilight’s eyes, the way they’d acted, it was like they didn’t even think she could possibly understand, like trying to get her to see things their way would be a lost cause.

“How do you plan on getting all your stuff there?”

“I can manage,” Twilight insisted. She closed her eyes and with her magic, felt the space around her father. She saw him without eyes, his solidness, and gently, very gently, *pulled*. Her father hovered a foot above the ground and gently drifted back downwards.

“Whoa!” he said. “You’ve been practicing!”

Twilight glanced briefly down the hallway, following the trail of arrows with her eyes and saw the stairway. She suddenly regretted not asking for help.

Twilight’s mother gasped. “Careful! Don’t strain yourself.”

“Hey!” said Twilight’s father as his hooves sank back to the floor. “Are you calling me fat?”

Her mother looked like she was about to answer seriously, but Twilight interjected. “I can definitely handle a few bags, but uh, I probably need help getting them up the stairs.” Twilight peered down the hallway at the stairway the arrows pointed to.

After her parents helped her lug the heavy suitcases to the second floor, Twilight saw that the arrows pointed down another hallway. She turned to her parents who were removing their saddlebags with their magic. “Thanks for everything... I mean, I couldn’t have made it without you guys.”

Her mother bent down to rest her chin on the top of Twilight’s head. “I’m sure you could’ve taken everything up one book at a time if push came to shove.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Make sure to write at least twice a week,” said her father, pressing his muzzle against Twilight’s neck.

“And good luck Sweetie,” her mother said. “We’ll see you soon.”

Twilight’s father turned to leave. “If you need us for anything, don’t hesitate to tell us. We’re not far away.” There was a pause. Bottled up feelings, things unsaid, they all seemed to hang in the air. This was her last chance before they left. She knew what she did and she also knew that she didn’t want them to spend the rest of the year thinking of her like a *foal* whose one saving grace was her own ignorance.

“I’m really sorry about not telling you guys about what happened outside the library.”

“It’s in the past now, Twi’,” her father said to her, but this was the last thing she wanted to hear.

“I know that, but it doesn’t excuse what I did. Or rather, what I didn’t do. I should have known better... I *did* know better...” She shook her head sadly. “I just... didn’t want to disappoint you.”

Her mother had an undecipherable look on her face. Twilight was, for a moment, terrified that her mother would feed her a comforting line straight from a parenting book, and then also terrified that she *wouldn’t*.

“Sometimes when you lay down a blueprint, the reality of the making is a lot different from the theory of the design. There’ll always be pitfalls and disappointments, on both our side and yours and that’s just the way life goes. The important thing is that despite a bumpy trial you’ve learned from your mistakes.” She wrapped her forelegs around Twilight. “I’m confident that you will be more responsible from now on.” Twilight rested the weight of her neck on her mother’s upright shoulders. Her eyes stung.

Twilight’s father grinned at her. “Twi’, one of these days you’re going to have to stop caring so much about what *we* think. You worry way too much.”

“I’m sure she gets it from your side of the family,” her mother said, grinning back.

“I’ll miss you guys.”

Her father ruffled her mane, leaving a messy cowlick. “Ditto, kiddo.”

When they had gone back down the stairs Twilight loaded the hefty saddlebags on top of what she was already carrying and was flattened to the ground by the weight. They were much heavier than they looked. *Why did I have to bring so many books?* If she held it very steady and moved slowly she could probably balance almost everything on the largest wheeled suitcase. She would still have to wear her saddlebags, but at least it wasn’t all three at once.

She didn’t trust her magic to be stable enough to hold the suitcase without it toppling. Twilight gripped the handle in her teeth and walked backwards instead, heading in reverse down the hallway after the arrows. The uniform that she was already wearing restricted her movement. She couldn’t move her forelegs as freely as she could before and had to take tiny, mincing steps

to accommodate. It made balancing the luggage quite tricky.

She'd been here before, but in the anxiety of her exam she'd only seen the most obvious differences from her old school. She'd observed the sun-shaped sigils on the ceiling and walls with awe the first time around; they gave off a bright sterile light without any noticeable heat. Unusually, the hallway was completely windowless. Twilight supposed that it made sense that a school as prestigious as this could have artificial lights. She wondered what they used as a power source, electrochemical cells? Magic? Bioluminescence? Okay, that last one was a stretch.

For the first time she noticed the doorknobs on every door. They were a testament to the fact that everypony in the school was able to use magic. The only doors to have them at Twilight's old school were the ones outside of the teacher's lounges and offices.

A deep circular indentation in the wall caught Twilight's eye as she walked past a classroom. She stopped following the arrows to examine it more closely. Her possessions clattered to the floor, momentarily forgotten. The hole was about crest-height of an adult pony, so she had to stand on her hind legs to peer inside. *Huh*, she thought, lowering herself back to the ground, *it doesn't go anywhere*. It was far too geometric and deliberate-looking to just be a broken wall. It was the perfect height and size for an adult unicorn to stick her horn.

Cautiously, she extended her magic to probe the hole. Purple light crept around the edges.

She explored the surface with a tactile kind of vision. Her magic "saw" the world in a way that wasn't exactly sight, sound, smell, taste or touch, sensing certain energies and frequencies that she couldn't otherwise observe. A countless number of viewpoints were centered around the cavity, distancing herself from the two eyes located on her head. It was dizzying to do this and keep her eyes open. It was like looking at a panorama of a landscape and at the same time, superimposing an extremely detailed wireframe image of every possible angle of a single blade of grass; it was also a little like being in two places at the same time. When the worst of the disorientation had passed, Twilight gingerly extended the violet light of her magic into the depression. There was a brightness - crisscrossing lines of light and power, branching pathways looping over themselves recursively. Fascinated, she pushed her senses deeper.



