

# Half the Day is Night

by AugieDog

## Chapter 12

The story made Rainbow Dash shout "What??" more than a few more times, and by the time Rarity got to the part about her and Ory Stargazer kissing, Dash wasn't the only one.

"What??" Twilight's mane seemed to be standing on end.

"Ory?? But he's...he's--!"

"Such a gentlecolt!" Rarity breathed. "I always dreamed of coming to Canterlot and meeting a prince, but, well, Ory was going to be Night Minister, and that's nearly the same thing." She sighed, a blush lighting her cheeks, and Dash couldn't help remembering her own blush earlier in the Citadel garden with Captain Destrier.

Which made her clear her throat. "I think you're missing the point here, Rarity! Somepony just tried to kill you!"

Rarity rolled her eyes. "Well, yes, if you want to dwell on the more unpleasant aspects of the evening..."

A snort from Applejack. "And that proves this ain't no test from Princess Celestia. This is broken-leg serious."

"Indeed." Princess Luna spoke for the first time since Dash had come in, and the rumble of anger in her voice made the cheerful firelight suddenly a whole lot scarier. "You said earlier, Minister Applejack, that you suspected Lord Daybreak or Lady Stargazer of being behind this. In the morning, then, I'll have Captain Destrier and the guard--"

"No!" Dash shouted--and was more than a little surprised when Rarity and Twilight echoed it just as loudly.

Pinkie blinked at them. "Was that just a song? Did I miss rehearsal?"

"It's impossible!" Rarity was saying. "Why would Ory's mother or his uncle want to kill him?"

"And think about it, your Highness!" Twilight cut in. "Arresting the Day Minister and the former Night Minister? They have a lot of friends in Canterlot, and you--" She bit her lower lip. "Well, you said it yourself, princess. You just have us."

"Nope!" Pinkie waved a hoof. "She's got all those ponies who came tonight, and all those ponies who'll come tomorrow night!" She turned to Rarity. "Oh, and I gave 'em all ribbons, too. Hope you don't mind."

Rarity gave Pinkie one of her sideways look. "Darling, you

were the one laying down rules for ribbon distribution."

"That was me??" Pinkie seemed genuinely shocked, and Dash couldn't help grinning. "Huh. Well, I guess I musta known what I was doing, then."

"But we need more evidence, your Highness." Twilight sighed. "And by 'more,' I mean 'any at all.'"

Princess Luna's eyes narrowed. "I really must remember to thank Sister for going off on vacation and leaving me in the middle of all this." She turned those narrow eyes toward Applejack. "Minister?"

"She ain't wrong, ma'am." Applejack looked really worn out, Dash thought. "We got nothin' 'nless we can find a good, solid connection to them ponies Dash and Pinkie brought in this mornin'--or yesterday mornin' now, ain't it?"

The princess huffed a breath. "Politics." Then suddenly her gaze was swinging around and fixing on Dash. "And you, minister? What's your objection?"

"Oh." She tried to act nonchalant. "Just that you don't need to wait for Des and the Day Guard if you wanna arrest anypony since, y'know, you've got the Night Guard and all."

"The--" Princess Luna's face went blank for a moment, then slid into a slight scowl. "I believe I've made it plain,

Minister Dash, that I have no need of--"

"Yeah, but, see, you do." Dash grinned at the sudden silence, everypony staring at her now, and she had to wonder how often the princess got interrupted. Not often, she guessed, her stomach flopping queasily, so she pretended she was doing something easy instead--like flying blindfolded through a thunderstorm. "And I'll be happy to explain why, too, if that'd be OK, your Highness."

Another moment, then a little smile pulled at Princess Luna's muzzle. "Well, now that you've got me interested...."

"It's just--" Dash tried to organize her thoughts, but it was way too late--or like AJ said, way too early--for that. So she gave up. "I mean, you saw it, your Highness, same as I did! We walked outta the Day Palace with Captain Destrier and the music and the banners and ev'rything, and when we got to the Night Palace--" She stuck her tongue out and blew a raspberry.

"Hey!" from Pinkie.

"OK, yeah." Dash nodded to her friend. "You did a great job with the place, Pinkie, but that you hadta do so much work just proves my point! You remember, your Highness, how worried you got that first minute we walked in here?"

