

The Might of a Quill

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Prologue: “We’re not all lucky”

Princess Twilight Sparkle stepped out onto the balcony of her enormous crystal castle and looked over the quiet city of Ponyville. Celestia had raised the sun just a few moments before, which bathed the sleepy town in a soft amber light. The sky above her was filled with clouds, but she could see that the weather pegasi were already hard at work dissipating them. *Except for Rainbow Dash*, Twilight thought to herself, grinning. *There's no way she's up this early! Only Applejack rises at this hour. No pony works harder than she does.*

The gentle harmony that Twilight witnessed in the city below perfectly reflected her own inner peace. The previous week had been surprisingly uneventful – which was nice for a change. Rarity was in Canterlot, showing off her latest line of designer clothing to some important pony in the fashion industry. Fashion wasn't really Twilight's thing, but she knew it was important to Rarity and she tried to be supportive. Still, she was glad that she wasn't the one who got stuck in all those stuffy parties with those aristocrats. *Rarity seems*

to enjoy it, though, Twilight reflected. I guess it suits her.

Fluttershy and Treehugger were in the Everfree Forest, searching for rare and exotic magical creatures. Twilight really hadn't had much of a chance to get to know Fluttershy's new green earthpony friend, but from what she saw at the Gala Treehugger seemed nice – if a bit spaced out at times. The Forest could be a scary place, but Fluttershy knew what she was doing. She might be timid, but when she had to she could stare down a dragon – or a cockatrice.

Pinkie Pie – well, she was still Pinkie; you never really knew what you'd find her doing. One moment she was inviting you to a party to celebrate the party you went to the day before, and the next day she was winning the turkey calling championships. Even her dreams were pure chaos. *You just kinda have to roll with her,* Twilight thought.

Rainbow Dash had made herself scarce that week. Normally Twilight would have attributed that to her innate laziness, but this time she actually had an excuse. Due to a mix-up at the weather factory in Cloudsdale, Ponyville had become behind in its rainfall. In order to make up for it a major storm had been scheduled for last night. Rainbow personally led the team to make

sure that the upcoming storm didn't hurt anypony. Her pegasi spent days pruning trees, searching the area, and making sure everypony was safe. When the storm hit it had been a real doozy – but as Twilight looked down upon the city below, she couldn't see any signs of damage. *Nice work, Rainbow. I guess you've earned yourself a nap.*

And as far as Applejack went –

In the distance Twilight heard a sharp crack, as if a tree had just broken in half. The princess shook her head. *That's gotta be her. Only the Apple family would wake up this early to start clearing dead trees! The word 'relax' just isn't in their vocabulary.*

Since Twilight's friends had been otherwise occupied, the princess of friendship had spent the week doing what she loved best: reading. Her new castle didn't have the same library as her former tree home, but ever since she moved in she had been trying to remedy that. Now, thanks to her tireless efforts, new shipments of books were arriving on a weekly basis. It was a bit expensive, but she was a princess, after all; she could afford it.

Twilight yawned, stretched, and walked back inside. She lazily wandered downstairs to the kitchen and poured herself a cup of tea. *I wonder*

what book I'll read today. Maybe this would be a good time to begin my study of squirrel culture. The possibilities are endless!

A loud knock on the front door startled her. *Who in Equestria could possibly want my help at this hour?* Twilight wondered. "Hello?" she called out. No one answered, but a moment later there was another knock on the door. She heard a muffled voice, but she couldn't make out what the pony was saying.

Of course – they can't hear me from here! How silly of me. Normally Spike handles these situations. I guess it's up to me today.

Twilight got up out of her chair, stretched again, and began making her way to the front door. She hoped that whoever it was would wait until she got there. The castle was enormous, and it took a bit of time to reach the door. Twilight could have just teleported to the entrance, but she was feeling a bit lazy. *They can wait*, she decided. *After all, it is pretty early. They're lucky I'm not still in bed.*

Whoever was at the door couldn't be one of her friends; they would have just let themselves in without knocking – which was how she liked it. Princess Celestia definitely wouldn't have knocked either. No, this had to be some stranger. *Perhaps it's the start of a quest?* Twilight

wondered.

As she walked by the castle's throne room she glanced at the giant map that took up most of the room's floor space. It was silent. *Must not be a friendship emergency, then*, she thought.

There was another knock on the door again, followed by a muffled shout. "I'm coming," Twilight shouted back. She hurried on down the hallway.

Twilight failed to notice that the cutie mark on Applejack's throne had lost all its color. If she *had* noticed – well, it still wouldn't have mattered. It was already too late for her to save the life of her friend. Life in Equestria was about to change forever.

Nearly a minute after the mysterious pony began knocking on her front door, Twilight finally reached the entrance of her luxurious castle. She quickly opened the massive doors and looked outside. "I'm so sorry about the wait," she said quickly. "I was in the kitchen."

In front of her was standing a white stallion with a short brown mane. Beside him, on the ground, was a small stack of very thin books. Twilight noticed that the pony had a gaming controller for a cutie mark.

The pony's eyes widened when he saw the princess. "Wow! Um, sorry about that, your

highness. I kind of figured that Spike would answer the door. Doesn't he normally handle that for you?"

"Spike's out of town right now," Twilight replied. "He's up in the Crystal Kingdom visiting my brother. The crystal ponies think very highly of Spike, you know. He's a very important dragon."

"Right. Well, that explains it, then." The stallion paused. "Could you do me a favor, then? My name is Frosted Arrow. Spike ordered these comics a couple months ago, but they were backordered and didn't come in until now. Could you maybe give them to him when he comes back?"

"You're a delivery pony?" Twilight exclaimed, surprised. "Isn't it a little early to be making deliveries? Who delivers mail at this hour?"

"I'm not a mailpony," Arrow corrected. "I actually work in the comic book store just down the street from here. Normally I don't deliver anything, but since Spike had been waiting so long for these I decided to come by here before my shift started and hand them to him. You know – as a favor to a friend."

Twilight glanced at his cutie mark again. "But isn't your special talent gaming? Why do you work in a comic book store?"

Arrow sighed. "We're not all lucky enough to

have jobs that use our special talent. Gaming doesn't really pay the bills, you know? You've got to make ends meet somehow."

"I guess that makes sense," Twilight remarked. "Rarity's special talent is finding jewels, but she makes her living creating designer dresses. She only uses the jewels as accents."

"Right," Arrow replied. "Because there's no possible way anypony could earn a living digging up incredibly valuable jewels. Rarity is just another broke unicorn, struggling to live her dream."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Twilight said absently, as she levitated the stack of comics off the ground. "I think she's pretty rich, actually. Hey, you're right! I thought you were delivering books, but these are just comics. Well, *that's* disappointing. I was hoping my shipment of encyclopedias had arrived."

"Hey now! Comics are books too," Arrow said defensively. "In fact, they're quite popular among the younger crowd. There are lots of ponies who really enjoy our products."

In the distance Twilight saw a small group of medics race off down the street. *That can't be good*, she thought. She then eyed the comic that was on the top of the stack. Its cover showed a group of six ponies dressed as superheroes.

In the corner she spied the publisher's name. "Enchanted Comics? Isn't that the company that makes those evil comic books that suck you into the story?"

"They're not evil," Arrow said, offended. "They're actually a lot of fun!"

"Fun? Are you crazy? When I got sucked into one of those things, there was this evil villain with a really strange mane problem."

"Mane-iac."

"Exactly – a real maniac! We had to fight her, and things got rough, and we all would have been killed if it hadn't been for Spike. It was *not* a relaxing afternoon. I'm surprised those things haven't been banned."

Arrow's eyes widened. "Please, please don't ask Princess Celestia to ban them! Look, I think you just had a misunderstanding of how the comics work. You were never in any actual danger. The comics are enchanted, yes, but it's impossible to actually die in them. If you didn't like the way the story was turning out you could have left at any time. You didn't have to finish the story. We're not psychos, you know!"

"Are you serious?" Twilight replied. "We could have left at any time?"

Arrow sighed. "Normally when these comics are sold to new buyers, we give them a page of

instructions that explain how the magic works. Apparently Spike missed that part. I think he bought that one in Canterlot, and they're probably not as careful up there. But you have to realize that most of our customers have a really great experience – if they didn't, they wouldn't buy any more and we would go out of business. You have to please the customer if you want them to keep coming back.”

“I suppose,” Twilight said dubiously. “Honestly, though, I just don't see the appeal. Why not read a good book on history instead?”

Arrow shook his head. “Of course *you* don't see any value in them. You're a superhero in real life, so it would be completely pointless for you to daydream about what it would be like to have superpowers. You go off to save Equestria practically every other weekend! Entering an amazing comic book world where you finally have magical powers is meaningless when *that's already who you are in real life*. And on top of that, you live in the biggest castle in Equestria!”

“That's not true,” Twilight replied. “Celestia's castle in Canterlot is actually bigger. Not by much, but still.”

“And she shares that castle with a whole bunch of other ponies – like her sister, and the guards, and her staff, and who knows who else.

Tell me – who lives with you?”

“Just Spike,” Twilight admitted.

“My point exactly. You see, princess, most of us aren't like that. I don't live in an enormous castle that dominates the entire skyline; instead I've got a small apartment. I don't get to go out and save the world; instead I sell comic books to ponies that really don't get the respect they deserve. I don't have any magical powers, or a throne, or any magical super-friends. I actually have to *work* for a living. I have bills to pay, you know, and I've got problems.”

“Hey – I've got problems too,” Twilight insisted.

“Sure you do. But when *you've* got problems, why, you have the might of the entire country to solve them. Celestia herself has got your back. You can actually throw entire *mountains* around, if that's what it takes.”

“I don't remember ever doing that,” Twilight said thoughtfully.

“But I'm sure you could,” Arrow countered. “The point is, you have pretty much everything anypony could ever want. If something goes wrong in your life, you've got options that the rest of us don't have. Your life really couldn't possibly be much better than it is.

“For normal ponies – like me – life isn't that

much fun. It's hard work, no one really respects you, and it can be excruciatingly boring. So often it feels like we're just not making a difference. We get up, go to work, and do the same thing day after day after day. I would love to save the world – just once – but that's never going to happen. I would love to be the hero and save the day, but instead I sell comic books to customers who dream of having a better life but who probably won't. Do you have any idea how soul-crushing it is to know that you're never really going to make much of a difference?”

“But you are making a difference,” Twilight said quickly. “You're, um, delivering these comic things.”

Arrow sighed. “Yes, precisely. I am delivering these 'comic things'. If I had never been born, somepony else would be standing here delivering these 'comic things'. Nothing much would change. Now, if *you* had never been born then all of Equestria would be dead several times over. We'd all be changeling food or something. You make a tremendous difference every day, and I never will. If I get eaten by some monster this afternoon the world will happily continue on its merry way. If *you* get eaten then we are all doomed.”

“That seems kind of morbid,” Twilight

replied. "You don't really believe that, do you? Everypony's life has value. We just have different roles, that's all."

"Says the royal superpony who lives in a magical fairy castle," Arrow scoffed. "*Your* role in life is apparently to have everything that you ever wanted, all of the time – so of course a magical comic book world isn't going to appeal to you. Your reality is actually *better* than any fantasy we could create – which is kind of sad, in a way. But for most ponies our comics give them a chance to experience a better life. They can actually be the hero and make a difference. For a few hours they can live the sort of life that you live every single day. Don't take that away from them, princess."

"I'm not going to take anything from anypony," Twilight insisted. She eyed the comics again. "Still, I'm just not sure about this. I don't know if I want Spike to get sucked back into a comic book again. I don't think he had much fun last time."

Arrow sighed. "You don't have to worry – these aren't enchanted. I mean, they are from the publisher that is named 'Enchanted Comics', but they're not magically enchanted to suck you into the story. They're just ordinary comic books. Spike thought that would be safer."

"Great!" Twilight said. "Thanks – I'll make

sure he gets them. Is there anything else that you need?"

"Can you tell Spike that I came by and said hello?" Arrow asked.

"Absolutely," Twilight agreed.

The stallion paused. "You do remember my name, right?"

Twilight froze. A look of panic crossed her face. "Um, your name. Right. I've got this." She paused for a moment. "Are you the one they call Derpy?"

Arrow face-hoofed. "Of course not! Derpy is a *mare*. She's the one who dropped a piano on your head that one time! I'm – oh, never mind. Just tell Spike that some random pony delivered those comics. He'll know who it was. Have a good day, your highness."

The white stallion turned and walked away, leaving the princess alone. As Twilight started to close the door, she noticed out of the corner of her eye a group of ponies dashing off into the distance. "That's odd," she muttered. "It looks like they're heading straight for Sweet Apple Acres."

A bad feeling came over her. *A loud noise, medics, and now a crowd – no, that can't be good at all. I'd better get over there immediately. Something is definitely wrong.*

Chapter 1: “Please give me my big sister back”

Twilight Sparkle galloped down the dusty road that led out of Ponyville as fast as her legs could carry her. The noise of her hooves striking against the compacted dirt distracted her from the worries that clouded her mind. Something terrible had happened; she just knew it. Everything was *not* fine. Where was everypony going – and where were her friends? *Why weren't they–*

Over the horizon, a rainbow-colored pony streaked through the sky and headed straight for her. The pegasus raced toward her with incredible speed and landed expertly right in front of her path. “There you are!” Rainbow Dash called out. The blue pony was out of breath and panting heavily. Her body was drenched in sweat. “I've been looking for you – and Fluttershy too,” she panted. “I can't find her anywhere, though. But look, you gotta come to Sweet Apple Acres at once! Half the town is already there.”

“That's where I'm going,” Twilight replied. She skidded to a stop, inadvertently kicking up a

small cloud of dust. "Wait. What do you mean, half the town is already there? What happened?"

"I swear it wasn't my fault," Rainbow said urgently. "Really! You gotta believe me!"

"What's not your fault? Rainbow, talk to me. What's going on?"

Rainbow shook her head and took off.

Twilight became even more worried than she already was. "Hey – wait!" She leaped into the air and chased after her friend, but the princess wasn't fast enough. The pegasus quickly streaked away, leaving a rainbow-colored trail in the sky. "You didn't answer my question!" she shouted.

But her friend was already a small dot in the distance. She didn't answer.

Twilight flew as quickly as she could to the Apple family's farm. As she spread her wings and soared through the sky she glanced down at the road below. Normally the road that led out of Ponyville was fairly deserted at this early hour of the morning, but today she saw more than a dozen ponies galloping in the same direction that she was going. She still didn't know what the emergency was, but she had a bad feeling about it. That noise she had heard earlier could only mean – no, surely not. *Whatever is wrong, I'm positive I can fix it*, Twilight thought to herself. She wasn't sure if she actually believed that or not,

but she had to reassure herself somehow. The suspense of not knowing what had happened was killing her. Couldn't Rainbow Dash just tell her? Why did she have to be so mysterious?

It only took Twilight a few minutes to reach the farm. What she saw confirmed her worst fears. Something terrible *had* happened. The enormous red barn that dominated Sweet Apple Acres had collapsed, turning the majestic structure into a pile of debris. It looked like a giant hoof had dropped out of the sky and flattened it into splinters. A cloud of dust still hung over the ruined structure, suspended in the humid morning air. *It must have been the storm last night*, Twilight thought. *I guess it was rougher than I thought. Oh, I hope no one was inside when it happened. Surely—*

That's when Twilight noticed that no one was gathered around the barn. Instead a large crowd had surrounded a single apple tree in the front yard, which was now lying on the ground. Somehow it had snapped off about halfway up its trunk, and its top had come crashing down.

And that is when Twilight saw the body.

* * * * *

"I'm telling you, this wasn't my fault,"

Rainbow Dash kept repeating over and over. “If the storm had really been *that* violent, it would have destroyed homes and trees all over Ponyville! I had nothing to do with this.”

But no one paid her any particular attention. In fact, no one was even blaming her. They were too focused on the tragedy that was unfolding before them.

Twilight Sparkle landed on the wet grass beside Rainbow Dash and tried hard not to cry. A few feet behind her the surviving members of the Apple family were huddled together in a small group. Granny Smith was holding tightly on to Apple Bloom. Granny was trying to comfort Applejack's little sister, but she refused be comforted. Big Mac stood next to her. The large red stallion stared at the fallen tree but said nothing. He had little to say in the best of times – and this was not the best of times.

Behind them, standing at a respectful distance, was a large crowd of onlookers. Most of them weren't saying anything but a few spoke in hushed tones. Rainbow Dash was right – a large portion of the town really had turned out. But this time there wasn't anything they could do to help. It was already too late.

The focus of everypony's attention was the apple tree that had snapped. The tree was an old

one that had grown to enormous size. From the outside it looked strong and healthy, but now that it was on the ground Twilight could see that it had decayed from within. Perhaps it had fallen victim to some sort of disease – it was hard to say. *It's no wonder it collapsed*, Twilight thought. *It must have been on the verge of breaking for a long time. All it would take to come crashing down was one sharp jolt at the wrong place.*

Beside the fallen tree stood a doctor and two nurses. They were packing up their medical equipment and preparing to leave. Twilight briefly wondered why they had bothered unpacking their gear at all. It only took a single glance to show how utterly hopeless the situation was.

Applejack must have gotten an early start to her day, Twilight realized. *She came out here and gave this tree a good, hard whack. Then the tree snapped, and – and fell.*

Twilight could not bear to look at the scene of the accident. When the tree fell over, it came straight down and utterly crushed Applejack. Her head was still intact, but that was all that was left of her. Everything else was simply gone.

She must have been running away from the tree when it fell, Twilight realized. *She heard the tree cracking and bolted for it – but couldn't get away fast enough. If she had only had one more*

second she might have made it. But she didn't.

The doctor saw Twilight and walked over to her. He put a hoof around her neck. "I'm very sorry," he said quietly. "I truly am. I know how much she meant to you – to all of us. But as you can see there's nothing we can do. If the tree had just been smaller then perhaps her earth pony strength..."

"I understand, Doc," Twilight replied, as tears ran down her face. "I know you would have helped if you could. Thanks for responding so quickly. Has everypony been told about the accident?"

"They're working on it," Doc replied. He walked back over to the tree and resumed packing his medical bag. "A message has been sent to Canterlot to inform Rarity. No doubt she will head back here as soon as she can. Rainbow Dash has also sent some pegasi to fly over the Everfree Forest to look for Fluttershy. No one really knows where she is, though, so it might take some time to find her. The Forest is a large place, after all. Still, I'm sure they will find her in time. The funeral probably won't be for several days, since it will take that long to make all the arrangements. I've already notified the—"

"Woah, woah woah," Rainbow Dash interrupted. "Hold on there! Twilight, you can fix

this, right? After all, you're an alicorn princess! Isn't there some magical spell you can use to fix Applejack?"

"Fix this?" Twilight echoed, uncertainly. "Look, I know how much this hurts – I really do. She was my friend too. This whole tragedy is just so senseless; I can't even take it all in. This feels so *wrong*. But there are no spells that can raise the dead. It just doesn't work that way."

"What about necromancy?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Aren't there forbidden dark magic spells you can use?"

"*Dark* magic?" Twilight repeated. "All dark magic can do is make things much worse. Even if there was some dark spell that could resurrect Applejack – and I've never even heard of such a thing – it would just turn her into some kind of undead monster. She wouldn't be the same pony who was your friend."

"Ok, fine. Then what about time travel? You've traveled back in time before, haven't you? Couldn't you just warn her not to go near that tree? Then she wouldn't die in the first place, and everything would be fine!"

The doctor looked surprised. "You have traveled back in time?"

"Just once," Twilight said. "It wasn't as exciting as it sounds."

“What are you talking about?” Pinkie interrupted. “I thought it was a lot of fun. Don't you remember breaking into the Canterlot library and trying to steal their top-secret spells?”

Twilight blushed. “Yes, I – wait. Pinkie, where did you come from?”

“I've been here all along,” the pink pony replied. She was sitting beside Big Mac. “In fact, I got here first. When I saw the accident I ran and told Rainbow Dash. My pinkie sense told me, you know. It was *awful*. I'd never felt anything like that before. I just knew something terrible had happened.”

“Are you ok?” Twilight said. “How are you handling this?”

“Well...” Pinkie said slowly. “I was really super sad at first. But when I found Rainbow Dash, she told me you could fix this. If you *can* fix it then there's no reason to be sad anymore, right?”

Twilight quickly looked at the blue pegasus. “You told her *what*?”

“Like I said – time travel!” Rainbow said quickly. “You've done it before, so you can do it again, right? How hard could it be?”

“It's not that easy. Yes, time travel is possible, but the spell I used was a one-time deal. The pony who casts it can never cast it again.”

“Who cares if it's against the rules?”

Rainbow Dash scoffed. "What – do you think Celestia is going to throw you in prison or something for saving your friend? I'm sure we can explain the situation to her. After all, this is Applejack we're talking about!"

"It's not *illegal* – it's impossible! You don't understand. Some spells can be cast over and over again. Other spells can only be cast once. After you cast them, the spell changes you and you can never cast it again. It's just the nature of that spell."

Rainbow Dash frowned. "No way! That doesn't make any sense. Are you sure about that?"

"It all goes back to the nature of magic," Twilight explained. "Not all spells are the same. Most spells can be used repeatedly, but there are entire classes of spells that are more complicated than that. There are some spells that can only be used on certain days of the year, or under certain lunar cycles. Some spells are time-limited – after you use them once, you can only keep using them for a fixed period of time and then you can never use them again. The time spell is in that category, only its lifetime is less than a second, which effectively makes it a single-use spell. If you're interested I have a good book on magic theory that you can borrow."

"No thanks," Rainbow replied, shaking her head. "That just sounds really arbitrary to me. And unfair."

"Magic can be like that," Twilight agreed. "Why do zap apples like bright colors and loud noises? Why do the apples respond to someone dressing in a bunny suit and hopping around? Magic doesn't always make sense. That's why it's called magic."

"It's like eating a muffin," Pinkie chimed in. "Once you eat it, you can't eat that same muffin again. The muffin just isn't there anymore."

"All right," Rainbow said, irritated. "Fine – so *you* can't go back in time again. But why can't someone else do it? Like Celestia, or Luna. Or even Moondancer, for that matter. I bet *she's* never traveled through time before."

"Probably not," Twilight agreed. "The time travel spells are kept in the restricted section of the Canterlot Library, and Celestia doesn't let very many ponies near them. I'm pretty sure that Moondancer doesn't have access to them. But Rainbow, traveling back in time isn't going to help. You can't change the past."

"Sure you can! Just send someone back to warn Applejack. It's easy! It'll just take, like, a second."

Twilight shook her head. "That's not what I

mean. The past *cannot* be changed. After my own experience with time travel, I looked into it and discovered that nopony has *ever* been able to change the past by traveling backwards in time. Instead of changing things, they end up causing the very thing they wanted to prevent – which is exactly what happened to me. If you were transported back in time and tried to warn Applejack, you would end up *causing* the tree to fall on her. In other words, you would become *directly responsible* for her death. Do you really want that?”

“Of course not! But – there's got to be *something*. You can't just leave her like that! She was your friend, wasn't she?”

“She was a true friend,” Twilight replied softly. She looked at the tree and then quickly looked away. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Apple Bloom was still crying. Twilight knew that if she didn't do something soon, her grief would overwhelm her and she would completely fall apart. “I would do anything to save her.”

“Then *try*,” Rainbow Dash said. “Take her remains back to your castle and read a book on raising the dead, or something. You have to at least *try*.”

“I'm afraid Twilight is right,” Doc commented. “There really is nothing that can be

done. Applejack isn't just injured, Rainbow Dash; she is crushed. No amount of healing is going to help – not even magical healing. Her body would need to be completely reconstructed, and that simply isn't possible.”

“So? What harm will it do to try?” Rainbow demanded. “If Twilight comes up with nothing then we can bury Applejack's remains and that's that. But if Twilight *does* find something then we get Applejack back. Isn't it at least worth trying?”

“No one has ever done anything like that before,” Doc said. “If it was possible, somepony would have figured it out long ago. Death isn't exactly a new problem, you know. You're not the first pony to lose a friend.”

“Oh yeah? Well, Twilight's done *lots* of things that nopony has ever done before! Maybe she'll do it again.”

The doctor did not appear convinced. He looked over at Big Mac, who hadn't said a word. “What do you think about all this? Are you willing to let Princess Twilight give this rather morbid experiment a try?”

Big Mac didn't even hesitate. “Yup.”

“Me too!” Pinkie exclaimed. “What? I'm part Apple too, you know!”

Apple Bloom looked at Twilight. She tried to wipe her tears away with her hooves. “Please,

Twilight, ya gotta help us. Please give me my big sister back.”

No pressure there, Twilight thought. But she couldn't bear to tell the little filly no. She had to at least *try*.

“All right,” Twilight replied. “I can't promise anything, and I don't want to get your hopes up, but I'll see what I can do. Doc, can you have Applejack's remains brought to the castle? Please be careful with her.”

“Well, I suppose I can, if you're sure you want to do this,” Doc said, shaking his head. “I don't think this is wise but I'm not going to try to stop you. I still think the family should be making funeral arrangements.”

“Just give me a week,” Twilight begged. “I'll know by then if anything can be done.”

“All right,” Doc agreed. “Since that's what the family wants, I'll help. Her remains will be delivered to you later today.”

Twilight nodded. “Thanks. Um, I guess I'll be going, then. I've got a lot of studying to do.”

“And I'm going to be right there with you,” Rainbow Dash announced.

“What?” Twilight exclaimed, startled. “Why?”

“Because Applejack was my friend too, and I'm going to do whatever it takes to fix this!

Whatever. It. Takes. I'm not leaving until we get her back."

"But you're not a unicorn!" Twilight protested. "You're not even capable of doing magic. How could you possibly help? This isn't really your field."

"I can help in lots of ways," Rainbow said defensively. "I can run errands, and fetch books, and make coffee, and keep you awake until you figure something out. You're going to need somepony to handle all that mundane stuff so you can focus on the task at hand."

Twilight looked at her friend. It was obvious that the pegasus was in a lot of pain and that she desperately wanted to fix this situation. The word *denial* came to mind. *She really does blame herself for this*, Twilight thought. *She's trying to deal with her guilt by offering to help. Well, I won't turn her down. She is the element of loyalty, after all. I'm not going to deny her the chance to be loyal.*

"All right," Twilight agreed. "Thank you, Rainbow. The first thing that I'm going to need is all the research that's available on raising the dead. I'm sure there must be material on this in Canterlot – probably in a restricted section somewhere. If you could make a trip there and fetch—"

"Already on it!" Rainbow Dash interrupted. She leaped into the sky and zoomed off.

After she was gone, the doctor looked at Twilight. "I mean no offense, your highness, but why are you patronizing her? This isn't going to work."

"It's *gotta* work," Apple Bloom shouted. "You've gotta save her!"

Twilight looked over at the Apple family. *I have to stay strong for them*, she thought, as she felt her grief rising. *There's got to be some hope left. There's just got to be.*

"I'll let you know what I find," she said aloud. "I – I mean, I'm so sorry—"

"I know," Big Mac said.

"Let me know if I can help," Pinkie added. "I know you can do this."

Granny Smith nodded. "If anyone can, it's Twilight. She's a smart one. Smartest pony I've ever seen."

Twilight shut her eyes and leaped into the sky. She couldn't see where she was going, and she didn't care. She was on the verge of breaking down and she just needed to be alone.

* * * * *

That afternoon found Twilight hard at work

in her castle's enormous library. Books were stacked all around her, and even more books were scattered haphazardly on the table and all over the floor. Her library was in complete disarray, but for once she just didn't care. She was looking for something – for a solution – and she was finding nothing.

The castle was utterly silent. Spike was still in the Crystal Empire and wouldn't be back for several days. No one else was home, and the lack of noise and chatter was oppressive. She was tempted to put on some music, but this wasn't the time for that. The princess just wasn't in the mood.

Twilight had hoped that a little time and a space would make her feel better, but she had been proven wrong. Somehow crying only made her feel worse, and being alone only compounded the problem. When nothing helped, she finally forced herself to stop dwelling on her grief and instead focus on the situation at hand. *Think of it as a test*, Twilight thought. *You're great at tests! All you have to do is find the answer.*

But as far as Twilight could tell, there was no answer to be found.

Rainbow Dash had still not returned from Canterlot, but Twilight wasn't surprised. The journey to Equestria's capitol was not a short one,

and when Rainbow did come back she would be bringing with her a large pile of manuscripts and books. Twilight didn't expect to see her again until the next day.

An hour ago the doctor had come by. True to his word, he delivered Applejack's corpse to the castle in a simple wooden coffin. Twilight had his assistants carry the coffin down into a large, empty room in the castle's basement. The princess forced herself to peek inside, to see how much of her friend was even left to be resurrected. She instantly regretted it.

Twilight cast a spell on the coffin to keep the remains from decaying, and then headed back upstairs. The spell wouldn't preserve them forever, but it would at least halt the process for a while. That would buy her time – but all the time in the world wouldn't help if there was no solution to be found. There were some things that even magic can't do.

“I know what needs to be done,” Twilight said out loud. “All I have to do is somehow build a new body for Applejack. Then, somehow, take her brain and transfer her memories and personality from her crushed body to her new one. Then I need to somehow bring that new body to life.”

Twilight sighed. “*Somehow*. But none of this has ever been done before! Oh, what am I going

to do?”

Chapter 2: “There isn’t a spell that just lets you create things out of nothing?”

Twilight felt somepony shaking her. “C'mon, Twilight, wake up!”

The purple alicorn slowly opened her eyes. She was exhausted, she was sore, and she did *not* want to be awake. “What's the emergency? Is the castle on fire?”

“You fell asleep! You're supposed to be working, remember? We have a deadline!”

Twilight's eyes finally came into focus, and she realized that Rainbow Dash was talking to her. *Why did I fall asleep in my library, and why is Rainbow here? What could possibly—*

Then she remembered, and a flood of grief and sorrow washed over her. Applejack had died three days ago. If anything, the feeling of loss had only grown with time.

“I brought you some coffee,” Rainbow Dash said cheerfully. She set a steaming white cup down onto the desk – and right on top of a rare, first-edition book. “It's nice and fresh! Pinkie told me that it's a special blend that is great at keeping

ponies awake.”

“You talked to Pinkie?” Twilight said groggily. She levitated the cup off the book and put it on a coaster. “But it’s dark outside. What time is it, anyway?”

“Oh, I dunno. 3 am, maybe? Could be 4, I guess.”

“*Three in the morning?*” Twilight exclaimed. “You got Pinkie up at three in the morning? Are you out of your mind? She was probably trying to sleep!”

“Oh, she was fine,” Rainbow said casually. “She wasn’t upset at all, once I told her what I was doing. In fact, everyone in Equestria has been eager to help. The whole country is pulling for you to bring Applejack back to full health.”

“All of Equestria?” Twilight echoed. “Just how many ponies have you told about this?”

“Just, like, *everyone*,” Rainbow Dash bragged. “I mean, c’mon! It’s been four days, and we only have three left.”

“I thought it had only been three days.”

Rainbow shrugged. “Well, it’s after midnight now, so technically it has been four days. But enough with the chatter. This is the time to be hustling, not sleeping!”

“But I am so tired. I need to *sleep*, Rainbow. If I can just get some sleep then maybe I can clear

my mind. I can't think when I'm this tired."

"Sure, sure, I get it," the pegasus replied. "But just look at your desk! You've got books opened, and hoof-written notes, and there's a gizmo thingey there. You were in the middle of something, right? A breakthrough, maybe?"

Twilight suddenly remembered something. "Wait a minute! I sent you to Manehattan on an errand. What are you doing back here so quickly?"

"Oh, I hustled," Rainbow replied. "I couldn't wait until morning, so I just flew all night to get back. You know – the quicker I get back, the quicker Applejack returns. No time to waste!"

"You flew all the way from Manehattan to Ponyville? And *at night*? But that's a journey of at—"

"Eh, no biggie. Not for a pro like me, anyway! The stuff that you wanted is right over there in that bag. I'm glad I had you write all those names down, by the way. I couldn't even pronounce half of them. What do they do, anyway?"

"They're for use in mental transfer spells," Twilight explained. "If I can somehow create a new body for Applejack then we're going to have to – wait a minute, did I send you any bits to pay for those items?"

"No worries – I covered it," Rainbow Dash

said quickly. "It's not a big deal."

Twilight Sparkle sat up straight. "Rainbow, it is a big deal! That equipment is very costly and very rare. You can't possibly afford that kind of expense!"

"What we can't afford is to *fail*," Rainbow said. "And we're not going to. Right?"

Twilight sighed. "I don't know. I just don't know. I mean, I'm trying, but I just don't see how we can pull this off. No one has ever done anything like this before. To be honest, I think this is completely impossible. Applejack is gone, Rainbow. We're not going to get her back."

Rainbow Dash froze. She stood there, staring at Twilight. She didn't say a word. "It's not true," she said, her voice wavering. "Applejack isn't dead! She can't be. She *can't* be." Tears began to form in her eyes. "Tell me it's not true! Tell me you can bring her back."

Twilight paused before saying anything. *I've tried everything I know to try. I've read every book on this subject. There's nothing left to do. It's over.*

But she could not bear to crush her friend. "Fine," she sighed. "I'll give it one more try. But I'm just too tired to think right now. Can you make sure that no one disturbs me? If I can just get some sleep then maybe I can think of something."

"Got it," Rainbow said. "If you need anything

else just let me know.” The blue pegasus darted out of the room, closing the library door behind her.

Twilight was going to say something else, but she was too tired. She sunk into her chair and fell back to sleep.

* * * * *

Once again she felt someone shaking her. “Twilight? Are you awake yet? Have you had enough sleep?”

Twilight opened her eyes. This time she felt more rested. She was still sore, but that was probably due to sleeping in a chair instead of her bed. Light was streaming through the window, which meant that Celestia had raised the sun. Morning had come.

“Yes, I’m awake,” Twilight told Rainbow Dash. She yawned, then got up and stretched her legs. “Thanks for letting me sleep.”

“No problem! I told you that I’d make sure you weren’t disturbed, and that is exactly what I did. nopony gets through on *my* watch! Can I get you anything for breakfast?”

Something about Rainbow Dash’s tone of voice struck her. “What’s that? What did you do, Rainbow?”

"Just making sure you got a good night's rest! That's all. Nothing much, really."

"Why?" Twilight asked. "Did someone come by?"

"Well, yeah. Princess Celestia came over. She wanted to talk to you about your research. Celestia said something about it not being healthy to keep obsessing over the dead, or something like that. To be honest, I didn't quite catch everything she said. Once I realized she wanted you to give up I kinda stopped listening to her. I just sent her straight back to Canterlot. She didn't even make it through the front door."

"You did *what*?" Twilight exclaimed. "You sent *Princess Celestia* away?"

"Of course I did! You wanted your sleep, right? So I made sure you got your sleep."

Twilight winced. "I am really going to have to apologize to her. If Celestia wants to talk to me—"

"You can talk to her after you've succeeded," Rainbow Dash insisted.

"But if she wants me to stop—"

Rainbow interrupted her. "You can stop when Applejack is back. I'm sure she'll forgive you. It'll be fine. So, where do you want to start?"

Twilight sighed. She looked at the giant mess that had once been her well-organized library. There was nothing but chaos and diagrams as far

as the eye could see. “Well, um, let's see. If we had a body, we could probably transfer whatever is left of Applejack's mind into that body. That is, provided the mind in the new body was blank, and the body was in working order. Since Applejack's head is still intact—”

“Great!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “I'll go grab you a body. Does it have to be an earth pony?”

Twilight turned pale. “Wait! Hold it right there. You *cannot* go and dig up some random corpse in order to get a body. The body has to be *alive*. That's the whole problem! If we could somehow create a new body for Applejack that was exactly like her old one, then we might have a chance of pulling this off. But there's just no way to do that. There is no 'create a cloned body out of a blood sample' spell.”

“No worries – I'll just grab a living earth pony, then. I'm sure you've got a 'mind erase' spell, right? Then you can just transplant Applejack's mind into that one, and—”

“We are *not* going to do that,” Twilight said firmly. “There is no way I'm going to kidnap some random earth pony and sacrifice their mind just to get our friend back. Even if I was willing to do that – and I am *not* – Applejack would never stand for it. As soon as she found out what you had

done she would knock you into next week. She would be *furiosus*."

"But what if the pony was willing?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Like, um, me, for instance? Would you do it then? I mean, I know I'm a pegasus and all, but—"

"No, Rainbow, we're not doing that either. It's very noble of you to offer, but I'm not going to sacrifice one of my friends in order to save the other. Do you really think Applejack would be happy with that?"

"But she'd at least be alive," Rainbow replied stubbornly.

"But *you* wouldn't." Twilight sighed. "No, we're going to have to come up with a different solution."

"So you're *sure* you can't just make one? There isn't a spell that just lets you create things out of nothing? Like, 'Hey, make me some—'"

"—cupcakes!" Twilight finished. "Of course! Could it be that easy?"

"Cupcakes?" Rainbow Dash asked, surprised. "What in Equestria do we want cupcakes for? We can get all the cupcakes we want from Pinkie. She's, like, the cupcake champion. We don't need a magical spell for that."

"But there was one time Pinkie created cupcakes out of thin air with pure magic," Twilight

said excitedly. "That may be the answer!"

"She did what? No way! Pinkie's not a unicorn, Twilight. She's never used magic in her life."

"Have you already forgotten that one time we got sucked into that Power Ponies comic book and became superheroes?" Twilight asked. "What was the very last thing that Pinkie did when she was Filli-Second?"

"Um, let me think. Didn't she go and get cupcakes or something?"

"That's exactly what she did. Before that comic book disappeared she went to the bakery, grabbed cupcakes, and took them *out of the book and into the real world.*"

Twilight grinned. She felt a heavy, dark cloud lift from her spirit for the first time in days. "I know what to do now. I think we may have a chance after all! It's time for me to run an errand."

"Great! Let me do it. What do you need?"

"No, I'll handle this," Twilight insisted. "I've got something else I need you to do."

Rainbow looked at her, frowning. "Well, ok, but are you sure about this? Are you really going to go out into Ponyville looking like that?"

"What do you mean? Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, I'll say there's a problem! You haven't bathed in, like, four days. There are actual flies

buzzing around your head. I'm pretty sure nobody is going to let you get anywhere near them – even if you are a princess. Ponies have standards, you know.”

Twilight trotted over to a mirror and looked at herself. “Oh. Right! I guess I kinda forgot. So why didn't you say something before now?”

“Priorities, of course! We have bigger things to worry about right now than your mane style.”

“My mane style!” Twilight exclaimed. “Oh my goodness! I completely forgot about Rarity and Fluttershy. Did anypony ever find them?”

“Yeah, that's old news,” Rainbow Dash replied. “Rarity got back in town two days ago, and they found Fluttershy yesterday. I told them not to bother you, though. You're pretty busy right now.”

“You... told... them... not... to... bother... me.” Twilight said slowly. “I am going to owe so many apologies when this is over. Who else has been trying to see me that I don't know about?”