A powerful shock ran down from the tip of her horn to the base of her skull.

Reflexively, she pulled her magic inwards, perspective withdrawing into her head like the tentacles of a startled sea anemone. She gave herself very bad vertigo in the process.

Twilight's magic winked in and out a couple of times, then failed completely. Cross-eyed, she stumbled into a wall, smacking her face into the solid stone.

"Ow." That was really cool, but.... definitely not doing it again.

After having a moment to recover, Twilight continued, re-stacking her luggage, then following the arrows down the short hallway.

It looks like the groundwork of a very complicated spell, she thought, satisfied.

She briefly wondered exactly what the hole-spell did and how it worked, but pushed the thought out of her mind. She knew that if she kept thinking about it she wouldn't be able to resist going back to investigate. Her horn and muzzle still smarted from the first time.

There was a door at the end of the hallway. Twilight saw out of the corner of her eye that the last arrow pointed to it. Approaching the door at an angle, Twilight turned the knob with her magic and then backed herself into the room, a din of conversation greeting her. Ten feet from the door she dropped all her things and turned around to see what was going on.

The room was full of fillies and colts. Everypony was already here.

Oh no, was there an orientation or something? she thought. *Did I miss it?*

She grit her teeth at the possibility, the very thought of being late and missing something important.

There was nothing she could do about it now, but she'd be extra early from now on to make up.

Twilight figured that this must be the area for studying and recreation. It was a large open space with sturdy-looking couches, desks, chairs and bookshelves. She noticed that all the furniture was bolted down to the floor, and some was even bolted to the ceiling as well.

Most of the ponies here were gathered around the sofas, talking and lounging at the same time. She counted eight doors at the far side of the room which presumably led to the dormitories. She mentally made notes of all her future classmates: there were thirteen of them, including herself, more fillies than colts so far, and none of them were dressed in their uniforms yet. Twilight felt conspicuously out of place.

On one side of the room there was a dignified-looking pair of adult unicorns. Twilight observed with the edges of her peripheral vision, trying to watch them without seeming like she was staring. One was a forest green mare with a top-hat for a cutie mark, the other a grey-black stallion with a single gold ring for his. They lingered around, talking softly to a grey filly wearing glasses, keeping a respectful distance. Twilight guessed that she was their foal.

She wandered off to see what kinds of books there were on the shelves and made it halfway across the room before the grey filly approached her. Everything about her looked plain and unassuming, from the neutral tones of her coat to her black mane and the muddy brown of her eyes. Even her cutie mark, a yellow ladder, did not seem to be very exceptional. Twilight caught sight of the two adults leaving the room. She scolded herself mentally for assuming that all the ponies who came here would look like superheroes.

"Hi there," the filly said cheerfully. "I'm Echelle. What's your name?"

"Uh, Twilight Sparkle." Twilight glanced at the bookshelf out of the corner of her eye. She knew that if she avoided eye contact, pretended to be interested in something else, and made one-to-three-word responses, people would usually stop trying to make conversation. In her

experience, ponies her age usually had little of value to say.

“Nice to meet you, Twilight,” said Echelle, looking sincere. She glanced at Smarty Pants, still sitting on Twilight’s shoulders. “Is that your doll?”

Twilight had to choke back the half-formed “Uh-huh” and prevent herself from staring down at her hooves. She knew that she should give Echelle a chance. The ponies here were prodigies; they were the most talented and brilliant young unicorns in all of Equestria. They had better things to talk about than games and music.

Twilight tried to look friendly. “Yeah, her name is Smarty Pants. She has her own notebook and quill.”

“She has pretty eyes,” Echelle said. “I have a bunch of dolls back at home too, but I had to leave most of them behind. Mama only let me bring Merriweather with me.” Twilight watched as Echelle struggled with her saddlebags, flap glowing but scarcely moving. She gave up and reached around physically, pulling out a stuffed pegasus made of red velvet. “This is Merriweather.” Merriweather looked like she had seen better days, but, if Twilight’s knowledge of textiles was accurate, her mane was made of cords of knotted silk.

“What does Merriweather like to read?”

Echelle looked confused. “To read?”

“Yeah, doesn’t she have favourite books?” Twilight asked, “Smarty Pants’ is *Textiles, a History*. She makes me read it to her all the time. I convinced her to start trying magic books and she likes them almost as much as I do.”

“I guess you could say we both like magazines. Neither of us are very good at magic.”

Twilight scrunched up her eyebrows. “Did they have you hatch a giant dragon egg for your entrance exam too?”

“Oh no,” she said, looking shocked. “That sounds really hard. They just gave me a written and made sure I could do basic levitation.”

“*What!*” Twilight was about to articulate, but was interrupted by the looming form of an adult pony.

She was older than Twilight’s parents, a vibrant yellow unicorn with steely blue eyes and a blue and purple mane. A pair of smiling suns adorned her flanks. There was a clipboard floating in the air in front of her.

“Greetings!” The yellow mare glanced down at her clipboard and then at Twilight’s cutie mark. “You must be Twilight Sparkle.”

Twilight nodded in reply and Echelle trained her eyes on the yellow unicorn with interest.

Twilight saw Echelle half-whisper-half-mouth something under her breath, but the mare didn't seem to notice.

"I've been popping in every once in a while to see if you had arrived," explained the adult. "Where are your parents?"