Twilight still seemed a little shocked, but the princess

was looking more thoughtful than mad. So Dash figured she might as well go on. "Of course, we don't want any big productions like they do over in the Day Palace, but a little something is a whole lot better than a big nothing. And the thing is: you could've had that little something already here the whole time!" She waved her hoof toward the night barracks. "Six months ago, you had a hundred ponies out there, ponies who'd sworn their lives to serve Equestria. And you said you didn't want 'em." She lowered her voice. "Might be you know what that's like, showing up night after night to do a job nopony seems to appreciate."

The only sound for a moment was the crackling of the torches. Dash tapped her necklace. "Those forty-nine loyal ponies who haven't resigned yet, your Highness? They've been trying to figure out what they can do for you. But loyalty's a two-way street. They go through the academy, prove they've got the stuff, and swear their oath, but then, see, then it's your turn. 'Cause you're their princess. And you've got responsibilities to 'em."

Princess Luna was looking into the fire. "It was so much easier before..."

"What??" Pinkie's voice came loud as a cymbal crash. "No,

it wasn't!"

"I beg your pardon??" Anger creased the princess's forehead as she snapped a glare at Pinkie Pie.

"Well??" Pinkie glared back. "If it was so easy back then, why'd you spend a thousand years on the moon??"

"Pinkie!" Twilight was on her hoofs now.

But Pinkie had leaped up as well, was springing past Twilight to slide on her knees to Princess Luna's side, Pinkie's eyes wide and shimmering. "But you don't hafta be jealous anymore, princess! 'Cause, sure, we love your sister, but we love you, too! And your sister loves you even more!"

The princess had gone completely still, her purple-black mane puffing up so much like a thunderhead, Dash had to swallow, the sudden tightness in the air making her feel the way she did when she really let herself go, just poured on the speed and blasted over the landscape, everything vibrating and blurring like she was heading for the sound barrier with no hope of stopping. "Uhh, Pinkie?" she managed to say.

"But you hafta stop trying to be the sun!" Pinkie was going on, glowing against the rising dark of Princess Luna. "You don't shine on ev'rypony the same all the time ev'rywhere like your sister does! You're closer, softer; you just shine on one

pony at a time!" She waved at the big double doors across the throne room. "You saw those ponies here tonight, each one private and quiet and just wanting to see you and be your friend! And that's how we love you! Like a fire on a cold night or a breeze on a warm evening!"

Princess Luna still hadn't moved, wasn't even breathing as far as Dash could tell. Then: "You...you love me?" a tiny voice asked from her lips.

"Of course!" came Twilight's shout, Fluttershy following with a breathy, "Oh, yes, princess, we do!" and Rarity adding, "The three young fillies I'll be presenting to you tomorrow night, your Highness, are positively enraptured at the thought of meeting you!"

"And the Night Guard," Rainbow Dash put in. "Soon as I told 'em they were back in service to the throne, it was like they turned into brand new ponies."

"I--" Princess Luna's eyes shone like stars in the midnight of her face. "I don't know...don't know what to--"

A soft rustling snore, and Dash looked over to see Applejack had fallen asleep, her chin tucked between her front hoofs. Another little rasp of breath, and the princess began laughing softly. "This double duty does take a bit out of a

one, doesn't it?" She touched her horn to Pinkie Pie's ribbon, tangled in her mane. "But I thank you all so much."

Pinkie gave a happy little squeak, her eyes curling into crescents, and Twilight bowed her head. "It's an honor and a privilege, your Highness."

"Still..." Princess Luna looked at the torches, and they began going out. "We have schedules we must keep. An hour's nap for me while the rest of you should follow our Minister of Honesty's example and turn in till the dawn procession."

A laugh from Rarity. "Your Highness, I doubt all the warm milk in Equestria could get me to sleep tonight!"

Which was just what Dash had been hoping for. "So you wouldn't mind, y'know, designing and putting together, like, forty or fifty new uniforms for the Night Guard? Something like the Day Guard has but..." She rubbed her chin. "I dunno: darker and cooler, maybe?"

The way Rarity was staring at her, Dash felt like she'd suddenly sprouted a horn. "Just like that?" Rarity's lower eyelid began twitching. "Just design and assemble fifty uniforms? That's all you're asking?"