“Um, well, a lot of ponies, I guess?” Rainbow replied carefully. “Don't worry, though – I've got it covered. Spike is staying with Rarity until you're done.”

Twilight face-hoofed. “You told *Spike* not to return to *his own home*?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess he does kind of live here,”

Rainbow said. "Oops. My bad."

"*Go get him,*" Twilight growled. "Then clean up this library. Spike knows how I keep my books organized, so you can consult with him to learn the proper filing procedure. While you do that I'm going to go and take a bath, and then I'm going on an errand. When I return we will have a lot of work to do."

"Got it!" the pegasus said. She raced out the door.

* * * * *

An hour later a clean and refreshed Twilight Sparkle walked up to a small store that was tucked away in a corner of Ponyville. On her head she wore her crown – which was quite unusual for her – and over her flank she had her trusty saddlebag. The bag seemed unusually full.

When the princess made her way through Ponyville in search of that particular store, the residents of the city were glad to see her. It was the first time Twilight had set hoof outside the castle since the day Applejack died. A few ponies walked over to speak with her, but when they saw the determined look on her face they backed away. It was clear to everypony that Twilight was on a mission and did *not* want to be disturbed.

The princess glanced up at the wooden sign that hung over the door. In old, elegant letters it read "Ponyville Comic Emporium". *This must be it*, she thought. The princess opened the door and walked inside.

Twilight had spent countless hours in bookstores, but she had never been inside this particular store before. Up until today, comic books had held no interest to her whatsoever. A good book on history could keep her intrigued for hours, but comics were a completely different matter.

She was therefore surprised to see that this was not like any bookstore she had ever visited. The shelves were lined with more than just comics. There were giant posters, clothing, records, action figures, and merchandise of all kinds. It was a bit overwhelming. A few ponies loitered around, browsing. All of them stopped and stared at her when she walked in.

No one dared to say anything to her.

Twilight was going to say something, but then a particular item caught her attention. She walked over to it to get a closer look. When she realized what it was her eyes widened. "You have action figures of *me*?" she said incredulously.

"Of course!" Frosted Arrow called out from behind the cash register. He quickly walked over

to the princess. "As a matter of fact, you're a very popular item. Only Princess Luna outsells you. We have you in both alicorn and unicorn varieties – there are a few die-hards who prefer the older models. We also have the rest of the Elements of Harmony."

"That's crazy," Twilight said. She levitated the figure off the shelf and brought it closer to her. The detail was impressive – her cutie mark was right, her mane was captured perfectly, and she could see every feather on her wings. "Why didn't I know about this?"

"I have no idea. I'm sure Celestia is sending you your cut of the licensing revenue. This is all official merchandise, you know. Besides, didn't you notice that Spike had a Rarity doll? Where did you think he got it?"

"I guess I thought he made it himself," Twilight said.

"Oh, not at all! You see, you and your friends are heroes, and heroes are big business. A lot of ponies wish that they could be you. Playing with your action figures is sort of the next best thing."

"That is really weird," Twilight commented. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"You should be honored," the white stallion replied. "It means you're loved."

"How would you feel if they sold action

figures of *you*?”

“Actually, that would be really cool! I should check into that.”

Frosted Arrow smiled. “But I’m sure you didn’t come in here to talk about that. How can I help you, princess? I have to admit I’m a bit surprised to see you in here. I thought you weren’t interested in our products. You made that pretty clear the last time we talked.”

“Well, ordinarily, they’re not really my thing,” Twilight admitted. “But I’ve been a bit busy lately, as you might have heard.”

A shadow came across Frosted Arrow’s face. “Oh, right – Applejack. I am so sorry about what happened. I never had a chance to meet her, but I know she was a true hero. I’m sure you must miss her terribly.”

“Well, actually, that’s why I’m here. Do you have any enchanted comics?”

“Well, sure, we carry comics from that publisher,” Frosted Arrow replied, a bit confused. “Was Spike missing a particular issue?”

“No no no – that’s not what I mean. Do you have any comics that are actually enchanted?”

“Oh – ok, sorry. Yes, we carry those too. I thought Spike didn’t like those, though.”

Twilight shook her head. “These aren’t for Spike – they’re for me. I want all of them that you

have.”

“Really?” Arrow asked in amazement. “Wow. Well, let's see. The only line of comics that was ever produced that was actually enchanted was the Power Ponies storyline. I've got quite a few of them in stock, but I'm missing a couple of the earlier issues—”

“I don't care which ones you have,” Twilight said quickly. “I just want all of them. As in, all copies of all of them that you have in stock.”

“Are you kidding?” Arrow exclaimed. “What could you possibly want with nine copies of issue #7? I mean, I admit it was a pretty good issue, but—”

“Just give them to me,” Twilight interrupted. “I need them. It's very important.”

“Well, if that's what you want,” Arrow said slowly. “I've got to warn you, though, they're pretty expensive. It takes a lot of skill to enchant those issues, and that really impacts the price. Each one has to be enchanted separately – they can't be mass produced like the others. At fifty bits an issue, that will cost at least—”

Twilight Sparkle ignored him and walked over to the counter. Using her magic, she opened her saddlebag and brought out an enormous bag of bits. She levitated the bag over the counter and turned it upside-down. A shower of golden bits

rained everywhere, covering the counter and cascading onto the floor.

"I am a princess of Equestria," she said in a determined tone. "Money is no object. I want *all* of them. *Now*. This is a matter of life and death."

Frosted Arrow looked at the pile of bits, and then back at the princess. "Are the rumors true, then? Are you really trying to raise Applejack from the dead? I just couldn't believe that a pony as smart as you would attempt anything that crazy, but I guess I was wrong. Is *that* what this is all about? Because if it is, I have to tell you that these are just comic books. You're not going to find Applejack in them. The Power Ponies may have been inspired by you and your friends, but they're just *stories*, princess. Nothing in them is real."

"Just give them to me," Twilight said. "I know what I'm doing."

"All right, if you insist," Arrow replied. "Never let it be said that I refused to help a paying customer. The issues that you want are right over there. Let me bag them for you."

"Thank you," Twilight replied.

Chapter 3: “That was pretty freaky. Did it work?”

Rainbow Dash stood guard outside the door to Twilight's crystal castle. Her sharp eyes scanned the evening sky for signs of trouble. “I just know they're out there,” she muttered to herself. “I can feel it. They think they can pull a fast one, do they? Well, no one's faster than me! Just try something – I dare you.”

The sun was low on the horizon and cast long shadows upon Ponyville. Luna was just moments away from raising the moon and plunging the world into darkness. Some ponies loved the night; others were terrified of it. But this time Rainbow Dash was guarding against a very different kind of twilight.

In the distance the pegasus heard a humming sound. The noise was faint at first; in fact, it was so muted that she wasn't quite sure if she was really hearing it or not. Then, slowly, the ominous buzzing grew in intensity. As the full moon began to rise in the sky and take the place of the sun, Rainbow Dash spied a swirling dark cloud that was rapidly moving in her direction.

Changelings!

Rainbow was tempted to dive right into them and knock them into next week, but she held her ground. *Come on – get a little closer*, she thought to herself. *You're not going to get inside this castle, you little monsters! I'm going to buck you so hard you'll–*

The blue pegasus felt something shaking her. She glanced around but didn't see anything. "Who's there?" she called out.

Something shook her again – and then she heard a different sound over the roar of the oncoming changeling army. "Rainbow Dash, wake up! I need your help!"

To Rainbow's dismay, the dream vanished. *Figures it'd end just when things were getting good*, she thought. Since going back to sleep apparently wasn't an option, she opened her eyes and looked around. The room around her was dark, lit by eerie glowing lights. She could see shadows but she couldn't make out any shapes. "What's going on?" she called out.

"Come on, Rainbow, I need your help!" the voice repeated.

"Gimme a minute," Rainbow said groggily. "I feel like I've been run over by a train. Just hold on, will ya?"

Rainbow Dash stretched, yawned, and tried

to get her eyes to focus. This was the first time she had fallen asleep in several days, and she found it very difficult to regain consciousness. It took her several minutes of effort to finally be able to focus on what was going on. What she saw was deeply unnerving.

Rainbow was in the lowest level of Twilight's castle, in a large room with a cobblestone floor and crystal walls. The walls were covered with enormous arcane symbols that gave her the creeps. Half of the symbols were glowing an eerie red light, and occasionally a random symbol pulsed and emitted a low tone. *Are the walls trying to talk?* Rainbow wondered. *What has Twilight been doing? When did she have time to do all that?*

Rainbow glanced at the floor. In the middle of the room was a large red circle that was filled with even more symbols she had never seen before. In the center of the circle was a black void. Its surface rippled, as if it was a liquid pool of pure nothingness. It did not look inviting.

The only light in the room – aside from the eerie glow that the magical writing emitted – came from the fireplace that was a few feet in front of her. Rainbow Dash had fallen asleep in an overstuffed easy chair that was right in front of the fire. The flames, though, weren't yellow; they

were a sinister green color. Most fires put out a lot of heat, but this one somehow made the room colder. Just looking at it seemed to sap the warmth from her blood.

In front of the fireplace was a large bag of gold. *No, scratch that – there are six bags,* Rainbow realized. *Where did Twilight get all that money? And why does she keep it in here?*

Most of the floor space was occupied by two long wooden tables, which were arranged in parallel to each other. The wooden tables were covered with books, parchments, multicolored crystals, and the magical instruments that Rainbow had purchased from Manehattan a few days ago. She also saw a couple comic books lying around, and even more comic books stacked on the floor. A few of them were pretty tattered; two of them looked like they had once been on fire. *Somepony has certainly been busy. Apparently I missed some good stuff.*

In the far corner of the room, not far from the tables, was a plain wooden coffin. Rainbow Dash didn't have to ask who was in it; she already knew. The sight of the coffin reminded her what was going on.

“Do I need to shake you again?” Twilight asked impatiently. “Are you awake now?”

Rainbow Dash turned her head and saw that

Twilight Sparkle was standing right behind her. Compared to the room they were in, she looked surprisingly normal. "Twilight, are you seeing all this? This dungeon of yours is one of the creepiest things I've ever seen! This is all just a dream, right?"

A puzzled look came across Twilight's face. "I don't understand. What's wrong with my lab?"

"Nothing, I guess. I just – oh, forget it." Rainbow yawned. "Couldn't you have let me sleep for just five more minutes? I was having the best dream ever!"

"Really? Do you mean you were dreaming about reading books?"

"Of course not! That's crazy. No, I was dreaming about a changeling invasion. This huge flock of 'em was heading straight for this castle, and I was—"

Twilight shuddered. "I *hate* changelings! That sounds more like a nightmare to me. Since changelings can change into anything, you can never tell what's real and what isn't. They make you doubt the reality of your best friends and everything around you. I am so glad they never returned."

"But kicking their tail was so much fun!" Rainbow exclaimed.

"Really? I'm pretty sure that they kicked *our*

tail. If it wasn't for Cadence and Shining Armor we'd all be changeling food right now."

"Aw, we got some good whacks in there," Rainbow insisted.

Twilight shook her head. "Enough about dreams – we've got some work to do. I need your help."

"Great! So – what can I do?"

Twilight walked over to the long table that was nearest to them and levitated a few pieces of white parchment. "Well, first, you can sit and listen while I explain to you what's going on."

Rainbow Dash groaned. "Aw, c'mon, can't we just cut straight to the action? You know magic's not my thing. I don't care *how* you bring Applejack back; I just want to have her back. I promise I won't tell anypony that you've been using forbidden dark magic."

Twilight looked startled. "Dark magic? Where do you see dark magic?"

"Um, like, *everywhere*? Hello, but do you not see what's going on? The walls are trying to talk, you have a fire that burns *cold*, and you somehow created a pool of nothing. You can't tell me any of that is healthy."

The purple alicorn shook her head. "It's not what you think – really. Yes, the green fire is a little weird, but it didn't start out that way. Apparently

that's what happens to flames when you burn enchanted books. I'm not really sure why; I'll have to study it one day. It doesn't seem to do any harm, though.

"The symbols on the walls are needed to keep this room stable. Some of the things we're doing in here are just a *little* tiny bit dangerous. The 'pool of nothingness', as you call it, is actually a pool of *unmatter*. It's sort of an undefined metamaterial that responds to magic in interesting ways. I need a lot of it because it's what the books are made of. Originally I thought the books were just enchanted paper, but it turns out—"

"Blah blah magic magic," Rainbow interrupted. "I don't really care. Have you got it to work? Can we get Applejack back?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you! This is all really complicated. I'm pretty sure that I'm making progress, but I need to think this through. That's why I need you to sit there and pretend to be a rubber duck."

"You need *what*?" Rainbow Dash turned pale. "Look, I want to help and all, but *please* don't turn me into anything unnatural. I really, *really* like being a pegasus."

Twilight grinned. "That's not what I mean! You see, Rainbow, creating new magic is actually

really hard. It's like trying to solve a complicated math problem. One of the tricks they teach you in magic school is the rubber duck technique. Basically, what you do is take a rubber duck and explain whatever problem you're having to that duck. The act of explaining the problem in detail is usually enough to show you what you're doing wrong."

"That sounds, like, *really* dumb."

"I know, but it really does work! It's just a way to think through something that's complicated."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Fine. So you need me to sit here and do nothing while you say things that I don't understand, right? I think I can do that. But, like, couldn't you have done that while I was *asleep*? You don't expect the duck to talk back, do you?"

"Well, there's more to it," Twilight replied. She hesitated. "I'm going to need a favor from you at the end of this conversation, and you probably won't like it. But we'll get to that."

Rainbow settled into the chair and yawned. "So. Yesterday you went to the store and bought all those comic books. Then you poked them for hours and I kinda fell asleep out of boredom."

Twilight nodded. "Right. The reason I bought all those comic books was to study how their magic worked. I learned some interesting things.

First of all, you can enchant a comic to contain anything you want. You can create any world that you can imagine – even worlds that don't make any sense and that violate all the laws of physics. As long as you are inside the comic it is completely real. However, there's a catch: you can't take anything *out* of the comic. All of the new magical things that get created are forever trapped inside the comic.”

“Really?” Rainbow Dash asked. “That doesn't sound right. Are you sure? I mean, Pinkie was able to swipe those cupcakes, remember?”

“Exactly! That's what told me it actually *was* possible to create things out of pure magic. It turns out you're not supposed to be able to do that. The only reason Pinkie succeeded was because of her enormous speed – she was Filli-Second, remember? Because she moved with incredible speed she was able to bypass the barrier and bring something out of the comic and into the real world.”

Twilight shuffled through the notes she was levitating. “Once I realized what was going on, I developed a new type of enchantment that didn't have that limitation. I was able to create a new comic book, write the definition for a bag of bits, and then bring it out of the comic and into the real world.”

"So *that's* why there are six bags of bits over here," Rainbow commented. "I was wondering where you got all that money."

"Right. So, as I was saying, hyperspeed is no longer a problem. However—"

Rainbow interrupted her. "Wait a minute! You can create *bits*? Doesn't that mean you can create infinite wealth? You could be the richest pony in all of Equestria!"

"Who cares about bits?" Twilight asked. "I think you're missing the point. The only reason you need bits is to buy things. I don't need bits anymore because I can make *anything I want*. Making bits is just a waste of time. At least, it will be, after I figure all of this out."

Rainbow started to say something else, but Twilight silenced her with a wave of her hoof. "Quiet, rubber duck! As I was saying, I discovered a reliable way to extract things from the enchanted comic. However, that's when I discovered the next problem. When the story is over the comic vanishes, and anything created by the book disappears 47 seconds later."

"Really? Then why didn't those cupcakes that Pinkie swiped disappear?"

"Have you ever seen a cupcake last an entire 47 seconds around Pinkie Pie?"

"Point taken," Rainbow replied.

Twilight continued. "So far I haven't found a way around that particular limitation. However, I *did* come up with a way to keep the comic from self-destructing. I can enter and leave the comic at will and take whatever I want out of it. As long as the comic itself isn't destroyed, anything that I take out of it will continue to exist."

Rainbow looked at all the money that was sitting by the fireplace. "So all that money would just disappear? Just 'poof' and it's gone?"

Twilight nodded. "Bits are really easy to experiment with because they're small, simple objects that are easy to define. As long as I don't destroy the source comic, those bits will continue to exist. In fact, they're actually completely indistinguishable from ordinary bits. If I destroy the comic, though..."

Using her magic, Twilight levitated a brown book off the desk and tossed it into the fire. The book erupted into green flames and turned into ash. Twilight then grabbed a stopwatch and started counting. Less than a minute later, one of the bags of bits disappeared. "See? Exactly 47 seconds!"

"Ok," Rainbow said slowly. "So you're telling me that when we bring Applejack back, her life will depend on the comic that we got her from?"

"For now," Twilight replied. "I'm sure there's

a way around that limitation, but we're running out of time. This is late into day 5, and her corpse is going to start decaying if we don't act now. I'll solve that particular problem later. Until I can sever the connection without losing the object, we'll just need to make sure that nothing happens to her comic. That won't be a problem, though. I can enchant comics with a preservation spell and have them last hundreds of years. They're a lot easier to preserve than the dead."

"Well, that's good, I guess," Rainbow replied. "So can you do it? Can you bring Applejack back? You *can*, right?"

"I think so. The thing is, I want to do this as precisely as possible. There are a couple different ways to bring her back. One option would be to just write a definition for her, the way I did for the bits. That's not really precise enough for me, though. I don't want to create a pony that matches what I thought she was like; I want to bring the real thing back. I want the new Applejack to be *exactly* like the original one. Any definition I could possibly write would leave things out. She would be missing things – maybe really important things."

"That makes sense," Rainbow replied. "So if writing a 'definition' – whatever *that* means – isn't good enough, then what's your plan?"

“Well, my plan has two parts. The first thing we will do is take a sample of her blood. I'll then use my magic to extract the genetic material out of her blood and merge it with the comic. That way the comic will have her exact physical makeup. It will be a perfect definition! Once we've made sure that worked, I'll use a memory spell to copy the memories from her brain and merge them into the comic. If all goes well and the comic doesn't catch fire, the new Applejack will have the same body and mind as the original.”

“The *new* Applejack?” Rainbow Dash asked, confused.

“That's right. That's what we're doing here – we're using magic to recreate Applejack.”

“So we're not *really* raising her from the dead, then,” Rainbow replied. “We're actually creating a copy of her.”

Twilight shook her head. “It's not like that. Think of it this way. Since Applejack's old body was completely destroyed, we're going to create a new one for her. We will then copy her mind into that new body. When it's done we will have a living, breathing Applejack.”

“And you're sure this is the same thing as raising her from the dead? I mean, I don't know about all this magical stuff and all, but it sounds kinda different to me.”

“Positive,” Twilight replied firmly. “There won't be any difference whatsoever between the old Applejack and the new one. They will be just like the bits – identical in every way.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Let's get to it!”

“That's why I need you,” Twilight replied. She levitated a needle off the table and gave it to Rainbow. “Could you, um, use this to take a vial of her blood and fill that small beaker right there? It's just that – well, her corpse – that is, ...”

Rainbow grimaced. “Can't you get Spike to do it? I mean, not that I'm afraid or anything, but I don't exactly have medical training. I'm more of a flying pony.”

“And you think that Spike *does* have medical training? Seriously, Rainbow. Yes, normally I could just ask Spike, but he's upstairs asleep. He's had a long day and he needs his rest. He is just a baby dragon, you know.”

“Fine, fine, I'll do it,” Rainbow muttered. “Never let it be said that I left a friend hangin'.”

The blue pegasus walked over to the coffin and raised the lid. When she saw what was inside she shuddered and closed her eyes. “All right, c'mon. You can do this. For Applejack. Just pull yourself together.” Rainbow steeled herself, opened her eyes, and used the needle to extract

a small amount of Applejack's blood. She then quickly closed the coffin, carried the needle over to the table, and filled the crystal beaker.

"Thanks," Twilight said. "By the way, we're going to need her brain for the next step."

Rainbow's eyes widened. "No way! I am *not* doing that. You'll have to find some other way."

"Fine, fine. We'll talk about that later. Now give me a minute to transfer this material."

Twilight's horn lit up. The alicorn levitated the crystal beaker off the table and stared at it. After a few seconds the beaker began to emit a pale red light. Around the room the symbols on the wall came to life, and weak filaments of magic arced from the symbols to the vial of blood.

"Good, good," she muttered. "Now..."

Twilight's eyes glowed white. A wind swept through the room, coming from nowhere. A few loose sheets of parchment were blown off the table and onto the floor. Twilight ignored them and continued to focus on the vial.

The blood in the vial turned from red to black. It began emitting a dark green glow.

Without breaking her concentration or losing her grasp on the vial, Twilight levitated the comic book she had been writing off the table. Her horn glowed brighter, and sparks began to leap out of it. She steadied herself, refocused her

mind, and continued pouring mana into her spell. Small beads of sweat appeared on her forehead, but she did not buckle.

Rainbow Dash almost screamed when five glowing magical symbols appeared in the air around Twilight's head. One by one the symbols shot out a ray of black light into the vial of blood, and then connected the vial to the book. *Wait a minute – black light? What's up with that? What the hay is Twilight doing?*

As the eerie light from the vial intensified, Twilight's body lifted off the ground and became suspended in mid-air. The glow from her horn increased until it was blinding.

The alicorn moved the vial of blood until it was directly over the book. Black filaments stretched down from the vial, grasping at the book below. As she slowly brought them closer together, the glowing symbols that surrounded her head merged into one.

Twilight waited until the last symbol began to pulse with magical energy. She then carefully brought the vial into direct physical contact with the book. Instantly there was a brilliant flash of green light, and the vial vanished.

Twilight's eyes returned to normal and she fell back to the ground. The light from the walls died down, and the room returned to normal.

“Woah,” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “That was pretty freaky. Did it work?”

Twilight panted, trying to catch her breath. “Give me a second and I’ll see,” she gasped. “That was kind of intense.”

For a few minutes Twilight sat on the floor with her eyes closed. Rainbow was dying to ask her questions, but reluctantly decided against it. Twilight finally opened her eyes, stood up, and picked up the comic from the desk. She began browsing through its pages.

“Well? Did it work?” Rainbow demanded.

“I think so,” Twilight said uncertainly. “I’ve never done this before, but I think that might have worked. What I’m seeing in here looks pretty promising – it’s what I was hoping to see. I guess in order to be sure we’ll need to go inside the comic and check.”

“And what are we going to find there?”

“That’s a good point,” Twilight said thoughtfully. “I’ve been doing this all night, but you haven’t so I guess I need to prepare you. First of all, this isn’t going to be like the time we became the Power Ponies. You and I are going to stay exactly who we are in the real world. We’re not going to change into somepony else. Second, the only thing I’ve defined in this book is Applejack. The rest of the world is blank.”

"What do you mean, blank? Just how blank are we talking?"

"You'll see. Now, you'll be able to breathe, and I did create a default ground and sky, but there won't be anything else. Since we're only using this comic as a hack to recreate our friend, I didn't see a reason to add anything else to the world. We're not going to be selling these in stores, you know."

"I guess that makes sense," Rainbow replied. "So what is Applejack going to be like? Will she recognize us?"

"I don't think so. The spell I just cast should have recreated her body and brought her to life, but her mind will be blank. Since we haven't given her any memories, though, she won't know who we are or what's going on. Before I take that next step I want to make sure the spell worked and she's alive. There's no point in trying to give memories to someone who's dead."

"Then let's go! So how do we do this?"

Twilight turned the comic to its front page and set it down on the desk in front of her. "I've changed the way this works. Normally you read the story and get sucked into the adventure when you reach the last page. Since these comics don't actually have a story, I put the portal on the first page. The rest of the pages just have the magical

definitions that create the world inside the comic.”

“So *that's* why there aren't any pictures,” Rainbow commented.

“Right.”

Rainbow walked over to Twilight and stared at the comic. “So all I have to do is place my hoof on that sinister-looking glowing square and I'll see Applejack again?”

“That will suck you into the comic, yes,” Twilight replied. “But the pony you find inside will only *look* like Applejack. It won't actually *be* Applejack again until we restore her mind. Now, she should be able to talk because I already transferred that sort of basic knowledge into her mind, but she won't have any of her old memories. When you see her she'll probably be pretty confused about what's going on.”

Rainbow positioned her hoof over the glowing panel. She hesitated. “There's no reason to be nervous,” the pegasus said aloud. “It's just Applejack. Back from the dead. Without a mind. It's nothing to be afraid of. This is all perfectly normal.”

“I wouldn't go *that* far,” Twilight remarked.

Rainbow glared at her. “Not helping here!” She shook her head in an attempt to clear it, and then pressed her hoof against the page. The pony instantly disappeared in a flash of light.

Twilight followed her a moment later.

* * * * *

When Rainbow Dash materialized inside the comic book she found a blank world. The sky was a featureless white color, and the ground beneath her hooves wasn't dirt – it was just a solid gray substance. The ground had no texture at all; it was simply a featureless gray slab that extended endlessly in all directions. The air had no scent to it and there was no wind. There wasn't even a sun in the sky. The world was filled with light, but the light didn't seem to come from anywhere. It just existed.

Creepy, Rainbow thought. *Yup. Definitely creepy. So where is Applejack?*

Rainbow Dash looked around and finally spotted her. About fifty feet behind her an orange pony was wandering off into the distance. “Wait!” Rainbow called out. She leaped into the sky and raced after her.

The orange pony with the yellow mane halted, turned its head, and looked at Rainbow. She stopped and stood still.

Rainbow Dash landed in front of her and looked at her closely. “Is that you?” she asked.

“I don't know,” Applejack replied. “Who are

you?"

At that moment Twilight Sparkle materialized into the world. She looked around, saw the two of them, and galloped over. She came to a stop beside Rainbow Dash and looked at Applejack.

"It looks like it worked!" Twilight exclaimed. She breathed a sigh of relief. "She looks pretty authentic to me. Her coat color, her mane – even her cutie mark is right. I wasn't sure if that would transfer over or not."

"Her hat is missing," Rainbow commented.

"Of course it's missing! Her hat isn't part of her genetic makeup. Did you think it was a physical part of her or something?"

"I guess not," Rainbow replied. "Her hat was just part of her look, that's all. She looks kinda weird without it."

A confused look crossed Applejack's face. "Um, you two are acting sort of weird. Do I know you?"

Twilight hesitated before replying. "That's kind of a complicated question to answer. Do you mind if I examine you? I want to make sure you're in good health."

"Sure, go ahead," Applejack replied. "By the way, how did I get here, and what is this place? I don't seem to remember anything. Do I have a

name?"

"What's wrong with her voice?" Rainbow Dash asked. "That doesn't sound anything like her at all. What happened to her over-the-top country accent and slang?"

"We already talked about this, remember?" Twilight replied. "She is a blank slate right now. All she has is the basic knowledge that I gave her. She won't revert to her normal self until we transfer her memories."

Applejack spoke up. "Transfer my memories? Is that why I don't remember anything? Are you doctors or something?"

"Something like that," Twilight agreed. Her horn lit up, and she encased Applejack in a magical field. Twilight then walked around the earth pony and used her magic to gently examine the pony's physical structure.

"You never did tell me my name," Applejack said.

Rainbow spoke up. "It's Applejack. Your name is Applejack. You are – um, a friend of ours. A really good friend."

"Ok," Applejack said slowly. "So how did I lose all my memories? Did something bad happen?"

"You could say that," Rainbow replied, as tears began to form in her eyes. "Something very,

very bad. But I think it's going to be all right now. How is she looking, Twilight?"

Twilight shut down the magical field around Applejack and let her go. "She looks fine to me! As far as I can tell she is perfect in every way. I don't see any abnormalities. I think it's safe to proceed to the next step."

"Awesome!" Rainbow exclaimed. She immediately rushed over to Applejack and threw her front hooves around her neck. "This is so awesome. You have no idea how good it is to have you back! I have missed you so much."

Applejack looked startled, but hugged Rainbow back anyway. "Um, ok. That's good, I guess. But I still don't know who you are."

Rainbow let go of her and grinned. "Who am I? Well, my name is Rainbow Dash. I am the queen of Equestria, and rule over pretty much everything in a totally awesome way. I am, like, your hero. Since you were a little filly your goal in life was to be exactly like me in every way. I am just that amazing."

Twilight glared at the pegasus. "Rainbow, what are you doing?"

Rainbow quickly put a hoof over Twilight's mouth. "As I was saying, you and I are the best of friends. Your goal in life is to one day be as cool and talented as I am."

“Really?” Applejack replied. “Then why do I have apples for a cutie mark? Are you the princess of apples or something?”

“It's because apples are awesome,” Rainbow Dash explained. “Especially apple cider. You see, you and your family makes the best apple cider in all of Equestria. The next time you make a batch, you're definitely going to save it for me, right?”

“Well, sure,” Applejack replied. “Since you're the queen that seems only fair.”

Rainbow laughed. “This is so much fun! I could do this all day.”

Twilight whacked Rainbow on the back of her head. “This is *not* the time to be pranking her! You're worse than Pinkie Pie. We still have work to do.”

Twilight turned to face Applejack. “I know you have a lot of questions and are pretty confused. Don't worry, though. I promise that despite Rainbow here, you are in good hooves. We have to leave now, but we will be back soon. When we return your mind will be restored and everything will be clear. Just sit tight and don't wander off anywhere.”

“If you say so,” Applejack replied. “Although from what I can tell, there's really not anyplace else to go.”

“This won't take long,” Twilight promised.

She and Rainbow Dash then disappeared, leaving Applejack alone.

Chapter 4: “Twilight, what have you done?”

Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle reappeared in Twilight's basement. “Woah,” Rainbow exclaimed. “How do you keep yanking both of us out of the comic like that?”

“It's really not a big deal. I'll explain it later, though, when we have more time. I don't want to leave Applejack in there any longer than I have to. We've got a lot of work to do, and she's waiting on us.”

Rainbow stared at the comic book that was lying open on the desk. “So Applejack is in there,” she said, with wonder in her voice. “That is so awesome. Is she, like, waiting on us right now?”

Twilight nodded. “That's one of the changes I had to make to the way the comics worked. From the moment these books are first enchanted, time begins passing in them at the same rate that time passes in this world. Applejack is still standing there. She is fully conscious of the passage of time.”

“Then I guess you're right – we need to get moving on this. So what's next?”

Twilight glanced at the coffin, and then looked back at Rainbow Dash. "Applejack won't be whole again until we restore her memories, which are stored in her brain. We need to get them out."

Rainbow Dash slowly backed away from Twilight. "I don't like where this is going. How were you planning on doing that, exactly?"

"Well, you saw what I did with her blood. We had to put the blood sample in that vial, then enchant it, and then merge it with the book. Since her complete genetic code is in every drop of her blood, we only needed to get a little bit of it. Her mind, though, is different. We need *all* of her brain in order to do this. Which means—"

"Absolutely not!" Rainbow protested. "There is absolutely *no way* I am doing that. Do you have any idea what I'd have to do to get her brain out of her head? There has got to be some other way. Your plan is *waaaaaay* too gross."

"I know," Twilight sighed. "It's just that the blood spell worked so well! But you're right. If we do that with her brain and something goes wrong, there's no backup plan. We could always take more blood – up to a point, anyway – but she only has one brain. Let me think about this."

Twilight stared at the desk in front of her. Time passed. She picked up a book and read

through it, then set it down and picked up a different one.

“How long is this going to take?” Rainbow Dash asked. “Applejack is waiting on us, you know.”

“This isn't easy. You do realize that nopony has ever done this before, right? It's not like there is a how-to guide for this!”

“Maybe not for raising the dead, sure. But all you want to do is move her memories from one place to a different place. Aren't there any memory copying spells? Surely *that* has been done before. Hasn't anypony ever wanted to save their memories?”

“That's it!” Twilight shouted. “You're a genius. Wait here – I'll be right back!”

Twilight raced out of the room, leaving Rainbow Dash alone in the basement.

“Sure, sure, just take your time,” Rainbow Dash called after her. “It's not like I'm alone in a creepy basement or anything.”

Twilight did not respond. She was already out of earshot.

Rainbow Dash glanced at the bubbling pool of utter darkness that was in the center of the floor. “And you can't tell me there's no dark magic going on here either,” Rainbow muttered. “Dark magic is green, right? Green and black. This room has 'forbidden magic' written all over it. You really

owe me one this time, Applejack. The things that I do for my friends.”

Ten minutes later, Twilight raced back into the room. “Isn't this great? I actually had one after all! Oh, this is going to be fabulous!”

The purple alicorn was levitating two objects in front of her – a heavy black book, and a spherical crystal stone that was about three inches in diameter.

“What's that?” Rainbow asked.

“It's a first-edition copy of *Enchanted Memories*,” Twilight said enthusiastically. “There are only six copies of it in existence. I got this book about a month ago, and let me tell you it has been fascinating. You see, about four hundred years ago—”

Rainbow Dash interrupted her. “Not the book, the stone. I know what books are, you know! Is there something special about that rock?”

“Oh – right.” Twilight gently set the book down on the table and opened it to page 834. “This object is called a memory stone. It's used to contain memories. Technically it isn't actually a stone at all. It's more of a complicated magical repository that was carefully engineered to hold memories for an indefinite period of time. This one happens to be industrial strength. It was meant to hold an entire *mind*.”

“So who's mind is in it?” Rainbow asked.

“It's empty right now,” Twilight replied. “The nice thing about this is that although these stones are incredibly difficult to make, they are very easy to use. All it takes is a simple spell to copy a pony's memories into this stone. Once they are in here I should be able to merge them with the comic. Then Applejack should be her old self again!”

“What happens if it fails?” Rainbow asked. “Will her mind just be gone?”

Twilight shook her head. “All we're doing is making a copy. If things go wrong then we can just try again. No harm done.”

“And her brain can stay inside her skull?”

“Of course! It's a simple, painless procedure.”

“Wonderful.” Rainbow breathed a sigh of relief. “I knew there had to be some other way. Not that I was scared or anything but – well, you know.”

“Give me just a minute to set this up,” Twilight said. The alicorn then carefully reread the page three times, and then nodded. “Ok. I think I know what to do. Let's give this a try.”

Twilight walked over to the coffin and opened it. She glanced inside, turned pale, and quickly turned her head away. She then forced herself to look back into the coffin and gently placed the memory stone next to Applejack's

head.

"All right," she said, a bit queasy and more than a touch nervous. "Here goes."

Twilight lit up her horn, and the memory stone turned purple. She then amped up the power. As the stone began to glow more intensely, a weak beam of light shot out of the stone and connected with Applejack's head. Twilight poured even more magic into the spell, and the beam of light strengthened. Slowly, ever so slowly, the stone began to change. Specs of light began appearing within it and swirling about.

"Now I just have to hold the connection," Twilight muttered.

"For how long?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"*Not now,*" Twilight hissed. She closed her eyes and concentrated.

As the moments passed, the sphere filled with tiny points of light. Rainbow Dash was utterly fascinated. The points of light somehow looked alive. *Are those individual memories, or are they moments of her life? This is actually pretty cool. Magic users can do some pretty neat tricks.*

After five agonizing minutes the link began to fade. "That's all of it," Twilight said wearily. She cut the connection and collapsed onto the floor. Sweat poured off of her body. The spell had left her weak, and she found it difficult to move.

Twilight gently sat up, grabbed a cloth off the table, and wiped her forehead. "Now I just need to breathe – in, then out. Woah, but am I ever woozy. I am really getting a workout today!"

Rainbow walked over to the coffin and stared closely at the memory stone. "So Applejack is in there? *All* of her?"

"I think so. At least, that's all of her I could get," Twilight replied. She was still panting. "I'm pretty sure that I got it all. The preservation spell kept her mind from decaying, and I don't think she had any brain damage from the accident. I guess we'll find out when we talk to her."

"So what now? How do you get the memories out of that rock and into our friend?"

"Give me a minute," Twilight pleaded. "Spells are hard work. Intense magic – like what we've been doing here – is really draining. I already have a headache, and I still have to transfer that stone into the comic. I need a moment to rest."

"Fine, fine," Rainbow Dash grumbled. "Just remember that our friend is waiting for us in that terrible place you created! That has to be the most boring world I've ever seen. Couldn't you have at least given her an apple or something? Even a tree would have been a huge improvement! She could have looked at it or something."

"Didn't a tree just kill her?" Twilight asked

wearily. "And you want me to put a tree in the comic? For all I know she hates trees now. Applejack probably thinks they're death traps or something."

"Good point – so no trees. But still, couldn't you have at least created some grass? Grass is pretty harmless, isn't it?"

"I guess, but she wasn't supposed to live there, you know. She won't be in there for very long, and once she's out she will never have to go back into the comic again. But I guess I could have given her a book to read while she waited."

"Because if there's one thing we all know about Applejack, it's that she's a big reader," Rainbow said sarcastically.

Twilight ignored her friend. She lied back down onto the floor and tried to catch her breath. Minutes ticked by. Rainbow Dash resisted the urge to reach out and touch the memory sphere. She considered walking around the room, but decided against it. *This just doesn't look like a good place to go around touching things.* So she sat down by her friend and waited – impatiently.

"You're not going to fall asleep on me, are you?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Not after that nightmare last night," Twilight replied.

"Nightmare? What nightmare? When did

you have a nightmare? And hey – when did you fall asleep?”

“It was nothing. Just, you know, the usual.”

“So, your books were trying to eat you again?”

Twilight shook her head. “No, not this time. In this dream all of Equestria was, well, empty. All of the buildings were ruined, and all of the ponies were gone, and I was the only pony left. Well, wait. I think Celestia was there. She was really angry with me about something, and we got in a big fight—”

Rainbow Dash laughed. “By 'big fight' you mean she scolded you, right?”

“Not this time. Celestia actually tried to kill me! I'd never seen her so angry.”

“C'mon, Twilight, that's never going to happen! You're her favorite student, remember? There is nothing you could possibly do that would make her that angry. We're the heroes of this world, remember?”

“I guess you're right,” Twilight said. “Maybe I was just tired.”

The alicorn struggled to her hooves. “All right, all right. I think I can do this – but this is positively the last spell I'm going to cast before getting some rest. I've had all I can take.”

Rainbow nodded. “So – what now?”

“Just sit down and be still. And *don't touch*

anything. I don't want to accidentally infect you with Applejack's memories.”

Twilight gently lifted the memory stone out of the coffin and carried it over to the table. She then placed the stone into a small metal tripod. Once she was satisfied the stone was secure, she picked up the tripod and placed it directly on top of the open comic book.

The alicorn then glanced back to *Enchanted Memories* and read the page one more time. She then turned to her friend. “Are you ready?”

“Do you have to ask?” Rainbow Dash said.

Twilight smiled in spite of her weariness. She looked back at the memory stone and stared at it intently. She then lit up her horn and struck the stone with an intense beam of light. The light refracted off the stone and bounced down into the comic. Twilight continued to hold the connection for about thirty seconds, and then she shut it down.

Rainbow Dash looked at the stone. It was still filled with small points of swirling light. “Did something go wrong?”