"Oh... they didn't come in with me." Twilight regretted that she'd sent them away before she'd gotten here.

"Hm, we will just have to contact them later," said the unicorn with the clipboard, giving Twilight what she took to be an understanding smile. "Don't worry. It will not be a hassle,"

Twilight opened her mouth slightly to reply, but then closed it, feeling like she was interrupting.

"My name is Marching Dawn." The mare punctuated the statement with a curt nod, "One of Princess Celestia's administrative assistants and acting principal of this school." She turned abruptly and gestured towards the door Twilight had just come out of, beckoning for Twilight to follow.

There were twelve sets of eyes watching them now, unsure if they were included as well. The mare used her magic to bundle up all of Twilight's luggage and then swung it effortlessly into the air in front of her. Several heads turned back to whatever they had been doing before.

"I will be escorting you to your living area and explaining to you, the unique circumstances of your stay here," the unicorn mare said clip-clopping out to the door.

Twilight followed, not sure if she should respond.

"As you know, Princess Celestia has requested for you to be her personal protégé."

Twilight heard murmuring behind her.

Marching Dawn either ignored it or didn't hear it. She moved aside her clipboard and Twilight's luggage, opening the door in front of her with her magic. She stepped into the hallway. "Being princess, however, is a very demanding job and as it is, she cannot devote all of her time to teaching." Marching Dawn waited for Twilight to step outside before closing the door behind her.

Twilight's heart dropped. Did this mean Princess Celestia didn't want to teach her anymore?

"That is why you will be receiving the majority of your education here at the school rather than at the palace."

That was a relief. This meant that she'd still be Princess Celestia's student... just not all

the time.

“On weekdays you will observe the same schedule as every other student at your level. On weekends you will attend private lessons at the palace. Princess Celestia has some free time between the hours of sunset and sunrise.” Twilight and Marching Dawn reached the spiral staircase and began to ascend at a leisurely pace.

“Does that mean I don’t get to go home until the holidays?” said Twilight, finally breaking her silence.

“That is entirely up to you and your parents,” Marching Dawn told her. “You are a citizen of Canterlot, correct?”

Twilight’s head bobbed in response.

“If you live very close or can arrange a pegasus carriage, going home before the holidays is a definite possibility. Otherwise I do not believe you will be able to make anything but the briefest and most infrequent trips.”

Ah, Twilight had thought as much. She would have to explain this to her parents in a letter.

“But I digress. Your living arrangements are different from the other students. It was requested for you to be situated in the teacher’s living area rather than the student’s.” Marching Dawn continued up the stairs past a landing on another floor. The trek up the stairs would have normally been exhausting, but the principal was carrying all the heavy luggage and the pace they were making was far too slow to make Twilight more than a little winded.

“Why?”

“Well, there is only one dormitory parent per floor, and it was noted that it would require several adults to restrain you, or at least mitigate the damage if you ever lost control of your magic again.”

“Oh...” Twilight’s cheeks flushed.

“Entering and exiting the shared dormitories at night would also be a problem for the other students. Your comings and goings would disrupt their sleep and study. There is no formal lights-out policy here. Students get their sleep when they can get it and are glad when they do.”

“But won’t I be going on the weekends anyway?”

“I assure you, three or four weeks into the school year and you will not be the only Canterlot citizen who decides to stay here for the weekend,” said Marching Dawn. “Either way, if you require anything there are teachers in all the surrounding suites who can answer your questions and assist you with what you need.” The two of them climbed past another landing on

what Twilight had numbered as the fourth floor.

Marching Dawn gave Twilight a quick run-down of the school's workings and schedules when they finally made their way up to the fifth floor. Twilight saw that the staircase kept going up, but the principal walked down the hallway instead. She was curious about the floors above them, but went after the principal anyway.

"Do you have any questions, Miss Sparkle?"

"A couple, yes. Why didn't you just mail my parents about all this?"

Marching Dawn took a deep breath. Twilight thought for a moment that the principal was going to yell at her.

"This was a situation with little precedent. It took months to follow all the proper protocols and jump through all the legal hoops, and we were not entirely sure we could secure all the permissions by the time you arrived."

She didn't really answer my question, thought Twilight, but knew better than to say it. Instead she responded with something almost as bad.

"Can't Princess Celestia just do whatever she wants, though? If she says she wants something, doesn't everypony have to listen and then do what she tells them?"

There was a quiet moment as Marching Dawn appraised Twilight, looking as if she was seeing her for the very first time. "Twilight Sparkle, *everypony* has to obey the law, rulers and commoners alike."

The two of them approached a doorway in the hall. Marching Dawn pulled a key from the front pocket of her vest and used it to open the door.

"But doesn't Princess Celestia make the law?" Twilight followed the older unicorn into what seemed like another lounge. The furniture here wasn't as solidly built as the furniture in the student's area, and none of it was bolted down.

"No, Miss Sparkle, I'm afraid she doesn't."

Twilight's mind tried to wrap around that statement as the pair of unicorns trotted to the far side of the room. Surely Marching Dawn wouldn't lie to her about something like that when she would be seeing and talking to the Princess every week.

"Twilight Sparkle," said Marching Dawn. "Princess Celestia is the beloved ruler of Equestria, the Goddess of the Sun. She has led us before we could name our forbears and will continue to do so long after our bones are dust."

These were familiar words. Twilight looked up at Marching Dawn expectantly. The unicorn's piercing blue eyes met Twilight's and locked on to them. The floating luggage held

rock-steady in the air and did not dip or flag.

“But her word is not the letter of the law,” the principal said finally.

Twilight held her gaze for a moment, but then had to look away.

