

Half the Day is Night

by AugieDog

Chapter 3

"I don't like this, Twilight." Spike poured tea into her cup, Twilight Sparkle watching through bleary eyes as he squeezed in exactly the right amount of lemon. "Princess Celestia says she's passed all my questions on to Princess Luna, but I haven't got a single answer yet! Not one!"

Nodding, Twilight activated her horn and raised the cup to sip from it, Zecora's special blend just exactly what she needed to perk herself awake at five o'clock on a Monday morning after two of the most hectic days of her life. But she'd gotten everything checked off her list: all Fluttershy's blankets had gotten unpacked, Rainbow Dash had made arrangements with the weather crew, Applejack had left at least 50 pages of instructions for her brother and sisters, Rarity had dropped a hissing box of Opalescence off at her parents' house after locking up her boutique, and Pinkie Pie had put together a Sunday night 'going away' party with a speech from the mayor and apple pie all around.

Twilight took another sip of tea. "I'm sure Princess Luna's made arrangements."

A clatter from the library's front door, and Pinkie Pie came bouncing in, her panniers flapping against her flanks. "This is so exciting! I mean, I didn't even know there was a five o'clock in the morning!"

Whooshing up behind her, Rainbow Dash snorted. "Reminds me of dawn patrol at flight school, getting the sky ready for sunup." A single battered bag strapped to her side, she landed beside the table, clamped her hoofs around one of the cups Spike had set out, and sucked it dry. "Not my favorite thing."

Another snort, and Applejack sauntered in, her packs not nearly as bulging as Pinkie's. "Some of us're up this early ev'ry day."

"Yeah?" Dash gave her a toothy grin. "Well, some of us are crazy."

"Girls! Really!" Rarity swept through the doorway, a simple but elegant traveling cloak thrown around her shoulders and draped across her back. "We've a very long day ahead of us, and I fully expect our nerves to be completely frazzled long before we manage to lay our weary heads down upon whatever silk and satin finery the palace manages to put together for us."

"Silk?" Fluttershy peered around the doorpost, her eyes wide. "And satin?"

Rarity nodded firmly. "At the very least." She shrugged her cloak open, her horn glowing, and eight small golden brown muffins, shiny with glaze and each wrapped with a red ribbon, floated out to settle themselves among the tea cups. "So I had these specially prepared by Mrs. Cake last night to strengthen us for the journey."

Fluttershy drifted over to join the group, her one bag even smaller than Dash's. "Oh, Rarity! They're beautiful!"

Pinkie Pie dived face first into hers and came up chewing, the ribbon stuck to the pink forelock of her mane. "Tasty, too!"

Dash laughed, spun her muffin on the tip of a front hoof, and bit its head off. "Not gonna eat the ribbon, Pinkie?"

"What??" Pinkie looked shocked. "Don't you dare, Rainbow Dash! Those are totally our totems!" She touched the little bow. "We wear them in our manes as long as we're in Canterlot. So anytime we're feeling icky or sticky, woozy or bluesy, one look at that ribbon, and bam! We'll know who we are, where we are, and what we're do-do-doodly doing!" She gave a massive grin, her eyes curling shut, bits of muffin clinging to the

corners of her teeth.

A shiver iced down Twilight's spine like she sometimes felt when she'd unraveled a particularly knotty magical problem.

Which was odd; why would--?

But she stopped that line of thought. She'd learned the hard way that it was sometimes best not to question things when Pinkie was concerned. "I think you're right, Pinkie," she said. A flicker from her horn pulled the ribbon off her own muffin, and she turned to Rarity. "Could you please do it for me, Rarity? I've never been much good with bows..."

The white unicorn blinked, then smiled, her eyes and horn lighting up to tie the ribbon in Twilight's hair just behind her right ear. Chattering and laughing, the others quickly finished their muffins, and Rarity fitted their ribbons in among their manes as well. "You, too, Spike," she said over her shoulder, swirling Applejack's ribbon around the band already holding her pony tail together.

"Me?" Spike looked from Rarity to the other two muffins and back again, and Twilight couldn't keep from smiling at the astonishment spreading over his face. "You made one for me?"

"Well, of course!" Rarity cocked her head at him. "You're part of our little ensemble, aren't you?"

The dragon picked up a muffin, undid its ribbon, and gave it such a reverent look, Twilight was surprised hearts didn't burst into the air around him. "But I don't have a mane..."

Rarity puffed a breath that ruffled the ribbon she'd used to partially tie Fluttershy's straying strands away from her face. "Oh, let me!" She aimed her horn at him, the ribbon flew from his claws, and in less than an instant it had wound itself around the spikes above his right ear hole, the red standing out against his green scales. "There!"

Spike touched it with a claw. "I've gotta look in a mirror!" He turned, took half a step toward the library's foyer, and stopped, his eyes going wide. "Princess Luna!"

Twilight felt her ears fold back, and she looked over to see the co-ruler of all Equestria standing still as a statue just inside the front door, something almost bottomless in those dark eyes. "I--" The princess stopped, then started again. "I didn't want to interrupt...."