Twilight moved the tripod off the comic and flipped through its pages. “No, it worked,” she replied. “It looks like everything is here. Why?”

“Because I'm still seeing lights in that rock. If you moved them into the comic then shouldn't

they be gone?"

Twilight shook her head. "I *copied* them into the comic. I didn't have to move them. Now Applejacks' memories are in three different places: in her brain in her old body, in the memory stone, and in the comic book."

"Weird! So, um, that was fast. I kind of expected it to take longer."

"The hard part is getting the memories into the stone," Twilight explained. "Once they are there, the stone itself will help you copy them. That's the whole point of the stone in the first place."

"So what now? Are we done?"

Twilight nodded. She turned the comic back to its front page and placed it on the table. "Are you ready to meet her again?"

"Are you kidding?" Rainbow Dash replied. She quickly leaped over to the comic book and placed a hoof on the glowing panel. As soon as she disappeared, Twilight followed behind her.

* * * * *

Rainbow Dash once again found herself in the blank world that Twilight had created. A quick look around revealed that Applejack had not moved from where she had been before. She was

still there, sitting quietly on the ground, staring out at the horizon.

“So, hey there,” Rainbow Dash called out. She flew over to Applejack and landed in front of her. “How do you feel?”

Applejack glared at her. “So you're the queen of Equestria, are you? Just how dumb do you think I am?”

Rainbow Dash laughed. “Oh, c'mon, it was funny! You were believing everything that I told you, and I just couldn't pass up an opportunity like that. It sounds like you have your memory back now.”

“I most certainly do,” Applejack replied. “As I recall, Celestia is the princess who raises the sun, and her sister Luna raises the moon. All you do is loaf around and take naps.”

“I do not,” Rainbow Dash said defensively. “I happen to have been very busy lately.”

“She actually has,” Twilight called out. She had entered the world a moment after Rainbow Dash and was slowly walking over to them. Twilight was completely worn out, but she was doing her best to keep walking. “In fact, I couldn't have gotten this far without her. She has been a true friend through this whole ordeal.”

“See?” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “Told you!”

Twilight walked up to Applejack. “What is the

last thing that you remember?”

“Rainbow Dash trying to tell me she's in charge of the whole world.”

Twilight facehoofed. “No – before that. What is your last memory before you found yourself here?”

“That would be gettin' killed by that blasted tree. I had just finished breakfast with the family, then went outside to get started on the day. I shoulda known that storm had weakened the tree, but I just didn't think about it. Too much goin' on, you know? So, like a fool, I gave it a good hard buckin'. When I heard the tree crack I knew I was in trouble. I tried to get away but I just wasn't fast enough. It caught me good – killed me instantly, I reckon'. There's just one thing I don't understand.”

“Really?” Rainbow Dash asked. “Just *one* thing? 'cause I can think of a whole lot more than just one question you should be asking right now.”

“Hush,” Twilight said. “What's that, Applejack?”

“Well, if I'm dead, then this must be the afterlife. I've gotta say I really expected it to be more, um, involved. This has got to be the most boring place I've ever seen. I don't really think I want to spend eternity here. But, anyway, my question is this: if I'm dead and this is – well, whatever this is – then what are you two doing

here?”

“Easy,” Rainbow Dash replied. “You see—”

Applejack raised a hoof. “Now hold on a minute. I don't have any trouble believing that Twilight knows how to visit the world of the dead. She's an alicorn, after all. There's no tellin' what kind of spooky magic she's learned up in Canterlot. But I refuse to believe that Rainbow Dash has magical powers and can talk to ghosts. That just ain't possible.”

Rainbow Dash grinned. “You know, it *could* be possible. You don't necessarily know *all* my secrets! I am a pretty awesome pony.”

Twilight immediately reached over and whacked Rainbow Dash on the back of her head. “Stop it! I don't know what's gotten into you. You have been acting super weird lately.”

“I'm just glad to have Applejack back, that's all,” Rainbow replied.

Applejack spoke up. “You still haven't told me what you're doin' here. And I don't think I'm 'back'. Whatever this place is, it sure ain't Equestria.”

“I guess I should start at the beginning,” Twilight said slowly. “First of all, it's true that the tree, um, fell on you. You were injured pretty badly. I raced out to the farm, but—”

“‘Pretty badly’?” echoed Rainbow Dash. “Are

you serious? The tree *totally*—”

“Quiet! Let me finish. As I was saying, the tree injured you pretty badly. Since the doctors couldn't do anything to help you, I had you carried to my home. Rainbow Dash and I spent the past week inventing a way to, um, heal your injuries. It has been a real challenge but I think we've been successful. How do you feel?”

“Um, ok, I guess,” Applejack replied. “So how is it you were able to help me when the doctors couldn't?”

“Magic!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed.

Twilight nodded. “I can use my magic to do things that are beyond the reach of ordinary medicine. If you're feeling all right then I think it's time to bring you out of this place and get you back home.”

“So this isn't the afterlife?” Applejack asked.

Twilight shook her head. “Nope. It's not. It's just a place I created to assist in the healing process. Now that you're well, I can bring you out of it.”

“Am I in a coma? Is all this inside my mind?”

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth, but Twilight quickly silenced her. “I think it would be easier to just show you. Are you ready to go?”

Applejack nodded. “I reckon' anyplace would beat this.”

Twilight nodded. A moment later all three of them vanished.

* * * * *

The three friends reappeared in Twilight's basement. Rainbow Dash was the first to speak. "You just *gotta* show me how you keep doing that."

"I'll be sure to make a note of it when I publish my findings," Twilight replied.

Applejack looked around the room in amazement. She quickly looked down at herself to make sure that she was really there, and then back at her friends. The farmer then glanced at the bewildering items that filled the room. "We're in the castle basement, aren't we?"

Twilight nodded. "That's right. This room used to be empty. I've decorated it a bit."

"It looks like you've been workin' real hard," Applejack commented. She looked at the long table, which was covered with papers and books, and she stared at the walls that were laced with magical runes. That was when she noticed the coffin.

The coffin that was still open.

Which contained her corpse.

Applejack screamed. "What in tarnation is *that?*"

Twilight quickly used her magic to close the coffin. "I am so sorry about that. I really meant to close that before we left, but I've just been so exhausted. It kinda slipped my mind."

"Was that what I think it was? Because it looked an awful lot like my head was in there."

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "After the accident that's all that was left of your body. When that tree fell it pretty much obliterated you. That's why Twilight had to use a comic book to recreate your body. Then she used this neat spell to copy your memories from your brain into your new body, and there you are! Good as new."

Applejack turned pale. She walked over to the table and pointed at the comic book that was lying face open. "Are you saying Twilight used *that* book to bring me back?"

Twilight nodded. "It was the only way."

"But I don't understand. How is that even possible? You're not making any sense."

"It's actually kind of simple. Do you remember that one time we were sucked into that comic book and became Power Ponies? Do you remember how real that world was?"

"Sure I do."

"Well, this is the same thing. You see, I used that comic to write you into existence again. I used a sample of your blood to recreate your

physical form, and I copied your memories from your old body into your new body. It was the only way to bring you back.”

“Oh,” Applejack replied. She didn't say anything. She just stared at the comic, lost in thought.

“Do you want me to go into more detail?” Twilight asked nervously. “I'd be more than happy to explain the exact spells that I used.”

Applejack shook her head. “Nope, that ain't necessary. So let me see if I have this straight. The real Applejack was crushed by a tree. Since she was dead, you created a copy of her in a comic book and used magic to bring that copy to life. You then gave that comic book character Applejack's memories so that it would think it was her. Then you brought that copy here. Is that about it?”

“You are *not* a comic book character! You are the real Applejack. You have her body and her memories. You aren't a magical construct; you're a flesh and blood pony. It's true that I used magic to bring you back, but that doesn't make you any less real. You really are you.”

“But you *didn't* bring Applejack back,” Applejack replied. “Isn't her corpse still in that coffin over there? What's left of it, anyway. *That* is Applejack. I'm just a copy that you made.”

“You are *real*,” Twilight insisted. “If I pricked

you, you would bleed. If I poisoned you, you would die. You have senses, emotions, and desires. You can get hungry and sleep and apparently quite irritable. You are every bit as real as every other pony in this world. You could even have foals if you wanted.”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “Only your life does depend on that comic book. If something ever happened to it you would kinda disappear.”

“I knew it! I just knew this was all wrong. Twilight, what have you done?”

“Look, it's just temporary!” Twilight said hastily. “I didn't have a lot of time, so I skipped the part where I freed you from the comic. My main concern was bringing you back to life. I'm sure there's a way to sever the connection between you and the comic so that you don't depend on it anymore. Would that make you feel better?”

“This ain't about feelings! Don't you get it? I'm *not* Applejack. I'm just a comic book character that you brought to life. The *real* Applejack is dead. You didn't do a thing for her.”

Twilight was taken aback. Tears began to form in her eyes. She had worked so hard to save her friend, and was certain Applejack would be delighted and grateful. She never imagined her friend would react this way. She was deeply hurt – but Applejack didn't seem to notice or care.

"You are completely wrong," Twilight said angrily. "I think you're focusing too much on the magic that I used to bring you back to life. You really are real – honest."

"Then answer me this. Couldn't you use the same magic to make another copy of me? Couldn't you make five Applejacks, or ten, or twenty?"

"I suppose. I'm sure at least *one* of them would be grateful about being alive again."

"Oh, I bet," Applejack replied angrily. "After all, you could make them however you wanted, couldn't you? You could make an Applejack with a green coat, or with a pair of boots for a cutie mark. You could give her any memories or attitudes or thoughts that you wanted her to have. That's because it's all just stuff in books. You write the words and it comes to life. That's it, isn't it?"

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "Hey – that gives me an idea! Twilight, couldn't you give Applejack a pair of wings? You could make her a pegasus, couldn't you? It would be so awesome if she could fly!"

Applejack stared at Twilight angrily. Twilight was beyond hurt; she was now getting angry herself. "Sure, I could probably do that – not that she'd be grateful for it or anything. Some ponies wouldn't know gratitude if it kicked them in the

head. But you're both missing the point. You were dead, Applejack – *dead!* And now you're alive again. There is *no difference* between who you were before the accident and who you are now. There's no problem here!”

“I'm a *character* from a *comic book*,” Applejack said with emphasis. “How can you not see that?”

“This is ridiculous! I'm sure Fluttershy wouldn't have had any problem with any of this. Some ponies would have been *glad* to have been raised from the dead.”

“Fluttershy ain't the element of honesty. This may be a clever trick and all, but it ain't honest. That I know for sure.”

“What are you talking about? I never asked you to lie about where you came from! You're more than welcome to tell everypony you know. In fact, I plan on publishing my findings for further use and research. Besides, I was honest with you, wasn't I? I could have hidden all this from you, you know. I could have had you be asleep when you came back to life and got your memories back, and had you wake up in a nice comfy bed somewhere in Ponyville Hospital. I could easily have told you a comforting lie that *you would have believed*. I didn't have to tell you what I actually did, but I did because *I am not a bad pony*.

I care about you – even if you don't care very much about us.”

“I know,” Applejack said hurriedly. “I don't mean it like that. I'm sure you and Rainbow have worked real hard to make all this happen, and I don't mean to sound ungrateful. This is just – well, it's wrong. It bothers me. I can't get past the fact that I'm not actually real. This is an awful lot to deal with.”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “Well, I think you're real. I told Twilight that she could bring you back, and that is exactly what she did. I think you're just thinking too hard. Give it a rest! Enjoy life or something.”

“Answer me this,” Twilight said. By now tears were running down her face. It never occurred to her that things might go this badly. “Do you really want Apple Bloom to grow up without her big sister?”

“Of course not,” Applejack said quickly.

“What about Big Mac and Granny Smith? Do you want them to live the rest of their lives without you? Do you think they'll be able to manage Sweet Apple Acres just fine on their own, without your help?”

“It'd be mighty difficult,” Applejack admitted.

“Now, I understand that you have hangups over where you came from. I don't agree with

them in the slightest, but I'll table that for now. But tell me this: don't you think your family misses you? Don't you think they want you back? Do you honestly believe that Apple Bloom is going to be as upset over the metaphysical aspects of this as you are? Isn't it more likely that what she really wants is to get her big sister back? Are you going to deny her that?"

"Of course not! She needs me to watch over her. I'm sure she's plum torn up over what happened. I just – I dunno. Maybe you're right. Maybe I just need to go home."

"I totally agree with that," Rainbow Dash said. "I have no idea what time it is, but I don't think they'll mind waking up – not when they see who's knocking at their door."

"It's three in the afternoon," Twilight replied. "I highly doubt they're in bed. So are we through with this? Are you ready to go home, or do you want to yell at me some more for trying to help you?"

"I'm sorry," Applejack said. "I didn't mean it that way. I know you're just tryin' to help me. I'm sure this must have been hard on everypony."

Applejack walked over to Twilight and tried to give her a hug, but to her surprise Twilight pushed her away. "Let's just get you home," Twilight said. "I have had enough of this."

“Um, ok,” Applejack replied. “This basement of yours is kinda giving me the creeps anyway. It will be real good to see my family again.”

Applejack reached out to take the comic book, but Twilight grabbed it before she could lay a hoof on it. “Don't touch that!” Twilight hissed. “You have no idea what you're doing. Your continued existence depends upon that comic. It has got to be taken care of, and there's no way I'm trusting you with it. I'm going to put it in a safe place where nothing can happen to it. You'd probably lose it or feed it to a cow or something.”

“I ain't stupid,” Applejack said. “Don't you think I know how important that comic is?”

“You don't even know how important *you* are. So, no. I don't.”

Applejack sighed. “I sure put my hoof in it this time. Well, ok then. I reckon it'll be safer here anyway.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. She hugged Applejack, then raced out of the room. “C'mon – they're waiting on us!”

After Rainbow Dash disappeared, Twilight slowly began to follow her out of the room. Applejack noticed for the first time how tired and worn she was. Every step she made seemed to be painful for her.

“Hold on just a minute,” Applejack said. “Look. I can see that I hurt you, and I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that. I know you did all this because you care about me, and that means a lot.”

“Stop patronizing me!” Twilight said angrily. “You don’t believe that you’re real, and you’re angry that I did this. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

“I’m sorry, Twilight. I know my honesty can be hard to take sometimes, but I’m not one to hide things from ponies – especially not ponies that I care about. Even if I’ve got reservations, I’m sure this will all work out in the end. After all, this is safe, right? It’s not like there’s anything dangerous going on here.”

Twilight shrugged. “I guess. It might be safe. Does it really matter?”

“Yes, it matters. Is there some danger that you haven’t told me about yet?”

“Nope,” Twilight replied firmly. “There is no way any of this could go wrong. I’m certain we’re not opening some kind of Pandora’s box that will destroy the whole world.”

“Really?” Applejack asked. “Then why even bring that up as a possibility?”

Twilight remembered the dream she had the night before. “Um, no reason,” she replied.

Rainbow Dash yelled down the stairs. “Are you two coming or what?”

Chapter 5: “No solution is perfect”

It was mid-afternoon in Ponyville, and a feeling of quiet dread hung over the town. A small group of ponies had gathered outside Twilight's castle and were talking in low tones. Twilight had asked for a week to heal Applejack, and that week was nearly over. It looked like she was on the verge of failure – the first failure she had ever experienced in her career.

“Well, I can't say that I'm surprised,” Carrot Top remarked. “After all, Applejack was clearly dead. There's simply no way anypony could have helped her.”

Roseluck nodded. “I completely agree. Even Princess Twilight isn't all-powerful, you know. She has limits, just like everypony else.”

Lyra frowned. She had a worried look on her face. “But what does this mean for the future of Equestria? There are six Elements of Harmony, you know. *Six*, not five! With one of the bearers gone, does that mean the Elements are broken and can't protect us anymore? We could be flooded with disasters – disasters that nopony can

fix!"

"Or we could stop having monster attacks altogether," Carrot Top replied. "After all, Ponyville was a quiet place before the princess came to live here. Maybe things will go back to normal and life will be peaceful again."

"And maybe bits will rain down from the sky and wishes will come true!" Lyra said sarcastically. "Come on, Carrots. This is serious! Who's going to protect us now? The Elements were our first and only line of defense!"

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that," Bon Bon said confidently. "I'll take care of Ponyville. All I—"

At that moment the doors to Twilight's castle flung open and Rainbow Dash soared out. "She did it!" the pegasus exclaimed excitedly. "Applejack is back, everypony! Can you believe it? Is this awesome or what?"

The crowd gasped. There, standing in the castle doorway, was Applejack. A few feet behind her was Twilight, who had an irritated look on her face.

Applejack looked around and smiled nervously. She raised a hoof and waved at the crowd. "Well, howdy, y'all."

"It's a ghost!" Roseluck shrieked. She fainted.

"Wait!" Applejack exclaimed. "I ain't a ghost

– honest. I'm flesh and blood just like the rest of you. It really is me.”

Applejack walked up to the crowd, which stared at her in amazement. No pony said a word.

Bon Bon bravely walked over to her, reached out a hoof, and touched Applejack's nose. “Hey, cut that out!” Applejack said.

“Sorry,” Bon Bon replied. “I just had to make sure you weren't a ghost. I guess you are real after all! I can't believe it. The princess found a way to bring you back from the dead. That's – remarkable, actually.”

Twilight was still standing in the castle doorway, scowling. “I *don't* want to hear about it,” she grumbled. She walked over to Applejack and frowned. “C'mon, let's get this over with. We need to get you to Sweet Apple Acres. I can't wait to hear what complaints your family is going to have about all this.”

“Complaints?” Carrot Top said, confused. “What complaints?”

But no one responded – Twilight had already teleported herself and Applejack out of sight.

Rainbow Dash facehoofed. “Aw, really, Twilight? I thought you were tired of using magic!”

The pegasus was about to race off to the Apple family farm when Carrot Top called out again. “Rainbow, what's going on? Why is Twilight

upset? How did she fix Applejack? Who is complaining?"

"Beats me," Rainbow called out as she soared away. "If you ask me everything is going great. Applejack can just be weird sometimes, you know?"

Before anypony could say anything else, the blue pegasus streaked across the sky and disappeared, leaving a rainbow trail behind her.

Lyra looked at Bon Bon. "She didn't answer the questions."

"Not even close," Bon Bon agreed. "But I bet we don't want to know the answers. This situation has trouble written all over it. If everything was fine then the princess would be happy – and the princess is most definitely *not* happy."

Carrot Top looked up at the rainbow that still hung in the afternoon sky. "Does this mean that the princess knows how to raise the dead? Is she a necromancer now? Is that good, or bad?"

Lyra shrugged. "Who knows? Personally, I think this would be a great time to leave Ponyville and go on an extended vacation. If Twilight just opened a portal to the afterlife then we could be on the verge of a zombie invasion! There's no telling what terrible things will happen next."

"Not zombies!" Roseluck shrieked. She fainted again.

* * * * *

Twilight and Applejack appeared on the dusty road that led to Sweet Apple Acres. Applejack looked around, confused. "Why are—"

The alicorn immediately lit up her horn and teleported them again. The pair reappeared further down the road. The farm was visible now in the distance.

Applejack tried again. "Hold on just a minute. Why are—"

Twilight ignored her and teleported them once more. This time they appeared just outside the ruins of the Apple barn.

"— you doing this?" Applejack finished. "We could have just walked, you know. You look dead tired. In fact, I'm kinda surprised you're even able to stand, what with all you've been through."

"Walking would take too long," Twilight replied. She was clearly irritated, and her bad mood had not improved. "I just want to get this over with."

The two ponies looked around. There was nopony in sight. The barn was still in ruins; it was clear that no one had touched it. Even the tree was still lying where it had fallen.

"I can't believe you beat Rainbow Dash here,"

Applejack commented. "She's the fastest pony I've ever seen. You know, it's ok if you want to take a minute and rest. There's no rush."

Twilight ignored her. "Your family is probably inside the house. I'll go get them."

The alicorn teleported to the door. She lifted a hoof and banged on it. "Hello? Anypony home? Are you there?"

Applejack shook her head. "You know, you could just open the door and go inside. I'm pretty sure they'll be happy to see you. You're not a stranger, Twilight."

"You mean I *wasn't* a stranger. But things are different now, aren't they?"

Twilight waited for a few seconds and then banged on the front door again. A moment later there was a commotion in the house, and a small filly raced to the front door. The door flew open and Apple Bloom looked up. "Oh, howdy, Twilight," she said in a quite voice. "So what—"

Apple Bloom glanced behind Twilight and saw Applejack walking toward the house. The filly's eyes lit up, and a look of wonder and joy appeared on her face. She dashed over to her sister and jumped on top of her. "I can't believe it! I really can't believe it!"

Applejack grinned and hugged her back. "It's good to see you too. I hope you haven't been

getting into any trouble while I've been gone! I'm sorry for giving y'all such a scare."

"I've missed you so much," Apple Bloom said, as she held onto her sister tightly. "I was beginning to get worried that Twilight wasn't going to be able to fix this. I didn't want you to be gone."

"You don't need to worry about that anymore," Applejack replied. "I'm right here and I ain't goin' anywhere."

By now Big Mac and Granny Smith had reached the front door. "Well, I'll be," Granny Smith said. "That's Applejack! She's back."

"That's what I've been trying to tell everypony!" Twilight exclaimed, her voice full of frustration. "That is Applejack. Can't you see that? Is this really so hard?"

"Nope," Big Mac replied. A big grin appeared on his face.

As the rest of the Apple family rushed over to Applejack, a blue pegasus streaked across the sky and landed on the lawn. "I can't believe you beat me here, Twilight," Rainbow Dash panted. "You're a lot faster than you look!"

Twilight said nothing. Even though the Apple family was clearly overjoyed about Applejack's return, the princess was unable to share in their delight. Twilight just sat on the ground and

stewed in her anger.

Applejack was talking to Big Mac now. Her big brother wasn't saying much, but he was obviously pleased.

Rainbow Dash nudged Twilight. "You did it! I knew you could do it. You've made everything right again."

"I wish," Twilight said sourly. "Applejack doesn't believe that she's real. This isn't a triumph; this is a disaster. I never dreamed she would react that way."

"Eh, just give her some time. She *has* been dead, you know. She probably just needs to get her head on straight. I wouldn't worry about it."

Apple Bloom had been listening to their conversation. "What do you mean she was dead? Is that right, sister? Is Twilight tellin' the truth?"

Applejack nodded. "I was dead all right. But as you can see, I'm here now. I'm all better now."

"Did you say dead?" Granny Smith exclaimed. "Tarnation, child, that ain't good! Once a pony is dead they stay dead. Coming back from the dead just ain't natural! There's dark magic involved in that. Nothing good can come of it."

Twilight's anger instantly turned into rage. "This is the last time I'm doing the Apple family a favor!" she said bitterly. "Next time you can raise your own dead." The alicorn lit up her horn and

teleported out of sight.

Applejack lifted a hoof. "Now just hold on, everypony. Let me explain. First of all, I ain't a resurrected corpse. Twilight hasn't been doin' any funny business and no dark magic is involved. You ought to know better than that! What happened was—"

Big Mac spoke up, cutting her off. "It don't really matter," he said gently. "You're home."

"See?" Rainbow Dash said. "My point exactly! She's home and everything is right again. That's what matters!"

"You bet," Apple Bloom agreed.

In the distance, ponies were running down the road to the farm. Word had spread that Applejack was alive again – and the whole town wanted to see her.

* * * * *

In Celestia's castle in Canterlot, a royal guard burst into the throne room. The armored stallion galloped down the long red carpet and past the giant stained glass windows, and approached Celestia's throne as quickly as he could. "Your majesty," he panted. "I bring urgent news from Ponyville."

Celestia looked surprised. She put down her

white teacup and turned her attention to the guard. "Is something the matter? Has there been an attack?"

"No, your highness. It's Princess Twilight. She has brought Applejack back from the dead! Applejack is with her family now, at Sweet Apple Acres."

The Princess of the Sun immediately stood up. "Back from the dead? But that's impossible! Are you sure?"

"Positive. The whole town is there now, and there are numerous confirmed reports. Applejack is no ghost – she is real and she is alive again."

"But that's not possible. It's never been done before. It can't be done! Even magic cannot raise the dead."

"Yes, your majesty. I do not disagree. But apparently the princess has found a way."

Celestia thought for a moment. "I must see this for myself. If Twilight has engaged in necromancy then this could be very bad for all of us. I will head to Ponyville immediately."

The guard nodded. "Of course. What should I tell Princess Luna?"

The princess glanced outside and saw that it was still mid-afternoon. "Let her rest. I'll talk to her myself later, when I return."

Celestia then vanished in a burst of yellow

light.

* * * * *

Twilight wearily dragged herself to the entrance of her castle. She had only been able to teleport part of the way home before she lost the strength to cast another teleportation spell, and had to walk the rest of the way. By now she was so tired that she couldn't even fly. Every bone in her body ached and she had a splitting headache. All she wanted to do was rest – rest and put this whole ugly business behind her.

She was intensely angry at Applejack for being so ungrateful. *I brought her back from the dead – back from the dead! – and all she could do was complain about my methods. Just see if I ever do her a favor again!*

The walk back to her castle was difficult. It was also lonely; nopony stopped to help her. As Twilight struggled down the road she was passed by a stream of ponies who were all hurrying toward Sweet Apple Acres. None of them paid her any attention or offered to help. They were all focused on one thing – going to see Applejack. Twilight even thought she spotted Rarity and Pinkie Pie in the massive throng.

But Twilight didn't care. In fact, she was long

past caring. The last thing she wanted was more ponies yelling at her. She just wanted to get home. Yet, when she finally reached the entrance to her castle, she collapsed outside the door. She was just too worn out to go inside.

For a long time she just laid there on the ground, panting. She found it hard to concentrate on anything. The more she thought about Applejack the more her pain deepened. *How could Applejack do this to me? Doesn't she know I was trying to help her?*

A voice interrupted her thoughts. "Are you ok? Do I need to call a doctor?"

Twilight turned her head and saw that a white stallion was staring at her. "Oh, it's you. What do you want?"

Frosted Arrow hurried over to Twilight. "I heard that you were just lying here, so I closed up shop and came over. What's wrong? Are you sick?"

"No, I'm ok. I'm just tired, that's all. Tired of casting difficult spells. Tired of doing the impossible. Tired of doing favors for ponies who just get mad at you. I am so very, very tired."

"I can understand," Arrow said gently. "You've had a big day today. Let me go get Spike for you. He can help you inside and put you to bed."

Twilight shook her head. "Just leave me here.

I'll be fine."

"You are *not* fine! You look half dead – and judging by the look on your face, that's the least of your problems."

Frosted Arrow hesitated. "Look, it's none of my business, but I don't understand this at all. I mean, I can understand why you're tired – you *have* been working really super hard. But I can't understand why you're so depressed. This should be your moment of triumph! You defied the odds and brought Applejack back to life. The whole town is happy, but you don't look happy at all."

"Just give them time," Twilight muttered. "I'm sure in a few hours there will be an angry mob here with pitchforks, ready to burn the castle down to the ground."

"Your castle is made of crystal – it can't burn," Arrow pointed out. "It's not like the Golden Oak Library, which was actually made of wood and was therefore able to catch fire and, um, burn down."

"My library," Twilight breathed. She looked off into the distance. She couldn't see its ruins from where she was lying, but she would never forget it. "You know, thanks for reminding me of that painful loss. That's really what I needed right now."

"Oh, right," Arrow said, embarrassed. "I am

so, so sorry about that! I didn't mean to bring that up. It's just that – well, sometimes I forget that you're real.”

Twilight glared at him. In spite of her complete exhaustion, she struggled to her hooves and looked him in the eye. “And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Oh, um, sorry! I am so sorry. I really didn't mean that the way it sounded. But you have to realize that to most ponies you're a legend. Ponies read about your adventures and hear all the amazing things you've done, but they never get a chance to actually meet you. To pretty much everypony you're an abstraction. You are the Element of Magic – and the Princess of Friendship too, I guess. No pony really thinks of you as being *real*. You're too big and legendary for that. You're more like a force of nature. The closest most ponies get to interacting with you is owning your line of action figures.”

“But I *am* real,” Twilight said. “I am very, *very* real – and so is Applejack.”

“I know you are, and I'm sure Applejack is too. Now, I haven't seen her or anything since you raised her from the dead, but I've heard what ponies have been saying. I want to see her – I really do – but I've been working.”

“But you're not working now,” Twilight

pointed out.

“Um, well, actually, I'm *supposed* to be working,” Arrow admitted. “It's not technically closing time yet. However, when I heard that you had collapsed I came over to see how I could help. To be honest, I kind of expected your friends to already be here. I guess they're all at Sweet Apple Acres with Applejack, then, right?”

“I guess,” Twilight said. Her tone softened. “So you closed up the comic book store and skipped out on your job just to come and see me? Why would you do that?”

“Because I care about you! The whole town does. We might not show it that often, but you have saved Equestria several times. All of us owe you our lives. It was the least I could do.”

“Thanks,” Twilight said. “Really, I'll be ok – eventually. Probably. I just need to rest. Bringing Applejack back from the dead was really taxing, and the way she reacted didn't help matters.”

“The way she reacted? How did she react?”

“Very poorly.” Twilight sighed. “She thinks that just because I used the magic from an enchanted comic book to bring her back to life, that means she isn't real. She thinks she's just a comic book character. I tried to explain to her that she is one-hundred-percent real, but she won't believe it.”

“Wait a minute,” Frosted Arrow said. “You mean you were actually able to use our comic books to pull this off? That means you must have found a way to take items out of the enchanted comic and bring them into the real world. But that's impossible! No pony has ever been able to do that – and believe me, they've tried. It just doesn't work that way.”

“It does now,” Twilight said.

“Really? Oh, wow. The implications – why, this will change everything! You must have somehow infused her genetic material into the book, then copied her memories, and then extracted her. This is huge! This is going to change everything. Do you have any idea what this means?”

“I certainly do. It means I have a friend who believes I made a mistake in raising her from the dead. She will never believe that she is real.”

Frosted Arrow hesitated. “I suppose it's a matter of perspective. From your point of view you made a perfect copy of Applejack. She has Applejack's body and mind, and is completely identical in every way. Mathematically, if two things have the same value then they are equal. Therefore, since there is no difference between the copy you made and the original, what you created is the real Applejack.”

“That's exactly my point!” Twilight said, exasperated. “Why can't she see that?”

“Because she has a different perspective. You are an alicorn and you deal in the world of magic. Applejack, though, is an earth pony. She deals with the physical world. In Applejack's farm, a copy of something is just that – a copy. If you take a book and copy it then you have two books. If you have a barn and build another one, you have two barns. If you then tear down the first barn you have lost it. It's gone. The first one isn't there anymore because it wasn't repaired – it was replaced. From Applejack's point of view, all you did was build a replacement. You didn't repair the first one; you created a second one. And that weighs heavily on her.”

“But it shouldn't! Just because I used magic to create her doesn't mean she isn't real.”

Frosted Arrow nodded. “I know. I understand where you're coming from, but think of it this way. Suppose that you were trapped in a cave somewhere and nopony could find a way to rescue you. So Celestia used magic to create a perfect copy of you, and told your friends that since she had created that copy, it was ok to let you remain trapped in the cave and die. Would you be ok with that, since you had been duplicated?”

"Of course not!" Twilight exclaimed. "The duplicate may be a perfect copy of me, but it isn't me! They—"

She suddenly stopped. For a long time she said nothing at all. She just looked out in the distance. "Oh," she said at last.

"Exactly," Frosted Arrow said. "And that is why Applejack is upset."

"But I can't do anything about that! I can't repair the original. No pony can. It's impossible. This is the best that any pony can do."

"And it is better than nothing," Arrow said quickly. "I'm sure that some ponies wouldn't even give it a second thought. It just happens that Applejack is the Element of Honesty, and she cares about details like that. But I think even Applejack is glad that she exists. Equestria needs her, and her family needs her too. Over time I'm sure she'll accept who and what she is."

Twilight looked at Frosted Arrow. She had a look of intense pain on her face. Frosted Arrow realized that he hadn't made her feel better; if anything, Twilight now felt much worse.

"What have I done?" Twilight asked him. "I was just trying to help."

"And you did help. There's just – limitations, that's all. No solution is perfect. There are always trade-offs and costs."

The two ponies were interrupted by a brilliant flash of yellow light. Princess Celestia appeared a few feet away from them. She was large, regal, and alone.

When Twilight saw her she winced. "And of course Celestia found out! Why wouldn't she? This is a perfect ending to a perfect day. What else could go wrong?"

Celestia looked surprised. "Excuse me?"

Frosted Arrow glanced at the ruler of Equestria, and then back at Twilight. "Um, I think I'll go now," he said hurriedly. "You take care of yourself, Twilight. Get well soon." He turned around and ran for his life, as fast as his hooves could carry him.

Chapter 6: “I am not a bad pony”

Princess Celestia stared at Twilight. To Twilight's surprise she didn't look angry; instead she looked deeply confused. There was a long, awkward silence, and then the ruler of Equestria spoke. “Would you care to explain what is going on?” she asked gently.

Twilight looked up at the towering white alicorn. She thought about the day that Applejack died, and the immense pain she felt when she realized that her friend was unquestionably dead. She thought about how Rainbow Dash insisted there was something she could do to fix it, and the long, hard hours it took to find a solution that would bring her dear friend back to life.

It had been so hard and so difficult. The magic spells that Twilight had used to resurrect her friend had drained her, and she was so tired she could no longer even do simple tasks. She was exhausted, physically and emotionally. The simple act of standing up on her hooves took all the strength she had left.

But the worst part was knowing that she had

failed. Frosted Arrow was right: Twilight *hadn't* brought Applejack back. Her dear, dear friend was gone, and she would never return. *The new Applejack hates me*, she thought desperately. *She will never get over who she is. Her family thinks I used dark magic to bring her back, and that I've done something evil and twisted. It's only a matter of time before the whole town comes to my home and burns it down. I'll have to run for my life, and go into hiding, and—*

Twilight finally couldn't take it anymore. She collapsed onto the ground and burst into tears.

Celestia looked at Twilight in shock. "Twilight, what's wrong? I don't understand. What is going on?"

But Twilight did not respond. She just cried even harder. All the pain and suffering of the past week had finally caught up with her, and she couldn't hold it back any more.

Celestia quickly walked over to Twilight, picked her up off the ground, and hugged her. "I am so sorry," Celestia said softly. "I didn't know how hard all of this had been for you. I thought you were doing all right. I should have been here for you – and insisted that Rainbow Dash let me inside. But I'm here for you now and I'm not going anywhere. Just let it all go."

It took some time for Twilight to calm down.

When Celestia saw that a crowd of onlookers was starting to gather, she gently carried Twilight inside the castle and closed the door. Once Twilight finally regained control of herself, Celestia dried her tears and set her down in a chair in her beloved library.

Celestia noticed that the library was a mess, but she didn't say anything about it. *I should have been with Twilight this week, Celestia thought. I should never have left her all alone. Rainbow Dash was not the comfort that she needed. I have let Twilight down.*

Celestia looked at Twilight. "Do you feel like talking?"

Twilight nodded. "I think so. I'm just so sorry about all this! I didn't know things would turn out this way. I had good intentions – really, I did."

"What are you talking about? Everything turned out fine. I stopped by Sweet Apple Acres before I came here, and—"

"You stopped by the Apple farm?" Twilight asked, surprised.

"Yes, I did, and I saw Applejack there. She's doing fine, Twilight. Her family loves her and is so happy to have her back. All of Ponyville came out to see her and welcome her home. Everyone is happy about this – everyone except for you, apparently. Applejack told me that you were

upset, but she wouldn't say why. She just said I should come and see you."

"I did my best," Twilight said hurriedly. "I really did. You have to understand that this was really, really hard. I found the best solution that I could, but there are some things that just can't be done."

Celestia nodded. "I know – and I used to think that bringing ponies back from the dead was one of those things. Yet, somehow, you found a way to do it. When I saw Applejack I was quite impressed. I thought you had used some sort of necromancy to reanimate her, but I could detect no dark magic about her at all. That really was Applejack, in the flesh. She was no different from the last time I saw her. You did it, Twilight, but I don't understand how. You have accomplished something that I have never seen done before."

Twilight sighed. "But that's just it. I *didn't* do it. I mean, I thought I had done it, until Frosted Arrow explained what was really going on. Applejack saw the truth all along. That's why she was so upset."

"Who is Frosted Arrow?" Celestia asked.

"Um, well, I don't really know a lot about him. I do know that he runs the comic book store in Ponyville. He's the stallion that ran off in a panic when you appeared on my doorstep."

“Oh.” Celestia paused. “Is he a powerful magic user?”

Twilight shook her head. “No, he's an earth pony. Like I said, he sells comic books.”

“Then why were you taking magic advice from him? Why not talk to me instead? If you had asked me for help, Twilight, I would have come. Luna would have helped as well. We are both well versed in the magical arts.”

“I would never dream of asking either of you, princess! You have a whole nation to run and important things to do. You're just too busy. That's why I had to do this myself – well, with Rainbow's help. I couldn't have done it without her.”

“But she's not a magic user either. What did you do, Twilight? How did you bring Applejack back to life?”

Twilight hesitated. “It's – um, it's complicated.”

“I have all day,” Celestia said gently. “Take your time.”

Twilight pointed a hoof at the library window. “Um, about that. I'm pretty sure the day is almost over. Isn't it almost time for you to set the sun?”

“I can set the sun from here,” Celestia pointed out. “I have time for you, Twilight. I know I am busy, but you *do* matter to me. You are my favorite student, you know, and you always will be.

I care a great deal about you.”

“Thank you,” Twilight replied. Celestia saw that her former student was finally beginning to relax. The fear and pain seemed to be leaving her. “That really means a lot to me. Let me get my notes, then, and we can get started. I think you'll find this fascinating.”

Twilight tried to get out of her chair, but she ended up falling onto the floor instead. Her back legs knocked over the end table and sent it crashing onto the ground. The teacup that was resting on the table shattered into dozens of tiny pieces.

The noise roused Spike, who leaped out of bed and raced into the library. He was surprised to see that Celestia was there, helping a very unsteady Twilight get back up onto her hooves.

“Oh, hello, princess,” Spike said. “So, uh, what's going on? What did I miss?”

“Twilight has had a long day,” Celestia replied. “I think she needs to go to bed and get some rest. I can continue my discussion with her another day. Can you take care of her?”

“Of course!” Spike announced. “That's what I'm here for. So, um, how did that thing with Applejack go? Did that work out?”

Celestia nodded. “Twilight was able to bring her back to life. I'm not sure how she did it, but it

worked. Applejack is now home again.”

“That's great news! Maybe that means Rainbow Dash will move out and stop bothering Twilight. She has been a real pest lately. In fact, she hasn't let Twilight get any sleep at all! It's been awful.”

“I see,” Celestia said thoughtfully. “That certainly explains a lot.”