They walked up to a door with the numbers 508 above the frame. The principal extracted a second key from her vest, lifting it into the air and then using it to unlock the door. Marching Dawn motioned for Twilight to go inside before gently placing all of Twilight’s assorted saddlebags and suitcases on the floor on the far side of the room.

It was a big room. A door to the side hinted that there was probably even more on top of that.

The bedroom was obviously built with an adult pony in mind. To the right of the door there was a huge desk that she was far too short to use. A mostly-empty bookshelf and three fully empty ones lined the left wall, a dresser and wardrobe on the right. An enormous springy-looking bed lay in the farthest wall, right next to a nightstand and under a large curtained window. Twilight had to resist the urge to immediately gallop over and jump onto the mattress.

That would have to wait until the principal left.

Twilight noticed that there was one of the light-giving sun symbols painted on the ceiling, and there were several more on the walls, despite the fact that this room actually got natural sunlight. The principal saw Twilight looking at the mini-suns and used her magic to draw the curtains shut. The painted suns emitted no light.

“You can control the lights with magic,” said Marching Dawn. “Touch one of the lower suns with your horn.”

Twilight obeyed.

“Imagine how bright you want the room to be,” said Marching Dawn.

Twilight pictured the room filling with a cozy dim light.

“Now send a little bit of magic into the sun.”

The painted suns glowed faintly.

“Oooo!” Twilight was surprised at how easy that was, far easier than any spell she’d ever attempted. “How –”

“The lights were designed around a basic light spell, but the controls are simplified and made very intuitive. Anypony who can use even the smallest amount of magic can use them.” Marching Dawn seemed to anticipate Twilight’s thoughts. “Is there anything else about the school that you wish to know?”

Twilight was worried about asking the wrong things after their recent exchange, but she had so many questions and didn't know when she'd be given another chance to ask.

“So... what are those holes in the walls? The ones this high,” Twilight lifted a hoof in the air to demonstrate and then twirled her hoof in the air, “with the curly light line thingies in them?”

“Ah, that's a frequently-asked question,” said the principal. “From the sound of it, you tried to investigate yourself.”

“Heh...” Twilight rubbed the sore spot on her forehead absently.

“The indentations in the walls contain a network of spells that are built into the school,” explained Marching Dawn. “Princess Celestia designed the basic framework almost a thousand years ago, and since then there have been adjustments and improvements made upon her original design.

“Every graduating class makes their own addition to the network. Other than that I am afraid I do not know more about the mechanics than the absolute basics.”

“But what does it *do*?”

“Many things,” she said unhelpfully. “I know that they can be used to control the lights and interior temperatures of the entire building and through them you can project sound through the walls. The unicorn using it doesn't need to have any specific knowledge or talent to use the spell matrix, much like how the lights operate.”

The temperature? Twilight thought, *That sounds incredibly dangerous.*

Marching Dawn looked thoughtful for a moment. “There are probably other uses that I am not aware of, but those three are the most commonly-used features. We have a technician who comes in once a fortnight who is well-versed in the more esoteric functions.”

“What does it use as a power source?”

“The sun,” said the older unicorn, plainly.

“Huh? How?”

“I am not entirely clear on the details myself, but that would be a good question to ask the Princess.”

Marching Dawn clearly did not share Twilight's interest.

“Speaking of which,” said the principal. “Princess Celestia has requested that you make a visit to the royal palace tonight at seven o'clock. She wishes to speak to you before the start of your classes.

“You can see the palace from outside, of course, and it’s only a twenty minute walk, but if you wish we can provide a teacher to escort you to the palace.”

“I should be fine, but...”

“Yes?”

“So if you stuck your horn into one of those thingies and imagined the school was as hot as a volcano, what would happen?”

The principal groaned.

Marching Dawn had placed the keys to both her room and the teacher’s lounge on Twilight’s night stand, leaving Twilight to unpack her things. As soon as Marching Dawn was out of the room, however, Twilight cannonballed herself onto the large bed, bouncing on it like a trampoline.

“Wheeeeeeeeeeeee!”

This was way more fun than her smaller bed at home. There was just so much room and it was so springy and soft... Every leap launched her high into the air. The particularly good jumps ended up with her scraping her horn on the ceiling.

After Twilight had gotten it out of her system she meticulously unpacked all her books, carefully placing them on the shelves. She made sure to categorize them by whether or not they were fiction as well as by the author’s last names. For some reason, no matter how well she organized her books she always had trouble finding the ones that she wanted, but that never discouraged her from trying. The sight of a full bookshelf, books neatly stacked, the scent of paper, fresh and old... it was wonderfully calming.

Nearly an hour had passed by the time Twilight was done unpacking her books. It was a few minutes past eleven, judging from the clock she’d placed on her nightstand. She pulled open the drawers of her dresser, dumped all her clothes into them and then pocketed her keys and left. She made her way out of the teacher’s lounge, down the four flights of stairs and out of the school.

It was only a twenty minute walk and she wasn’t expected until the evening, but Twilight wanted to make sure that there was no possibility that she could be late for her audience with the Princess.

By mid-afternoon she was cursing her lack of foresight. The trip to the palace was as short as Marching Dawn had said and the palace guards had let her in easily enough. One of the burly white pegasi had even walked Twilight to the big stone room where she was supposed to wait for the Princess. Still, it was four hours till she was supposed to arrive and Twilight hadn’t

thought to bring a book or even a snack.

Twilight briefly wondered if there would be time to go back to the school and grab an impromptu lunch. Marching Dawn had told her about how the kitchens worked and although there were times when everypony could sit down for a meal together, they served food at any time of the day, or even night.