"Well,--" Dash began, but the princess interrupted:

"If you can design the uniforms, Minister Rarity, I've



heard Sister say that all Canterlot's clothiers are most amenable to any work we can send their way."

Rarity's eyes widened. "Even...even Lace Brocade?"

The princess shrugged. "I'm not familiar with most of the fashion houses, but if this Lace Brocade is in Canterlot, I'm sure we could work something out."

"That...that...that--" Rarity looked almost frozen to Dash, a snowpony shaped like her friend. "One of my designs," she whispered. "At the House of Brocade..." She snapped to life so suddenly, Dash almost jumped backwards. "I'm seeing black and silver where the Day Guards have white and gold, the shape very similar, of course, but...a red plume atop their helmets!" She leaped to her hoofs. "You'll excuse me, your Highness!" Throwing off her blanket, she galloped across the throne room and disappeared down the side corridor.

Twilight laughed quietly. "No one works like Rarity. Once she gets started, I mean."

Another snore drew Dash's attention to Pinkie, tucked up fast asleep beside Princess Luna. Dash smiled and nodded to Twilight. "Fluttershy and me can prob'bly carry Applejack if you can float Pinkie."

Fluttershy giggled, and Twilight nodded. They all stood,

bowed to the princess, but when Dash straightened back up, she was right there in front of her: Princess Luna, just that much taller than Dash so she had to look up to meet those deep, dark eyes. Then the princess was bending forward, touching her horn to the ribbon Dash had almost forgotten she had tied in her mane, the rush of it cool, sweet, and refreshing as skating over a flat evening cloud top on her way home after a hard day weather wrangling. "When will my troops be ready for review, Minister Dash?"

It took Dash a minute to find her voice. "I was thinking we could go down after your first morning session. If the uniforms're done, you can be there when we pass 'em out."

The princess nodded. "Until dawn, then," she murmured, and springing into the air, she vanished into the darkness as the last torch sputtered out.

"Oh, my gosh..." Dash heard someone mutter, and she was a little surprised to recognize it as her own voice. She shook her head and looked at her two non-sleeping friends. "What's a dumb crash jockey like me doing in a place like this?"

Twilight's horn glowed, tiny lights swarming around Pinkie, lifting her from the cushion. "I was wondering the same thing about a certain egghead," she said with a grin.

Another giggle from Fluttershy. "I'm just surprised I haven't been fainting more often than I have."

"Well," Pinkie said groggily, "like my Uncle Egmont used to say,..." But all that come out of her then was a snore.

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"C'mon, AJ!"

Applejack jerked awake, couldn't think for a minute where she was or what time it might be or why Rainbow Dash was standing sideways above her saying, "We all got places to be after we take our big walk, so let's move it!"

Rolling out of bed, stretching, shaking her head, the events of the previous day slowly trickling back into Applejack's memory, she blew out a breath. "I feels like forty miles of bad road..."

Dash chuckled behind her. "Y'know, I wasn't gonna mention it, but--"

She kicked out a hind hoof just hard enough to tap Dash nice and solid in the chest. "Reckon I look better'n you're gonna in about half a minute."

"Oh, yeah?" A whoosh, the blowback from Dash's wings scattering the loose hairs from Applejack's pony tail into her face. "'Cause half a minute's about all you've got!"

"What??" That brought her fully awake, sent her spinning around, Dash smirking in her fancy blue duds. "Horse apples! Why didn't ya wake me 'fore now?? How'm I s'pposed to--??"

Dash rolled her eyes. "OK, maybe it's half an hour."

A rattling sound from the open doorway, and Pinkie pushed in a cart full of pastry. "Most important meal of the day!" she crowed. "Especially when it's stuffed with brown sugar and covered in frosting!" She nudged a plate with her nose. "I saved you some apple fritters!"

Applejack's stomach growled. "Well, now, that's right neighborly of you, Pinkie." The fritters were perfectly baked, too, the second one even better than the first since she slowed down enough to taste it. Stepping to the wash stand, she undid the ribbons at the end of her pony tail with her teeth, reared up, grabbed the pitcher, and laying her head in the basin, dumped the water over herself, the cold absolutely bracing and just what she needed.

"Oooo," she heard Pinkie say. "Dashie, remind me to put milk in that pitcher tomorrow, 'K?"