Twilight spoke up. “Celestia, do you think you could come back a week from today? Maybe you could return in the evening so Luna can join you. By then I'll be rested and will have my notes organized, and I can teach both of you how to perform the technique that I used on Applejack. Will that work?”

“That sounds like a wise plan – and I am sure my sister will gladly join us. She enjoys spending time with you, you know. I will make sure that our schedules are clear that evening. Who are we going to raise from the dead?”

“Um, let me think. Hmmm. What about Starswirl the Bearded? He had his brain preserved for science, right?”

“That is correct. His brain currently resides in the Canterlot Library.”

“Great – then that should work. When you come back next week, bring that and a lock from his mane. That should be enough.”

“Very well. I will acquire both of those items.”

Celestia was about to return to Canterlot when the force of what they were talking about suddenly hit her. Starswirl had been dead for almost a thousand years, but a week from now they were going to bring him back to life again. The thought filled her with hope and joy. This wasn't just another magic lesson; this was something amazing – something that would change Equestria forever!

The princess was overwhelmed with pure happiness. “Oh, Twilight, it will be so good to see him again! He has been gone for such a long time. It's still hard for me to believe that this is possible. I thought he was gone for good – but you've changed that. You have made all sorts of things possible. I never imagined that this day would come.”

The ruler of Equestria turned her attention to Spike. “Make sure that Twilight gets plenty of rest this week, and don't let anyone bother her. She is exhausted and needs to recover. Can I trust you to handle that?”

“Of course! You can count on me. I'm Twilight's number-one assistant, after all.”

Celestia smiled. “Then I will see you both next week. Twilight, please write to me if you need anything. I will do whatever I can to help you.

All right?"

"Thanks," Twilight said wearily. "I'll see you then."

Celestia gave Twilight one last hug and then disappeared in a flash of yellow light, leaving Twilight and Spike alone in the library.

"All right," Spike said. "Let's get you off to bed. Do you think you can make it? Because if you can't, I don't think I can carry you."

Twilight smiled in spite of weariness. "I can try. A little rest is definitely what I need. I'm sure I'll feel better in the morning."

* * * * *

Twilight was so tired that she went to sleep immediately after collapsing in bed – but rest did not come easy for her. Her sleep was troubled and fitful. She kept tossing and turning, unable to find the peace that she so craved.

The worst part was the nightmare that she kept having. Usually the princess dreamed gentle, happy dreams about reading books or making new friends. Tonight, however, her dreams were dark and disturbing.

Twilight saw herself standing in front of her crystal castle. The area around her was bathed in a gray light. All the color seemed to be drained out

of the world; even her castle had been turned black. It was as if all of Equestria was in a state of mourning.

In front of her, about thirty feet away, was Celestia. The ruler of Equestria had a look of intense anger on her face, and her horn was glowing. Twilight knew that she was getting ready to attack and she began to panic. She desperately wanted to flee, but found to her terror that she couldn't move. Celestia was going to try to kill her and Twilight could do nothing about it. The dream was fixed and could not be changed.

Behind Celestia was the ruins of Ponyville. The city had crumbled into dust and was overrun with weeds and trees. It looked like the town had been abandoned for a century – perhaps more. Nothing was intact and nothing was lived in. The town was deserted and forgotten.

A cold wind blew through the air, and a dark sun hung low on the horizon. Evening was approaching. There were a few scattered clouds high in the sky, but there were no birds or pegasi in sight. Somehow Twilight knew that she and Celestia were the only two ponies left in the world. Everypony else was gone, and had been gone for a long time. The whole world had come to an end.

Celestia was the one who broke the chilling silence. “You have to end this!” she screamed.

“Do you not see what you have done? Is this what you wanted? Was this your plan all along?”

Twilight found that she had no choice. Each time she dreamed this dream she tried to change its outcome, but she couldn't. It was as if she was watching someone else – or was a part of something that could not be changed.

“You should have gone with Luna!” Twilight shouted at her former mentor. “Everypony else has left and is safe. They have found their own happiness. Why have you stayed behind? There's nothing left here in this dark and terrible world. Even I don't live here anymore! I only came back to protect my kingdom from your rage.”

“Rage? *Rage?* I will show you rage!”

Celestia leaped into the air and fired a bolt of intense magical energy directly at Twilight.

Twilight immediately woke up, screaming in terror. She was drenched in sweat and her heart was racing. Her thoughts were filled with blind panic. *Celestia is going to try to kill me! I just know she is. But why? What have I done?*

* * * * *

After a restless night, Twilight hauled herself out of bed and made her way to the kitchen. She did feel a little bit better. Her headache was gone

and her body's pains had mostly subdued. It was an improvement – but she was still field with doubts and uncertainties.

As she made herself a cup of tea she thought about her dream the night before. *Does that scene have any significance? Am I seeing a glimpse of the future, or is it just a manifestation of my own anxieties? Am I worried that Celestia is going to be upset when she learns how I brought Applejack back, or was I just overly tired?*

The fact that she kept having the same dream over and over again weighed on her. It had to mean something; she just didn't know what. *I don't understand how my new magic could destroy Equestria. Raising the dead seems like a good thing! Maybe I was just too tired yesterday.*

After Twilight finished her tea she went downstairs into her basement. She had a lot of work to do. *I don't even know where to begin! Let me think. I need to organize my findings and create a book I can publish, so other unicorns can learn how to cast these spells. Since non-alicorns are going to be attempting this, I might need to find an easier way to do some of these tricks. After all, unicorns aren't going to have alicorn magic to fall back on when things get tough.*

Then she remembered the ruined barn at Sweet Apple Acres. The Apple family depended

on that barn; rebuilding it would be a terrible financial hardship on them. It was a virtual certainty that Applejack would eventually come by and ask for help rebuilding it. She would be reluctant at first, because the Apple family was proud and self-reliant. But she would give in eventually, out of necessity. That meant that when she came by, Twilight had to be ready for her. Even though Twilight was upset with Applejack, she was still her friend and she wasn't going to let the Apple family suffer if she could help them.

Twilight pulled up a chair to her workbench and looked over the materials scattered all over it. The table was a mess – books, quills, and crystals were scattered everywhere. The lack of organization made her wince. *I must have been really out of it yesterday*, she thought. The alicorn took a moment to put everything into symmetric groups and neatly organized stacks, and then sighed in relief. *Much better*. She then gathered up her thoughts and levitated a quill off the table. *I guess I'd better get to work, then! These to-do lists aren't going to get themselves done*.

Twilight took a blank book off of a stack she had prepared and began writing. She had only been at work for a few minutes when a small dragon walked into the basement. “So that's

where you are,” Spike said with relief. “I’ve been looking all over for you! To be honest, I kinda thought you would still be in bed. It’s still pretty early, you know.”

“It’s eight in the morning,” Twilight replied. “I went to bed yesterday afternoon! I’ve had plenty of sleep.”

“Well, sort of, I guess. I mean, if you count having nightmares and screaming yourself awake as ‘sleep’. Which I’m pretty sure you did all night long. Are you sure you don’t want to go back to bed? After all, Equestria isn’t in danger or anything, and everything is fine. There’s no reason why you can’t take the week off.”

“Sorry, Spike, but I’ve got a lot of work to do! I just can’t afford to take any time off right now.”

“I don’t know,” Spike said dubiously. “Celestia seemed pretty certain that you needed to rest. She thinks you’ve been working too hard.”

Twilight put down her quill and looked at Spike. “I *am* taking it easy! In a way. I mean, I’m not going outside and fighting any monsters or anything. I’m just going to sit here and write. That will give me something to do – something that isn’t strenuous. You don’t have a problem with me writing books, do you?”

“I guess not. It still sounds like work to me, though. Couldn’t you spend the day with your

friends instead? You could go to the lake or have a picnic or something! You have kind of been neglecting them lately. When was the last time you spent time with somepony who wasn't Rainbow Dash?"

Twilight winced. "I know, Spike, I know. I do need to do that – but I promised Celestia I'd get all of this ready for her return visit next week. After I've finished my work I promise I'll go relax, all right? I just need to finish a few things first."

"If you say so. Is there any way I can help?"

"There certainly is," Twilight replied. "I need you to watch the door and keep everypony out. I don't want to be disturbed."

"You want me to keep *everypony* out? Really? Even your friends?"

"Well, not my friends, I guess. If Applejack comes by be sure to let her in. I'm just afraid that once word gets out that I know how to raise ponies from the dead, a giant mob will form outside the castle. I need you to keep them out so I can work. Can you do that?"

"Absolutely! Now *that* is something I can do. Consider it done."

Twilight smiled as Spike made his way back upstairs. She then levitated the quill once more and resumed her work.

It wasn't until that afternoon that she had any visitors. Twilight was working on documenting the new technique she had invented when she heard voices echo down the stairwell. When she heard the noise she put down her quill, got off her stool, and stretched. *I guess I could use a break*, she thought.

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea," she heard a deeply country voice say.

"Oh, come on! This is a *great* idea. You need help, and Twilight can help you. It'll be easy!"

"That's the whole problem – it'll be *too* easy. I don't like this at all."

A moment later Applejack and Rainbow Dash entered the basement. "Oh hey there, Twilight!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "I see you're still busy working. Got anything good going on?"

"Just documenting my findings," Twilight replied. "So how can I help you two?"

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth, but Applejack stopped her. "Let me handle this, ok? I've got some things I need to say."

"Fine, fine," Rainbow Dash replied. She flew over and landed in front of Twilight. Applejack walked over to Twilight and stood in front of her. Applejack looked at her awkwardly, then looked

down at the ground. Twilight noticed that she was wearing her straw hat.

"First of all, I want to apologize for the things I said yesterday," Applejack said. "I know I hurt you, and I didn't mean to do that."

"But the things that you said yesterday were true," Twilight pointed out. "You were absolutely right. I didn't bring you back from the dead; I just created a copy of you. I didn't understand that at the time but I do understand it now."

"You do?" Applejack asked, surprised. "Really?"

Twilight nodded. "Really. Applejack, I'm the one who is sorry. I wanted to raise you back to life, but in the end I couldn't. This is the best I could do. I think, though, we can all agree that having you back – even as a copy – is the best thing for everyone, can't we? Your friends need you and your family needs you, and they have you now. That's got to count for something."

"I guess I can agree with that. I know you did your best, Twilight, and the Apple family is grateful. Can we be friends again now? I really don't like knowing that you're angry with me."

Twilight walked over to Applejack and gave her a hug. "Of course we can be friends! I don't know what got into me yesterday. I must have been tired or something."

Applejack hugged her back and then smiled. "Well, that's a load off my mind! I feel better now."

Rainbow Dash interrupted. "Enough about feelings already! We've got work to do. Twilight, we need you to create some bits for us. Applejack needs a new barn and I figured you could help us out. After all, you can make bits, right?"

"Rainbow Dash!" Applejack exclaimed. "That's no way to treat Twilight! My barn is not her problem. She doesn't have to help me. She's already done a lot, and I have no right to ask her for anything else."

"It's all right," Twilight replied. "I knew you'd be by. My whole goal was to help the Apple family, and recreating your barn is part of recovering from that terrible storm. I'm not going to leave a job half done."

"Follow me," she called out, as she walked over to the basement stairs. Behind the stairs was a wooden door. She opened the door and revealed a long underground hallway. The hallway was made of polished crystal.

"Hey, wait a minute," Rainbow Dash said. "I'm pretty sure this hallway wasn't here yesterday. What gives?"

Twilight shrugged. "I needed some more storage space, so I made it this morning. It's not a big deal."

“You made it this morning? But – that's impossible! Your hooves aren't even dirty. How could you possibly have dug all this out in one morning? That would take a whole team of construction ponies!”

“I used magic, of course! I just wrote about it in a comic and then extracted it into my castle. It wasn't hard.”

Rainbow Dash stopped. “Woah. You can do that?”

“Of course I can! That's what we did for Applejack, remember? Why did you think it would work on ponies but not rooms?”

“I dunno. I just think that's kind of amazing, that's all. Does that mean you could just create Applejack's barn intact?”

Applejack interrupted. “Now hold on just a minute! I ain't doin' that. I'll take the bits, buy the materials, and build it myself, but that's as far as I'll go. Having a whole barn conjured out of nothin' is just too lazy.”

“I figured you'd say that,” Twilight said. “Which is why I built this hallway. Come with me.”

With Applejack and Rainbow Dash following behind her, Twilight entered the hallway and went to the third door on the left. When she reached it she opened the wooden door and motioned inside with her hoof. “Take whatever you need.”

Applejack poked her head inside the room and gasped. The room was filled with hundreds of bags of bits, which were stacked to the ceiling. "Why, there's got to be thousands of bits in there!"

"Millions," Twilight corrected. "I could buy Diamond Tiara's estate several times over – and there's more where that came from. Just take whatever you want."

"See?" Rainbow Dash said, as she nudged Applejack. "I told you Twilight could help! Isn't this awesome?"

"It's surely amazing, all right," Applejack said in wonder, as she stared at the enormous wealth that was in front of her. "I'm just not sure this is a good idea. I was kinda hopin' that this wasn't possible."

Twilight frowned. "And why is that? These are *bits*, Applejack. They don't have souls. There are no ethical considerations whatsoever in creating little round pieces of metal! They aren't counterfeit; they're genuine."

"Right, I know," Applejack said reluctantly. "Look. I don't want to step on your feelings again or anything, but I'm a mite worried about all this. I mean, it used to be that in order to get bits you had to earn them. Oh, sure, there were bad folks who would spend their time defrauding ponies – like those awful Flim Flam brothers – but by and

large you had to work. If you could have whatever you wanted without working for it then why would anypony bother to work at all? Isn't it mighty dangerous to be doin' this?"

"It's *exciting*," Twilight insisted. She felt her irritation from yesterday start to return. "With my new magical technique I can put an end to hunger and poverty. I can create an entirely new society – one in which everypony can have everything that they want, all of the time. This is a *good* thing. No pony needs to go hungry anymore."

"But what are ponies going to do with their time? If they don't need to work then doesn't that make life kind of meaningless?"

"Only if you consider work the purpose of life. If ponies are freed from having to work then they can spend time with their families and friends. They can build relationships. They can pursue the arts and the sciences. We can make a *better* world – one in which life isn't so hard."

"If you say so," Applejack said doubtfully. "This all sounds kinda scary to me, but you could be right. You usually are, you know."

Applejack took one of the bags of bits and put it in her saddlebag. Rainbow Dash shook her head. "Aw, c'mon, take more than that! They're free, you know. Is one bag *really* enough to rebuild an entire barn? That barn was pretty big."

"Fine," Applejack said. She reluctantly took a second bag. "I really appreciate this, Twilight. You've done a lot for us."

"You're welcome!" Twilight replied. She closed the door to the room of bits. "Is there anything else I can do?"

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "Could you give Applejack wings? *Please?* That would be so awesome! You can do that, right?"

"Oh, probably, I guess. I could take some of your genetic material and fuse it with Applejack's comic. If I did it right she would have both earth pony strength and the flight abilities of a pegasus. Of course, to teach her to fly I'd have to give her your knowledge as well. I'm pretty sure it would be possible – in theory, anyway. I've never actually tried it."

"Now hold on just a second," Applejack interrupted. "I do *not* want to be a pegasus. I'm an earth pony – always have been and always will be! There ain't ever been a pegasus in the Apple family. That's not who I am."

"But why not?" Rainbow Dash asked. "You have a chance to *fly*, Applejack – to fly! Do you know how awesome flying is? Not only would it help you with your farming stuff, but you could soar into the air. This is an amazing opportunity – an opportunity that nopony else has ever had. Are

you really going to throw all that away just because it's something new?"

Twilight spoke up. "She has a point, you know. Besides, if you don't like it I can always put you back the way you were. Is there really any harm in trying it out? Is the thought of having wings really that scary?"

"I ain't scared," Applejack insisted. "It's just – I'd never even thought of that before. That sort of thing isn't usually possible. You and Cadence are the only ponies who have ever switched species."

"But it is possible now. In fact, all sorts of new things are possible. You should embrace the future, not run from it."

Applejack sighed. "All right. I guess I'll give it a try. Now, if I don't like it then you can put me back, right?"

"Of course! Not a problem. So, Rainbow Dash, I'm going to need your help. Specifically, I'm going to need a lock of your mane."

"Aw, but my mane is awesome! How about feathers? I've got lots of those. Could you use them?"

Twilight shook her head. "The spell I know doesn't work on feathers."

"Then why can't you use *your* mane? After all, you've got wings! Wouldn't that work?"

"I'm an *alicorn*, not a pegasus! We're trying

to give Applejack wings, not a horn. Besides, you're the best flier in Equestria. What pegasus could possibly be better to use than you?"

"Well, *that's* true. I guess I am pretty awesome. Fine, fine, you can have some of my mane. But don't take too much, all right?"

Twilight nodded. She levitated a pair of scissors off the table and took a sample of Rainbow's mane. "Thanks! That's exactly what I needed. Now, I'm going to need some time to figure this out, and I'm going to need both of you here to actually do it."

"Ok, I guess that makes sense. So when will you be ready?"

"Tomorrow evening. That should give me enough time to set things up. If everything goes well, I mean."

"Fantastic! Then we will see you tomorrow."

Twilight walked Applejack and Rainbow Dash back upstairs and led them to the door of her castle. When she opened the door and told them goodbye she was surprised to see that there was a large mob waiting outside.

"What in Equestria is that?" Twilight shrieked.

"Looks like you've got some fans!" Rainbow Dash said. "They've been here all morning. Anyway, see you later!"

As Applejack and Rainbow Dash made their way through the mob and headed off into the distance, the large mass of ponies turned its attention to Twilight. They began to move in closer to her.

Twilight immediately took a step back. "Woah there! Hold on, everypony! What's the problem?"

"You gotta help me!" a voice called out.

"No, help me first!" another voice said.

"I've been waiting the longest!" a deep voice bellowed.

As the crowd grew more animated, it rushed toward Twilight. The princess panicked and lit up her horn. She cast a protective shield around her castle, which pushed the mob back.

The mob started shouting at her. There were so many ponies talking at once that she couldn't understand what they were saying.

"QUIET!" Twilight bellowed.

The voices in the mob died down.

"That's better. Now listen up, everypony. I know that you all want help – I understand that. But I can't possibly help all of you. There's only one of me and there are lots and lots of you. That means there's not enough of me to go around."

The mob started to make noise again. Twilight silenced them. "That is why I am working

very, very hard to publish my findings. I am working on a book that will explain everything. Once it's released, any unicorn with magical ability will be able to do what I did for Applejack. I just need you to be patient while I work on this. Please help me help you. Can you do that?"

The mob started shouting at her again. Twilight shook her head. *Apparently not. Well, this just got a lot harder.*

Spike walked up to Twilight and peeked outside. "Yeah, they've been out there all morning. I've been trying to keep them at bay but they're kinda pushy. They don't really want to listen to reason. I've at least managed to keep them outside, though – although I don't know how long that will last."

"Thanks, Spike." Twilight sighed. "I have a feeling that crowd is just going to grow. The spell I cast around the castle should keep them out – well, for now, anyway. I'll have to remember to maintain it, though, or it will decay. Then we'll be overrun by that mob and I won't be able to get any work done."

"So how can I help?" Spike asked.

"Just let me know if anything bad happens. I'll be down in the basement writing, and I need some peace and quiet. Keep an eye on things, will you?"

“Absolutely! I'll take care of everything for you.”

* * * * *

Twilight walked back down to the basement and sat on the chair in front of her workbench. She wanted to get back to work, but she was distracted. There was too much on her mind.

Twilight glanced at the bags of bits that were still sitting in front of the fireplace. *Applejack just doesn't understand, she thought. She doesn't see the vision of what Equestria could be. All she sees are problems. She even sees herself as a problem! I understand her point of view, but this new magic can make Equestria better than ever. I just wish she could see that.*

Then she thought of something. Applejack's personality and mind was defined by the comic book that Twilight had written. It was true that the comic book did not wholly define her; now that Applejack was alive she would continue to have new experiences and would change over time. However, the definition in the comic book was her foundation. If Twilight rewrote that foundation, she could give Applejack a new appreciation for magic. She could change the way Applejack thought.

She could change Applejack.

It was so tempting. All it would take was a small change – just a few lines added to her definition. Once the change was done, Applejack wouldn't have a problem with this anymore. She would be happy again and at peace with her new self. Everything would be the way Twilight wanted.

It was tempting – but it wasn't right. *No*, Twilight thought firmly. *I am not going to do that. It would be a violation of her character. Applejack is who she is, and I'm not going to rewrite her to change her into someone I like better. That would be wrong – very, very wrong – and I am not a bad pony. I would never do something like that to my friends. Not for any reason. Not even if they hate me.*

Twilight sighed. “I need help,” she said aloud. “This is just too much for one pony to handle! I can't possibly get all this work done in time. I have to document my findings, and prepare things for Celestia's visit next week, and learn how to turn Applejack into a pegasus, and keep that blasted shield maintained so I don't get trampled to death. What I need is help.”

Twilight glanced down at the blank comic book in front of her. *Maybe I'm overthinking this. Maybe all I need to do is create somepony to help me. Spike is great and all, but I need a powerful*

magical user. I need a pony who can help me with my research and work to meet my deadline. After all, I can create anything I want. Why not create some help?

And I know just who to copy.

Chapter 7: “Call me Sunshine”

It took Twilight until late that afternoon to prepare everything. What she was about to do was momentous, and more than a little frightening. She wanted to make sure that everything was handled exactly right. Mistakes would not be fatal, but they might cause problems; it was better to get everything correct on the first try. *After all, Twilight thought, that's the whole point of checklists, right? They make sure that nothing is forgotten. Ponies might make fun of my methods, but they can't argue with my results.*

The first thing Twilight had done that morning was organize her basement, which she had formally turned into her experimental magical laboratory. The room was no longer a temporary workspace; the magical changes she had made were now permanent. This would be the place where great discoveries were made and great things were accomplished – she just knew it! Twilight could feel the magic lingering in the air. The room had a good feeling about it, no matter

what Rainbow Dash claimed.

Twilight put out the magical green fire that raged in the fireplace, and spent more than an hour organizing the contents of her two workbenches. All of the crystals were placed into orderly rows (sorted by color and size), and her expensive magical instruments was cleaned and repaired. A neat stack of blank books was placed on both tables, next to a row of brand-new inkwells and quills.

Once everything was in place, Twilight sat down at the workbench nearest the fireplace and picked up a blank book. After opening the comic and laying it in front of her she levitated a quill and began writing. It only took her a few minutes to create a blank world; merging the genetic material that she had prepared took a little bit longer than that. Twilight was pleased to see that the merge was a success. The comic told her that she had successfully created a new pony. That brought the first step to a close – and gave her something to check off her checklist.

I'll just stick with the basic body for now, she thought. I'd like to upgrade her body later but I'll let her take care of that. I'm sure she will know what to do once I bring her to life. After all, I'm going to give her my memories! She'll know everything about this experiment and she'll know

what I'm trying to accomplish. She will be perfect.

The princess stared at the comic thoughtfully, then levitated a quill once more. This was the most important part of the process. Before she gave the pony her memories she had to define its personality. The character needed to have a foundation – a starting point – before it was given a mind. It was time to define who this pony was, what it wanted, and what her life was all about.

As Twilight began writing she felt a twinge of guilt. This part of the process somehow felt wrong. The pony she was creating was not going to get to choose what it wanted to be in life; instead she would be defined right from the start. She would have free will, but the only things she would ever want would be the things that Twilight wrote into her character. The pony would grow as time went on, but only in the ways that Twilight had already predefined. In a very real sense she would be limited – and Twilight was the one who put those limits in place.

But that's how it has to be, Twilight thought to herself. All fictional characters are like that! The author creates a character, and that pony then does whatever the author wants. It's how all books work. Characters don't get to define themselves! The only difference is that I now have the ability to reach into a comic and bring

characters to life.

A feeling of doubt gnawed at Twilight. She tried to mentally push it away. I'm not doing anything wrong. After all, you could always make the argument that I'm actually adding life to them, not taking away their free will. Besides, the goal here is to create an assistant so I can make Equestria a better place – not to create a new race of mind-controlled slave ponies! I just need someone who can help me, that's all. Spike is great but he can't cast spells. This is the way it has to be.

Twilight cast her misgivings away and refocused on the blank book in front of her. All right. So what do I want in an assistant? Well, first of all, I want her to be supportive. This pony will always agree with me. She will always back me and will do everything in her power to help make my plans succeed. That's what assistants do, right? She will be completely loyal to me at all times, no matter what.

Twilight began writing. I've already given her magical talent; I'll also give her a love of magic and a love of study. Oh – and a love of reading and writing. If she's going to help me write books then she'll need that. It would also be great if she loved me and wanted to stay by my side; after all, if she moved away to Canterlot then she wouldn't be

much of an assistant, would she? And let's make her a great friend, too. I'll give her my knowledge and love of friendship – although, truthfully, it might be better if she had Pinkie's knowledge of friendship. Pinkie is really good at making friends.

It didn't take Twilight very long to finish defining her character. After she finished writing, she reread the section three times to make sure she hadn't left anything out. Oh, wait – she also needs to be happy. Not just happy in general, but happy knowing who and what she is. I don't want her to turn out like Applejack and be all bitter about being, well, a fictional character. The last thing I need is an assistant who spends all her time whining about metaphysical issues that I can't fix. That's not the kind of help that I need.

Twilight made the final changes and then read the comic one last time. It's not like I'm trying to overwrite the personality of one of my friends. This is an entirely new pony that never existed before. It's just like writing a character in a book! It will be fine. It's a little weird, but that's only because nopony has ever done this before. There is nothing to worry about.

But the misgivings did not go away.

Twilight shook her head and put the quill down. Misgivings or not, she was going to do this; there was no going back. The princess lit up her

horn and levitated a memory stone that she had prepared a few hours earlier. Twilight had considered implanting her entire mind into this new character, but she decided against it. She didn't want to make a clone of herself, because that would just get confusing. Instead she wanted to give this pony her knowledge of magic, her memories of Celestia, and the events of the past few days. She would know a lot about Twilight, but she wouldn't *be* Twilight. She wouldn't even look like Twilight. This pony would be her own character.

After Twilight copied the information from the stone and merged it into the comic, she gently set the stone back down onto the workbench. She then carefully read over the comic to make sure the magic had worked. Once she was certain that nothing had gone wrong, she lit up her horn one more time.

The comic began to glow and levitated off the table. As Twilight concentrated her mind on the newly-created book, there was a flash of light. The comic fell back down onto the workbench – and a white pony appeared a few feet away. This pony was a tall, white alicorn with a blue and pink mane and a long flowing tail. She looked *exactly* like Celestia.

Twilight clapped her front hooves together.

“Excellent! I was hoping I could grab things out of the comics without actually going inside them. It worked!”

The white alicorn smiled. “Well, of course it did, Twilight! When do you ever fail? You have quite a track record of success. It's no wonder Celestia depends upon you so much.”

The newly-created pony extended a hoof to Twilight. “Call me Sunshine. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Sunshine?” Twilight asked, confused. She cautiously touched her hoof against the one Sunshine had extended. “I don't recall giving you a name. Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure I left that out.”

Sunshine nodded. “I believe you did. But the name makes sense, doesn't it? After all, you created me to be a clone of your mentor Celestia. You wanted a version of her that was more to your liking, and so here I am. Celestia provides sunshine to the entire world; I was made to bring sunshine just to you. I am the friend that you always wanted – one created with quill, ink, and paper.”

“And you're ok with that, right? No hang-ups or worries?”

Sunshine laughed. “Yes, of course! In fact, I think that the way you made me is rather fantastic.

Being created through magic opens up all sorts of possibilities. You've already considered giving me changeling DNA so I can morph into other shapes, haven't you? Things like that would not be possible if I was a normal pony."

"That's right! I did think about it, and I'd like to try it once I can track down a changeling and get a sample of their mane. I thought it might be interesting to explore the limits of what's possible. We've never really had a chance to explore changeling magic before."

"All sorts of things are possible now," Sunshine commented. "And I will see to it that I take very good care of you. Your friends have really let you down, Twilight. That is one thing that I will never do."

"Do you mean Applejack? I wouldn't say she let me down, exactly. It's more like I let her down. I don't blame her for being upset. She's just not comfortable with who she is."

"She should be grateful to be alive. Not many ponies get a second chance at life. You did her a great favor! But I actually wasn't talking about Applejack specifically. I was talking about *all* of your friends. Have you forgotten what they did to you at Cadence's wedding? You were convinced that something was wrong with Cadence, and you were absolutely right. Cadence had been replaced

by a changeling that was intent on destroying Equestria. But none of your friends believed you. Every single one of them walked away. When you needed your friends most, they weren't there. They were terrible friends."

"But they apologized afterward," Twilight pointed out. "I don't blame them for not believing me. My theory *was* sort of hard to believe."

"You are too kind, Twilight. You really *should* blame them. If your friends won't stand by your side when things grow difficult then they're not very good friends at all! In all your other adventures the danger has always been obvious. There was no need for them to trust you when Tirek was going around stealing magic from everypony. Cadence's wedding was the one time when your friends should have trusted you – but when that moment came you discovered that none of them actually did. Your friends have proven that they do not trust you, Twilight. They will not be there for you if something like that happens again – but I will. I will be the friend that they should have been."

"They're really not all bad," Twilight insisted. "Really."

Sunshine shook her head. "I'm not telling you anything that you don't already know. After all, you gave me your memories. You have to face

up to the fact that your friends are flawed. They're imperfect in ways that are dangerous. You've already noticed this – I know you have. There are things about them that you would like to change, but you feel bound to leave them the way they are. But look at what's possible now! I realize you are focused on fixing Equestria and making it a better place, but why bother? Do you not see that you can create much better worlds with ink and quill?"

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. In this world there will always be pain and suffering. Ponies will do things that hurt you; they will fail and let you down. There will be hunger, disease, and death. There will be tragedies and monsters and all sorts of horrible disasters. But you can create a better world – in fact, you can create *perfect* worlds. Using ink and quill you can create worlds that are *exactly* the way you want them to be, and you can live in them forever. You can create a world that will never know hunger or disease or pain. You can create worlds without hardship or poverty."

Sunshine gestured at the comic book that held her character definition. "Look at what you've already done! You've created one perfect pony and brought her into this world – but you don't have to stop there. You can do so much more. You can create an entire world full of

perfection *and then live there*. You can create new versions of your friends – perfect versions that are without flaws, and who actually appreciate everything you do for them. You have already created me to be an improved version of Celestia; you can do the same with the others. You can have everything that you ever wanted – and so can all the other ponies in Equestria. Everypony can have all their dreams come true. That will never be possible in this world, but it *will* be possible in the new worlds that you and I can write.”

“It's very tempting,” Twilight said slowly. “Really, it is. I'm just not sure what Celestia would think of that.”

Sunshine walked over to Twilight and put a wing around her. “Celestia doesn't care about you, Twilight. Stop and think about it. How many times has she put you in mortal danger while she stayed behind in her castle, safe and sound? How many times have you needed her when she hasn't been there? You have helped her so many times, but when has she ever helped you? Has she been there to comfort you when you were sad, or to encourage you when you were discouraged? When you went to the Crystal Empire to rescue the crystal ponies from Sombra, Celestia didn't even bother to go with you. Instead of taking the

situation seriously and doing everything in her power to safeguard the lives of those thousands of innocent ponies, she used the whole thing as a test – and nearly got everypony killed.”

“You have a point,” Twilight admitted.

“You need to forget about Celestia. I've replaced her and I am better than her in every way. I love you very dearly, Twilight, and I will watch over you and protect you. Don't worry about Celestia's disapproval. There is nothing she can do to stand against us. I'll see to that.”

“Thanks,” Twilight replied.

Sunshine kissed her. “That's what I'm here for. So where would you like to begin? I can see that you have a lot of work to do.”

Twilight sighed. “That's the problem! I have way too much to do. I need to document my findings, and I need to develop a way to give Applejack wings. There's also the issue that the magical technique I'm using to create these enchanted comics is too difficult for most unicorns to even attempt. I need to find a simpler approach.”

“You also need to create copies of your friends,” Sunshine added. “In fact, why don't you start with that? You still have a little time left this afternoon; you could use it to go get some memory stones. You already have Applejack's

mind stored in that stone over there, so you don't need to worry about her. When Rainbow Dash comes by with Applejack tomorrow morning you can copy her memories. Then after Applejack's upgrade you can go to Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity and copy them. You could easily be done by the afternoon."

"Copy them? Why would I want to do that?"

"To save them, of course! You and I are alicorns; we're going to live for a very long time. Your friends, though, have much shorter lifespans. You need to copy their memories now so that you can recreate them after they're gone. Besides, once you have their memories you can put them in comics and improve them."

"Like I did with you," Twilight replied. "I guess that makes sense. Only when I made you I gave you Celestia's body and *my* memories."

Sunshine nodded. "Do you see how your magic opens up new possibilities? Now, I'm sure that you'll eventually want to copy the memories of other ponies as well, so they can also be preserved. There's your brother, and Cadence, and Luna, and so many more. But that's something we can deal with later. While you're out collecting memories, I'll find a way to upgrade Applejack. Then I can invent a better way to create these enchanted comics – one that is

accessible to ponies who aren't unicorns at all."

"Is that possible?"

"Of course! All things are possible. Just give me some time. We want to give everypony the ability to create whatever worlds they desire. I am certain that we can find a way to do exactly that."

"You're very optimistic," Twilight commented.

"I'm confident. I can tell that we're going to make a great team. I see wonderful things in our future."

Twilight nodded. "All right, then. I guess I'd better go and get those memory stones before the supply store closes. Is there anything else you need?"

"There is one more thing. Before you go it might be a good idea for you to introduce me to Spike. After all, I'm going to be living here with you from now on. Spike probably needs to know that I exist and that I'm going to be a big part of your life."

Twilight looked surprised. "Wait, what? You're going to be living here? With me? In this castle?"

"Of course! Where did you think I was going to live? Now, you don't need to worry about anything. I know this castle has overwhelmed you, but I can fix that. I'm going to take charge of this

place and manage it for you. We'll add some guards to protect you, and we will also add staff to keep this place clean and organized. I'll handle all of that. With me to take care of all those household chores, you will be free to focus on all the important things that you care so much about."

"Staff? Guards? Isn't all that going to be expensive?"

Sunshine laughed. "Of course not, silly! I'll just write them into existence. Now that we can create things with magic, *nothing* is expensive. We could fill this castle with solid gold furnishings if that's what you wanted. Twilight, this is exactly why you need a friend who is your equal and who can take care of you. There are so many possibilities that you've never considered. I'll just move in to the big empty bedroom that's across the hall from your room – and don't worry; I'll furnish it myself. I promise I'll never be far away.

"You have been alone for so long, Twilight. None of your friends really understand you. They can't relate to who you are or what you've been going through. But you don't have to be alone anymore! You have a friend now – someone who is like you and who truly understands you."

"This is all moving really fast," Twilight said uncertainly. "I thought I was just getting an assistant, but now you're going to live with me,

and hire guards, and get staff, and everything is changing. I mean, all of these things are good and all, but I just didn't see any of this coming. To be honest I thought you'd be more like Spike. I never imagined you would turn into my sister."

Sunshine hugged Twilight. "There's no need to panic. Everything is going to be fine; I'm here to help you and make your dreams come true, remember? You wanted help and you got it. Your life is about to become radically better."

Sunshine let go of Twilight and looked around. "Spike is probably upstairs, right?"

Twilight nodded. "That's right. I'm sure you know this castle as well as I do, even though you're less than an hour old. Here – come with me. Let me introduce you to him."

* * * * *

The two alicorns found Spike in the map room. The young dragon was seated on his throne, deeply engrossed in a comic book. When Twilight saw him she smiled. "Hello there, Spike! Reading more about the Power Ponies, are you? Didn't you get enough of that when you lived the experience?"

Spike glanced up. When he saw Sunshine he immediately put the comic book down and got

out of his throne. "Oh, hello there, Celestia! I didn't hear you come in. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Sunshine laughed. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Spike! No need to worry – I'm not actually Celestia. I'm just a copy of her that Twilight created in order to help her do her research. The real Princess Celestia is in Canterlot."

Spike looked confused. "You're a copy of Celestia? Wait a minute. Twilight can do that?"

"She certainly can! In fact, she can do all sorts of things now. Twilight has invented a new type of magic that has the potential to change the world. She can now create anything that she wants. The big thing that she wants right now is help, so she created me to serve as her magical assistant."

"She needs help? But what about me? I'm her number one assistant! She never needed other help before. Well, except for that owl of hers, I guess."

Twilight spoke up. "You are a great assistant, Spike, and I could never replace you – and I don't want to replace you, either. But how good are you at casting magical spells?"

"Not very good, I guess. I am a dragon, after all. Our magic is very different from pony magic."

"Exactly. In order to get everything done in

time I need an assistant who can help me with my research – someone who knows a lot about pony magic. I need a different kind of help than what you can provide, so that's why I made Sunshine.”

“‘Sunshine’?” Spike echoed. “So, that's your name, huh? Man, but just wait until Celestia gets a load of this! She is *not* going to be happy.”

“She will be fine,” Sunshine assured him. “Celestia will pay us a visit next week and I'll explain the situation to her at that time. There is no need to worry about it.”

“Next week? You mean you're not going to tell her until then? I mean, I'm not trying to tell you your business or anything, but don't you think that word is going to get out that Celestia now has a twin? How are you going to keep this a secret?”

“I'm not. Why would I try to hide? But I'm also not going to write a letter to Celestia and explain it, either. If Celestia becomes curious about me then she can write to us and ask, or she can simply stop by. If that happens I'll handle it. If she doesn't then I'll simply talk to her whenever I see her.”

“I guess that makes sense. So is there anything I can do to help?”

“There certainly is,” Twilight announced. “I need to go buy some more memory stones for some magical work that I have in mind. Do you

think you can help me with that?"

"Sure! So what about you, Sunshine? Is there anything that you need? I take it you're going to start living here, right?"

Sunshine nodded. "That's right! I'm going to move into the bedroom that's across from Twilight. I'll handle all of those arrangements, though. You should just focus on taking care of Twilight and getting her whatever she needs. All right?"

"Absolutely! So, Twilight, are you ready to go?"

"You bet, my number one assistant," Twilight replied.

Sunshine smiled as the two left the map room. She then back headed downstairs and got to work.

* * * * *

That evening Twilight was in her room getting ready for bed. It had been a long day and she was tired – in fact, it had been a long week, for that matter. Twilight was sitting on a stool in front of her mirror while Sunshine combed out her mane. The two ponies were talking over the events of the afternoon.

"You know, I can start putting Spike to bed

every night if you want,” Sunshine remarked. “It’s not a problem.”

Twilight shook her head. “No, I don’t mind doing it. Really. It means a lot to him.”

“I understand – I just wanted to offer. I know how much you care about him. Spike has been a loyal friend. I know he cares about you and would do anything for you.”

Twilight nodded. “Just like you, I guess. I know I said this earlier, but I was really impressed at all the work you did this afternoon. I think your plan is going to work just fine. We shouldn’t have any problem giving Applejack a nice, strong pair of wings.”