If she went back to the school *now*, it would defeat the purpose of her waiting here for so long. If Princess Celestia came out of her meeting early and Twilight wasn't here, this entire ordeal would be moot. Hunger gnawed at her, but she tried to ignore it. Grownups had to deal with things like this all the time. They didn't always get to do the things they liked or wanted, Dad had told her long ago. He said that a lot of being a grownup was being patient and persistent. She would be patient. She would persist.

Her stomach growled loudly.

This was so hard...

It was late afternoon by the time she saw anypony again. Her stomach was more bearable now than it was earlier, perhaps, she thought, because she had gotten used to it. Twilight heard the sound of hooves clicking on stone and her heart rose. She stood up straight and adjusted her clothes, trying to make herself look as presentable as possible.

An green pegasus stallion walked into the room. He had a pine tree for a cutie mark and was absently towing a trolley with numerous cleaning supplies. Twilight stayed standing for a minute, hoping that maybe the Princess might be following behind him. When it became clear that it wasn't happening, she slumped back down to the ground, partly sulking. Somehow, the pegasus hadn't spotted her and jumped a little when he heard the *whumpf* of Twilight dropping bodily onto the carpet.

"Goodness!" said the green pegasus, looking down at her. "I didn't think anypony was in here!"

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to sneak up on you or anything," Twilight said. "Do I have to leave?"

"No. It's fine if you stay," he said, pulling a green feather duster from his saddlebags with his teeth. "I might need you to move to a different spot if I'm tidying the area right around you, though."

With that, he set to the task of cleaning the room, first flying up to dust the tops all six of the large windows, then scrubbing with sudsy water and a washcloth. Twilight watched quietly, trying not to be a nuisance.

"So," he said conversationally while hovering in the air and polishing the glass of a large window, "what are you doing here anyway?"

“I’m just waiting for the Princess,” said Twilight. “I’m supposed to meet her this evening.”

His wings faltered for a split second as he processed that and he left a soapy smear on the window as he slid down a foot in the air. “It’s not even sunset yet.”

“I’ve been here since before noon,” Twilight told him. “I didn’t want to be late.”

“You’ve been waiting in here the whole time... Almost five hours.” he said, incredulous, the window forgotten. “Isn’t that kind of overkill?”

“I *hate* being late.”

“No chance of that, that’s for sure.”

“Tardiness is tantamount to contempt,” she recited. “Being late means that you have no respect for the pony or ponies you kept waiting.”

The green stallion blinked.

“I don’t want the Princess to think I don’t respect her,” Twilight explained.

“I can understand that, but since before noon? Aren’t you the slightest bit hungry?”

“Yeah... I forgot to pack a lunch.”

“Lunch.” He looked at her like he half-admired her and half thought she was crazy. “It’s almost dinnertime!”

Twilight’s stomach rumbled at the mention of food.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “I’m supposed to have this room clean by sunset, but I’ll grab you something from the kitchens if you take over for me until I get back.”

“Oh yes, *please!*” She used her magic to yank away his washcloth and scoured the window furiously with it before the green pegasus could reconsider.

As he flew through the door, he called out to her. “Try not to leave suds on the glass or I’ll have to redo the windows again anyway!”

The stallion’s name was Alpine Wind, she’d learned from him after he brought back a heavily-laden food tray. There was a sharp and creamy cheese sandwich on crusty rye bread with a couple of crisp, tart apples and a small mug of cocoa. Twilight’s mouth watered and she dug into her food with gusto.

Out of gratitude she continued to help him clean after she was done with her impromptu meal, sweeping the dust and grit from the floor as he polished all the windows. Alpine Wind, it turned out, had been working at the palace for almost three years. The pay wasn’t bad, he’d said,

the food was great and the retirement package was the same as any other government job. Plus, he added, he got to see Princess Celestia every day. The green pegasus claimed that although he may not be something glamorous like a Wonderbolt or a guardpony, he still got to meet some very interesting people. Given the way he'd reacted to her, Twilight wondered if he included herself among that list.

By the time they were done cleaning, every surface gleamed. It was still quite a while till sunset. Twilight was surprised at how glad she was to have someone to talk to and was sad to see him go when they were finally done.

Belly full and eyelids heavy, she curled up with her hooves tucked under her and fell asleep on the thick carpet.

“Greetings, Twilight Sparkle. It’s good that you’ve had a nap,” said Princess Celestia’s voice as Twilight blinked herself awake. “I’m not sure how long our meeting will take and it wouldn’t do to have you nodding off halfway through.”

Oh no, what time is it? She might have slept right through when they were supposed to meet!

“Whar...” Twilight mumbled. “Am I late?”

“I don’t think that would be possible,” Princess Celestia said coyly. “One of my servants informed me that you were waiting in this room all day.”

Twilight blinked a couple of times, her sleep addled-brain processing the words very slowly.

The Princess looked amused and a ripple went down the billowing cloud of her tail. In any other pony it would have been a simple flicking motion. “I came here as soon as I found out, but you looked so peaceful I decided to have a little dinner and let you rest.”

She was going to skip dinner?

“Did I sleep past when we were supposed to meet?” Twilight clarified.

“Not at all. It’s actually a little early. It appears you are punctual even while unconscious.”

Twilight stood up slowly, stretching. She stifled a yawn.

“Also,” Princess Celestia added. “Did you know that you talk in your sleep? Who’s this gorgeous stallion who you were going on about - the one with the beautiful alabaster coat and liquid amber eyes?”