Parts of her brain finally unfreezing, Twilight bowed to the floor, saw the others doing the same, heard Rarity saying, "Oh, not at all, your Highness! Please, come in! We've a muffin for you, if you're feeling peckish."

Silence, and Twilight straightened, afraid they'd somehow

insulted her. But the winged unicorn seemed to be blinking more in surprise than anything else. "For...me?" she asked after a moment, and Twilight remembered what the princess had said the other morning during her first visit.

"Of course!" Twilight stepped forward to stand beside Rarity. "Because that's what friends do!"

For a moment, Twilight thought she saw a shimmer at the corners of the princess's eyes, but then she was tossing her head, her mane flying like a pre-dawn breeze. "Thank you!" she said, almost leaping across the room, every bit of her shyness gone so suddenly, Twilight couldn't help smiling. "Celestia says that breakfast is the most important meal of the day," the princess went on with a grin, "but I've always been more partial to supper myself."

Pinkie gasped. "Dinner muffins! That would be so great!" She bent around and started rooting through her panniers, streamers and glitter flying in every direction. "I've gotta make a note for when we get back!"

Applejack and Rainbow Dash shied away from the sparkling shower with a "Hey!" and a "Watch it!", and Twilight sent a quick shield spell from her horn to keep the stuff from falling into the cups. "Do you have time for some tea before we go,

your Highness?"

Princess Luna was unwrapping her muffin, both the ribbon and the pastry floating in the air ahead of her. "I'd better not." She give the muffin a nibble and nodded toward the darkness outside the window. "It's only an hour and a half till sunup, so it might be best that we get to the palace for Celestia's ceremony before she begins to worry."

Fluttershy gasped. "Ceremony? At the palace? What do we--? Are we supposed to--? I thought we would just..." Her voice trailed off, her wings quivering.

Twilight found her heart speeding up a bit as well. She'd attended any number of ceremonies at both the Day Palace and the Night Palace during her years in Canterlot, and knowing how much pomp and circumstance tended to surround them... "Excuse me, your Highness, but--"

"Yes, I know." The princess sighed. "If it were up to me, Celestia would simply give me her power, head off on her vacation, and that'd be it. But Sister seems to have become very fond of ceremonies during the last thousand years." She finished her muffin, and the ribbon darted to the base of her horn, tied itself there in a flowery knot. "We have our ribbons, though." The taller pony smiled and bent to touch the

tip of her horn to the ribbon in Fluttershy's mane. "I certainly know I'm going to need mine."

Fluttershy blushed so red, Twilight was sure she could feel heat from it. "Oh, princess," the pegasus whispered, peering up from behind the locks of pink hair her ribbon held together. "What if I trip on some stairs and run into a pony carrying a pitcher of water and that pony spills the water all over another pony and ruins that pony's gown?? What if that??"

Princess Luna blinked, and Twilight opened her mouth--but Rainbow Dash spoke out first: "If that happens, Fluttershy, we'll deal with it!"

"Exactly!" said Pinkie, sliding over and bumping her shoulder against Fluttershy's side. "Like my uncle Yorick used to say: if you're gonna make a mistake, make it a good, loud mistake!"

Applejack gave her a sideways look. "Since when d'you have an uncle Yorick?"

Pinkie put a hoof in front of her mouth. "Shhh! Don't tell Fluttershy!"

"And don't worry." Princess Luna's smile made Twilight think of a summer night under the stars. "Don't any of you worry." She turned that smile on each of them in turn, and

Twilight could almost smell the tension in the room dissolving. "Your only job this week will be keeping an eye on me." Which brought some of the tension back to Twilight's shoulders. "But with my ribbon here--" The princess touched one silver shoe to the bit of red around her horn. "I'll remember you're watching me, and that'll make me watch myself." She blinked again. "If that makes sense."

Pinkie nodded briskly. "Perfect sense!"

"Uh-oh." Dash gave another of her grins. "If it makes sense to Pinkie..."

The others laughed, and Princess Luna joining in made Twilight's breath come a little easier again. Maybe this would all work out after all. "Well, Spike." Twilight tapped a hoof against the table. "If you'd kindly put the dishes away, we'll be ready to go."

The little dragon had been stroking his bow, a dreamy expression on his face, but he snapped out of it, gathered up the tea things, and carried them away. A moment of clattering, and he returned brushing his claws together. "Fastest dish washer in Equestria," he said.

"All right, then." Princess Luna looked around. "Everypony has everything she's taking?"

Twilight patted the satchel beside her, and Rarity gestured toward the front door. "Well, my luggage is in the cart outside, but I wasn't sure how we'd be traveling, so--"

"Traveling?" The princess's horn flared so bright, Twilight had to squint and look away. "Like this, of course!"

The light faded almost immediately, but it took Twilight a moment of blinking before she could make out her friends, standing beside her and doing their own blinking in the middle of a vast, dark, cold, and empty chamber. "Welcome to Canterlot!" Princess Luna's voice called, the words echoing strangely in the darkness all around Twilight.