Sunshine smiled. “It is a true joy to help you! That’s why I’m here. You know, if we had a sample of Rainbow Dash’s mane we could probably go ahead and make the changes to the comic now. There’s no need for Applejack to physically be here; everything that we’re going to do has to be done to her book definition. Since we don’t have a mane sample from Rainbow, though, we’ll have to wait until morning.

“Speaking of that, Twilight, you need to remember to collect genetic material from your friends when you go get a copy of their minds. We’re going to need it in order to reproduce them.”

Twilight nodded. "That's true! I'd forgotten about that. I guess I'll also need to create a vault to store all these things. It will need to be a secure, dry place. I'll put in it the memory stones, the mane samples, and all the comics that we're going to write. I don't want anything to happen to your book definition – or any of the worlds that we end up making, for that matter."

"Why don't you make that your personal project?" Sunshine asked. The white alicorn finished combing Twilight's mane and set the brush down on the vanity. "I'll take care of writing the book that explains the technique you developed. I already know how you planned on simplifying the spells – I have your memories, you know – and I can research that. You can plan for the future while I focus on the needs of the present."

"Thanks. I feel a lot better knowing you are here. I really needed help."

Sunshine wrapped one of her large wings around Twilight. "I'll always be right here by your side, Twilight. I promise. For years you've needed somepony to look out for you, and nopony has ever taken that role. Celestia should have been there for you, but she was too preoccupied with her own life to notice the things that you needed. But I'm here now and you don't need to worry

about anything. In the morning when Applejack and Rainbow Dash come over you can help them, and then you and Spike can go out to collect minds. I'll handle everything else."

"Thanks," Twilight said. She stretched, and then yawned. "Well, I think I'll go to bed. I'll see you in the morning."

Sunshine smiled at her. "Goodnight, Twilight. Tomorrow's a big day."

Twilight climbed into bed. "Goodnight, Sunshine."

Sunshine kissed Twilight's forehead, then turned out the light and closed the bedroom door behind her.

Twilight was finally at peace. She had a watchful protector now, and she somehow knew that everything was going to be all right. After all, who needs real friends when you can just make them up yourself? *Fantasy is so much better than reality*, she thought happily. *Sunshine is much better than Celestia – and she will never leave me.*

Twilight then fell asleep – the first genuinely restful sleep she'd had since Applejack died.

Chapter 8: "Twilight deserves to be happy"

Twilight Sparkle awoke the next morning after a very relaxing night's sleep. This time she had no nightmares, and she did not wake up screaming. When she opened her eyes she saw that a gentle yellow light was streaming in through her bedroom windows. The sun had risen and a new day had begun.

"Good morning, Twilight," a voice called out. Twilight lazily rolled over in bed and saw that Sunshine had poked her head in the room. "How is my favorite mare feeling today?"

"Really, really good, actually. I'm ready to go out there and get things done. I have a good feeling about today."

"Fantastic! That's what I like to hear."

Twilight was about to get out of bed, but Sunshine stopped her. "There's no need for you to get up, princess. Your breakfast is on its way. It's coming to you this morning."

"It is? But you don't have to do that! Really, it's fine. You don't have to go through all that trouble."

“But I'm not the one who's bringing it. Take a look and see.”

Twilight glanced at her bedroom door, intrigued. A moment later the door opened and Moondancer walked in. She was levitating a tray that held a steaming cup of tea and a stack of freshly made haycakes. “Good morning, princess!” she said cheerfully. She set the tray down on the bed. “Here you go, your highness – a nice, hot breakfast! I hope it's what you wanted. Is there anything else that I can get for you?”

“Moondancer?” Twilight exclaimed, astonished. “What in Equestria are you doing here?”

“Just serving you, princess. I'm stationed in the kitchen. I'll be making all of your meals, so if you have any requests just let me know. Sunshine has already told me the sort of foods that you enjoy, but if you want something special I'd be more than happy to make it for you.”

Twilight looked at Sunshine curiously. The white alicorn smiled. “Surprise! I stayed up late last night and did a bit of writing. I told you that we needed some staff to run this castle, and I decided we just couldn't wait any longer. It's only proper for a princess to have servants. Since Moondancer was one of your friends, I thought you might like to see her around. I made six copies

of her. This one runs the kitchen, and is actually pretty good at it. The other five were created to be writing assistants. They're in the basement right now working on your new book."

"Oh, wow. I didn't expect that. Thank you! But how did you get Moondancer's genetic material? I'm positive I didn't have any of her hair on hand."

"I didn't. I just created her based on your memories of her. She's not a perfect copy, but she doesn't have to be. I wasn't trying to make an exact clone her. We just needed some help."

Moondancer spoke up. "So is there anything else that you need, your highness?"

Twilight took a sip of her tea. "Nope. I'm good."

"Very well, princess. Just let me know if there is."

Moondancer then left the room, leaving Sunshine and Twilight alone.

Sunshine opened Twilight's curtains and glanced outside. "We have a big day ahead of us, Twilight! I have a lot of research to manage, and you have two friends who need your help."

Twilight nodded. "That's right! I'm sure Applejack and Rainbow Dash will be over here soon. Today is the day Applejack gets her wings."

"Would you like me to take care of that for

you? It wouldn't be any trouble."

Twilight shook her head. "No, I'll do it. They are my friends, you know. Besides, it shouldn't take very long. Once I'm done with that I'll go out and collect the minds of the rest of the gang. I'll return here when I'm done."

"I will be waiting for your return. If you get done in time then perhaps we could have lunch together. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"It seems that you've done kind of a lot already! I have to say, it's a little creepy to have an army of Moondancers as my personal servants. I'm not sure how she would feel about that."

"Would you like me to change them?" Sunshine asked. "I can alter their form into something else, if you wish."

"No, that's ok. Just leave them as they are. Did you really make six of them?"

Sunshine nodded. "I certainly did. Why not? After all, they're relatively easy to make. It didn't cost anything."

"Do we have that many spare rooms? I'm guessing they're going to be living here with us, right?"

Sunshine shook her head. "We do have that many rooms – and more – but no, they're not staying here. Once they finish their daily tasks they will return to the comics that they were

created from. I've created a place for them to live there – a home of their own. There's no reason for them to live in the castle. I thought we could keep the space you had left for your guests and friends.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Twilight said. “Thanks.”

“Let me know if there's anything I can do for you,” Sunshine said cheerfully. She then left the room, leaving Twilight alone with her breakfast.

This is really nice, Twilight thought, as she munched on breakfast in bed. *I think I'm going to like my new life. I should have done this a long time ago.*

* * * * *

An hour later Twilight walked into her library. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were already there.

“I'm so sorry to keep you waiting!” Twilight said. “I'm afraid I kind of slept in this morning. It was really hard to get out of bed.”

“Oh, that's all right,” Applejack replied. “It ain't no big deal. Besides, we haven't been waiting long.”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “And the wait gave us a chance to meet that clone of Celestia that you made. Boy, is she ever creepy! What was her

name again?"

"Sunshine," Applejack replied. "She seems nice and all, but it sure was strange talking to her. I don't think Celestia is going to like her."

"Why not?" Twilight asked. "She's not a bad pony, and she's very good at what she does. Sunshine has helped me out quite a lot."

Applejack frowned. "And how does she help you, exactly? By creating Moondancer clones to answer your front door? I'm not sure Moondancer is going to like that. It's just plain weird. Are you sure you should be making copies of your friends and turning them into your servants?"

"I think it's great! This new magical technique I've invented opens up all sorts of new possibilities. We are on the verge of changing Equestria forever. In a few weeks hunger, poverty, and want will be things of the past. Celestia has no reason to be upset. I haven't hurt her at all, you know. I didn't take anything from Celestia in order to make Sunshine."

"That's not the point," Applejack replied. "Think about it. You're planning on releasing this new magic into the world, right?"

"Absolutely! I can hardly wait."

"Right. So, you know, ponies are going to use it to make the stuff that *they* want. You are a

pretty popular pony, Twilight. I've seen ponies dress up as you for Nightmare Night. What are you going to do when they create copies of *you* to play with? Do you have any idea what sort of things they're probably going to *do* with those copies?"

Twilight turned bright red. "All right, I see your point. I suppose there are some ethical boundaries that we need to work out. But this magic is a *good* thing. It brought you back to life, Applejack, and made your family whole again. And now it's going to teach you how to fly. Are you ready to get started?"

"You bet!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "I was born ready. Applejack, you're going to love flying. It is totally awesome. You'll never want to set hoof on the ground again."

"I don't know about that. I still think this is all a mite unnatural. But I'm willing to give it a try. Never let it be said that an Apple was afraid of something."

"That's the spirit! Believe me, flying is not scary. It is the best thing ever."

Twilight sat both of her friends down and began to work. Since the castle basement was filled with copies of Moondancer, she had arranged to have the equipment she needed brought up to the library. That way she could

perform the transformation spell there.

The first part of the spell was the trickiest. She took a small mane sample from Rainbow Dash and carefully merged it with Applejack's comic. What made it difficult was that she only wanted to extract the flight information from Rainbow's mane; she didn't want to overwrite Applejack with Rainbow Dash. The pony still needed to be Applejack, with her earth pony strength and her cutie mark. It just needed to be Applejack with wings.

Fortunately Sunshine had developed a technique to get just the material she needed. She had even invented a way to merge it with Applejack's existing body. Twilight was impressed at how quickly Sunshine had been able to figure out a solution. *I'm so glad I have her*, she thought, as she completed the spell. *Although, now that I think about it, how did she test this new process? Maybe I need to ask her some questions. Or maybe I should just trust her and not worry about it. After all, she's mostly a copy of me. I'm sure she handles things the same way I would.*

After Rainbow's genetic material was merged with the comic, Twilight read it over carefully to make sure that she had done everything correctly. She then made a few minor manual adjustments. The purple alicorn then

stepped back, took a deep breath, and activated the modified comic.

In an instant Applejack changed. A pair of beautiful orange wings sprouted from her side. Applejack gasped involuntarily. She turned her head and looked down at her changed body.

“Are you all right?” Twilight asked anxiously. “Did it hurt?”

“No, I'm fine. It just surprised me, that's all. That was the strangest feeling. I felt – well, I don't exactly know how to describe it. I just changed all of the sudden.”

Applejack stared at her wings with a look of pure wonder and amazement. She gently flapped them, and was surprised when she lifted off the ground. She quickly stopped and landed on the floor. “Well if that don't beat all! I can actually *feel* these things. It's like they're a part of me.”

Rainbow Dash laughed. “Of course you can feel them! That's how wings work. Aren't they awesome?”

“They're a sight all right. So what's next?”

Twilight smiled. “Next is the easy part. I'm going to copy Rainbow Dash's mind into a memory stone and then give you her knowledge of flight. Once I do that you'll know how to use your new wings. In fact, you'll have as much flying knowledge and skill as Rainbow Dash.”

“That is, like, totally awesome!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “So I just need to sit still, right? I’ve seen you do this before. Only last time you did it with a corpse.”

“That’s right, Rainbow. This won’t take long. Since you’re alive it should be a lot easier than before. It took a lot of effort to get Applejacks mind out of her, um, old self.”

Applejack spoke up. “What did you do with my body, anyway? Last time I saw it my corpse was in your basement. You didn’t keep it for experiments or anything, did you?”

“Of course not! I buried the coffin in my basement. It has been respectfully laid to rest.”

“Seriously?” Rainbow replied. “Are you telling me that your super creepy dark magic laboratory now has *dead bodies* buried in it too? Are you also going to add pony skeletons to its walls? Maybe you could add a whole shelf of skulls. You know – to make it more inviting and homey.”

Twilight facehoofed. “This isn’t dark magic! Look. I didn’t bury the body in the main section of the laboratory; instead I created a memorial room off to the side. It’s all very respectful and in good taste. Applejack, if you ever want to visit your, um, remains, you are more than welcome to do so. Oh – and if you would rather have them buried at the

family farm then I can dig them up for you. They are your remains, I guess. Come to think of it, I probably should have asked you before I did anything. I'm just not used to asking ponies what to do in this situation."

Applejack shook her head. "It's fine, Twilight. I'm not worried about it. My body is fine where it is. I was just curious, that's all."

"Enough already!" Rainbow Dash interrupted. "I've got big plans for today. Let's get this finished so I can take Applejack flying. This is gonna be so great!"

The memory transfer process was fairly straightforward. Since Twilight had done it once before and knew what she was doing, she found it much easier to cast the spell a second time. It really *was* easier to get memories out of a living body – especially one that was willing and eager to help. Twilight copied Rainbow Dash's mind into a memory stone, and then set about trying to extract her knowledge of flight and transfer it into Applejack.

To her surprise that proved to be much trickier than she expected. The hard part wasn't transferring information into a living body; she knew how to do that. The problem was that Rainbow's flight knowledge had other information attached to it as well. Applejack was

going to get a lot more of Rainbow Dash copied into her than she was expecting.

It will be fine, Twilight thought. After all, they're friends. It's not like they have secrets or anything. I'm sure Rainbow Dash won't mind.

The entire process took less than ten minutes. When Twilight was done she levitated the memory stone back onto the table and looked at Applejack. "How do you feel?"

"I'm not sure," Applejack said slowly. "This is really strange. I know all about flying now – in fact, I know as much about flying as I do about raisin' apples. Flying is really, really easy. It's the weirdest thing. I guess the spell worked, Twilight."

"Awesome!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "So let's—"

"But there's more," Applejack interrupted. "I don't just know *how* to create a sonic rainboom; I actually remember doing it. I have a vivid memory of creating a rainboom at flight camp when I was just a filly. Only I'm pretty sure I wasn't a pegasus when I was a filly."

"Do you mean you have my *memories* too?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Not all of them. Just some memories about things you did when you were flying. You know, Rainbow, you've done some pretty weird things while you were in the air."

Applejack frowned, as if she was thinking about something. Then her eyes suddenly widened. "Sweet Celestia! I can't believe it. Rainbow, do you mean to tell me that you once—"

Rainbow Dash immediately put a hoof over her friend's mouth. "Let's not talk about that. Twilight, you didn't tell me that you were going to give away all my secrets!"

"I am so sorry. I didn't do it on purpose! I didn't even know you had secrets. This is all new magic, you know. There are some parts of it I haven't worked out yet."

Applejack looked at Rainbow Dash. "You are quite a pony. I have to say you're not the pony I thought you were. I think I understand you a lot better now."

"Is that good, or bad?" Rainbow Dash asked anxiously. "It's bad, isn't it? Oh, please tell me it's not bad. You're going to disown me now, aren't you?"

Applejack hugged Rainbow Dash. "You ain't got nothin' to worry about. I'm proud to know you, and I'm mighty pleased to have this new set of wings. In fact, I think we should go try them out. I hear the sky is a pretty awesome place."

Applejack turned to Twilight. "Thanks a lot — for everything. You've done a lot for the Apple family and for me personally, and I'm grateful."

"You're welcome. But I don't understand. What has Rainbow been doing?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all," Rainbow Dash said quickly. "C'mon – the sky's waiting!"

Rainbow Dash flew out of the room, and Applejack flew right behind her. It was an amazing sight. Applejack flew with the skill of an experienced flyer. *It's like she has been doing it all her life*, Twilight thought.

Twilight was very pleased. The experiment was a complete success. She had a feeling that Applejack and Rainbow Dash would be much closer now. *If anything, this is going to improve their friendship.*

As Twilight cleaned up the library, Spike and Sunshine walked in. "So how did it go?" Sunshine asked.

"It went very well! Nothing went wrong. Did you see Applejack fly out of here?"

Spike spoke up. "I sure did! It was one of the weirdest things I've ever seen – and I live with *you*. I never thought I'd see her fly. She's actually surprisingly good at it. Rainbow and Applejack made good time flying down the hall and out the door."

Sunshine spoke up. "I'm glad it was a success. Twilight, you should be proud of your great accomplishment. Were there any problems with

my technique?"

"Nope – it worked like a charm. You did a great job. Applejack is delighted to have wings. I think the two of them are going to spend the rest of the day in the sky. I wish I'd had this magic available when I first got wings. It took me forever to learn how to fly. I'm still not very good at it."

Sunshine glanced at the memory stone that was resting on the table. "If you want Rainbow's knowledge of flight then why not take it? After all, you have all of her memories right there. I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

"And miss out on the joys of learning? It's tempting, but I'm not going to do that. The learning process is just so rewarding! Reading books is about more than just getting information out of them, you know. The act of reading itself is part of the fun. I wouldn't want to skip that."

"I understand," Sunshine said.

Spike shook his head. "I think you two are crazy."

Twilight grinned. "Are you ready to go out and run some errands with me? We have more memories to collect, and I'd love to have the help of my number-one assistant!"

"Sure thing! I'm right behind you."

Sunshine levitated the memory stone off the table. "I'll go ahead and place this stone with

Applejack's, and I'll store Rainbow's extra mane sample there as well. Please let me know if there is anything I can do while you're gone."

"Thank you so much," Twilight replied.

Twilight and Spike then left the room. The two friends talked cheerfully with each other. It was obvious that both of them were in a great mood.

Sunshine smiled as she watched them depart. She then began cleaning the library.

* * * * *

The first stop was at Sugarcube Corner, the premier bakery of Ponyville. Pinkie Pie was working at the front counter. When Twilight and Spike walked in through the front door she became very excited.

"There you are!" the pink pony exclaimed. She rushed over and gave them both a big hug. "I haven't seen you two in, like, forever! How have you been? Have you been doing anything exciting? I heard that you made your own personal copy of Celestia. How is she working out? Do you like her?"

Twilight grinned. "Oh, Pinkie, it's good to see you again! I have missed you more than I realized. I've spent too much time cooped up in that castle."

Spike spoke up. "In that creepy basement,

you mean.”

“So tell me everything about Sunshine,” Pinkie said. “Is she nice?”

“She's very nice. I created her to be my research assistant. She has really helped me in my studies of arcane magic.”

“She sounds wonderful! Did she help you give Applejack wings?”

Twilight looked surprised. “Pinkie! How did you know about that? That only happened less than ten minutes ago!”

“Oh, I saw them fly by. Applejack doesn't normally do a lot of flying, so I picked up on that pretty quickly. I then asked myself, who could possibly have taught her how to fly? And I checked the list, and your name was at the top.”

“Sunshine did help with that,” Twilight admitted. “She's been doing a lot for me.”

“That's great! I love helpful ponies. In fact, I need some help myself. Do you think that you could ask Sunshine to make a copy of me?”

“You want *what*? A copy of you? Why in Equestria would you want that?”

“Because it would be amazing! That's why you're here, isn't it? You want to copy my mind into a memory stone, just like you did with Applejack, so you can bring me back in case I get stepped on by a giant marshmallow monster. And

you want a mane sample so you can recreate my body. I've already got everything prepared for you."

Pinkie gestured to a corner of the room, where she had a giant pile of pink mane clippings. "But you see, I don't want you to wait until I'm squished to copy me. I would really like it if you could go ahead and duplicate me now. Before I get squished. I've always wanted to be friends with myself. I think the two of us would get along super well."

"Didn't you try that before? I seem to remember this one time when an entire hurricane of Pinkie Pies invaded Ponyville. The town barely survived."

Pinkie waved a hoof dismissively. "That was different. Those were mirror pool clones. They may have looked like me, but they weren't *me*, and they got out of hoof. For one thing, there were way too many of them. All I'm asking for is just *one* perfect copy of me. That's it – just one. It would mean a whole lot to me. Can you do that?"

"Sure, I suppose so. If that's what you want. Do you want to make any changes to your clone?"

"You bet! I've given it a lot of thought over the past four minutes, and I want my copy to be able to fly. That would be amazing! Other than that it should be exactly like me."

Twilight froze. She thought about what it would be like to have a flying Pinkie in Ponyville. A vague feeling of horror came over her. Pinkie was already an unstoppable force. If she got wings—

Before she had a chance to say anything, Spike spoke up. “Sure, Twilight can do that. In fact, she is an expert at things like that! It won't be a problem.”

“Wonderful!” Pinkie exclaimed. “Oh, we will have so much fun together. Me and myself are going to be the best of friends. I can hardly wait to meet me!”

Pinkie sat down in front of Twilight. “All right, do your magic! I'm ready.”

Despite her misgivings, Twilight took out a memory stone and copied Pinkie's mind. She then took some samples of Pinkie's mane from the giant pile and gave the stone and the samples to Spike.

Twilight hesitated. She knew what she was about to unleash upon the world, but she couldn't say no to Pinkie. “Spike, take these to Sunshine and ask her to make a clone of Pinkie Pie right away. Tell her to give the clone a set of pegasus wings and Rainbow's knowledge of flight. Also tell her that this is a priority request, and Pinkie wants her clone as soon as possible.”

“Got it,” Spike said. He took the stone and the mane and walked out the door.

Pinkie hugged Twilight. “Thank you thank you thank you! This is going to be amazing.”

The pink pony then raced out the door. “Wait for me, Spike! I want to watch!”

* * * * *

After Twilight tracked down the Cake family and made sure that somepony was attending the counter at Sugarcube Corner, she headed out of the city to Fluttershy's cottage. The purple alicorn gently knocked on her front door. “Hello?” she called out. “Is anyone home? Any pony, I mean. Not that I'm against animals or anything.”

Fluttershy opened the door. “Oh, hello, Twilight! It's so nice of you to drop by. Won't you come in?”

Twilight followed Fluttershy inside. As usual, the cottage was filled with animals of all types. Twilight always found it a bit odd that Fluttershy let bears roam around her living room, but she knew that was just her way. Fluttershy had an amazing talent with animals – one she had never seen in any other pony.

Fluttershy and Twilight sat down on her couch. “So what brings you here?” Fluttershy

asked. "I've heard that you have very been busy in your castle, working on new kinds of magic. Are things going well?"

"They certainly are! But I'm really sorry about neglecting you. I know I haven't been around very much lately, and I'm going to change that. Things have just been so difficult since the accident."

"Oh, I understand. There's no need to apologize. That whole situation was so terrible, wasn't it? I felt so bad for the Apple family. But then you were able to bring Applejack back. That was really nice of you. The family has been so happy ever since she returned. I had no idea you were able to do things like that."

"I've learned how to do all sorts of things. I can actually create entire worlds now, and make dreams come to life. The magic that I've developed has enormous potential."

"You can make dreams come to life?" Fluttershy asked. "Really? How does that work?"

"It's actually pretty simple. You just write down in a comic whatever you want. Then you can enter the comic and live the dream. Anything that you can imagine is possible."

"That *does* sound interesting. Um, do you have to be an alicorn to do that? You probably do, don't you? I bet a pegasus like me can't use those

books. We can't use magic, you know."

Twilight shook her head. "It's true that I used magic to bring Applejack back to life, but I'm working on a new way of doing things that can be used by anypony. Once I've figured everything out you won't need to be a unicorn to create these comics. You could be a pegasus or an earth pony and it will still work."

"That would be so nice. I've always enjoyed my dreams, but it would be wonderful to actually live them. You know?"

"Exactly!" Twilight agreed.

"So, um, I know you're busy, but if one day you could show me how to do that – once you've figured it out and all – I would really appreciate it."

"Of course! I would be glad to."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Fluttershy asked.

"Actually, there is." Twilight took a memory stone out of her saddlebag. "Would you mind if I copied your mind into this stone? And I'll need a sample from your mane as well, if that's ok."

"I guess I don't mind, although no one has ever asked me that before. But how is that going to help you?"

"It's in case of accidents. If something ever happened to you I could use this stone and your mane to bring you back to life. Just like I did with

Applejack.”

“Oh. Well, that sounds like a good thing. I think I'd like that.”

“Great! This will take just a few minutes – and it won't hurt a bit.”

* * * * *

After Twilight finished copying Fluttershy's mind into the memory stone, her friend invited her to stay and visit for a while. The two ponies spent more than an hour talking to each other. Twilight thoroughly enjoyed the conversation. It had been a while since she'd had a chance to catch up with her friend, and it was good to know what was going on in her life.

Fluttershy invited Twilight to stay for lunch, but Twilight said that she had to get going. She still needed to stop and see Rarity. So she bade her friend goodbye and headed back into town.

When she got to the Carousel Boutique and entered the door she saw that Rarity was not alone. Pinkie Pie was there with her. In fact, there were *two* Pinkies – one with a pair of wings, and one without. The two Pinkies were filled with energy and were excitedly darting around the room. A very frazzled Rarity was trying to calm them down, but her pleas were having no effect.

When the Pinkies saw Twilight they rushed over to her. "There she is!" Pinkie exclaimed. "That's Twilight Sparkle."

"I know!" the pegasus Pinkie said. "I have all your memories, remember? But it's still nice to meet you, Twilight! Today is my birthday. I am literally less than one day old! Did you have a nice visit with Fluttershy?"

"It was very nice," Twilight replied. "Fluttershy is doing well. Um, how are you doing? What is your name?"

"It's Pinkie, of course," the pegasus Pinkie replied. "I've always been Pinkie since I was born. Well, since the original was born, I guess. I'm the copy made by your assistant Sunshine, which you probably knew because of my wings. But a copy of Pinkie is still Pinkie."

"Maybe you could be Pinkie Two," the other pink pony said. "I could be Pinkie One. That way when ponies call out our names we'll know which one they want."

Rarity spoke up. "Whatever your names are, will you please calm down? You've already knocked over a whole rack of my dresses, and you scattered sequins everywhere! If you are going to fly then please do it *outside*. This boutique is not a barn."

"That's Rarity," Pinkie Two said to Twilight.

“She's a wonderful pony.”

“*You* are a wonderful pony and clone,” Pinkie One exclaimed. “It's nice to have another sister in the Pie family! You can never have too many sisters, you know. Especially if the sisters are you. Oh, Maud is going to be so excited to meet the new me!”

Twilight grinned. “Well, if you see your sisters be sure to tell them hello for me. All of them are welcome back to Ponyville any time. I know we'd all love to see the Pie family.”

Pinkie One's eyes widened. “That gives me a terrific idea! Pinkie Two, you haven't met my family yet, have you? We've got to plan a trip immediately!”

“Let's do it!” pegasus Pinkie exclaimed. She picked up the original Pinkie up and put her on her back. The pair then flew out of the store and soared off into the sky.

Twilight shook her head as she watched them leave, and then closed the door behind them. “They're quite a lively pair, aren't they?”

“Indeed they are,” Rarity agreed. “They are much *too* lively, if you ask me. It's a bit hard to get a word in edgewise now that there are two of them. I don't mean to be rude, darling, but why in Equestria did you agree to clone Pinkie? Have you taken leave of your senses? Surely the mirror pool

incident demonstrated that the world can't survive more than one Pinkie at a time!"

Twilight was taken aback by Rarity's irritated tone. "I don't think they're going to be a problem – and no, I'm not stupid. Pinkie brings a lot of joy and laughter into the world, and she is very good at making friends. Two Pinkies is better than one. Besides, I think Pinkie learned her lesson. She's not going to go crazy this time."

Rarity looked around at her dress shop. The whole room was in a state of utter chaos. Dresses were everywhere, furniture was overturned, and the ground was littered with sequins. The place looked like it had been hit by a riot.

"Pinkie is *already* crazy. Two Pinkies compounds that craziness and makes the whole situation far, far worse. I don't know what's gotten into you, Twilight. You've turned into some kind of mad scientist. Have you given even a moment's thought about the consequences of what you're doing?"

Twilight felt a sharp pain stab through her heart. Her joy and happiness vanished in an instant and was replaced by a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Excuse me? What do you mean?"

Rarity used her magic to hang some dresses back on the rack. "Are you blind? Don't you see

what is happening here? The whole world has gone crazy, and it's all your fault! Applejack is back from the dead, and she now has wings and can fly like a pegasus. You have your own personal copy of Celestia, who you've turned into some kind of mind-controlled slave. And now you've duplicated Pinkie Pie and they're going around destroying the whole town. I just don't know what to do anymore. When did you decide to become a force of chaos?"

"I am *not* a force of chaos!" Twilight said angrily. "I am a *good* pony. I am helping things, not making them worse!"

"Then you really are a fool. Can't you see what is happening? You've launched a revolution, Twilight, and are turning reality onto its head. You've become just like Discord. This world used to be governed by rules – rules that could not be broken. Those rules provided a sense of understanding and order. Ponies knew what sort of things to expect. For example, when a pony died they stayed dead. If you were an earth pony then you would always be an earth pony; you would never be able to fly. And ponies were unique. There was only *one* Pinkie Pie and there would never be two of them. Those were things you could count on."

Rarity sighed. "Don't you see? Now that

you've found a way to create anything that you want, there's no longer any way to live your life with a sense of order and predictability. You can't plan for the future because you have no idea what the future might bring. Change is painful, Twilight. It leads to confusion and uncertainty. What I'm seeing is discord, not harmony. I have to say I really don't care for it. You of all ponies ought to know better."

Twilight felt rage boiling up inside her. She fought back the tears and tried to keep herself calm. "I just don't see your point. All of the things that you mentioned are good things. Bringing Applejack back from the dead was a good thing. Giving her the ability to fly was a good thing. Being able to create food and water for starving ponies is also a good thing. Yes, it's true that my magic is bringing change. But all of these changes are going to lead to a better Equestria. They will bring new opportunities and a new way of life. There may be some adjustment involved, but after that adjusting period is over ponies are going to love their new lives. Don't you see? With this magic you can have anything that you ever wanted! Applejack wanted to fly, and now she can fly. Pinkie wanted a copy of herself, and now she's got that. Isn't there anything that you want?"

"I already have everything that I want,"

Rarity replied testily. "Or, at least, I used to. I had a loving sister, a thriving business, good friends, and a world that I understood. Now I see my world teetering on the brink of utter madness. It's frightening, Twilight. I have to say I don't care for it – and I don't care for what you've become, either. I'm very disappointed in you. I really thought you were better than this."

Rarity suddenly stopped. She eyed Twilight critically. "Just why are you here, anyway? I haven't seen you in some time. This isn't just a social call, is it?"

Twilight was deeply hurt, but she was determined to not let Rarity know that. She wasn't going to break down and start crying in the middle of her store. There was no way she was giving Rarity that satisfaction.

The purple alicorn took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. "Well, Rarity, it is and it isn't. I did want to go around and see all of my friends – honest. I had a lovely visit with Fluttershy. It was so good to spend some time with her – and I'd like to spend some time with you, too. I feel like I've lost touch with what is going on in everypony's life. But you are right. I did come here to ask you for a favor."

"You want to copy me, don't you?" Rarity said bitterly. "You foolish mare. Pinkie already

told me all about it, and frankly I'm appalled. She said you copied her mind into a stone, and then Spike took it to your assistant. Sunshine then used her magic to create the pink pegasus that is now terrorizing the town. You want my mind as well, don't you?"

Twilight resisted the urge to slap her friend. *Don't make me turn you into a frog, you bitter harpy. You're about as generous as a zombie.* "That is correct. I need a copy of your mind and a sample of your mane. Now, I'm not planning on making any copies of you. I just want to have these things on hand so that when you die I can bring you back, the way I brought back Applejack. I'm not going to clone you like I did Pinkie. I only did that because she asked for it."

"I'm afraid I can't help you," Rarity said firmly. "Well, technically speaking I suppose I *could* help you, but I have far too much sense to do so. You have taken leave of your senses, Twilight. I have no desire to see a copy of myself roam around Equestria, using my name and reputation to do who knows what. I'm not going to permit that while I'm still alive, and I'm not going to permit it after I'm dead either. I find the entire matter deeply offensive."

"You know it will be *you*, right?" Twilight asked. "It will be you in every possible way. It will

have your body, your memories, your knowledge, your morals – even your cutie mark. It's not going to be some kind of undead abomination.”

“It will most certainly *not* be me! I am me. If you create a duplicate, it still won't be me. It will just be an imitation of the real thing, and I refuse to be imitated. I am a rarity, darling. There is only one of me, and that is how it will stay. I am not going to participate in this madness. Now if you will excuse me, I have some work to do. That is, until you give all my customers the ability to make their own dresses out of nothing. Then I suppose I'll be out of work and will starve to death. Good day.”

Rarity turned around and walked out of the room, leaving Twilight alone.

* * * * *

Twilight was deeply hurt by Rarity's complete rejection. She slowly walked back to her castle and made her way to her bedroom. She then collapsed onto her bed and cried. The princess knew that it was silly to cry. Some ponies would like her new technique, and others wouldn't. It was unreasonable to expect everypony to be on board with it – after all, it was quite new, and new things can be intimidating.

Besides, most of Twilight's friends approved of all her hard work and were supportive.

But Rarity's cutting words deeply hurt her. Rarity was her friend – in fact, she was one of her closest friends. Twilight had put a great deal of effort into inventing this new magic. She had really put her heart and hopes into it. Yet, when she freely offered it to one of her best friends, Rarity had stomped it into the ground and deeply wounded her. Twilight had been counting on the support of all of her friends, and she now saw that she wasn't going to get it. Rejection was hard enough to deal with when it came from strangers. Having it come from those you deeply respect and admire was a thousand times worse.

I've done so much to help you, Twilight thought bitterly. I even modeled a dress for you in Canterlot so you could use my name and reputation to get sales. Is this how you repay me? After everything I've done for you, this is how you treat me?

So Twilight cried. She knew she was acting like a filly but she didn't know how to handle this sort of situation. Her friends had had disagreements before, but nothing like this. Her spirit was crushed.

Twilight was only in her bedroom for a minute when Sunshine rushed in. When she saw

Twilight she hurried over to her, picked her up, and held her close. "Oh, Twilight, what's wrong? What happened? Moondancer told me you were upset. Can you tell me about it?"

Twilight shook her head. She just held onto Sunshine and cried.

Sunshine patiently waited on Twilight to calm down. She held her close and wrapped one of her wings around her, and then used her magic to remove her saddlebag. The white alicorn carefully levitated out the bag's contents. Sunshine found a memory stone and a bit of yellow mane, and a second memory stone that was empty. That was enough to tell her what happened. *Spike gave me Pinkie's memory stone, Sunshine thought, so this must belong to Fluttershy. Twilight would have gone to Rarity's store next, but there's nothing in here from her. Rarity must have rejected her – that heartless, selfish mare. She's the one who did this to my poor Twilight. I am going to make Rarity pay for what she's done. No one can get away with treating my princess like this. Twilight deserves to be happy.*

Sunshine gently stroked Twilight's mane. "It was Rarity, wasn't it?" she said softly. "She's the one who hurt you."

Twilight nodded. Tears were streaming down her face. "She hates me and she hates my magic.

She said I'm like Discord. She said I was destroying the world and was going to put her out of business and make her starve to death."

Sunshine gasped. "I'm so sorry, dear. I had no idea that Rarity would respond that way to the small favor that you asked of her. She's clearly a very mean and selfish pony who doesn't deserve to have a friend like you. Couldn't she see that you were just trying to help?"

Twilight didn't respond. All she could think about was Rarity's rejection.

"I know," Sunshine said. "I know it hurts, and I know you care about Rarity. But don't worry, Twilight. All of this magic is new, and sometimes it takes ponies a while to get used to new things. Some ponies like the old ways and need to be taught that the new ways are better. I know Rarity isn't being very nice right now, but I think if you give her some time she will come around. Trust me, Twilight. She will change."

"You think so?" Twilight asked.

"I know so," Sunshine said. "Now look. You've had a stressful day, and things haven't gone very well. Why don't you come down with me to the basement? We've been making some excellent progress in our research. Would you like to see what we've done? You might have some ideas about where we should go next."

Twilight nodded. "I'd like that."

Sunshine wiped away Twilight's tears and hugged her one more time, then let her go. "I have so much to show you!" she said enthusiastically. "I think you're going to love it."

* * * * *

That evening, Sunshine put Twilight to bed. She had managed to calm her down and improve her mood, but she knew that Twilight was still hurt over her friend's rejection. *Twilight is a sensitive soul, she thought. She's had a very stressful month and she isn't emotionally stable. What she needs right now is the full support of her friends. I'm going to make sure that she gets that.*

Sunshine watched Twilight until the exhausted mare fell asleep, and then quietly made her way over to the Carousel Boutique. The night was darker than usual. An overcast sky hid the moon and the stars from view, and a low fog had rolled in from the Everfree Forest. Sunshine kept to the shadows and made sure that nopony saw her. If somepony did see her she could always pretend to be Celestia, but she didn't want it to have to come to that. It would be best if her nighttime adventure went completely unnoticed.

The trip to Rarity's shop took her about half

an hour. In the daylight she could have crossed that distance in a fraction of the time, but tonight stealth mattered more than speed. Once Sunshine reached her target she used her magic to teleport herself inside. She then quietly made her way upstairs.

She found Rarity in her bedroom, fast asleep and dead to the world. Sunshine looked at her coldly. She wanted to rush over to Rarity and yell at her, but she knew that wouldn't be productive. *Ponies like Rarity cannot be reasoned with. There is only one thing that they understand – brute force. The time for talking and reasoning is over. Now is the time for action.* Sunshine had a plan to fix everything and make Twilight happy again, and she was going to stick to her plan.

Sunshine cast a spell onto Rarity that made her fall into a deep coma. She wanted to make sure that Rarity would not wake up, no matter what happened. Once the spell was cast, Sunshine levitated a memory stone out of her saddlebag and placed it near Rarity's head. When she had put the stone in position she took a moment to smile. She knew time was of the essence – she must *not* be caught doing this – but she couldn't help feeling a bit of triumph. *Did you really think you could stop me? Twilight always gets what she wants because she deserves it. I*

would do anything to make her happy – unlike you, you self-centered brat. I would burn down all of Equestria if that would avenge her pain. You have no idea who you're messing with. Twilight isn't alone anymore, Rarity. She has a very powerful ally now, and I am completely dedicated to protecting her. You crossed the wrong mare.

Sunshine quickly copied Rarity's mind into the stone and took a clipping of her mane. That was the first part of her plan, and so far everything had gone well. It was now time to execute the second part.

The white alicorn took a blank comic book out of her saddlebag. She then merged Rarity's mind and genetic material with the comic. By now she had done that technique so many times that it was second nature to her. Once the comic had been imprinted with Rarity's information, Sunshine levitated a quill and began making changes.

This new Rarity is going to be quite different from the old one, Sunshine decided. The new Rarity will be fully supportive of Twilight at all times. She will always agree with Twilight, no matter what, and will always try to help her. Instead of being a selfish, heartless mare she will be totally devoted to my dear princess. She will love her like a daughter and will do anything for

her. As soon as she wakes up in the morning she will go straight to Twilight and apologize for her terrible, thoughtless behavior. This Rarity will have no problem with Twilight's amazing magical abilities, or with her wonderful plans for the world. She will be a perfect friend.

When Sunshine was done altering Rarity's definition, she cast a spell on the comic. The comic briefly glowed with magical energy – and a clone of Rarity appeared on the bedroom floor. She looked exactly like Rarity. She, too, was fast asleep.

Sunshine smiled. She then reached into her saddlebag and took out a small, black book. She cast a spell onto the original Rarity, and she vanished from the world.