Oh my goodness, Twilight thought, recoiling in horror. She couldn't remember her dream at all, but she blushed furiously anyway.

"I'm kidding! I'm kidding," the Princess said with a smile.

Twilight didn't know what to expect from the Princess, but this wasn't really it. She was glad, though, that she wasn't going on in her sleep about handsome imaginary ponies.

"Anyway, on to business. Did anything interesting happen during the summer?"

Twilight remembered what had happened, what she had said to her parents. She didn't know how Princess Celestia would react, but she knew what she had promised and what she had to do, no matter how hard it was.

"Yes, in fact..." Twilight said, finding it difficult to continue.

"Oh? Did you go on an interesting vacation or meet some exciting ponies?" Twilight cringed and resisted the temptation to lie flat out.

"I... um... kind of... lost control of... my magic... again..." She did not meet the Princess' eyes.

"Oh dear."

"It was an accident." Twilight's voice wavered slightly. "I was walking home and there were all these other ponies and they kept talking to me and arguing and then there was a thunderstorm and a lightning bolt was nearby and it was really loud and I didn't know what was happening and it really scared me and then before I knew it all my magic started coming out again and I couldn't make it stop and I think I turned all the other fillies and colts into bugs but then it was okay after! I promise! Because they all turned back and they were mad at me and my parents were mad at me for not telling them about it right away, but then I had to make sure I told you or else I would let you down like I let them down and I didn't want to do that again and *I'm sorry!*"

The Princess looked surprised, and perhaps, a little alarmed too.

"I'm really *really sorry*," Twilight said, eyes full of tears. "It was an accident!"

Twilight flattened herself to the ground.

"Please don't exile me or arrest me..."

"Oh heavens," the Princess said. "I wouldn't do anything like that."

Twilight began to sob. The Princess put one of her white hooves underneath Twilight's chin, tilting her head up until the two of them were face to face.

Princess Celestia was old, ancient even, but it hadn't been obvious until now. For a

moment, Twilight felt like she was falling without moving, was looking into something enormous without edges, an eternity that stretched beyond time. Twilight was more than a little frightened, but there wasn't a trace of hardness in the Princess' eyes. She radiated kindness and devotion. Twilight saw now how Equestria could follow her, not just out of duty and tradition, but out of love.

Princess Celestia wrapped her enormous wings around the much smaller unicorn, like a pegasus mother shielding her foal. In Twilight's mind she had a ghostly image of a much larger, less tangible being doing the same to the entire world.

Soft white feathers brushed against Twilight's body, smelling of dew on grass, of too-late nights and pink light just over the horizon.

Princess Celestia's voice was soft as she spoke, "Nothing bad is going to happen to you."

Twilight swallowed the last of her tears. She knew she should be ashamed for crying like a foal in front of the Princess, but for some reason, she wasn't.

The Princess folded her wings and looked out the window. "This just means we need to work on your control," she said. "And maybe take a few safety precautions."

Twilight nodded, not trusting her voice to be steady if she spoke.

"I've seen your magic at work, and it's quite potent. We should probably work outside."

Twilight wordlessly followed Princess Celestia up numerous stairs to the rooftop of the castle. She was just slightly out of breath by the time they arrived.

The night sky was cloudless. Twilight's practiced eye mapped out the constellations in the sky: *Lacerta*, the lizard, *Cygnus*, the swan, *Delphinus*, the dolphin and *Pegasus*... well, the pegasus. Funnily enough, she was partway through *Andromeda* when Princess Celestia decided that they had reached the right spot.

"Here we go. The perfect place to learn to control your magic."

Twilight looked around. It did seem like a pretty good spot. It was wide and open and there wasn't anything fragile-looking, nor were there any other ponies who might get caught in the crossfire of a wayward spell. The only thing that gave Twilight any pause was the fact that there were no guardrails on the roof. It unsettled her a little no matter how far away she was from the edges.

Presumably, though, the Princess would be there to catch her if she fell.

"Twilight Sparkle," said Princess Celestia. "Have you been able to conjure up large amounts of magic at will? Or only when you are surprised?"

"I have to admit I haven't really tried," Twilight said, then, shyly, "I was afraid that if I

did it on purpose I might lose control of it anyway.”

“Fair enough. I will stop any errant spells, so give it your best shot.”

Twilight closed her eyes and tried to mentally recreate the events that happened both times she lost control. She dipped into her magic and tried to send it out of her horn in a chaotic display of power. Her horn glowed weakly and sent off a few sparks, but nothing else happened.

“Um... I’m not sure it’s something I can do on command.”

“How about this?” A beam of magical light shot towards Twilight. Her heart began to beat quickly.

The world started to turn white.

Twilight felt something siphon off all her magic and slowly the sky became an inky black again.

“I guess I answered my own question,” Princess Celestia said, scratching her chin with a hoof.

“What just happened?”

“I apologise. I should have asked permission before I attempted that.” The Princess shook her head, a wavelike movement travelling through her mane. “I simply opened up the barrier between your conscious and subconscious and made your body believe that it was afraid.”

“Oh.” Then to herself, under her breath, Twilight said, “Catecholamine hormones.”

“Among other things,” said Princess Celestia, hearing Twilight anyway. “I wasn’t sure if you knew anything about it.”

The Princess had good ears.

“I read a lot,” Twilight said, by way of explanation.

“I think I have an idea,” Princess Celestia said after a pause. “I can teach you to manage what happens when you lose control or I can teach you to prevent yourself from ever losing control in the first place.”

“Uh...” A pressing question arose.

The Princess looked at Twilight attentively. “What’s on your mind?”