"Pinkie..." Rainbow Dash sighed. "It doesn't work as a prank if you tell her about it before you do it!"

"Prank?" Pinkie sounded confused. "I was just thinking

how much cereal you could put in a bowl that big!"

Applejack dried her face with the towels waiting on the sideboard, then settled back with hoofs and teeth to start plaiting her mane. "So what's the schedule, then? Reckon I musta dozed off afore we got anything settled last night."

"Easy peasy!" Pinkie said around the donut she was sucking down. "Me and Dashie getta go visit the Night Guard and-- What was you said we were doing, Dashie?"

Rainbow Dash gave a grin that positively sent chills up Applejack's spine. "Putting 'em through their paces. I figure I can take the fliers out for a little spin, and, well, we'll see if the ground troops can keep up with Pinkie."

Flopping her pony tail onto the counter, Applejack tightened the ribbons at the end into place. "Them poor fellers ain't gonna know what hit 'em."

"It'll be great!" Dash waved at the doorway. "Then Rarity and Fluttershy'll be cruising the fashion spots or whatever: she got the Night Guards uniforms designed last night, and some pony she's all excited about is gonna actually build 'em while she and Fluttershy let all the fancy ponies in Canterlot know about Princess Luna's ball tonight."

Pinkie made a noise like air squeezing out of a balloon.

"That! Will be! Epic!" She spun in place on one rear hoof, her pink dress flaring out around her. "Those gentleponies then abed will think themselves accursed they were not there!"

"And while that's going on," Rainbow Dash went on, "you and Twilight're meeting Spike at Twilight's parents' house to, y'know, figure out who's trying to kill us and ev'rything."

"Naw." Applejack slipped her head through her Element of Harmony neck piece and put on her hat. "It's Princess Luna they're after, not us."

Stillness froze the room, made Applejack turn to see if her friends were still there. They were, Dash with her rainbow mane sticking out even spikier than usual and Pinkie with her mouth and eyes wide. "Of course!" Pinkie muttered.

"What??" Dash shouted, leaping into a hover. "Somepony's trying to kill the princess??"

More cries of "What??" from the hall, and the others came rushing in, Twilight in front, Rarity and Fluttershy right at her hoofs. "Kill the princess??" Twilight shouted.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Applejack reared back, flailed her hoofs for attention. "I didn't say that, and that ain't what's happenin' here at all!"

"Yeah!" Pinkie gave a glare all around. "They don't wanna

kill her! They just wanna drive her away again!"

Twilight's horn was sparking. "How--?? What--?? You can't--! Why--??"

"All right, now!" Applejack pitched her voice the way she would talking to nervous cattle. "Let's ev'rypony all just settle down and listen for a minute!"

Every eye in the room focused on her. "I been askin' myself over and over why anypony's even doin' all this, and all I can figure is: they wanna get Princess Luna so riled up, she busts out all Nightmare Moon like she did a thousand years ago, and us or Princess Celestia hasta send her to the moon again." Applejack didn't much like this explanation, but it best fit the facts. "It's why I'm so darn sure it's either Lord Daybreak or Lady Stargazer behind it. They's the ponies got the most invested in seein' things go back to the way they was, I reckon, and--"

"Yes," came a shadow of a voice, and Applejack started back to see Princess Luna standing in the doorway, her mouth tight, her eyes narrow. "It makes sense."

Swallowing, Applejack bowed to the floor, the princess's mane whipping like a flag in a windstorm. "But as you said last night," she continued, stepping into the room, "we haven't much

in the way of evidence." She stopped beside Pinkie's cart and sniffed. "Oh, these smell heavenly!" One of the pastries rose into the air, and Princess Luna nibbled at it. "My compliments, Minister Pie. But your thoughts, Minister Applejack, on how we can prove any of this?"

"Well, ma'am..." Again, Applejack had thought and thought, but none of the options she'd come up with much appealed to her. "The party tonight'll be their next obvious target. I'd say our best bet'd be to have the Night Guard out in full force, have all of us with our ears pricked, and catch 'em in the act." She shrugged, looked up at the princess. "It ain't what I'd call the best plan, but it's kinda the easiest since we don't gotta arrest anypony till they actually do somethin'."