Sunshine looked at her tiny black book with a feeling of triumph. *You are very fortunate, Rarity. I could have killed you, you know. I could have put you in a dungeon and done terrible things to you. You deserve to suffer for the way you betrayed Twilight. But I am not a bad pony. I was kinder to you than you have ever been to your friends. As long as you are in this comic, time will not pass. You won't even have any dreams. You will be perfectly preserved there, with no way to escape or cause any further emotional damage.*

Meanwhile, your duplicate will be the pony

that you should have been. Since I control her book definition I can make sure that she always pleases Twilight. She will be so much better than you ever were. You natural-born ponies are so unpredictable and erratic. The magic-based race that Twilight and I are creating will be vastly superior. They will always follow their character profiles and do exactly as they are told. They will be perfect servants.

Sunshine put the small black book back into her saddlebag, then levitated the Rarity clone onto her bed and tucked her in. Rarity would sleep through the night and then wake up naturally. She would never know what had happened.

The white alicorn looked at her thoughtfully. *For now I will leave Twilight's other friends alone. Pinkie and Fluttershy were very supportive today, and Rainbow Dash has urged Applejack to embrace her new nature. As long as they continue to be nice to Twilight I will let them be. If they betray her, though, I will replace them with improved versions of themselves.*

Twilight must never know what happened. It's best if she doesn't know because then she can be happy about the new attitude of her friends. I will do anything for Twilight – make any sacrifice and run any risk. Making her happy is all that I

care about. It's why I exist.

Sunshine took the comic that defined the Rarity clone and put it into her saddlebag. She knew that she would have to hide both of those books well. They needed to survive and be protected, but Twilight must never find them. *That should not be hard. Twilight is not a suspicious pony, and there are so many good hiding places. These two books will never be found.*

Sunshine took one last look around to make sure that she hadn't left anything behind, and then exited the Boutique. *Tomorrow is a bold new day! Twilight is going to love it.*

Chapter 9: “Can I make a scene *now*, sister?”

The next morning Twilight Sparkle awoke to the sound of humming. It was a very odd experience, and at first Twilight could not figure out what was going on. Mornings in her crystal castle were usually absolutely quiet, simply because there wasn't anypony around to make noise. Twilight and Spike lived alone, and Spike had a tendency to sleep in. This morning, though, she was definitely hearing something. Somepony nearby was humming.

Twilight groggily opened her eyes and sat up. As she regained consciousness she slowly realized that she wasn't alone in her room. Sunshine was standing in front of her bedroom window, looking outside. The large white alicorn was humming a happy little tune to herself.

“Sunshine?” Twilight asked. “What are you doing in my room?”

“Good morning, princess!” Sunshine said cheerfully. “Isn't it a wonderful day? It is just so beautiful out there. I think that today is going to be much better than yesterday. I have a really

good feeling about it.”

“That's nice,” Twilight said sleepily. “But seriously. What are you doing in my room?”

“Waiting for you to wake up, of course! We have so much to do and I have so much to show you. Moondancer! Your mistress is awake.”

A pony opened the door and poked her head in. “I'll be right back with breakfast, miss,” she replied. Moondancer then closed the door again.

Twilight stretched her hooves, then collapsed back onto her pillow. She let out a deep breath. “Are you going to be this annoying every morning?”

“Not if you don't want me to. I'm just excited, that's all, and I like you. Each night I count the hours until you're awake and we can do things together again. You mean everything to me, and I would do anything for you – anything in the world. But if you want me to let you sleep in then I can do that too.”

“No, that's all right,” Twilight replied. “I need to start getting up on a regular schedule again anyway. I see that Celestia has risen the sun, so I probably should be up and out of bed.”

A moment later, Moondancer entered the room carrying Twilight's breakfast. She set the tray down in front of the purple alicorn. “Is there anything else I can do for you, miss?”

"No, that's everything. Thank you."

"There is one more thing," Sunshine called out. "Please go ahead and get the princesses' bath ready."

"Of course," Moondancer replied. "I will take care of that immediately."

"Thank you."

"My bath?" Twilight echoed, as Moondancer left the room. "You know, I'm perfectly capable of doing that myself."

"I know you are, princess. You are able to do a great many things. But you are a princess now and you have servants, and those servants are here to serve you and make your life easier. You no longer have to clean the castle, or make the beds, or dust, or do anything that you don't want to do. That is one of the perks of your position in society, and it is high time you started to take advantage of it."

"If you say so," Twilight replied. She took a sip of tea. "So what's on the agenda for today?"

"I've created a prototype of your new guard. I think you will really like them! They're quite sturdy and very powerful. They are exactly what you need to protect your home."

"That sounds nice. Thank you! Will that be our main project for the day?"

Sunshine shook her head. "I also want to talk

to you about the comics that we're developing. I've been doing some thinking, and I believe we need to make a few changes to our strategy. Have you stopped to think that there are millions upon millions of ponies in Equestria, and all of them are going to want this new magic? Manufacturing millions of blank comics by hoof would be prohibitive, to say the least. I think we need to adopt a smarter approach."

"Like writing the comics themselves into existence," Twilight exclaimed. "Brilliant! That would be much less work, and it would be safer too. If something went wrong we could just modify the master comic that was used to create the resources that everypony has. It would give us a way to keep things from getting out of hoof."

"Exactly. But I think we should go a step further. Our original plan was to create a how-to guide and give everyone a blank comic and a magic quill. Since the comic would be pre-enchanted, even non-magical ponies could use it. However, it occurred to me that in order to create a good world you need a great deal of talent and imagination. I think some ponies would find it very challenging to write a world that they would enjoy."

"I see what you mean," Twilight replied, as she ate her breakfast in bed. "It's just like writing

books. A lot of ponies *can* write, but very few ponies can write books that other ponies would want to read. It takes a lot of talent, training, and skill to write on a professional level. Most ponies don't have the time or patience for it."

Sunshine nodded. "I still believe we should give ponies instructions on how to use the blank books, but I also think we should include a pre-built world. We could make a copy of Equestria that's much like the one that exists today, and offer suggestions on simple ways to change it. We could even add a spell that turns the user into an all-powerful alicorn while they are inside their world."

"I like that. They would already have something to work with, and it would be simple for them to add new characters or tweak things. If something went wrong they could just reset the world and start over. Fantastic idea! But won't it take a lot of work to create that initial world? We can always use magic to mass-produce it, but we've got to design it in the first place. Equestria is a pretty big country."

"Your army of Moondancers is already working on it," Sunshine replied. "I have no doubt that they will do an excellent job and complete the assignment on-time. If they do get behind then I can always make more clones. After all, we

can have as many as we want.”

Twilight finished her breakfast and set the tray down onto the table beside her bed. “All right. Time to get to work!”

Sunshine laughed. “Not quite, princess. It’s time for you to go take a bath. Then you can get to work.”

“Oh, right. I’ll see you soon, then.”

Sunshine smiled as Twilight hurried out of her bedroom. The princess was clearly in a better mood this morning than she was yesterday. *And she will be in an even better mood when Rarity comes over and apologizes*, Sunshine thought to herself. *Oh Twilight, you mean so much to me. I would do anything to keep you happy.*

* * * * *

An hour later, Twilight and Sunshine were in the castle library. Twilight had taken a stack of books off the shelf and was browsing through them. “I’m still not quite sure how we are going to pre-enchant the comics,” she was saying. “Maybe we could use a variation of—”

Moondancer opened the library door and walked in. “Excuse me, miss, but you have a visitor. Rarity wishes to speak with you, if you are available.”

Twilight frowned. She vividly remembered what Rarity had said to her the day before, and she was not excited about the prospect of seeing her again. "She wants to see me? Um, ok. I guess that's fine. Show her in."

Moondancer disappeared. A moment later she led Rarity into the library. Moondancer then left.

Sunshine looked at Twilight. "I'll be right back. I don't want to intrude on your private conversation."

Rarity spoke up. "Celestia, you don't have to leave. It's quite all right."

Sunshine shook her head. "I'm not Celestia, Rarity. I'm Twilight's friend Sunshine."

"Oh," Rarity said, startled. "So you're Sunshine! I've heard so much about you, but I didn't realize how much you looked like Celestia. It is a pleasure to meet you at last."

"The pleasure is mine. But I think it would be best if I let the two of you talk by yourselves. I am not going to intrude on your private conversation."

Sunshine then teleported out of sight, leaving the two of them alone.

Twilight looked at Rarity, then looked down at the floor. "So, um, hey there."

Rarity burst into tears. "Oh Twilight, I am so sorry! I was such a beast yesterday. I simply can't

forgive myself for how rude and unkind I was to you. Can you ever forgive me for the dreadful way I behaved?"

Twilight looked at her in surprise. "You're *sorry*?"

"I am very, very sorry. I don't know what came over me. I must have been in a terrible mood to say all those unkind and hurtful things. Believe me, darling, I didn't mean them. I fully support what you are doing and I think your new magic is a wonderful thing."

Twilight was taken aback. "Really? Are you sure that's how you feel? Because yesterday you were pretty dead-set against it."

"I know, dear. I know what I said, and I know I made a complete fool of myself. Twilight, I think what you are doing is quite amazing. After all, it gave us back Applejack, didn't it? Think of all the good that you're going to accomplish! I was a horribly selfish pony. I'm supposed to be the Element of Generosity, not the element of pig-headedness. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you," Twilight replied. She quickly went over to Rarity and hugged her. "I'm just confused, that's all. You had an awfully big change of heart overnight. I thought you might come around eventually, but this seems really fast. Did Sunshine go to the boutique and

talk with you?"

"You mean the pony who was in here with you?" Rarity asked. "No, I hadn't met her until just a moment ago. I simply woke up this morning and started thinking about what I did yesterday, and I realized how horrible I was. I truly am sorry and I promise I will make it up to you."

"There's nothing to make up," Twilight said. "It's fine."

"It's *not* fine," Rarity insisted. "Look. Didn't you come to my boutique yesterday to make a copy of my mind? Go ahead – do it. I insist. And take some samples of my gorgeous mane as well. I want to fully support you and give you whatever you need."

"If you're sure," Twilight said reluctantly. "But yesterday you were pretty against all this."

"I simply hadn't thought it through. With this magic of yours I can live on after death. A world without a Rarity would be a pretty drab world, wouldn't it? Thanks to you I can continue to spread generosity for as long as there's an Equestria. I think that is a very noble thing, and I want to be a part of it."

"Very well," Twilight said. "Just wait right here and I'll go get the memory stone."

"Absolutely," Rarity replied.

After Twilight copied Rarity's mind into the memory stone, Rarity left. Twilight then took the memory stone and the mane clippings and exited the library. As the princess trotted down the hallway with them she met Sunshine.

"So how did it go?" Sunshine asked.

"It was really, really weird," Twilight replied. "Rarity apologized for her behavior yesterday and insisted that she wanted to help me."

"Why, that's wonderful! I'm very glad to hear it. But how is that weird?"

"It just wasn't like Rarity at all! When Rarity forms an opinion of something, she sticks to it. I've never seen her do a complete reversal overnight like that. If someone had gone and talked to her then maybe I could understand, but Rarity claimed she had this change of heart all on her own. I just don't get it."

"Ponies do have bad days, princess," Sunshine pointed out. "Maybe Rarity was just in a bad mood yesterday. Then when she woke up this morning she realized what she had done and wanted to make amends. She is the Element of Generosity, you know. Perhaps she was simply being generous."

"I guess you're right. I'm probably over-

thinking things – as usual. It really was great to see how supportive she was. It's wonderful to know that my friends support me.”

Sunshine smiled. “Indeed it is. So are you ready to meet your new castle guard?”

“Absolutely!” Twilight exclaimed. “Lead the way.”

Sunshine led Twilight down into the castle basement. The underground magical research laboratory was bustling with activity. There were five Moondancers here, all busy writing. The runes on the basement walls glowed with intense magical energy. There were stacks of books everywhere – on the two workbenches, on chairs, and even on the floor.

But what grabbed Twilight's attention was the giant monster in the middle of the room. When she saw it she immediately screamed. Twilight was so frightened that she let go of the memory stone and the mane clippings.

Sunshine immediately reached out with her magic and grabbed them before they could hit the floor. “I'll put these up for you,” she said cheerfully. “I will be right back!”

Twilight took a step back, away from the monster. “*That* is the new guard?”

The giant creature was even larger than Sunshine. It was the biggest pony Twilight had

ever seen. The stallion was a black alicorn with glowing red eyes and a dagger for a cutie mark. Its skin and wings were made of metal plates that were jet black, with red highlights. Spikes jutted out of the black metal, and a long black sword was strapped to his side. The head of the stallion was more of a metal skeleton than an actual head. The being looked very frightening and incredibly evil.

The monster looked at Twilight and bowed low to the ground. It then spoke, with a deep voice that sounded like it came from beyond the grave. Every word brought terror to Twilight's heart. "It is an honor to meet you, your majesty. A very great honor. Your glory is greater than I was told."

"You are absolutely terrifying," Twilight squeaked. "You are the scariest thing I've ever seen."

"I am only a terror to your enemies, your highness. To them I will be a relentless foe. But to you I will be a staunch and loyal ally. I will always be eager and ready to obey whatever commands you may give me. If I may serve you by my life or my death, I will. You have only to say the word, and I will take the world itself and lay it at your hooves."

Twilight hesitantly took a step closer to him. "So you're *not* going to hurt me."

"I would never dream of it. I would sooner die a thousand deaths than cause you pain."

Sunshine teleported back into the laboratory and stood beside Twilight. "So what do you think of him?"

"He's kind of scary," Twilight said slowly. "As in really *really* super scary."

Sunshine laughed. "That's the idea, silly! Guards are supposed to *protect* you. They need to scare away your enemies and warn them that it's foolish to try to hurt you. You don't want your guards to be warm and inviting – that would defeat the whole point! The scarier the better. I assure you that he is very powerful, very capable, very loyal, and very strong. He will do a fantastic job of protecting your life against all those who try to harm you."

"Well, ok then," Twilight said. "I just don't want to give ponies the idea that I'm some sort of evil supervillain. Are ponies still going to feel welcome coming into the castle?"

"That is entirely up to you," Sunshine replied. "All you have to do is tell the guards who is welcome and who is not. They will obey your every command. When you want to receive guests they will let them in, and when you don't they will keep them out. These guards are simply an extension of your will – nothing else."

“And we can change them if we need to, right?” Twilight asked.

“Of course! They are just a product of ink and quill, after all. Everything about them can be changed.”

“Then I guess I'm willing to give them a try. How many do you think we will need?”

“That is an excellent question. Let's talk about that for a minute. What would you think about having ten thousand guards?”

“*Ten thousand?*” Twilight shrieked. “Are you out of your mind? What in Equestria would I possibly do with that many guards? That's not a personal guard – that's an army!”

“Exactly! With your own private army, nopony would dream of attacking you. You could safeguard yourself and all of Ponyville as well. If anypony tried to attack or a foreign nation invaded, you would be prepared. Your guards could take care of the problem without ever putting your own life at risk.”

“That is true,” Twilight said. “Equestria really doesn't have much of an army.”

“There are other added benefits as well. If you had your own army then no one would dream of giving you grief. You could always get your way in every encounter and every conversation. After all, you would wield great power – more than

even Celestia. You would finally be a real princess with a real kingdom.”

Twilight looked surprised. “You want me to take over Equestria? What kind of pony do you think I am? I don't want to bully everypony into getting my way! That's not friendship at all.”

“It's not about being a bully, your highness – it's about safety. Equestria needs protection, because she is in constant danger. Threats against this nation have arisen time and time again, and each time Celestia has been helpless to deal with the matter. That is why she has always sent you and your friends to deal with the danger – which has put your lives in great peril. If you had an army then you would never have to be in danger again. The country could finally be safe. I know how much Celestia means to you, but the only way to ensure the safety of all of the ponies is for you to rule over the land. Look. If a terrible threat arises tomorrow, what do you think is going to happen? How is Celestia going to handle it?”

“By giving the problem to me,” Twilight said reluctantly.

“Exactly. So if you were in charge, and everypony knew that you had an army that could deal with any threat, the threats would *stop happening*. It would be better for everypony. I know this is difficult to think about, but I'm only

trying to consider what is best for the nation. You now have a chance to protect everypony, without putting the lives of your friends in danger. Isn't that worth doing?"

"I'm going to have to think about that," Twilight said. "Overthrowing Celestia sounds a lot like treason to me. Maybe we can come up with some other solution. For now let's just create enough guards to protect this castle. We can always make more later if the need arises."

"Very well," Sunshine agreed. "Let's start with that, then."

Sunshine started to say something else, but then stopped. *One way or another I will find a way to remove Celestia and put you in charge. I was created to make you happy, and I am going to give Equestria to you. I can't think of a more fitting gift to give to my dear princess. You ought to be in charge, Twilight, and I will make sure it happens. Your loyal Sunshine will see to that. You and you alone deserve to sit on the throne. I know you are too humble to ever take it; what I need to do is find the right way to give you all that power. But don't worry, Twilight. I will find a way.*

* * * * *

It took Twilight a few days to get used to

having guards stationed all over her castle. She had to admit, though, that they were very obedient and very nice to her. The black metal alicorns were there to protect and serve her – just like Celestia's guards in Canterlot.

The guards had an enormous impact on Ponyville. Before the guards were stationed around the castle there was always a massive crowd of ponies that wanted to get inside. After Sunshine stationed six guards by the front door, though, the crowd immediately dispersed. The guards allowed Twilight's friends passage into the castle, but they kept everyone else far away.

One pony who kept making daily visits was Rarity. Each morning she would come over to the castle and bring Twilight some sort of gift. The first morning it was a basket of freshly-baked muffins that she picked up from Sugarcube Corner. The second morning she brought a stylish new laboratory coat that she had hoof-stitched for Twilight. The coat was made of the finest purple silk, and was covered in white and red stars and studded with costly gems.

On the third morning Twilight finally said something to her. “You know, you don't have to keep doing this. Really, it's fine! I accepted your apology and everything is all right. There are no hard feelings between us – I promise. You don't

need to keep bringing me gifts.”

“Actually, darling, I didn't bring you anything this morning. Why? Is there something that you would like?”

“Oh no – not at all,” Twilight said hurriedly. “I just thought – never mind. So what brings you here today?”

“Well, I've been thinking. All this time you've lived in this giant castle, with just you and Spike. It must have been terribly lonely for you. You have all sorts of extra room but no one to share it with! So I was wondering: what you would think if I moved into the castle and lived with you?”

“You want *what?*” Twilight exclaimed. “But you already have a home! Did it burn down last night?”

Rarity laughed. “No, dear, nothing like that! But don't you see? I've spent years living alone in that little room over my boutique, while you've spent years living alone as well – first in the library, and now here. I simply didn't realize how lonely you were. You never told me how you felt.”

“Lonely? I'm not lonely! Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Look around you, darling! As soon as you invented your new magic you began filling this castle with ponies. First you created Sunshine to be your loyal friend. Then you created

Moondancers to help you work. Then you created guards. Darling, you must have been *terribly* lonely to actually use *books* to create friends for you. That is one of the saddest things I have ever seen. I am sure that Sunshine is a wonderful pony, but don't you see? You already have friends – we've been right here all along! You don't need to invent them out of a storybook. I would be delighted to spend more time with you. All you had to do was say something.”

“But – I mean, I'm not lonely,” Twilight insisted. “I just needed some help, that's all. I mean, all right, maybe I *was* a little lonely. But I'm ok. Really.”

“You are making friends for yourself *out of books*,” Rarity pointed out. “Look. This doesn't have to be a permanent arrangement. Why not let me try it for a while? I promise I can be a valuable asset to your kingdom. For one thing I can bring a lot of expertise to the décor of this marvelous castle. I've always wanted to live in a place like this, you know. And if you need me I'll be right here.”

“But what about your dress shop? If you live here then who will manage it?”

“I will, of course! I'll head over to the shop every morning, and then close it up and come here when the day is done. That's what most

ponies do, you know. There aren't many who live where they work."

"Well, ok then. I guess if you really want to, you are welcome to stay here. I do have lots of room. It would be kind of selfish to not share it with my friends."

Rarity hugged Twilight. "Oh, wonderful! I'll start moving my things here immediately. I promise you won't regret it!"

* * * * *

High above Ponyville, Applejack and Rainbow Dash were resting on a puffy white cloud. From their lofty vantage point they watched the comings and goings of the city below. Down on the ground Rarity was carrying her possessions from her boutique to the castle. A small army of ponies followed behind her, lugging her furniture.

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "Isn't that the weirdest thing you've ever seen? Who would have ever guessed that Rarity would move in with Twilight?"

"It certainly is mighty strange," Applejack agreed. "Of course, it's equally weird that I'm sittin' up here on a cloud. There's been a lot of weirdness goin' on."

"Well, *that* I understand. You have wings

because Twilight gave them to you. I was there, remember? But this Rarity thing confuses me. I'm pretty sure that Twilight and Rarity aren't a couple. Yet there she is, moving in. You don't suppose that we're all supposed to move in with her too, do you?"

"I don't get it. What are you talkin' about?"

"Well, I mean, that castle does have thrones for all six of us. And it does have plenty of room. Maybe the Elements of Harmony are all supposed to live together. Maybe Rarity picked up on that and is getting with the program."

"I don't know," Applejack replied. "I just don't think that's practical. Sure, it would make it easier for us to respond when the map finds a friendship problem, but the thing is we've got jobs. I need to live at Sweet Apple Acres – that's where my family is. I guess you and Pinkie could move into the castle, but Fluttershy sure can't. She needs to be in her cottage in the woods, with her animal friends."

"That's a good point," Rainbow Dash agreed. "Maybe the real wonder is that Rarity waited this long to move into that sweet castle. I bet she's been dying to get her own suite in there ever since it first appeared! She really goes in for that kind of thing."

"True. Come to think of it, Twilight really

doesn't care much for the place, does she? I bet Twilight would rather have her old tree back. She really loved that old library."

"So what's stopping her? Can't she just use her new magical powers to write it back into existence?"

"I guess she could. I hadn't even thought of that."

"I wonder how long it will take Twilight to think of it," Rainbow remarked.

"Maybe you could pay her a visit and suggest it to her."

Rainbow shook her head. "Nope. Not today! Don't you know what day today is? The princesses are paying her a visit."

"Is that today? I must have lost track of time!"

"It sure is. Today is the day that Celestia and Luna are going to come over and learn the secrets of Twilight's new dark magic – and the day that they meet Sunshine. Imagine how *that* meeting is going to go."

* * * * *

That evening, after Luna raised the moon into the night sky, Luna and Celestia teleported in front of Twilight's crystal castle. It was a beautiful night. There was a full moon in the sky, and the

bright stars twinkled in the darkness. The city was quiet and the evening was cool.

The crystal castle was as beautiful as it always was – but there was a change. Celestia was taken aback by the presence of the monstrous, intimidating guards. There were six of them guarding the entrance to the castle, and none of them were smiling.

When the guards saw Celestia, one of them turned around and knocked on the front door. The door opened, and he said a few words to somepony inside the castle. The door then closed.

The guard approached the princesses. “Sunshine is on her way. She will be here momentarily and escort you to Twilight's laboratory.”

“Thank you,” Luna replied.

As the guard returned to his post, Celestia frowned. “Guards? What is this? Since when does Twilight Sparkle have guards?”

“I do not see a problem, sister. After all, you have your own personal guard, and I do as well. Even Cadence is well protected. Considering all that Twilight has done for Equestria – and all the threats against her – I think it is very wise that she finally has her own guard. I will rest easier knowing that those who wish her harm will be stopped before they can reach her.”

“But look at these guards! Just look at them. Have you ever seen anything like them before?”

“Imposing, aren't they?” Luna smiled. “If you ask me, I think you are jealous. Twilight's guards are far more intimidating than yours.”

“My guards are *regal*. Those are simply terrifying.”

“So are my batpony guards. Terrifying can be good – especially if you want to keep your adversaries at bay and warn them not to start a fight.”

“But–”

Luna stopped her. “Sister, it is the height of hypocrisy for you to criticize Twilight for having her own royal guard when you are surrounded by hundreds of guards in Canterlot. Twilight is a royal princess of Equestria. If this is the sort of guard that she wishes to have then she has every right to it. She is a wise and thoughtful pony and has saved Equestria on more than one occasion. Do not make a scene.”

Celestia sighed, but said nothing. They waited in the cool night air. A moment later a white alicorn stepped out through the castle's front doors and approached them. She walked up to the princesses and smiled. “Greetings! Welcome to Twilight's kingdom. My name is Sunshine. If your highnesses will follow me I will

take you to Twilight. We have a wonderful night planned for you.”

Celestia stared at Sunshine in disbelief. She had heard that Twilight had created a clone of her, but she was still aghast. Sunshine was an exact physical duplicate of her. Seeing her was like seeing herself in a mirror. It was deeply unnerving.

Celestia looked at Luna. “Can I make a scene *now*, sister?”

Chapter 10: “I did *not* fail Twilight!”

Sunshine walked right up to Princess Celestia and looked her in the eye. “Is there some kind of problem?”

“There certainly is,” Celestia replied angrily. “Just look at you! How *dare* Twilight make a copy of me. She had no right to create a new pony in my image. Her behavior is utterly appalling.”

“Is that so? Tell me, princess. Why do you think Twilight did it? What could possibly have motivated her to create me?”

Celestia opened her mouth to respond, but Sunshine cut her off. “Tell you what – I’ll make this easy for you. The reason Twilight created me is because *you failed her*. All her life Twilight has wanted somepony to watch over her and protect her, and no pony has ever done that. She desperately wanted to spend time with you, but you’ve always been too busy for her. She needed somepony to protect her from danger, but instead of protecting her you actually sent her *into* danger. When she was hurt and crying and in need of help, she needed somepony to comfort her – but once

again you were just too busy. Oh sure, you'll take advantage of Twilight when you need her to save your life or rescue your kingdom, but other than that you simply don't have time for *the most important pony in the whole world*. You just can't be bothered to take care of her."

"That is not true," Celestia said sharply. "I take great care of Twilight."

"Oh really? And how do you do that? Did you provide her with friends? Nope – she had to find those on her own. Did you defend her life when she was in danger? Nope – you let her deal with danger on her own, and you *never* fought by her side. Did you provide her with her own personal guard? Nope – she had to create one on her own. The truth is that Twilight desperately needed you, and you couldn't be bothered to lift a single hoof to help her. So she created me. I am the pony that you should have been. I am the pony that is here for her, that protects her, and that comforts her when she's upset. If I infuriate you it is only because I am a very visible reminder of just how badly you failed your student."

Celestia angrily slammed her front two hooves into the ground. "I did *not* fail Twilight!"

Luna spoke up. "Calm down, sister. There is no need for such great displeasure. Even though you do not wish to hear it, Sunshine has a fair

point. You may believe that you have taken good care of Twilight, but Twilight obviously thinks differently. She must have believed that she needed companionship and help, or else she would never have created Sunshine. What matters is not what you or I think, but what Twilight thinks. If Twilight genuinely does feel neglected then it is not our place to tell her that she is wrong.”

“Twilight is most *definitely* wrong,” Celestia shouted. “Look at Sunshine – look at her! Twilight had no right to create a copy of me.”

“I am *not* a copy of you,” Sunshine retorted. “That is the *last* thing that Twilight needed. I am a completely different pony – one who is wholly loyal to Twilight and who would do anything for her. Unlike you, I spend all my time with Twilight. I take care of her and tend to her every need. I may look like you, but that is where the similarities end. What's the matter – can you not stand the idea of Twilight finally having someone who cares about her? Do you demand that Twilight spend her life alone and unhappy? What kind of ruler are you, anyway? Why do you care so little about the happiness of your subjects?”

“How dare you tell me that I don't care about Twilight! I care very deeply about her – as does all of Equestria. Twilight has *many* friends. She is not

alone.”

“Oh really? Then where were her friends when Applejack died? Oh, that's right – Twilight had to go through that alone. Where were her friends when Chrysalis imprisoned Cadence and tried to take over all of Equestria? Oh, that's right – instead of believing Twilight, you all abandoned her. None of you have ever been there for Twilight when she really needed it. If you, Celestia, truly do care for Twilight then why have you never fought by her side? Why have you never sent even *one* guard to protect her life from those who wish to do her harm?”

“You cannot be serious! I am the ruler of Equestria. It would be foolish for me to go into battle. Twilight can handle things on her own just fine.”

Sunshine shook her head. “No, Celestia, she can't. What about Starlight Glimmer? That evil pony is still out there somewhere, plotting her revenge. She once stole Twilight's cutie mark and she hates Twilight with a passion. One day she will return, and I have no doubt that she wants to kill Twilight or cause her great harm. Have you tried to hunt down Starlight and arrest her? Have you provided Twilight with any security to stop Starlight from walking right into Twilight's castle?”

Luna spoke up. “That is a good point. Why

haven't you tried to protect Twilight?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Twilight has never needed protecting before. She will be fine. There is nothing to worry about."

"That is the whole problem in a nutshell," Sunshine replied. "*You aren't worried about Twilight.* When you send her off on a dangerous mission, you don't worry about her safety. You know that there are ponies out there that want to hurt Twilight, but you don't even care enough about her to send her even *one* guard. Why? Because you aren't worried about her. You don't even spend a single moment worrying about somepony doing her harm. But I *do* worry about those things, and the reason I worry about her is because *I care about her safety.* Your idea of taking care of Twilight is to wave a hoof in the air and say 'Oh, I'm sure she will be fine. Servants, bring me more cake.' My idea of taking care of Twilight is to create an armed guard for her and then spend my every waking hour tending to her every need. So tell me, Celestia. Which of us *really* cares for Twilight? The one who does nothing, or the one who has dedicated her entire being and existence to her happiness?"

There was silence. Celestia didn't say anything. She angrily stared at Sunshine, and then stared at the ground.

Luna looked at her sister. "I think you may owe Twilight an apology. I realize that you do care about her, but it is clear that Twilight is not aware of how you feel. From her perspective you are indifferent and aloof. You may not have meant to fail her, but you have failed her all the same."

"Perhaps you are right," Celestia said at last. "Perhaps there is more that I could have done. I will have to give this matter some thought. But I am still appalled that Twilight would dare to create a copy of me."

"Oh, right," Sunshine replied. "That truly is the appalling thing here. It's not that you've spent years throwing Twilight into dangerous situations, or have failed to protect her in any way, or haven't been there for her when she needed you. It's not the fact that you owe Twilight your very *life* several times over, and yet still can't be bothered to worry about her safety. No, what's truly appalling is that Twilight loved you so much that when she decided to create someone who loved her back, she made that friend look like you. Clearly that act of flattery and devotion is worthy of being cast into your deepest dungeon! Perhaps she should have made me look like Chrysalis instead. Would that have pleased you?"

Luna spoke up. "I'm actually a bit disappointed that she didn't copy me. She clearly

loves my sister more than the Princess of the Night. Really, Celestia, you should be honored. This is *not* something you should fight with Twilight about. If you don't want her creating friends for herself out of books then maybe you should address the root cause – her loneliness.”

“Fine, fine,” Celestia said reluctantly. “I will let this go. But let it be known that I am *not* pleased.”

Sunshine nodded. “Very well. For what it's worth, I'm not very pleased with you either. But if the two of you will follow me then I will take you to Twilight. There is a great deal that she wants to show you.”

Sunshine turned around and walked toward the massive front doors of the crystal castle. The six metal guard ponies stepped aside, and two of them opened the doors so that the princesses could pass. Once they were inside the guards closed the doors behind them.

As Sunshine led them down the long crystal hallway, Celestia saw Rarity standing to one side. Rarity was looking up at a long tapestry. She appeared to be deep in thought.

Celestia came to sudden stop. “Wait just a minute. Did Twilight create a copy of Rarity as well? Has she been cloning all of her friends?”

Rarity turned around and looked at the

princess. “Oh, hello, your majesty! I'm sorry – I didn't see you there. I've been thinking about redecorating this place. It's so cold, you know? It needs some warmth so it will feel more homey. But to answer your question: no, Twilight has not been creating copies of her friends. I am the original Rarity – the one and only. I'm simply here to help.”

“Oh,” Celestia replied. “My apologies. Is Moondancer also just here to help? I thought she lived in Canterlot.”

Rarity shook her head. “No, the Moondancers that you see around here are just copies. Well, not copies, exactly. They're actually nothing like Moondancer at all. They just look like her. To tell you the truth it kind of bothers Twilight, although I don't think she'd ever say anything. She appreciates the help that they provide but I think she'd feel better about it if they didn't look like her old friend. Apparently the only pony she is comfortable copying is you.”

Celestia face-hoofed. “I really need to talk to Twilight.”

Sunshine looked at her coldly. “And what, exactly, do you plan on telling her?”

“We just need to talk. There was a time when Twilight came to me with her problems. She used to send me letters every week. Now she

apparently tries to deal with them herself, and I don't think she's doing a very good job. She has been making some very strange decisions."

Sunshine took a step closer to Celestia. "I will *not* let you hurt her. Do you understand me?"

Celestia nervously took a step back. "I would never dream of hurting my dear student. I only wish to know how she is doing and see if there is anything I can help her with."

Rarity spoke up. "I feel exactly the same way. It's so easy to neglect Twilight, isn't it? After all, she never actually asks for help – well, not usually, anyway. That's what makes it so easy to overlook her and think that everything is fine, when it really isn't. If you want to find out what is really going on then you have to talk to her and get involved in her life. She's not going to come to you, you know."

"I can see that," Celestia replied.

Sunshine turned around and began walking down the hallway. "If you will follow me, princesses. Twilight is waiting on us."

Rarity waved a hoof at them. "I hope you all have a wonderful evening! Let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

The three alicorns made their way to the staircase and then walked down into the basement. Celestia was taken aback by what she

saw. The basement had a dark and sinister look to it. The walls were covered with arcane magical symbols that glowed an eerie green color. There was a pool of black nothingness in the center of the floor, which bubbled occasionally. Two long wooden workbenches flanked the walls and were covered with neatly-organized magical equipment. The basement looked like the lair of some sort of supervillain.

At the end of the room was Twilight, who was busy making notes on a giant blackboard. When she heard the alicorns walk into the room she turned around. Her eyes lit up, and she ran over to Celestia and hugged her. "Oh, princess, it's so good to see you again! I'm glad you were able to come tonight."

Celestia hugged her back. "The pleasure is mine."

Twilight let go of Celestia and hugged Luna. "Thank you both for coming! Were you able to bring the materials that I requested?"

Luna nodded. "I have in my saddlebag the preserved brain of Starswirl the Bearded, along with a sample of his mane. I even brought one of his hats. It's a bit old but it's still in fairly good condition. I suggest being gentle with it, however."

Twilight's eyes widened. "Really? You brought his *hat*? Oh, this is so exciting! Tonight is

going to be amazing. I can't wait to finally meet him. This is going to be the best night ever."

Celestia spoke up. "Before we get started, do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure. What's on your mind? Is there something I can help you with?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. Twilight, have I failed you? Have I let you down?"

All of the joy and excitement left Twilight's face. She nervously took a step back. "What do you mean? Did I do something wrong?"

"No no – it's not that," Celestia said quickly. "I just get the feeling that I haven't been there for you as much as I should have. Isn't that why you created Sunshine?"

"You don't like her, do you?" Twilight said anxiously. "Oh, I should have known this would happen. I was so stupid! What was I thinking?"

Sunshine quickly ran over to Twilight and put a hoof around her neck. "Not at all, Twilight. You don't understand. Celestia isn't attacking you; she's apologizing. She is sorry for the way she has treated you."

Twilight looked at Celestia nervously. "You – you are?"

Celestia sighed. "Twilight, you have to understand that I thought you were fine. I didn't know that you were lonely. I didn't know that you

felt like no one cared about you. I thought you were happy. I wish you had told me how you really felt. I would have done something.”

“But you’re so busy! After all, you have all of Equestria to worry about, and I’m just one pony. You don’t have time to worry about me. You have more important things to be concerned about. I really shouldn’t be bothering you.”

“I do *not* have more important things to be concerned about. Nothing is more important to me than the health and well-being of all of my subjects.”

“Exactly,” Twilight replied. “You have lots and lots of subjects, and I’m just one of millions. I used to be your faithful student but I guess I’m not anymore. I know you care about everypony, but there are so many of us. You can’t possibly be there for everyone all the time. No one could ask that of you. It just doesn’t make sense to bring your problems to the ruler of Equestria. It makes a lot more sense to bring them to a friend. Someone who has time for you. Someone like, you know, Sunshine.”

Sunshine nodded. “That’s why I’m here. I have time for her – all the time in the world. I can do what you can’t.”

Celestia suddenly saw Sunshine’s point. For the first time that night she realized that she really

had failed Twilight. She felt terrible. Twilight had done so much for her, and she had given Twilight so little in return. She had just assumed that Twilight was fine. She had never bothered to ask.

"I am so sorry," Celestia said quietly. "Really, I am. I didn't mean to neglect you. You really are important to me, Twilight, and I will find a way to make more time for you."

"Really?" Twilight asked. "I mean, that's nice and everything, but you are pretty busy. Besides, I'm fine now. Now that Sunshine is in my life I'm feeling a lot better. I didn't realize how lonely I actually was until she came along. She has been so wonderful to me. I can't imagine life without her."

"I may be busy, but I am also the ruler of Equestria," Celestia replied firmly. "If I decide to spend more time with you then that is what will happen. Luna is very capable of ruling in my absence."

Luna spoke up. "Luna also sleeps during the day. If you really want some time off, sister, you should just ask Sunshine to rule in your absence. Or you could ask Twilight to make a copy of you."

Twilight spoke up. "You know, I'd be happy to do that. In fact, since you're here it would be easy to do."

"That's quite all right," Celestia said quickly.

"I think there are other, less drastic ways of solving that particular problem. Now. Didn't you have some magic to show me?"

"I certainly did! I have a great evening planned for us. First I'm going to explain the basic theory behind this new technique – I already have everything prepared on the blackboard. Then I'm going to guide you through bringing Starswirl the Bearded back to life. You're going to love it!"

"You're going to do what?" Celestia replied, startled. "Did you say that I would be bringing him back to life?"

"Absolutely! If you want to learn new magic then there's nothing like a little practice. But don't worry – it's not that difficult. I'll be here every step of the way to guide you. Shall we get started?"

"One moment," Sunshine commented. She levitated a thick blue book off the workbench and handed it to Twilight. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Oh, that's right!" Twilight exclaimed. She took the book and handed it to Luna. "Here you are, princess. It's a gift. We made this world especially for you."

"Why thank you," Luna replied. She looked at the book curiously. "And just what is this?"

"It's Equestria. You see, Sunshine and I recreated Equestria, the way it was a thousand

years ago before you were banished to the Moon. In this Equestria all the ponies are nocturnal. They love the night and cherish it. I know you don't get very much appreciation for all that you do, so I thought you might like to visit a world where the Princess of the Night was highly esteemed."