“Is that... the inclusive use of *or*?”

“Yes.”

Oh, phew, Twilight thought.

“I believe the best idea would be to teach you to control your magic before you learn to stifle it. It will be much harder to teach you how to manage large amounts of magic if you’re subconsciously preventing it from ever happening.”

Twilight nodded.

“Alright, the first thing you should keep in mind is that magic is supposed to be channeled through the *alicorn*, a unicorn’s horn.” the Princess gestured at her own horn.

“Um...” Twilight said, almost too quietly to hear..

Princess Celestia stopped lecturing, once again giving Twilight her full attention. “Yes?”

Twilight fought to look up. “Sorry for interrupting.” She pawed at the ground nervously with a hoof.

“No matter. What was your question?” The Princess did not look irritated or unkind.

“Isn’t-” Twilight said, trying to find a polite way to phrase what she was thinking, and failing. She considered telling the Princess that it was nothing, but then she’d feel even more rude for wasting her time. “Isn’t that what you are?”

“An alicorn?”

“Yeah,” Twilight said, unsure of herself. “That’s the word I’ve heard ponies use... at least.”

“Maybe,” admitted Princess Celestia. “I prefer to think of myself as a unicorn with pegasus wings and earth pony sensibilities, or perhaps, an earth pony with a unicorn’s horn and a pegasus’ wings or a pegasus with the characteristics of both a unicorn and an earth pony. Still, words are allowed to have more than one meaning.”

Twilight gave a slight nod. This raised even more questions but she was afraid to interrupt a second time.

“Anyhow,” the Princess said, “you had magic coming out of your hooves and eyes and just about everywhere. Preventing *all* magical bleed is impossible, but if a significant amount comes from anywhere but the *alicorn*, it can be harmful to the body and there’s no telling what might happen.”

“What should I do?”

“Don’t try to stop your magic. Focus it through your horn, instead. No matter how hard it is, don’t let it leave through anywhere else. The spell you use, if any, to channel your magic is of little consequence, but make sure to direct it into the sky where it can’t hurt anypony.”

Twilight thought about that for a minute. “What if... um... there’s a pegasus flying by...”

“Don’t aim for him and he should be fine.” The Princess looked around the rooftop, seeming to be scanning for errant pegasi anyway. “I don’t expect you to master it on your first try, or even your fiftieth, but the more you practice, the easier it should get.” Princess Celestia’s horn brightened in anticipation. “Ready?”

“Ready.” Twilight prepared herself for the incoming magic, laying down the groundwork of a light spell in her head and pre-aiming it towards the sky. Light was harmless and even if she hit anyone with it, she couldn’t hurt him or her with *light*.

Princess Celestia’s spell hit her mid-thought. Twilight felt her pulse begin to quicken as the magic filled her body. She pushed it into her horn with all of her lucidity and strength.

It hurt.

It was a little like exercising a muscle she wasn’t aware she had. It was weak, untrained and very prone to overexertion, but it was there.

A blinding beam of light shone straight from her horn right up into the night sky, illuminating the surrounding area as bright as day. Twilight narrowed her eyes to protect them against the brightness before realising, with surprise, that she could see at all. She lost control of her magic then, light turning into hissing snakes that fell to the ground and slithered at her hooves. She wasn’t floating either, she discovered in terror. She dropped any attempt she’d made to restrain her magic and the world whited out for a moment.

“An excellent first try,” said the Princess. “You weren’t sending out any excess magic at all for at least ten seconds.”

Twilight looked around at the miraculously reptile-free roof. “Where did the snakes go?”

“They disappeared when I stopped your magic.”

“Oh.”

The two of them practiced for hours. Princess Celestia looked as fresh and rested as she was at the start of their training session, not a hair out of place. Twilight, however, trembled on her hooves, her mane and coat sticky with perspiration. She had improved greatly after her first try, but after a certain point, she ceased to get better. In fact, after a while she seemed to be getting worse and worse. Twilight groggily wiped the sweat out of her eyes with the back of a foreleg.

Princess Celestia watched her with concern. “I think we’re done for tonight,” she said.

Twilight nodded, but didn’t let herself collapse to the ground in front of the Princess like she desperately wanted to do. It would be undignified and improper. She forced herself to stand

on shaky legs.

It was a little upsetting that they hadn't made more progress that night. Twilight didn't want to admit defeat, but she was so tired... It wouldn't be like failing, she told herself. It was more like working on a large project a little bit every day. She would get better.

"You won't like the sound of this," said Princess Celestia, "but before you go back to school, I need to dampen your magic."

"So I won't be able to hurt anypony?"

"Yes. I cannot allow any possibility of the students and teachers getting hurt."

"Okay," said Twilight, trusting the Princess' experience.

"That's it? No opposition?"

"I don't want to harm my classmates or teachers either," she offered hesitantly. "I... came really close to doing that the last time."

"Very well, Twilight Sparkle," said the Princess. "I admire your courage and self-sacrifice."

Wait, what?

The Princess' horn glimmered faintly, but it went unnoticed against strange negativity in the air. It wasn't just darkness, an absence of light, but some sort of other negative force - an absence of everything. A tight band of emptiness wrapped around the base of her horn. She could see it now, the not-force in the air. The unconscious connection she'd always felt to magic was severed and suddenly she could no longer see or feel the Princess' spell. She just felt cold and full of nothing.

Twilight's eyes crossed as she tried to look directly at her own horn.

A ring of light slid down the point, stopping above where she remembered the first spell had ended. Then a third spell, a fourth spell and a fifth, covering her horn with a shining cone of spells. She no longer felt the icy apathy she'd had at the start, but Twilight still couldn't feel or sense any magic.