Princess Luna was nodding. "Very well. Gather intelligence today however you can, and I'll ask you all to meet in my antechamber at 3 o'clock this afternoon so we may form a final approach to this evening's festivities."

"Oooooo!" Pinkie slung her pack around, started rooting through it. "Festivities! I gotta write that word down!"

A smile from the princess, and a little of the tightness eased in Applejack's shoulders. As long as Princess Luna kept smiling, things couldn't be too bad. "Minister Rarity?" the



princess asked. "What word on the Night Guard's uniforms?"

Rarity looked perfect, of course, her dress this morning dark blue, not nearly as fancy as the one she'd had yesterday, as close to a business suit, Applejack figured, as a pony like Rarity was likely to get, though if Applejack looked close, the little twitch around her edges told the story of her late night. "The courier I sent with the designs to awaken Lace Brocade an hour ago returned with an estimate of mid-morning."

Princess Luna nodded. "Let's plan on a presentation to the Guard before lunch, then." She turned to Rainbow. "Will that fit in with your plans, Minister?"

Dash shrugged. "I can make it fit."

"Then, ministers?" The princess raised her head, her mane definitely flowing more like Princess Celestia's again. "If you'll attend me, I shall raise the sun, and we will get this rather full day started."

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Despite what she'd said, Applejack was still a mite concerned that whoever was behind all this would get antsy and try something at the morning end of things. But since they'd blown their attack on Rarity and Fluttershy and Rarity's new beau last night, odds were they'd be doing some serious

regrouping this morning.

That new beau was waiting in the courtyard between the Night Palace and the Day Palace, Applejack noticed, when they came marching out just before dawn, a bigger crowd watching than she'd been expecting. A good looking fella: not as beefy as Applejack liked 'em, but, well, if he was an egghead the way Twilight said, he likely didn't get much exercise. And he started the chant, too--"Luna! Equestria! Luna! Equestria!"--the ponies around him, most of 'em with red ribbons tied somewhere in their manes, joining in.

Applejack had to smile when the princess nearly missed a step, caught herself, bowed, and continued to the archway leading into the Day Palace. The ponies of the Day Ministry stood at their desks in silence, their heads bowed to the princess, but Applejack couldn't stop a quick glance upwards at the empty stretch of ceiling where the beam had been. As near as she could tell from poking around up there yesterday, it had been ornamental instead of structural, so she wasn't worried about the whole roof collapsing. But still, it made the hairs prickle up along the back of her neck....

Minister Daybreak stood at the foot of the Day Throne, and Applejack gave him a squint-eyed look. He still struck her all

brazen and blustery, but she couldn't decide which of those he had more of: just bluster to complain about Princess Luna's return changing everything, or enough brass to try getting her out of the way again.

He was bowing to her at least; she bowed in return, faced the big stained-glass windows to the east, and her horn lit up almost too bright to look at. "The sun rises," she announced in that echoing voice, and light flooded in, Applejack's not the only gasp in the throne room, a smattering of applause from the ministry workers.

She stole a quick glance at Lord Daybreak, saw him frowning, but he cleared his throat and bowed again as Princess Luna ascended the Day Throne. He gestured to the guard at the side door, and that pony led in the first petitioner of the morning. The Day Ministry swung into work around her, and Applejack blew out a breath. Now, if Dash hadn't been joshing around earlier, she was supposed to go with Twilight to talk to her parents, so--

"Oh, Lord Daybreak!" Rarity's voice, Applejack looking over to see her friend smiling at the older unicorn. "Might I ask a favor?" She fluttered her eyelashes, and Applejack grinned again: nopony didn't melt a little under that treatment,

she knew from experience.

Sure enough, Lord Daybreak puffed out his chest and smiled. "Of course, Miss Rarity! How may the Day Minister be of assistance?"

"I was wondering, sir..." Rarity's horn glowed, and from the folds of her gown floated a ball of red ribbons. "Might I distribute these to the ministry workers here today? We've been giving them out around town since yesterday, and--"

"Ribbons?" Lord Daybreak's smile edged downward. "Not exactly part of the dress code, is it?"

Rarity blinked at him, her own smile fading a bit. "Dress code, sir?"

"Strict policy, Miss Rarity."