Luna looked at the book in amazement, and then back at Twilight. "Thank you very much. I have long wondered what it would be like if ponies appreciated my night the way they appreciate my sister's day. I will enjoy spending time here. This truly is a thoughtful gift."

Celestia looked at Luna. "Ponies *do* appreciate your night, and you *are* loved, Luna. Things aren't like the way they were before."

"Hush," Luna said, as she put the book in her saddlebag. "You have work to do."

* * * * *

It took Twilight about an hour to explain her new magic to Celestia and Luna. The two alicorns had a lot of questions. They were completely unfamiliar with the magic behind the comic books, and they had never attempted memory transfer magic before. Twilight patiently explained how the original comic books worked, and how she modified them so she could create items with just

magic.

Next, she explained how she was able to bring back the dead. Celestia was impressed at the technique she used to infuse genetic material with the comic, in order to perfectly recreate the host body. The memory transfer spell also made a great deal of sense to her. But there was one point that concerned her.

“Tell me something, Twilight,” Celestia said at last. “I think I understand how this works, and I must say it is all very clever. But when you are done, isn't the end result a copy of the original? You are not actually bringing the original pony back to life.”

“That's right,” Twilight agreed. “That is the part that tripped me up at first. What you end up with is a perfect replica of the original – or you can change the original, if you'd rather do that. With Applejack I started out with a perfect copy, but then I added wings to her. This magic really offers you a lot of flexibility.”

“So, in theory, you could use this to create multiple copies of somepony.”

“Sure! In fact, you could use it to create multiple copies of anything you wanted. That's what makes it so exciting!”

Luna spoke up. “Why do you ask, sister? Were you wanting to make more than one

Starswirl?”

“Not at all. I'm just trying to understand what is going on. It sounds like we are about to create an imitation of Starswirl.”

Sunshine spoke up. “You've seen Applejack, haven't you? Did she seem like just an imitation to you?”

“No, she didn't,” Celestia admitted. “In fact, I could not tell her apart from the original.”

“Exactly. For all intents and purposes she really was Applejack. Starswirl will be exactly the same way. He will be the unicorn that you once knew.”

“Are you ready to get started?” Twilight asked.

Celestia hesitated, then nodded. “All right. So what do I do first?”

* * * * *

Twilight Sparkle guided Celestia through the process. First, Celestia took a blank comic book and created a simple environment to contain the new pony. Next, she took a clipping of Starswirl's mane and fused it with the comic, to create a new body for the legendary magician.

The final step was to transfer his memories. Celestia levitated the memory stone and looked

at it. "Is it really necessary to transfer the memories to the stone first, and then to the comic? Can't we just copy them straight into the book?"

"Probably," Twilight replied. "But the memory stone will preserve the mind for thousands of years. It's always good to have a backup in case something goes wrong and we have to do it again."

"But we have his preserved brain," Celestia pointed out. "If something is amiss then we can just use it again, correct? I think in this case we can skip the use of the memory stone. It takes some time and effort, and I don't think it gains us anything."

Twilight shrugged. "It's entirely up to you. If you would rather use a direct memory transfer then go right ahead. That should work fine"

Celestia nodded. Her horn lit up, and she began copying Starswirl's mind into the book.

When she was done, she picked up the comic and read through it. After a few minutes she handed it over to Twilight. "What do you think? It looks all right to me, but then I've never done anything like this before. Do you see any problems?"

Twilight took the comic out of her hooves and looked through it herself. "It looks great! I just knew that you would be really good at this.

Everything is in place, and we're ready to bring Starswirl out of the comic and into the real world. Would you like to do the final step?"

Celestia took the comic back from Twilight and set it on the workbench. She then stared at it for a moment. "It has been such a long time since I've seen Starswirl. I never thought I would see him again."

Luna spoke up. "It's all rather exciting, isn't it? To get an old friend back again. I wonder what he'll think of Equestria."

"I'm sure he will be surprised to see you again," Celestia commented. "When he died you were still banished to the moon. He will be so happy to see you at my side once more."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Twilight asked.

Celestia smiled. "This is a big moment, my former student. Applejack had only been gone for a few days, but Starswirl has been dead for nearly a thousand years. But you are right. It is time. I won't delay this any longer."

Celestia's horn glowed. The comic began to emit a brilliant white light – and a moment later a gray stallion with a long beard appeared right beside the workbench. The stallion looked old and wise – and a little perplexed. He blinked, looked around the room for a moment, and then

glanced from Celestia to Sunshine. A look of confusion appeared on his face. "Two Celestias? How can there be two Celestias? Have I fallen into the foul hooves of changelings?"

Celestia laughed. "No, Starswirl, you are safe among friends." She levitated his blue wizard hat with bells and put it onto his head, and then gave him his blue star-studded cloak. "Welcome back to Equestria, my old friend! This hat is original, but I am afraid the cloak is just a copy. Your original cloak did not survive the passage of time."

"I see," Starswirl replied, as he adjusted his hat and put on the cloak. "This hat looks rather fragile, to say the least. But I still don't—"

Luna rushed over to him and hugged him. "Oh, Starswirl, it pleases me to see you again! When my sister Celestia banished me to the moon I was convinced I would never have a chance to tell you goodbye. When I returned to Equestria a thousand years later you were long gone."

"That's right," Starswirl commented. "It's all coming back to me now. You turned into Nightmare Moon, and Celestia was forced to banish you. Yet here you are, safe and sound and in your right mind again! I am pleased – yes, I am quite pleased. But that is not the only wonder that I see. When I last walked this world there

were only two alicorns, yet I see a new one – a purple alicorn with a talent for magic. I also see a second Celestia where there was once only one. There is also the small fact that I distinctly remember dying, and I presumably have been dead for a millennium. Can anypony explain this riddle to me?”

The stallion then noticed something on the workbench. “And is that my brain? What is my brain doing on the table?”

Twilight spoke up. She couldn't contain herself any longer. “Oh, it's you – it's really you! I have been such a big fan of yours for forever. It's a wonderful honor to finally meet you! You have been my inspiration ever since I was a little filly. I have spent days – weeks – in the Canterlot Library studying your spells. You are truly legendary.”

Starswirl looked at Twilight. “And who are you, princess? Did Celestia have a daughter?”

Sunshine spoke up. “That is Twilight Sparkle, the Element of Magic. She was born a unicorn but ascended to alicornhood after she completed your unfinished spell. She is now the Princess of Friendship. This castle is hers.”

Starswirl was impressed. “In my day Celestia and Luna wielded the six elements. The elements must have chosen new bearers. And to think you finished that spell of mine – well, you truly are a

powerful pony indeed. Well done! I shall have to take a look at your work. But why are there two Celestias?"

Sunshine spoke up. "That one over there is Princess Celestia. I am a copy, created by Twilight's magic. Her magic formed me and brought you back from the dead."

"Remarkable – truly remarkable!" Starswirl commented. He walked over to the blackboard and began reading the notes that were written on the board. "Twilight, could you explain to me what you did? This world contains many surprises. I never imagined that such things might be possible."

Twilight was delighted. Beginning with Applejacks' death, she explained the entire story. She told him how she came to invent this new magic, how it worked, and what she had done with it. It took her more than an hour to answer all of his questions. When she was finished, Starswirl was silent for a long time. When he finally spoke, there was a note of grave concern in his voice. "So you are planning on teaching this magic to all of Equestria?"

Sunshine spoke up. "That's right! We have invented a way to make this magic accessible to everyone – even earth ponies. No one will have to hunger or thirst or be in need again. Everypony

can have everything that they ever wanted.”

“Doesn't that seem a bit dangerous? Far be it from me to question the will of royalty, but this is an extremely powerful form of magic, and releasing it could have rather dire consequences. Have you considered adding a time limit to the spell?”

“A time limit?” Twilight asked. “What do you mean?”

Starswirl nodded. “As you no doubt know, I invented a time travel spell and used it to freely travel through time. However, I quickly realized that if other ponies got their hooves on my spell, they could use it with disastrous consequences. All it would take was one malevolent pony and the past could be changed forever. Therefore, in order to protect Equestria, when I wrote that spell down I modified it so that it could only be used once. I limited the spell so that its user could not use it to change the past. That rendered the spell safe and harmless.”

Twilight's eyes widened. “I know that spell! I actually used it once. But you mean to tell me that there is another version of that spell that *isn't* limited? It's actually possible to travel backward in time and change the past?”

“Oh, absolutely! But I knew how dangerous that could be, and I wanted to make sure that

no pony ever discovered it. I thought that if I released my limited version, ponies would assume that was the only time travel spell which was possible, and wouldn't investigate further. Apparently my trick worked, because here we are a thousand years later and you still have no idea that genuine time travel is possible."

"That's amazing! I had no idea."

Celestia spoke up. "I knew that Starswirl had mastered that spell, although I never learned the spell myself. Even after I was forced to banish Luna I knew better than to try to go into the past and change it. That can only result in more problems."

"You knew?" Twilight exclaimed. "All this time? And you didn't tell me?"

"I know how to keep a secret," Celestia said.

Starswirl continued. "The point is, Princess Twilight, I knew my time travel spell could be misused, and so I limited it to prevent any possible harm. Now, I realize that you created this new form of magic with the best of intentions, and you have used it wisely. But other ponies will not show the same restraint that you have. If you release these comics to the world, ponies will spend their entire lives living in them. In the real world they are small, powerless, and lead frustrating lives. In the comic world they can have

anything and everything that they want. Since their fantasy lives will be so much better than their real lives, nopony will want to live in reality anymore. Instead they will inhabit their fantasies until they die. In a single generation the entire nation will be lost and Equestria will cease to exist."

"That's rather dire, don't you think?" Twilight asked.

Starswirl shook his head. "The only reason that the fantasy world is not appealing to you is because your life is so good that it practically *is* a fantasy. Think about it. You are a princess, you wield great power, you can have anything you want, and you live in a castle. But most ponies spend their entire lives wanting things that they can't have. To them this new magic will be a poison."

"That's what Frosted Arrow told me," Twilight remarked. "Not the poison part – the privilege part. But don't you see? Yes, it's true that my life is amazing. But with this magic I can share that amazing life with everypony in the world. No one needs to be denied anything anymore! Frosted Arrow can have a life that's every bit as amazing as mine."

Luna spoke up. "Who is this Frosted Arrow? I do not recognize that name."

Sunshine smiled. "I'm not surprised. He runs

the local comic book store.”

“Ah,” Luna said. “I see. A pony of letters. I can respect that.”

Starswirl pointed a hoof at Twilight. “This is dangerous – very dangerous! I know you mean well, and I know your heart is in the right place. So why not compromise? I can show you how to put a time limit on this magic. You can engineer the comics so that they last only for a set period of time – say, 30 days – and after that they can never be used again. The ponies of this world can have one opportunity to live the life of their dreams, and then the dream will end and they will be back in reality. Isn't that safer than risking all of Equestria?”

“I just don't see the danger,” Twilight said. “I think ponies are much more responsible than you give them credit for. Besides, it seems rather cruel to give ponies a taste of a better life and then tear it away from them. Why can't everypony have the same kind of life and riches that I do? Denying them a better life is cruel and heartless. I refuse to believe that I deserve more than others and that this lifestyle should be reserved for royalty. I say let everypony enjoy it.”

Starswirl looked at Celestia. “What do you think, your majesty?”

Celestia opened her mouth to reply, but Luna

cut in. "To be perfectly honest, my sister usually lets Twilight decide how to handle these situations. Whenever there is a crisis, she turns the matter over to the six Elements of Harmony and lets them deal with it. She has come to trust Twilight's judgment – and Twilight has proven herself time and time again. She has saved all our lives on more than one occasion."

Celestia frowned at her sister. "I am still the ruler of Equestria. Twilight is *not* in charge."

"Very well. So what is your royal opinion? Do you wish to disagree with Twilight and crush her hopes and dreams, or are you going to support her the way she has supported you for years?"

"Don't you see the danger here?" Celestia asked. "Starswirl is not usually wrong. Perhaps we should listen to him."

Luna shook her head. "I see what is going on here. You want to take my book away, don't you? You don't want me to have my own world where ponies are nocturnal and I am loved and respected. But it's not just me that you are lashing out at. You want to take Applejack away from her family. You want to get rid of Sunshine. You want all of us to suffer. After all, why not? You have everything that you want. What do you care about other ponies?"

"Luna, that is very unfair! You know I care

about everypony.”

“Wait – what?” Twilight asked. “What's this about Applejack?”

“Think about it,” Luna replied. “The ponies of this world know that you used book magic to bring Applejack back from the dead. What will they think when they discover that *their* version of the magic is time-limited but yours is not? They will know that you are holding out the best magic for yourself, and they will become extremely unhappy. If we do time-limit the magic then we will have to time-limit it for *everypony*. That is the only fair thing to do – unless you want to face the wrath of an angry Equestria who wants to know why you believe you are better than everypony else.”

“But I can't give up Applejack! She's my friend. I would do anything for her. I am *not* going to lose her again.”

“Yet that is precisely what my sister wants to do. If we take her advice then you will lose your friend.”

Sunshine spoke up. “I will not allow that to happen,” she said, in a voice of steel. “I will not allow *anypony* to harm Twilight or her friends. I will fight to the death to protect her. Twilight's guards will fight to the death to protect her. I will burn down all of Equestria before I allow anyone

to harm my princess.”

Celestia took a step back. “Can't we find some sort of compromise? I just think we might be making a big mistake.”

Twilight frowned. “Applejack is *not* a mistake!”

Celestia opened her mouth to reply, then stopped herself. She sighed. “Very well. But tell me one thing. The comics that you are going to release to the public – you are planning on creating all of them from a single source, correct? So if something does go wrong you could, in theory, destroy that source and thereby destroy all the copies that were made from that source.”

“That's right,” Twilight said. “If the source comic was destroyed then all the other comics that were made from it would be destroyed as well.”

Celestia nodded. “Then that should be enough. If this does lead to disaster then we can correct the mistake before any lasting harm is done. But what will happen to the ponies that are in the comics? If a comic is destroyed while they are in it, will they die?”

Twilight shook her head. “I don't think so. I'm pretty sure that the comic will eject them. When the comic world disintegrates, they should be released back into this one.”

Sunshine spoke up. "You know, I think you're right. But we probably should test that just to make sure."

"It is fine," Celestia said. "I withdraw my objection. Twilight, when are you planning on releasing this magic?"

"Next week, if all goes well."

Starswirl spoke up. "So it has been decided, then?"

"Yes, it has," Sunshine replied.

"Very well. Then I will not stand in the way of royalty. I just have a few questions. First, may I stay here for the night? I understand that it's quite late."

"Of course!" Twilight exclaimed. "I would love that. This castle has plenty of rooms."

Celestia looked concerned. "You aren't returning to Canterlot with us?"

"Not quite yet. There is something else I want to do first, and then I will make my way to the capitol. Princess Twilight, might I have a few of your magical blank comics and a quill? And if you have any notes you've put together on this technique, I'd like to have them as well. Your new magic is truly fascinating – I never dreamed any of this was possible."

Sunshine spoke up. "Certainly. I will have them delivered to your room in the castle. I'll

include a saddlebag as well so that you can carry them.”

“I don't suppose I could have the comic that you used to create me, could I?” Starswirl asked. “I'd love to study it. I do promise to be careful with it; I know my existence depends on it.”

“Sure,” Twilight said. “I don't have a problem with that. I'll have it delivered to your room along with everything else.”

Starswirl nodded. “Thank you. Finally, does this Applejack live around here? I understand that she was the first pony that you created with magic. I'd like to meet her, if that's all right.”

Twilight nodded. “Yes, she lives just outside Ponyville at Sweet Apple Acres. I'll get you a map of the area. I'll also mark down the location of the homes of the rest of the Elements of Harmony. I'm sure that the two Pinkie Pies will want to meet you – in fact, I bet they're already planning on throwing you a Back From The Dead party.”

Celestia spoke up. “The two Pinkie Pies? Do you mean that terrible rumor was true? There are now two Pinkies that walk the land?”

Twilight grinned. “It's amazing, isn't it? Pinkie asked me to create a clone of her – one that could fly. I've never seen her so happy in all her life! The two of them have a really great time together. You should pay them a visit sometime.”

“The world of the future is truly remarkable,” Starswirl commented. “Princess, you are too kind. But now I must be off to bed.”

Starswirl turned to leave. He took a step toward the door, and then slipped. With a surprised shriek he lost his balance and fell on the floor. When he hit the floor his horn lit up, and a bolt of white magic shot out. The magic went right through his hat and struck one of the glowing runes on the wall. The magical bolt turned from green to white and bounced off. It struck the wooden table right beside Starswirl's brain. The table – and the brain – went up in flames.

Twilight screamed. Celestia took a step back, away from the blaze. Sunshine rushed toward the flames and used her magic to put them out.

“I am so sorry,” Starswirl said, as he struggled back up onto his hooves. He took his hat off his head, looked at the new hole in it, and then gingerly put it back on. “This basement is apparently full of hidden dangers. Was anyone hurt?”

“I don't think so,” Sunshine said. “The fire was put out quickly, so the damage was minimal. None of the comics were damaged, which is fortunate indeed! The only loss was your brain. I'm afraid it has been destroyed.”

Starswirl smiled. “Ah, well, no harm done

there. The one that is currently in my head seems to be working just fine. Once again I do apologize for my clumsiness! It appears that I'm still an old stallion. I'm just not as strong as I used to be. I don't suppose you could take me to my room now, could you? I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed."

Sunshine nodded. "Absolutely. If you will just follow me I will take care of everything."

Sunshine and Starswirl left the room, leaving the three princesses alone. Twilight yawned. "You know, I think I'll go to bed too. Celestia, is there anything else I can do for you?"

Celestia did not respond. She stared at the burnt brain for a while, and then shook her head. "No, thank you. Luna and I need to head back to Canterlot."

Luna spoke up. "Thank you so much for all you've done, Twilight! It is wonderful to have Starswirl back again – and I will treasure this world that you made for me."

Twilight beamed. "You're welcome, princess! I do hope that you'll enjoy it."

Twilight then led them through the castle and told them goodnight. After the two sisters were outside, Luna looked at Celestia. "Is there a problem? You seem lost in thought."

"Starswirl is clever," Celestia remarked. "I wonder what he is up to."

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we should keep an eye on him. He is not the doddering old stallion he pretends to be. There is more to him than it appears.”

“You mean you don't think his fall was accidental?”

“Do you?” Celestia asked.

Luna shrugged. “He is very, very old. Remember, you created an old body for him, which in hindsight may have been a mistake. It might have been wiser to create a *new* body to house his mind. He may simply be weak and infirm.”

“Or he might be the legendary Starswirl the Bearded. Twilight will find him to be a difficult opponent. He is quite clever.”

“Starswirl would never fight Twilight!” Luna said, shocked. “He has far too much respect for alicorns. He is from our generation, you know. They knew how to treat royalty.”

“We will see,” Celestia said. “We will see.”

Chapter 11: “For the good of Equestria”

Starswirl the Bearded woke up the next morning long before dawn. He had to admit that the service in Twilight's castle was impeccable. A white unicorn named Rarity delivered to him a hoof-stitched saddlebag, complete with his cutie mark. Another pony named Moondancer brought him three blank enchanted comics, a quill, and an early draft of the book that explained how to use the new magical technique that Twilight had invented. Yet another Moondancer brought breakfast to his room.

Starswirl ate his breakfast and spent an hour reading the book he had been given. He then tracked down Rarity and spent some time talking to her. When he learned what he wanted to know, he asked her for directions to Applejack's home. He then thanked her and left the castle.

The unicorn had wanted to tell Twilight goodbye before he left, but one of the Moondancers told him that she was still in bed. Apparently the princess did not get out of bed before Celestia rose the sun. It was actually still

dark when Starswirl left the castle, but he knew that Celestia would raise the sun soon. Applejack, he had been told, was an early riser. *Which is all the better*, he thought to himself. *Perhaps I can talk with her before anypony else knows what I am doing.*

* * * * *

Starswirl walked down the dusty road that led to Sweet Apple Acres. He was actually in a hurry, but he knew he couldn't appear to be in a hurry. If he ran along the road he would probably attract attention; if he attracted attention to himself there was a good chance that Sunshine would hear about it and wonder what was going on. So he had to act as if nothing was wrong.

He was a little surprised that no one noticed him. His costume was fairly elaborate, and he knew he couldn't possibly blend in with the local population. Yet he did not encounter a single pony on his trip, and he arrived at Sweet Apple Acres without incident.

The scope of the Apple family farm impressed him. The tree that had killed the original Applejack had been hauled away and was now gone. Starswirl looked at the barn, the family house, and the extensive apple orchard that

stretched to the horizon. *The Apple family has quite an extensive farming operation, he thought. How odd that one of the Elements works as a farmer. I'm surprised that Celestia does not keep them in Canterlot and put them on the state payroll. What advantage could there be to allowing them to live so far from the capitol?* But he had more important problems to deal with.

Starswirl walked up to the door of the Apple family residence and knocked on it. He was a bit surprised when the door opened just seconds later. A yellow filly with a red mane looked up at him. "Howdy, stranger!" the filly said excitedly. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Starswirl the Bearded. I'd like to speak to Applejack for a moment, if I may. Is she in?"

"Sure, she's in. I'm Apple Bloom, her younger sister. Wait just one moment, ok? I'll go get her."

Apple Bloom turned around and yelled through the house. "Applejack! You got company!"

"I'm comin'!" a voice called back.

Apple Bloom turned around and grinned. "She'll be here in just a minute. Can I get you some breakfast?"

"No thank you – I've already eaten. But I appreciate the kind offer. You have a lovely home."

"Thanks," Apple Bloom said.

A moment later Applejack walked into the room. When Apple Bloom saw her she raced off and disappeared through a doorway. Applejack walked to the front door. "I'm sorry my sister didn't invite you inside. Won't you come in?"

"Are you Applejack, the Element of Harmony?" Starswirl asked.

Applejack nodded. "Yup, that's me. And you – hmmm, I know you look familiar. I just can't place it. Oh, I know. Twilight dressed up as you once for Nightmare Night. She said you were somepony famous."

"I'm Starswirl the Bearded," the stallion replied. "I'm not surprised you don't remember my name. I died about a thousand years ago, and apparently history is no longer taught in schools. But might I have a word with you, in private? I fear that there is trouble brewing, and I need your help."

"So you died, huh? That means you're like me. Right? Did Twilight recreate you using that book magic of hers?"

"You are close to the truth. I am told that Twilight taught the technique to Celestia. Celestia is the one who did the actual deed."

"Well, there you go. Kinda weird, isn't it? But sure, I can talk. If this is a private conversation then we can head out to the barn. There won't be

anypony out there this time of day but the chickens, and they don't really say much. Well, except to Fluttershy, I guess. But she's not here right now."

Starswirl was surprised. "Do you mean the Element of Kindness can talk to animals?"

Applejack nodded. "Yup. Animals are kind of her thing. If you ask me, Fluttershy should be the Element of Animals and I should be the Element of Apples. Pinkie should probably be the Element of Friendship. But I guess it don't work that way. I've never really understood magic. Of course, I'm an earth pony, so that's probably why."

"But you have wings," Starswirl pointed out. "Doesn't that make you a pegasus?"

"Oh, right. I keep forgetting about that. The wings are actually new. I was born an earth pony, and Twilight brought me back from the dead as an earth pony, but my friend Rainbow Dash talked me into getting these wings. So I guess I am a pegasus now. Although, really, I consider myself more of an earth pony with wings. Not that it really matters."

Applejack stepped out of the house and accompanied Starswirl. The two of them made their way to the barn. On the short walk there, a rainbow-colored streak came down from the sky and landed directly in front of them. "There you

are!” the blue pegasus said. “I thought you'd never get out of bed. What – were you sleeping in or something?”

Applejack face-hoofed. “Rainbow, I get up at the same time every morning – you know that! And we talked about this. You don't need to follow me around all the time. You can go off and do your weather pony stuff. I'm fine – honest.”

“Ah,” Starswirl said. “This must be the Element of Loyalty. It's so strange to see the Elements of Harmony represented by ponies.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Rainbow said dismissively to Starswirl. “Look, Apples, don't worry about my job. I've got it covered. We weather ponies don't have anything going on today, so I've got all the time in the world. What's going on?”

“I'm tryin' to have a private discussion with Starswirl,” Applejack replied. “He said there's trouble of some kind.”

“Great! Count me in. So what's going on?”

Starswirl held up a hoof. “Let us find a private area first, and then I will discuss the details with you. What I am about to tell you must not be overheard.”

Rainbow grinned. “This just keeps getting better.” She raced off into the barn. Applejack and Starswirl followed behind a moment later.

Once the three ponies were safely inside the

barn. Starswirl closed the doors. He then cast a spell that created a bubble around the area. "There. That should keep us from being heard – for a while, at least. What I am about to tell you must not be repeated to anypony else. It is of the utmost importance that this remain a top secret."

"Let me guess," Rainbow Dash said. "You're a country music singer, right? Or maybe a clown. With that hat and bells, I'm going with clown."

Applejack groaned. "Rainbow, be serious! He's a famous pony from a thousand years ago. I think he's some kind of magician."

Starswirl nodded. "I am not merely *a* magician; I am *the* magician. I was the chief magician for Celestia for decades. I invented countless spells and performed feats of magic that had never been seen before. I even banished the three sirens to another dimension."

"Yeah, we know," Applejack said. "They caused all kinds of problems in that dimension, too. Twilight had to go and defeat them. She told us all about it."

"Oh, I see. Of course – you are the Elements. I am sure you have had all sorts of adventures and faced many different foes. But I fear that the foe you will face this time is going to be far more difficult to defeat. Equestria is in grave danger."

"What kind of danger?" Rainbow Dash asked.

“Monsters? Please let it be monsters. I haven't fought off a good monster in weeks.”

“Let me start at the beginning. As I understand it, a number of weeks ago a tree fell on Applejack and killed her. Twilight could not handle the loss of her dear friend, so she decided to use her magic to bring Applejack back from the dead.”

Rainbow interrupted. “No, no, you got it all wrong. Twilight was, like, totally ok with it. Well, not ok, I guess, but she wasn't going to do anything. I was the one who pestered her into finding a way to save Applejack. I practically moved into her castle, and I bugged her until we got results. I didn't let her have any peace. I'm really the one who motivated her to do it.”

“Then you may have destroyed all of Equestria. You see, Twilight succeeded. She discovered the most dangerous secret of all: she learned how to create things with pure magic. Even worse, she immediately used this technique to create a friend for herself – the pony Sunshine. I am very, very concerned about what she has done.”

“Why?” Rainbow Dash asked. “Sunshine is a great pony. I don't have a problem with her.”

Starswirl looked sternly at Rainbow Dash. “Sunshine is the most dangerous sort of pony in

the world. Not only is she a powerful alicorn with an extensive knowledge of magic, but she was created to be loyal to Twilight. *Completely* loyal. Unquestionably loyal. There can be no greater danger than a loyal friend.”

“Hey now!” Rainbow replied, offended. “I’m a loyal friend. What are you saying?”

Starswirl sighed. “Tell me something. Suppose that Twilight came to you and told you that she wanted to take Celestia’s place as ruler over the nation. In order to overthrow Equestria, Twilight wanted you to assassinate the royal sisters and burn down Canterlot. Would you do that for her?”

“Of course not! I would never hurt Celestia or Luna. But Twilight would never ask for a thing like that. If she did, though, I would set her straight. There’s no way I would agree to that. It’s crazy. And stupid.”

“But you are the Element of Loyalty. How could you refuse her? Surely you want to be loyal to Twilight, don’t you?”

“Well, sure. But I’m not the Element of Being Evil. If Twilight went crazy one day then I would set her straight. It’s what friends do.”

Applejack spoke up. “I see where this is goin’. Rainbow would tell Twilight off – but Sunshine wouldn’t. Am I right?”

Starswirl nodded. “Exactly. Sunshine is *completely* loyal. She would literally do anything to make Twilight happy. Sunshine is not dedicated to Twilight's well-being; she is dedicated to Twilight's happiness. If assassinating Celestia would grant Twilight some measure of happiness then Sunshine would do it without hesitation. If Twilight asked her to burn Equestria to the ground then Sunshine would do it. That is why Sunshine is so dangerous. She has great power, and she will do *anything*. Her behavior is only limited by the overwhelming desire she has to make Twilight happy. She would never, ever disagree with Twilight or tell her that she was wrong. It is not in her nature.”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “Now wait just a minute. How do you know that Sunshine is actually bad? Maybe she's just friendly, that's all. Has she actually done anything evil?”

“That is an excellent question. Now I will ask you one. The pony Rarity – the Element of Generosity. I understand that she now lives with Twilight. Is this normal for her? Are Rarity and Twilight exceptionally close friends?”

Applejack spoke up. “Well, not really. I mean, they're friends and all, but Rarity used to have her own life. She actually ran two dress shops – one in Ponyville and one in Canterlot. She was a pretty

busy pony.”

“And what about now?” Starswirl asked.

“Well, it's true that she has changed a bit. Her Ponyville dress shop isn't open as much as it used to be. Rarity seems pretty caught up in her new life in the castle.”

“That's quite interesting, isn't it? Has Rarity always been this supportive of Twilight's new magic?”

“Absolutely not. In fact, she hated it. She thought it was terrible. When Twilight came to talk to her about it, Rarity told her off and practically threw her out of her store. Rarity wanted no part of it.”

“I see,” Starswirl replied. “So what changed her mind?”

Applejack thought a moment. “Well, the next day Rarity came and apologized. She moved into Twilight's castle a few days later, and now she almost never leaves. I see what you're sayin' – it is a bit strange. Maybe even suspicious.”

“Think about this from Sunshine's point of view,” Starswirl said. “Sunshine was created to make Twilight happy. Sunshine surely realized that Rarity was upset with Twilight and was not being supportive. If Rarity was friendly and helpful then that would make Twilight happy. Therefore, it would make perfect sense for

Sunshine to kill the original Rarity and replace her with a new Rarity – one that Sunshine could create out of a comic book. The new Rarity would be loyal, friendly, and would never disagree with Twilight again.”

“No way!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “That doesn't make sense at all. Only a deranged lunatic would think that was a good idea.”

“I understand you point, but the reason you are horrified is because you have a moral compass that guides your actions. Your morality outweighs your loyalty to Twilight. It places limits on your behavior and your way of thinking. But Sunshine is different. If Sunshine comes to believe that Twilight would be happier if her friends had a different attitude, then I have no doubt she would kill them and replace them. Twilight would never know what happened; all she would know was that her friends had suddenly started agreeing with her. That would make Twilight happy – which is literally all that Sunshine cares about.”

Applejack spoke up. “Is that why you think she's so dangerous?”

Starswirl nodded. “I do not know very much about Princess Twilight, but very few ponies would be able to defend themselves against someone like Sunshine. All Twilight sees is a pony who wants to help her and make her happy.

Twilight would never imagine that Sunshine might be dangerous, because Sunshine would never be dangerous *to her*. It's only the rest of Equestria that is in grave peril."

Rainbow spoke up. "Fine, fine. Maybe you're right. So why don't we just go talk to Twilight? This sounds pretty easy to fix if you ask me."

Starswirl held up a hoof. "There is more. Sunshine is only part of the danger. The other problem is the magic that Twilight invented. In a few days Twilight is going to release her enchanted comics to all of the world. When she does that, everypony will be able to create any world that they want, and will have everything that they ever desired."

"That sounds totally awesome! I've already been thinking about what I'm going to do with that sweet magic. It will be the best thing ever."

"It will be the end of Equestria," Starswirl said darkly. "Once ponies are given those comics, they will live in them for the rest of their lives. Why would anypony come back to the real world, with its problems and pains and limitations, when they could spend their whole life living out any fantasy they can imagine? What will happen next is blindingly obvious. The ponies of this world will spend the rest of their days living in their fantasies, and then they will die. If this is not stopped then

this generation of ponies will be the last. A hundred years from now there will be no ponies left in the entire world. They will all be dead.”

Applejack frowned. “Look. I ain't no fan of this new magic, and I agree it's a bad idea. But do you really think it's going to be *that* bad? Maybe ponies will use it responsibly. Maybe the fantasies will get old. It seems to me like doom and gloom ain't the only possible outcome.”

“Perhaps,” Starswirl said. “Which brings me to my plan. As I said earlier, I am a magician – perhaps the greatest magician who has ever lived. One of the spells that I developed was a time travel spell.”

“That's it!” Applejack exclaimed. “I knew I'd heard of you somewhere. Twilight used that spell of yours once. It didn't really work out the way she hoped, though.”

“I know. That is because the version of that spell that I recorded for posterity was broken. I put limits on it so it would not be abused. But I know the *real* spell. I know a spell that allows you to travel through time as much as you desire. You can travel anywhere you wish, and you can change the past. It is very powerful and very dangerous.”

“That sounds totally amazing,” Rainbow Dash replied. “But how is that going to help us?”

"It is very simple. I want Applejack to travel a hundred years into the future. If the world is fine and all is well, she can travel back here and live out the rest of her days. It will be as if she never left. However, if I am right and the world has been destroyed, then Applejack will travel back to the day she died and prevent her own death. Once her death is prevented, Twilight will no longer have a reason to investigate enchanted comics. She will never invent the new magical technique, and this entire future will be prevented."

Applejack raised a hoof. "Hold on just a second there. First of all, I ain't a magical pony. I can't cast spells. How are you going to teach me to travel through time?"

"By turning you into an alicorn, of course. All I need is the comic that was used to create you. I can handle the rest from there."

"But I don't have that book. It's at Twilight's castle."

"I am sure we can obtain it," Starswirl replied. "Do you have any other objections?"

"Well, not an objection, really. But I do have a question. Why don't you go? Wouldn't that be easier?"

Starswirl sighed. "The problem is that preventing your death will only postpone the problem. It won't actually solve it. You see,

Twilight is an alicorn. That means she will live for a very long time – but you, her friends, will not. One day one of the Elements will die. It may be in an accident, or it may be of old age, but it *will* happen. When it happens this whole process will begin again. What we need to do is convince Twilight to *not* invent this magic. Somepony needs to tell her that it is too dangerous, that the cost is too high, and that no matter how much she hates reality she must *never* use enchanted comics. The best pony to tell her this is not me, a pony from the distant past. No, the only pony who might be able to convince her is one of her friends. Somepony like you – the living embodiment of honesty. Twilight just might listen to you. I very seriously doubt she will listen to anypony else.”

“I get it,” Applejack said. “I guess you have a point.”

“So will you do it?”

“Well, sure. As you said, I can just go into the future and see how things are. If things are fine then I can return and get back to my life. If things ain't fine then that means there's a problem, and so I'll go fix it. That seems fair enough to me. Do you want me to go and get my source comic?”

Starswirl shook his head. “Absolutely not. We must make sure that we obtain that comic without arousing Sunshine's suspicions. Sunshine

must not learn why we want that comic or what we are planning on doing with it. You are the Element of Honesty; lying is not in your nature. No, we need another pony to go and get it under false pretenses.”

“Which would be me,” Rainbow Dash commented. “Don't worry – I'm on it. You don't want me to mention you at all, right? Consider it done. I'll just go straight to Twilight and tell her that Applejack wants her book, and I'll come up with some excuse to explain why.”

“That is exactly what needs to be done. Rainbow Dash, this may be the most critical mission you have ever performed. The future of Equestria is hanging in the balance. You must not fail, and you must not let Sunshine find out what is going on. Can I trust you to do this?”

“You bet!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. She then raced to the door of the barn, opened it, and soared out into the sky. The moment she left the barn, the magical field that was protecting their conversation popped.

Starswirl watched Rainbow fly off. “Now we wait. The fate of the world is in her hooves.”

“Oh, don't you worry none,” Applejack said. “She's the fastest pony in Equestria.”

“But I fear she may not be the most discreet,” Starswirl replied.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later Rainbow Dash swooped down into the barn, holding Applejack's comic in her front hooves. She handed the book to Starswirl. "Here you go," she said, panting. "I told you I'd get it!"

"Thank you," Starswirl replied. "We need to hurry. We may not have much time."

Starswirl took the comic and laid it on the barn floor. He then plucked a few hairs out of his mane and laid them on top of the comic. The unicorn lit up his horn and began carefully merging his unicorn genetics with the comic.

Rainbow spoke up. "You know, when Twilight does that she uses all kinds of fancy equipment."

"I've been doing magic for far longer than Twilight has even existed," Starswirl replied. "I have learned many things that she does not even suspect."

It took Starswirl about five minutes to merge the information from his mane with the comic. He then levitated a quill and began making changes to the book. "The text needs some manual adjustments," he explained to Applejack. "Since I am a unicorn and you are a pegasus, the transfer is not exact. Merging the two natures requires

some fine detail work.”

“Fine detail work? You know, that kinda makes me nervous. I’m not big on being experimented on.”

“You will be fine. Trust me – I know what I’m doing. While I’m at it, I’m also going to give you a large mana pool. When this is over you should be the most powerful magic user in the world. If you have to fight Twilight you should be able to defeat her.”

“Fight Twilight? Why in Equestria would I need to fight Twilight?”

“You are about to travel into the distant future,” Starswirl replied, as he continued his writing. “I think it is quite likely that everypony will already be dead – but alicorns live a long time. It is quite possible that Twilight will still be alive. In fact, she may be the only pony who is still alive. If she has spent years as the last pony in the world, the strain of loneliness may have caused her to go insane. Twilight might not be happy to see you and she might not be in her right mind. If you do find her in the future and she attacks you, it is critically important that you are able to neutralize her. If she kills you then you will not be able to go into the past and fix the timeline.”

“So you want me to kill Twilight?” Applejack asked. “You seriously expect me to attack my

friend?"

"Of course not! I expect her to attack you. All I ask is that you defend yourself. You will have all sorts of powerful magical tricks in your arsenal. Hopefully you will find one that will restrain Twilight without injuring her. However – you *must* not fail. Remember that even if you do kill Twilight, you are going to go back in time and reset the timeline. Whatever you do will never happen. Your actions will be erased. They will not matter."

"Except for the part where I had to kill my friend. I'm pretty sure I'll remember that for the rest of my days. I'll never be able to look at her the same way again."

"You do realize you can erase your memories, don't you? You were created with this comic, and you can be changed by this comic. All you need to do is write a few lines, and any memory that you no longer wish to have will be gone."

Applejack shook her head. "I ain't gonna do that. I don't like messin' with who I am. If I did somethin' I want to remember it. I don't want to pretend I'm somepony that I'm not."

"Have it your way," Starswirl replied. "It is your life, after all."

A few minutes later Starswirl laid down his quill. "There, that should do it. Are you ready to become an alicorn?"

"I suppose," Applejack said reluctantly.

"This is gonna be so awesome!" Rainbow Dash said excitedly.

Starswirl smiled. His horn lit up, and he cast a spell on the comic. The comic glowed an eerie green color – and Applejack changed. A horn appeared out of her forehead.

Applejack gasped, staggered, and took a step back. She lifted a hoof up and touched her horn. "Woah. I feel really strange. It's like I have an extra sense now that I never had before. This is much weirder than suddenly having wings."