"What did you do to me?"

"I temporarily severed your connection to magic," said the princess. "There are cruder ways of doing it, removing your horn or parts of your brain, taking certain herbal concoctions, so on and so forth, but they're typically reserved as punishments."

"I thought..." Twilight searched for words that didn't make her sound as hurt as she felt. "I thought you were going to make it so that I couldn't harm anypony."

Princess Celestia looked bewildered for a moment. “I did,” she said. “The spell will be undone the next time we meet. Your magic isn’t gone, just bound.”

Twilight didn’t know what she had expected; maybe that the Princess would somehow make it so that she wouldn’t ever have another magical outburst but somehow leaving the ability to cast spells intact. She felt incredibly stupid for even humoring the idea. If Princess Celestia could do that, she wouldn’t bother training Twilight to control her magic. She would just fix her.

“I see,” Twilight said, not knowing yet, what to make of what just happened. Would she fail all her classes and be stuck in magic kindergarten for another year? “I guess I should be heading back now.”

The Princess began to trace their original path back into the castle. “Allow me to escort you,” she said. “You will have trouble getting into and around the school without your magic. We don’t know how long you will need to be bound like this, so it would be for the best if I make some changes in the building to accommodate.”

Inquisitive overcame both loss and fatigue. “Changes in... the building?”

“You may have noticed holes in the walls of your school. They are not just architectural damage.”

“Oh, Marching Dawn explained that to me,” Twilight said as they walked towards the pair of pegasus guards barring the front of the castle. They bent their heads respectfully at Princess Celestia, who returned the gesture with courtesy. The guards stepped aside mechanically and let the two pass. “She said you could use it to broadcast sound and control the lights and temperature, but didn’t explain much else. She didn’t know where the power came from.”

“Oh, that’s quite simple.”

The road was quite empty at this time of night. Only a couple of ponies still roamed the streets. All of them bowed as the Princess passed, making Twilight feel like she should kneel too. Princess Celestia lowered her head to acknowledge each of her subjects.

“The panels of the school’s rooftop can harness energy from the sun’s light,” the Princess said.

Twilight’s eyes widened. “There’s enough power in sunlight to run a whole school?”

“Enough to run the whole world.”

Something didn’t quite make sense, but Twilight wasn’t coherent enough to pursue that line of thought. Both unicorns walked the rest of the way silently under the moon’s wan light.

When they got to the school Princess Celestia opened the doors for Twilight and allowed her to walk in first before closing the doors behind them. Twilight followed the Princess until she

stopped at a nearby hole in the wall.

Princess Celestia, being much taller than an ordinary pony, had to both kneel and bend her neck to use the outlet. She plunged her horn into the indentation.

Twilight knew that something was happening but she didn't know what. Even before she could cast a single spell, she could always *feel* when powerful magics were afoot. There would always be this charged sort of anticipation that you could sense in the atmosphere, like the feeling right before a big storm hits. The stone around her seemed to whisper, but there was no familiar tingle in the air. She felt nothing.

"The walls need to know your voice, Twilight Sparkle," said Princess Celestia, looking regal even though she was bent into what must be an uncomfortable and awkward position. "Please say something to them."

"Um... Hi, walls?"

The sound of her voice echoed perfectly down the hallway, "Hi walls, hi walls, hi walls..."

"What room are you staying in?" asked the Princess.

Twilight fumbled at the pocket of her uniform with her teeth and tongue for a good while before she managed to get the key out. She dropped the key on the floor and strained her eyes in the dim light to read the numbers. "Room 508."

The Princess didn't respond, but after a moment she stood up, shaking out her neck and stretching her wings. "That should be sufficient," she said. "The doors and lights will respond to your voice now."

"You can do that?"

"Not me, technically. The graduating class three hundred and forty eight years ago developed that feature," said Princess Celestia. "Since just about everypony here can use magic, only the odd staff member ever finds a use for it."

Curiosity overcame tact. "Wow! What else can the school do?"

"There are over a thousand things it can do, although many are just a variation of a single task," said Princess Celestia. "It would take what's left of the night to list them all." The Princess smiled. "Let's just say, though, that it can't make very good tea."

Twilight walked with her as she left the school.

"Thank you for doing all this for me," Twilight said, bowing deeply for the first time to Princess Celestia out of both respect and appreciation. The Princess put a hoof on her shoulder

and shook her head.

Twilight stood, not knowing what she had done wrong. Maybe she was suppose to curtsy?

The Princess looked at Twilight, perhaps a little sadly. "I acknowledge and appreciate your gratitude, but please do not be so hesitant and formal. You certainly do not need to prostrate yourself," she said. "In my eyes, a princess' worth is the same as any of her subjects."

Twilight blinked. Marching Dawn's words suddenly made a lot more sense.

"Good luck, Twilight Sparkle," said Princess Celestia. "I will see you at the end of the week."

She spread her vast wings and launched herself into the night sky. A breeze swirled in the Princess' wake. Twilight peered up into the heavens, watching the distant outline until it was no longer even a little white dot.



She went inside.

“Um... Doors, could you close please?”

The entrance shut itself behind her.

It took Twilight the entire time to get back to her room before she discovered that although it was dark, there was still a small amount of light in the windowless corridors.

Twilight looked up at the sun sigils and saw they were now crescent moons.

Interesting, she thought, as she collapsed on to her bed and fell fast asleep.

(A big thank you goes to plen-omie and feotakahari who are helping me edit.)