"Oh, but, surely, sir, considering the current circumstances, you can--"

"No, madame." He puffed out a breath and shook his head. "I've no say in what these ponies wear after they leave this building, of course, but while they're here, I shall have this be a place of business." He bowed stiffly. "Now, if you'll excuse me." Turning, he started toward the desks along the far wall of the throne room.

Rarity looked like she'd been hit in the leg with a hammer,

her face bunching up like she was maybe gonna start yelling about it; Applejack sidled over and murmured, "Let it go, girl. If'n he's the one, we'll get him tonight."

For another few seconds, Applejack didn't think she'd gotten through, but then Rarity seemed to deflate a little, the pink tinge around her ears fading. "Yes," she said, an edge in her voice that Applejack knew all too well from the times they'd tussled in the past. "I shall look forward to that moment." She stepped away, then, suddenly nothing but sweetness. "Fluttershy, darling!" she called. "Shall we be on our way?"

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Twilight seemed about as nervous as Applejack had ever seen her, her ears flicking up and down as the two of them made their way through the bustling streets of Canterlot. And as much as she didn't want to pry, well, it always paid to be prepared, she'd always found. Keeping her voice as light as she could, she asked, "So, Twilight! Been a while since you seen your folks, ain't it?"

Twilight tried to shrug, but her shoulders were too tight for it to look anything but painful. "A year and a half, maybe. We write back and forth, though."

No bad blood between them, then: Applejack nodded. "Whoa.

I plain don't reckon I could do it, going so long without seeing my kin."

"Well, it's always been just the three of us, no aunts or uncles or cousins or like that." Twilight gestured to the next cross street. "We turn left up here."

Isolated, then, wealthy and educated and-- "You said you kinda took 'em by surprise, too, didn't you?"

Twilight smiled, more of the unicorn Applejack knew in her face than before. "Thirty years they'd been married when I came along, and since I moved to the University right after I got my cutie mark, we--" That troubled look came over her again. "We're not exactly the Apple family, AJ."

Applejack blinked. That's what had Twilight so worried! "Sugar cube,..." She butted her shoulder gently against her friend's. "Ain't only one way to be a happy family, y'know. Long as your folks don't call me a country bumpkin right to my face, I reckon I'm gonna like 'em just fine."

Judging by Twilight's broad grin, it was right thing to say.

They turned left, then, the Palaces visible between the spiraling towers sprouting from all the whitewashed houses in this neighborhood. Applejack couldn't stop a grin. Typical

unicorn way of building: everything close together, all pretty much the same size, shape, and color, and each one with at least one tower...

Marble steps led from the street up to every door, and Twilight turned at the third house along, tapped up the stairs, reached for the door just as it pulled open to reveal Spike, the little dragon looking relieved. "Twilight!" he cried out. "You're here! Great! 'Cause Lady Stargazer's here, too, and...and we were just talking about you!"

Applejack felt her hackles rise, but she smoothed them down quick enough, put on a smile, and said over the silence of Twilight's panicked stare, "Well, now! What a coinkydink! Me an' Twilight was just talkin' about Lady Stargazer!" Couldn't hurt to put a little shake into one of their main suspects, after all...

Spike stepped to the side, pulled the door open the whole way. "C'mon in, guys! We've got tea all set up!"

Dark wood lined the entryway, their hoofs clattering a bit as they followed Spike inside. Not a lot in the way of decoration, one small table in the hallway holding a vase with a few sprigs of pussywillow arranged haphazardly in it, and while the whisper of voices came from the first doorway on the right,

Twilight didn't rush forward, calmly following Spike. All mighty reserved, and Applejack wondered if a little of her Manehattan accent might be useful here.

But no. Playing up the whole 'country bumpkin' thing with Lady Stargazer in the room could be useful. City folks always figured that meant 'stupid,' after all...

Stepping after Twilight, Applejack had to smile again at the shelves and shelves of books along all four walls of the room they were walking into, the smell of old paper everywhere. Windows among the bookcases let in plenty of light, and the furniture--low tables and generously-cushioned sofas--made the place look perfect for lounging around and reading, something Applejack got to do all too rarely.

Off to one side under the largest of the windows sat three ponies, Phillipa Stargazer the one Applejack recognized, though the other two were so obviously related to Twilight, Applejack reckoned she would've known them anywhere. Both unicorns, of course, and while they weren't as old as Granny Smith--not that anypony in Equestria was likely near as old as Granny Smith--they had more silver hairs among their manes and tails than Lady Stargazer.

"Mom! Dad!" Apparently unable to hold herself back any



longer, Twilight skipped across the sitting room floor to the others.

"Kiddo!" Her father stood, his cutie mark a dark blue crescent moon and single star against his silver-blue flank.

"What's all this I hear about you at the Palace?"

Twilight rolled her eyes, tucked her head to her mother's neck, her mother reaching up to stroke Twilight's face. "Oh, you know me, Dad: trouble's my middle name." She looked back at Applejack. "Mom? Dad? This is my friend Applejack, owner and operator of Sweet Apple Acres outside Ponyville. Applejack, this is my father Nocturne and my mother Tercey."

Applejack came up and bowed to them. "Right nice to meet you folks." She aimed a bow at Lady Stargazer, then. "And nice to see you again, Lady--" She pretended to catch herself. "I mean, Phillipa, weren't it?"

"Quite right, minister." The blackish-green unicorn's horn sparked, her teacup rising to her lips. "Spike was just telling us some of your amusing adventures in Ponyville." A shudder, and she sipped her cup. "I can't imagine living so close to the Everfree Forest! What dangers you must face on a daily basis!"

The same frustration she'd felt earlier when talking to Lady Stargazer nibbled at Applejack. Unlike Lord Daybreak,

everything the lady said was friendly enough, but the scent behind her words made Applejack want to sneeze. "Well, now, I'm sure you've got dangers a-plenty hereabouts, ma'am." She watched Lady Stargazer, hoped she might give something away to show she knew about the attack last night, but all the other pony did was set her teacup back down.

"Dangers?" Twilight's mother asked. "In Canterlot?" She whinnied a little laugh and nodded at Lady Stargazer. "She's starting to sound like you now, Phillipa!"

Lady Stargazer flinched ever so slightly, and Applejack somehow kept her ears from perking. "You don't say!" She gave Lady Stargazer the most innocent expression she could round up. "Feelin' nervous lately, Phillipa?"

Her chuckle wasn't close to real, Applejack could tell. "Oh, well, now that I'm retired, I've little enough to do each day but chatter away with my equally retired friends." She smirked more than smiled. "Old ponies' tales: nothing more."

Applejack decided to pounce on that. "Y'mean like the Mare in the Moon? That sorta thing?"

The former Night Minister went very still, but Twilight's father gave a snort. "Oh, don't get her started, Minister Applejack! And as much as I agree that Princess Luna made a

mistake disbanding the Night Ministry, it's long overdue, her stepping forward the way she is this week!" He patted a hoof between Twilight's ears. "Who would've thought, kiddo, that you'd be helping somepony get out more into public! Just goes to show anything can happen!"

"Oh!" Twilight had settled onto one of the cushion, but now she started back. "That reminds me!" Her horn glowed, and several red ribbons popped into the air above the tea set. "We're having a ball tonight at the Night Palace, and I was hoping you'd be able to come!"

"A ball?" Tercey's voice wavered a bit. "At the Night Palace?" She looked past Twilight to her husband. "Must be nearly fifty years ago now, wouldn't you say, Turney?"

"Very nearly." Nocturne smiled, his horn glowing less brightly than Twilight's, a wave of light reaching for two of the ribbons, pushing one toward Tercey, pulling the other to himself. "Your mother and I first met at a Night Palace ball, Twilight."

Twilight's eyes were actually sparkling. "Then you'll come? Both of you?"

Her father's magic was pleating the ribbons among his mane and his wife's. "We wouldn't miss it," he said.

Smelling an opportunity, Applejack reached a hoof for one of the other ribbons floating above the table, scooped it up, offered it to Lady Stargazer. "And you, Phillipa? Reckon you'll be able to make it to the shin-dig tonight?"

The frozen depths of the lady's gaze almost made Applejack shiver. But Lady Stargazer smiled, sparks crackling from her own horn, the ribbon drifting up from Applejack's hoof. "Why, certainly, Minister Applejack." The ribbon touched her horn, wrapped itself loosely around the base. "I wouldn't miss it for all of Equestria."

And, yes, while she still didn't have one single lick of evidence, Applejack knew at that moment in her heart of hearts who was behind everything that had happened in Canterlot since yesterday.