"Of course! You now have magic," Starswirl replied. "What you lack is the knowledge and ability to wield it. That is what I am going to do next – give you my memories."

Rainbow spoke up. "But you don't have one of those stone things! How are you going to copy the memories?"

"I don't need a memory stone. Believe me, young mare, I am quite capable of casting this spell without the aid of any instruments. In fact, I invented this technique, although I suppose that knowledge has been forgotten."

Applejack spoke up. "Now, you're not gonna give me your memories, are you? Because when Twilight gave me Rainbow's knowledge of flight, she also gave me a lot of Rainbow's memories of

flying. And I learned a lot more about Rainbow than I ever wanted to know.”

Rainbow Dash turned bright red.

Starswirl smiled. “No, Applejack, there is no fear of that. It appears that Twilight used a crude version of my memory transfer spell. The version that I know is far more refined. I can give you my knowledge and control over magic without giving you any of my memories. You will be fine. Are you ready to begin?”

Applejack sighed. “Sure, why not. I've already come this far. There's no point in turning back now.”

Starswirl's horn lit up.

* * * * *

Twilight was seated in a comfortable chair in her castle library, deeply engrossed in a thick book. Sunshine walked into the room and came over to her. Twilight, however, didn't notice.

Sunshine glanced at the title. “Why are you studying basic magic? You mastered those spells years ago.”

Twilight looked up. “Yes, I've mastered the spells. But what intrigues me is the theory behind the spells. I've seen what's possible with the magic of enchanted comics. In that case I was able

to take that magic in an entirely new direction. It makes me wonder if there are other tricks that I've missed. Perhaps there are other basic spells that are not as well understood as we think. I've been putting together some ideas. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could create things with pure magic *without* the use of comics? The comics are a crutch – an obstacle. There must be a better way.”

“That's an intriguing thought! You are a very clever pony. I'll have to look into that. I don't mean to interrupt your research, but the reason I came in here is because I heard that Rainbow Dash stopped by. Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing's wrong. Rainbow just came to get Applejack's comic. Applejack apparently wanted it for some reason. Since the comic defines who she is, I kinda understand why she wanted it. So I gave it to Rainbow, and she flew off.”

Sunshine gasped. “That's terrible news! Don't you see what's going on?”

Twilight put her book down and looked at Sunshine. “Why is it terrible? I mean, if Applejack wants the comic then why not give it to her? It is kind of a part of her, after all.”

“Think about it, princess. Applejack is not a magical pony. She can't cast spells and she doesn't know how the comics work, so she can't be

planning on changing her definition. She also can't possibly believe that the comic would be safer in her care than it would be here. If she had left the comic here it would have been guarded by an army and stored in a cool, dry place. There is no safer place in all of Equestria."

"What are you getting at?" Twilight asked.

"There's only one possible reason why Applejack would want that comic. It's not because she wants to change it, and it's not because she wants to keep it safe. She must be planning on *destroying it*. Applejack has never been able to accept that she was created from a comic book. She can't handle who she is – so she must want to end it all. Twilight, she's trying to kill herself."

Twilight frowned. "But that's ridiculous! That's not like Applejack at all."

"That's not like the *old* Applejack," Sunshine corrected. "The new Applejack isn't stable. Don't you see? The reason she sent Rainbow Dash to get the comic is because she couldn't lie to you. She is the Element of Honesty, after all. So she had Rainbow go get it for her. As soon as Applejack gets her hooves on it she is going to burn it."

Twilight jumped out of her seat. "We have to stop her! We can't let this happen."

Sunshine put a hoof on Twilight's shoulder. "Don't worry – I'll go take care of it. I'll retrieve the

comic and will bring Applejack here. We'll talk to her together and will calm her down. All right? Just wait here."

Twilight reluctantly nodded. Sunshine then lit up her horn and teleported out of sight.

* * * * *

After the memory transfer spell was complete, Applejack looked at Starswirl. "You sure know a lot about magic! I know all kinds of spells now. Why, I had no idea that most of this stuff was even possible. Can I really do all these things?"

Starswirl nodded. "The spells will be second nature to you now – like walking. Do you know my time travel spell?"

Applejack nodded. "Yup, I've got it. It's kinda clever, actually." Applejack's eyes widened. "Hey, wait a minute. I actually understand the spell! I know how it works, even though I've never studied magic a day in my life. This just keeps getting' weirder."

"Of course you understand it! You have my knowledge of magical theory and practice. You understand magic as well as I do. But we must not tarry. Are you ready to depart? Do you know what to do?"

Applejack nodded. "I just have one question. If I go back in time and change things, will I disappear? You know – since I prevented the timeline that caused me to get created."

Applejack paused. "Wait a minute – I know the answer to that. No, I won't disappear. This magic doesn't work that way. I will still exist, and there will be two Applejacks in the new timeline. There will be the original, and then me."

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "And two Rainbows as well. Twice the awesomeness in one timeline!"

Applejack looked puzzled. "Two Rainbows? Why?"

"Because I'm going with you, of course! You don't think I'm going to let you go into some scary future all by yourself, do you? What kind of a loyal friend do you think I am?"

Applejack smiled. "Sure, I reckon you can come. In fact, I wouldn't dream of going without you. But how are we going to explain the fact that both of us disappeared?"

Starswirl spoke up. "It's not important. If you change the timeline then it won't matter, because none of these events will happen. If you don't change the timeline and just return here then you won't be gone, so it won't matter then either."

"Right," Applejack said. "Rainbow, are you ready to go?"

Rainbow walked over and stood right next to Applejack. "I'm ready! Oh, this is going to be so amazing."

Starswirl gave Applejack the comic that defined her. Applejack took it from him. She then took a saddlebag from a nearby table, put the saddlebag on, and placed the comic inside it. "Thanks – I'll take good care of that. Look. I know we haven't known each other for very long, but I just wanted to thank you. For everything. You are a true friend."

"Of course," Starswirl replied. "It was my pleasure."

Applejack lit up her horn. A glowing blue sphere appeared that encompassed both Rainbow Dash and Applejack. The sphere glowed brightly for a moment, and then vanished.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash were gone.

Starswirl waited for a few moments, but the two ponies did not reappear. The barn remained empty, and he was alone.

It is as I feared, Starswirl thought. The future truly was a disaster. Well, there's nothing to do now but live out the next one hundred years.. Then Applejack and Rainbow Dash will appear, see the problem, and go back in time and reset things. That is, assuming they survive whatever they find in the future. But first I need to create an

excuse to explain why they are gone, so that no one will discover what I have done.

Starswirl took a book out of his saddlebag – a comic that looked exactly like the one that defined Applejack. He set it on the ground, lit up his horn, and set it on fire.

“Stop!” a voice screamed in panic.

Starswirl turned around, startled. His heart nearly stopped when he saw Sunshine standing in the doorway to the barn.

Sunshine looked at the burning book, and then stared at Starswirl in horror. “What have you done? You set that book on fire – I saw you! You murdered Applejack. I was wrong – it wasn't Applejack behind this. It was you! But why? Why would you kill her?”

Sunshine then noticed the blue feathers that were scattered on the ground. She gasped. “And you killed Rainbow Dash too? You killed them *both*? But why? How could you do such a thing?”

Starswirl was about to say something, and then stopped himself. *I can't tell her what really happened. I don't dare defend myself. Perhaps it is best if she thinks I killed them. Then at least she won't go looking for them.*

“I did what had to be done,” Starswirl said coldly. “I acted in the best interests of Equestria.”

Sunshine looked at Starswirl angrily. Rage

was all over her face. “And now I will act in the best interests of Twilight. Give me your comic definition. Now. I am going to put a stop to your reign of terror.”

Starswirl instantly knew that he could not give his comic to her. *If I give her my book, she will change it so I become as mindlessly loyal as she is. I will then tell her what I did and give up the secret of time travel. But I cannot let that happen. I must protect that secret at all costs. It must never, ever fall into Sunshine's hooves.*

For a split second Starswirl considered trying to fight Sunshine, but he knew it was futile. She was a powerful alicorn, and he was not. Even if he managed to get away, she could send entire armies after him. He had to end this now. *For the good of Equestria. Besides, it's not like I'm the original Starswirl. I'm just a magical copy made from a book. I'm not actually real at all. Not really.*

“Very well,” Starswirl said. With his magic he opened his saddlebag and levitated out his comic definition. He then changed the levitation spell ever so slightly – and the book was instantly incinerated.

The book's ashes fell to the ground.

Sunshine screamed.

Starswirl vanished from existence. His saddlebag collapsed onto the barn floor.

Sunshine looked at the ashes in horror. “What have you done? How could you do this to Twilight? Oh, Twilight. I am so sorry – so very, very sorry. I have failed you. You have done so much for me, and I let Starswirl kill two of your friends. What have I done? How could I let this happen?”

Chapter 12: “You are the only pony who cares about me”

Sunshine stared at the ashes on the floor of the Apple family barn in disbelief. At first she could not comprehend what had just happened. That was quickly followed by a feeling of horror and complete panic. *Starswirl is dead. Applejack is dead. Rainbow Dash is dead. They're all dead – and it happened on my watch. This is very, very bad! How could this have happened? What is Twilight going to do when she finds out? How do I handle this situation?*

She knew she had to do something, but she was so overcome with panic and dismay that she could not even make herself move. The whole reason Twilight had created her in the first place was to bring some happiness and sunshine into Twilight's life, and *this* was going to devastate her.

The white alicorn remembered how upset Twilight had been the first time Applejack died. Twilight had given Sunshine all of her memories, and the terrible tragedy of Applejack's first death came flooding back to her. Sunshine remembered

the horrible, dark feeling that had overwhelmed Twilight's soul. She remembered the bitter pain and despair. She knew how hard it had been for Twilight – and now it had happened again.

Sunshine kept staring at the floor of the barn. She saw a small pile of ashes that represented all that was left of Applejack. She saw a few blue feathers that were all that was left of Rainbow Dash. And then there was a saddlebag and another pile of ash that was the last remains of Starswirl the Bearded.

I don't understand, Sunshine thought. Twilight idolized Starswirl. She thought the world of him. How could he do something like this? How could he murder Rainbow Dash in cold blood, and then turn and kill Applejack as well? This isn't like him at all. But I saw him burn the book – I saw it with my own eyes. This is not a mistake. Everything we knew about Starswirl must have been a lie. Celestia must have lied to us about him. That is the only answer.

But what do I do? Can I cover this up? Can I pretend this never happened? Do I–

“Excuse me,” a voice called out from behind her. “Where's my sister? I thought she was in here with you. I heard her voice in here, but now I don't see her. And why are there ashes on the floor? Was there a fire?”

Sunshine turned around and saw Apple Bloom standing in the doorway to the barn. The yellow filly had a confused look on her face. *Well, there's no covering this up now*, Sunshine thought. The white alicorn tried her very best to act normal. "There's nothing that you need to worry about, dear. Everything is going to be fine. Um, Apple Bloom, I need to go and get Twilight. Could you make sure that nopony enters the barn while I'm gone? It's important."

"Sure, I guess. But I don't understand. What's going on? Is something wrong?"

"I'll be right back. Everything will be ok – I promise."

* * * * *

Sunshine did *not* want to tell Twilight what had happened, but she knew she couldn't get away with covering it up. It was just too risky. Sunshine could fix the problem, but she could not hide it. Twilight was already worried that Applejack was trying to kill herself; it was too late to pretend that nothing was wrong. The princess wasn't stupid. She had to tell her the awful truth – that Twilight's hero had murdered two of her best friends.

Sunshine found Twilight in her library,

nervously pacing around the room. Twilight immediately noticed the concerned look on Sunshine's face. "Applejack killed herself, didn't she?" Twilight said in a panic.

"Applejack did *not* kill herself," Sunshine replied. "But there is something you need to see. I need you to come with me to Sweet Apple Acres."

"What is it? Please, just tell me. What happened?"

"Just come with me. Something happened that I did not foresee. I'll explain everything there."

By the time Sunshine and Twilight reached the barn, the whole Apple family had gathered there. Apple Bloom had kept her word, and the family was waiting outside. All of them looked confused and worried.

"What's going on here?" Big Mac asked.

"Yeah," Apple Bloom said. "Where's my sister? What happened to her?"

Sunshine said nothing. She stepped into the barn and motioned for Twilight to follow her. "Twilight, I'm afraid something has happened," Sunshine said at last. "Applejack—"

Twilight noticed the piles of ash on the floor. She stepped back in horror. "You lied to me! Applejack *did* kill herself. That's her burned book right there! Why did you lie to me?"

"I did *not* lie," Sunshine insisted. "When I

arrived at the barn, I came in just as Starswirl took Applejack's book and set it on fire. *He* was the one who killed her. When I confronted him about it he burned his own book. That is why there are two piles of ash on the floor. Starswirl murdered Applejack and then took his own life."

"No," Twilight screamed. "No! He didn't. He couldn't have. He's not like that! I know he's not like that. He's a good pony. He would never hurt anyone."

"I'm so sorry. I know this is horrible and hard to accept, but I am telling you the truth. I will show you my memory of the event if you want to see it. Starswirl is responsible for this."

Apple Bloom spoke up. "You mean my sister is dead? But you can get her back, right? Like you did last time?"

"Of course I can. I can fix this. I can bring Applejack and Rainbow Dash back. Everything is going to be fine."

"What do you mean, 'and Rainbow Dash'?" Twilight asked. Then she noticed the blue feathers on the ground. "*No*. Absolutely not. Rainbow Dash is *not* dead! I refuse to believe that."

"I know this is hard," Sunshine said. "When Starswirl attacked Applejack, Rainbow Dash must have defended her. You know how loyal Rainbow is – she would do anything for her friends. So

Starswirl killed them both. He might have gotten away with it, too, if I hadn't come here and caught him in the act."

Twilight was devastated. The first time Applejack died she did her best to put on a brave face in front of the Apple family. She wanted to give them hope that everything would be alright. This time, though, the pain was too much. Her hero – the pony she admired most – had murdered her friends. Everything she knew about him was a lie. Twilight's world had come crashing down, and all she could do was collapse onto the barn floor and cry.

Sunshine walked over to her and wrapped a white wing around her. "It's ok, Twilight. I know this hurts, but I can fix everything. I will bring Applejack and Rainbow Dash back. It will be fine."

Twilight angrily pushed Sunshine away. "It will *not* be fine! Don't you see? The real Applejack is dead, and now the real Rainbow Dash is dead too. All we can do is create a stupid fictional copy. And you know what? The fictional Applejack hated herself because she knew she was a copy. It's not the same, Sunshine! Copies are *not* the same thing as the original. But what do you know? You're just a copy too. My friends are *dead*, and no magic can bring them back. They are gone *forever*."

Sunshine was taken aback and deeply hurt. She felt like someone had stabbed her. "It's going to be all right," she repeated, as she fought to stop herself from crying. "Trust me, Twilight. I can fix this! I can make you happy again. Please, let me help you."

"I don't want your help!" Twilight screamed, as tears ran down her face. "I want the *real* Celestia. Magic couldn't bring back the real Applejack, and now magic has killed Rainbow Dash too. I'm going to Canterlot to talk to a *real* pony. You're useless."

Twilight lit up her horn and teleported out of sight.

Now it was Sunshine's turn to cry. Twilight was her whole reason for existing, and Twilight had just rejected her. All she could think was *I have failed her*. It was a crushing blow. If Twilight no longer had any use for her then what was the point of living?

Sunshine turned around and saw the Apple family. All of them were deeply upset. Apple Bloom looked up at Sunshine. "You will bring my sister back, won't you?"

"Don't worry," Sunshine said, with far more confidence than she felt. "I will fix this. I'll have Applejack and Rainbow Dash back within an hour. Everything will be fine."

But Sunshine felt that nothing would ever be fine again.

* * * * *

Twilight Sparkle made the trip to Canterlot in record time. She was deeply angry at Starswirl for murdering her friends and failing her. She was filled with sorrow, rage, and confusion. Her world was collapsing around her and she needed comfort. She desperately wanted somepony *real* to sympathize with her – somepony who understood her. Celestia had promised to be there for her. It was now time for Celestia to keep her promise.

Twilight teleported directly into the castle and appeared in front of the entrance to Celestia's throne room. The doors to the throne room were closed, and two guards were stationed outside.

"I am here to see Princess Celestia," Twilight announced. Her voice was full of anger and rage.

The two guards looked at each other. "Her royal highness is busy at the moment. She is currently conducting some delicate negotiations and cannot be disturbed. Could you come back this evening?"

Twilight glared at them. "I want to see Celestia, and I am *going* to see Celestia. If you do

not stand aside then I will turn both of you into frogs. Now *move it*. This is *not* a request.”

The two guards looked at each other. They didn't really have the authority to deny anything to a princess of Equestria, and they certainly didn't have the power to fight an alicorn. But the fact remained that Celestia did not want to be disturbed.

“You really can't go in there,” one of the guards finally said. “I'm sorry, but—”

“Oh really? Just try and stop me,” Twilight said through gritted teeth. She used her magic to fling the doors wide open, and she stormed into the room. The guards briefly considered running after the enraged alicorn, but then they decided they both wanted to live. So they closed the doors behind her and returned to their post.

Inside was the heart of the castle – the most magnificently decorated room in all of Canterlot. But its beauty, furnishings, and magnificent stained glass windows was lost on Twilight. All she noticed was Celestia, who was seated on her royal throne. To her left was a flock of irritated griffons, and to her right was a delegation from Saddle Arabia. The two groups were in the midst of a heated argument, and Celestia was trying to calm them down.

As soon as Twilight flung open the doors and

galloped into the room, everyone stopped talking. There was complete silence. All eyes stared at her as she flew up to the throne, pushed both delegations away with her magic, and landed down right in front of Celestia.

The Princess of the Sun was startled. "Twilight, what are you doing? What is going on?"

"What is going on? I'll tell you what is going on. Starswirl murdered Applejack and Rainbow Dash!"

Celestia immediately burst into laughter. "Starswirl killed somepony? You can't possibly be serious. Why, he's the most inoffensive pony I've ever known! I assure you that he did nothing of the kind."

"I am *not* joking," Twilight said heatedly. "My friends are dead and Starswirl killed them! You didn't tell me that he was a killer!"

One of the ponies from the Saddle Arabia delegation spoke up. "What is the meaning of this outrage? And how dare you push me aside like an animal. Is this some foolish attempt to silence us and give the griffons more leverage?"

"Of course not," Celestia said hurriedly. She then turned to Twilight. "I realize that you are very upset, but this is a bad time to be upset over nothing. This border dispute has been going on for years and the situation is now at a critical point.

We *must* finish these talks. I assure you that Starswirl has harmed nopony. He is incapable of it. Whatever happened was just a misunderstanding. Nopony is hurt and everything is fine. Once these talks are done I will help you sort everything out. But *not now*."

"Border dispute?" Twilight shrieked. "Are you serious? The Griffon kingdom doesn't share a border with Saddle Arabia!"

"This is not the time to explain," Celestia replied.

"Starswirl just murdered two Elements of Harmony. Isn't *that* important? Don't you care?"

Celestia frowned. "I have known Starswirl far, far longer than you have. He did *not* murder anypony, and the fact that you would even accuse him of that shows how little you really know about him. You are getting upset over nothing – again. Twilight, I have to ask you to leave. I will talk to you about this later."

"There won't *be* a later," Twilight replied angrily. She then teleported out of sight.

"Well, *that* was rather rude," one of the griffons commented. "Is this how you conduct affairs in Equestria? I thought your princesses had better manners than that."

"I am deeply sorry for the interruption," Celestia said. "I will speak to her about this later

to make sure that it does not happen again. Now, where were we?"

* * * * *

It took Twilight several hours to make it back to her castle in Ponyville. When she finally made it home, she found Sunshine waiting for her just inside the front door. The white alicorn had been standing there for more than an hour. Sunshine desperately wanted to make up with Twilight. Her whole life depended on Twilight liking her. If Twilight truly was done with her then her life was over. She had nothing left to live for.

Twilight was the first one to speak. She ran up to Sunshine and hugged her. "I am so sorry for what I said! I was horrible to you. You didn't deserve any of that. You have been a wonderful friend."

Sunshine hugged Twilight. A feeling of immense relief washed over her. "But Twilight, you were right. I really am useless. I couldn't stop Starswirl from killing your friends. I failed you."

"You're *not* useless. In fact, you are the only pony who cares about me. Celestia just threw me out."

"She – wait, what? She threw you out?"

Twilight nodded. "I tried to talk to her, but

she wouldn't listen. She said I was crazy for thinking that Starswirl killed anypony, and she was mad at me for interrupting her. Celestia wouldn't even talk to me! She just asked me to leave."

"That's horrible," Sunshine replied, shocked. "How dare she treat you that way! How could she do such a thing?"

"I was just as bad to you," Twilight said quietly, as Sunshine wrapped her in her wings. "I feel so terrible about it. You really do love me, don't you? Celestia doesn't love me, but you do. And you would never throw me out. I don't know why I said all those things earlier."

"You were just upset, that's all," Sunshine said. "I know you didn't really mean them. But I promise I am *not* like Celestia. I will always be here for you and I will always have time for you. You can count on me."

Twilight nodded. She rested quietly and let Sunshine hold her. Over time she gradually calmed down.

Sunshine was in no hurry. In fact, the longer she was with Twilight the better she felt. It was a tremendous relief to know that Twilight did love her. *Now I truly have replaced Celestia*, she thought with delight. *Twilight will never go to her for anything again. Twilight has accepted me – which means I can make everything in her life*

much, much better.

"I have some news!" Sunshine announced. "While you were gone I recreated Applejack and Rainbow Dash. I even gave Applejack wings again! The two ponies are out at the Apple family farm."

"That's good," Twilight said. "What about the wicked Starswirl? Did you bring him back? I want to put him in Equestria's deepest dungeon. He needs to pay for killing my friends."

Sunshine shook her head sadly. "I'm afraid there was no way to bring him back. Celestia did not place a copy of his mind into a memory stone, and the accident in the lab destroyed his preserved brain. We don't even have a mane sample for him. I am afraid Starswirl is gone – but that's a good thing, if you ask me. He is clearly a deranged murderer."

"He probably destroyed that brain on purpose," Twilight said bitterly. "I bet he didn't want us poking around in his mind and uncovering all his horrible secrets. Celestia must have covered up who he *really* was – and then when he started killing ponies, Celestia pretended that it was all my fault and I was the crazy one."

"Celestia is so mean to you! You really shouldn't let her get away with that. It's not right. She would never let you treat her that way."

"I know," Twilight replied. A thought

suddenly occurred to her. "Wait a minute. You used the memory stones to bring back Applejack and Rainbow Dash, right? But weren't those backups a few days old? That means they wouldn't contain anything that happened during the past few days. Did you bring my friends up to speed?"

"I did," Sunshine said. She hesitated. "I also made a small change to both of them – and I'm telling you this so that if you don't like it you can change it back. When I created the comics for them I added a line that makes them comfortable with being copies. They know that they're fictional and they are fine with that. I know you don't like tampering with them but I just wanted them to be happy."

Twilight sighed. "I know what you mean. The first Applejack clone was never happy with who she was. Maybe that's something we'll just have to do with all the clones we make. Bringing someone back from the dead isn't going to work very well if they just want to be dead again. I hate having to do that, but I did the same thing when I made you and you turned out pretty well. I think you made the right choice."

Sunshine was tremendously relieved. She did *not* want to tell Twilight what she had done, but she knew that Twilight would realize pretty

quickly the new Applejack clone had a very different attitude from the first one. Sunshine knew how much it had hurt Twilight to know that Applejack wasn't happy with who she was. Now that would no longer be an issue – and Twilight would be happier.

When I make a clone that Twilight knows about and change something that is obvious and overt, I'll have to be honest with what I did, Sunshine thought. But when I make a clone that Twilight doesn't know about – well, that's a different story. Twilight is much happier not knowing. Just look how much she has enjoyed the new Rarity!

The truth was Sunshine had made another change as well. The new Applejack and Rainbow Dash would be much more supportive of Twilight. They would agree to anything that Twilight wanted and they would always be there for her. Sunshine was hoping that Twilight would just think they were being friendly. *I may have overdone it with Rarity, so I've scaled it back a bit this time. The new clones should be more loyal, but not to the point where Twilight becomes suspicious.*

Sunshine spoke up. “Would you mind if I went and had a little chat with Celestia? I know you tried to speak with her and she refused to

listen, but perhaps if I spoke with her I could make her realize how much she hurt you. I think I could change her attitude."

"Why bother? I don't care about her anymore," Twilight said, as she snuggled up to Sunshine. "I have you now. You'll always be there for me, won't you?"

"Of course I will. But you can't let Celestia get away with the way she treated you. Her behavior today has been intolerable! She must pay for what she's done."

"Well, I've been thinking about that. It turns out that in the near future Celestia is going to stop mattering to anypony. You and I are going to change the whole world, and the new world won't have a place for her. For years Celestia has been too busy to spend time with me. Well, in a few months she'll have all the time in the world, because she is going to be out of a job."

"What do you mean?" Sunshine asked.

"I guess I need to back up a little bit. First of all, I don't think we should give ponies the ability to take things out of the comics and bring them into Equestria. Look at what happened with Starswirl: he turned out to be a murderer! What if badponies used our comics to create bad things? I don't want to see Equestria flooded with monsters. All it would take is one psycho with an

imagination to make really, really terrible things happen."

"That's true," Sunshine agreed. "That is certainly a risk. So what are you proposing?"

"I think we should put a limit on the comics. Now, I do believe that ponies should still be able to create them however they want. They can live in them, spend their lives in them, be whoever they want, and live out their every fantasy. However, what they can't do is bring anything *out* of the comic. I know that goes against everything we've been working on, but I think it's for the best. That way Equestria isn't put in danger but ponies can still have all their dreams come true. After all, if you think about it, what's the point of bringing things into this world at all? Why not just move into your new, perfect world instead, where you are in complete control and where you get everything that you want, all of the time? That's better for you and better for everypony. There's none of the risk and all of the reward."

"I see," Sunshine said slowly. "So you want ponies to leave Equestria and move into their own, private worlds. You *want* Equestria to be emptied."

"I want Celestia to be *alone*," Twilight said angrily. "Until you came along I'd been alone my whole life. Oh, sure, I had friends, but do you know what my two biggest interests are? Books

and magic. Do you know how many of my friends are interested in either of those things? Zero. Well, there's Moondancer, I guess, but she lives in Canterlot. The point is, the only pony I can talk to about these things has been Celestia, and Celestia just doesn't have time for me. Ha! We'll see how *she* likes being alone."

Twilight paused. "Is that – am I being too hard on her? I'm not being bad, am I? Is it wrong to feel that way?"

Now, if Fluttershy or Pinkie Pie or one of Twilight's other friends had been there, they could have calmed her down. They could have showed her a different path and reminded Twilight that revenge and hate were things to be avoided. But her friends *weren't* there. Sunshine had replaced all of them – and Sunshine desperately wanted to hurt the pony that she viewed as her arch-rival.

"O course it's not wrong," Sunshine said aloud. "Celestia deserves the worst treatment you can give her. That wicked mare abandoned you when you needed her most. If anything, you are letting her off much too lightly. There is no reason to go easy on her."

At that moment the castle door opened and Spike hurried in, clutching a handful of comics. "I came as soon as I heard what happened," he

panted. He looked at Sunshine and Twilight. "So, um, how are things?"

Twilight let go of Sunshine and walked over to Spike. She hugged him. "I'm feeling a lot better now, thanks! But where have you been? I haven't seen you all day."

"Oh, I've been over at the comic book store. Frosted Arrow is having a big sale today. Apparently nopony is buying comics anymore because they've all heard what you and Sunshine are up to. That's why the comics are on sale – and let me tell you, he's got some good ones."

Twilight grinned. "Poor Arrow! I guess we are about to devastate the comic book market. I'll make it up to him, though: I'll make sure he gets the very first copy that we give out. Then he can make a new world for himself, where he is the hero and all his dreams come true."

"Is there anything I can do?" Spike asked. "I heard that Applejack and Rainbow Dash are alive again, so I guess that's good. Do you need any assistance?"

"No, Spike, I'm fine," Twilight replied.

"All right then! I'll be in my room doing a little heavy reading if you need anything."

Spike hurried off, leaving Sunshine and Twilight alone.

"So I believe I understand your plan,"

Sunshine said. "In order to keep Equestria safe, ponies will be allowed to enter and leave the comics but they cannot take anything out. You will give each pony a comic that has their own personal world in it, and we will release a manual that will show them how to modify their world to their exact specifications. The ponies will then live in their worlds for the rest of their days."

"Exactly! That way everypony can have everything they ever wanted, and nopony can put others in danger. It will be perfect."

"That sounds like a clever plan. But wasn't your original plan to use the comics to make life better here, in Equestria? What made you change your mind? Was it just the risk of danger, or is there more to it than that?"

"Isn't it obvious? Life here is horrible. In this world ponies die – but in the comics nopony ever has to die. In this world there are limitations, but in the comics you can be anypony you want to be and you can have any powers you want to have. In the comic world nopony would ever be mean to you. Nopony would ever kill your friends or throw you out of their home. Instead you can have everything you want it, all of the time. It is much, *much* better than life could ever be in Equestria."

"Then that's what we will do," Sunshine

announced. "I'll have the Moondancers get started on the changes immediately. So what kind of world do you want them to make for you?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought about it. The truth is, all I ever wanted was a friend like you. Right now my focus is on changing the world. I'll think about my place in that new world later. We have work to do."

Sunshine could not be happier. *I really have pleased Twilight! I am the living fulfillment of her dreams. That is something I will not take lightly – which means there is something else I need to do. Twilight wants revenge. I need to make sure that she gets it.*

"Would you mind if I went to see Celestia later?" Sunshine asked. "I just can't accept the way she treated you. Somepony has to tell her that she was wrong."

"Sure, whatever," Twilight said dismissively. "I don't really care what you do. Do whatever you want. I don't care if I ever see her again. The two ponies I respected most in this world – Starswirl and Celestia – both betrayed me in the same day. They're dead to me. You are the pony I care about now. I mean, it's not that I don't care about the rest of the Elements of Harmony, because I do care about them. I know they're all good ponies. But none of them can measure up to you. Just, um,

don't tell them I said that.”

Sunshine felt utterly delighted. She loved Twilight's new attitude. “Very well. Since you do not object, I will pay Celestia a visit tonight – but enough about that. Let's talk about how these new comics are going to work.”

* * * * *

That evening, while Twilight was having dinner, Sunshine made her way to the basement. In the lowest level of the castle Twilight had created a secure vault, which housed all of the magical comics that had been created. The princess had planned ahead and made sure it was large enough to hold hundreds of thousands of comics. At the moment it only held a few volumes – along with the memory stones and mane samples of the Elements of Harmony.

Sunshine quickly found the comic that held her own definition. After taking it from the shelf she looked around the room to make sure that no one was watching her. The alicorn breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that the vault was empty. She didn't think that Twilight would object to the change that she was about to make to herself, but she didn't want anypony to know – not just yet. It would be best if this particular secret wasn't

revealed until later.

Sunshine took the comic and laid it open. It was a weird feeling, modifying who she was. The words on those pages defined everything about her, and she was about to alter her very nature. She was a bit nervous about it, but it had to be done – for Twilight. Sunshine would do anything for her. Even this. *After all, Twilight looks to me now. I have to be the pony that Celestia failed to be.*

The white mare took a dark green mane sample and laid it on top of the comic. That particular sample had been very difficult to come by. Changelings were scarce in Equestria these days, and their remains were even rarer. It had taken Sunshine a great deal of effort to find that bit of mane, but she had succeeded.

Sunshine was going to merge the changeling genetic information into her comic. She had to do it carefully. She wanted their ability to change into different forms, but she did *not* want to take on the nature of a changeling. Then she was going to pay Celestia a visit.

* * * * *

That night Sunshine put Twilight Sparkle to bed. “Are you feeling any better?” the white

alicorn asked. "I know you've had a terrible day."

"It really has been horrible, hasn't it?" Twilight asked, as Sunshine tucked her in. "But I like knowing that you're here. You brought Applejack and Rainbow Dash back, and they are just like their old selves. In some ways the clones are better than non-clones! If Applejack wasn't a clone then she wouldn't have wings. I think she likes being able to fly."

"I'm sure she does. Is there anything I can get you?"

"No, I'm fine." Twilight yawned. "Hey, weren't you going to go visit Celestia?"

"That's the next item on my agenda," Sunshine replied, smiling. "I'll take care of everything while you're asleep."

"Wait, you're going now? Won't Celestia be asleep too?"

"I think she stays up pretty late. Besides, I'm not worried about it. After all, if she's in bed then that means she's not busy talking to foreign delegations!"

Twilight giggled. "Well, *that's* true. Goodnight, Sunshine."

Sunshine kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, my dear Twilight."

Sunshine turned off the light and walked out of the door. She then closed the door behind her

– and teleported out of sight.

When Sunshine reappeared on the streets of Ponyville, she no longer looked like Celestia. Instead she looked exactly like Twilight. Sunshine had tested the new changeling magic earlier and was very pleased with the results. *I could have used any disguise, but this one is the most satisfying*, she thought. *Celestia will never see this coming.*

* * * * *

In Canterlot, Celestia had just said goodbye to the two delegations. “Well, *that* was a rough day,” she muttered to herself. “I am so tired. Why do these things have to be so difficult?”

As soon as the guards escorted the last delegate out of the throne room, Luna hurried in. “Sister, why are you still here? Shouldn't you be in Ponyville?”

“What do you mean?” Celestia asked, puzzled. Then she remembered. “Oh, that's right – I had forgotten about Twilight. She was truly beside herself today. I hadn't seen her that bad in a long time. What do you think has gotten into her?”

“Grief, of course,” Luna replied. “After all, Starswirl killed Applejack and Rainbow Dash, and

then took his own life! Why wouldn't Twilight be upset? What I don't understand is why you threw her out when she came to tell you. What's gotten into you?"

"Starswirl did not kill anypony," Celestia said, irritated. "That's impossible."

"But it's true! Applejack and Rainbow Dash are dead, and Starswirl is dead as well. He really did kill them – there are witnesses. Did Twilight not tell you? Did your guards not bring you the news? It is all over Equestria."

A dreadful feeling came over Celestia. "But that's impossible! Starswirl wouldn't kill anypony. There must be a mistake!"

"There is no mistake, sister. All three of them are dead. Something must have gone wrong in the process that you used to bring him back to life. Perhaps there was some brain damage that you didn't detect, or maybe the memory transfer spell failed somehow. The point is, Ponyville was the scene of a terrible tragedy today, and you did nothing. In fact, when Twilight came to tell you about it you threw her out! I understand that the border negotiations are delicate, but surely there is something you could have done. Could you not have taken a short recess, or perhaps postponed the rest of the talks until the next day?"

The blood in Celestia's veins turned to ice.

Her heart failed her, and she felt numb. "That can't be true," she said at last. "I – I never even considered the possibility that Starswirl's nature might have been corrupted. He looked so much like himself that I assumed it really was him. But that brain was so old. If Starswirl truly did murder Twilight's friends then perhaps I failed to recreate our old mentor. It seems I may have created a monster. Oh, Luna, what have I done? I truly thought Twilight was mistaken. I would never have thrown her out if I had known she was telling the truth."

"Then go to her," Luna said. "Tell her your mistake! Twilight needs you."

A guard walked into the room. "Excuse me, your highness, but there is a princess here who wishes to speak with you."

"Of course," Celestia exclaimed. "I told Twilight to come back later, and this must be her now. Oh, sister, what am I going to tell her? I have been horrible."

"Just apologize to her," Luna replied. "I'm sure she will understand. She is Twilight Sparkle, after all. There is not a pony in Equestria who loves you more than she does. Well, except for myself, of course. I'll leave to give the two of you some privacy."

Luna then teleported out of sight.

Celestia looked at the guard, who was waiting on her reply. She was embarrassed and deeply ashamed. She knew she had failed Twilight, and that knowledge hurt her deeply.

"All right," Celestia said. "Show Twilight in."

The guard left. A moment later he returned, escorting a pony that looked exactly like Twilight. Sunshine looked at Celestia with anger and rage. "So do you have time for me *now*, princess? Or should I come back next year?"

"I am so sorry," Celestia said, in a voice filled with regret. "Twilight—"

Sunshine cut her off. "Is there some place private where we can talk?"

"I suppose," Celestia said, taken aback. "I have some chambers this way. Why?"

"Why do I want to have a private conversation with you?" Sunshine asked. "Really? Two of my friends died today, murdered by my hero, and you are asking me why I want to talk to you in private? Do I really have to spell it out?"

"Of course not," Celestia said. "I'm sorry. Here, right this way."

Celestia waved the guard off, then led Sunshine down a short passageway and into a side chamber. The small room was luxuriously decorated. There was a marble fireplace against one wall, and two bookshelves filled with rare

books. Pictures of royal ponies from a previous era hung on the walls. There were two red couches in the room, and an elegant end table.

Sunshine walked into the room first, and Celestia followed behind her. The princess then turned her back to Sunshine and closed the door to the room.

That was when Sunshine fired a powerful bolt of magic at her. Celestia never even saw it coming. The bolt of green magic struck the princess in the back of the neck. The Princess of the Sun instantly fell to the ground, unconscious.

Sunshine then removed two comics from her saddlebag. *There we go*, she thought to herself. *Now it's time to replace you with a clone that will be much, much nicer to my Twilight.*

Sunshine worked quickly. She took a mane sample from the unconscious Celestia and merged it with the new comic. She then copied all of Celestia's memories into the comic, in order to make a perfect clone. Sunshine finished by making a few key changes to the new pony. *Let's see. You are going to support Twilight and go along with anything she wants. Oh – but you won't be too nice. You're not going to replace me. You are going to be ashamed of yourself and keep your distance from her. Twilight is never going to run to you for help or comfort again. You won't be*

that kind of pony.

Twilight wants her revenge, and she is going to get it. You are going to support her plan to release her comics into the world. When all the ponies are gone and Equestria is empty, you are not going to follow them into comics. Instead you are going to remain here. You will be all alone in this world as it decays into dust. You are going to be the last pony left, and you will be so crushingly lonely. You will live on for centuries, alone and sad. And my Twilight will enjoy every minute of your pain.

After Sunshine finished making the changes, she activated the comic. An exact copy of Celestia appeared on the floor, unconscious. Sunshine was pleased. She then levitated the clone onto the couch, and arranged her so that it looked like she had fallen asleep. *Now it's time to get rid of the old one.*

The second comic was a special book that Sunshine had prepared earlier that night. It was a prison Sunshine created to house the real Celestia. *As long as you are in this book, time will not pass. I did not kill Rarity and I will not kill you either. But you will never be allowed to enter the real world again. You will be trapped in here until the stars burn out and the universe ends.*

Sunshine then cast a spell on the original

Celestia, and she disappeared into the prison book.

After taking one last look around to make sure that everything was in place, Sunshine put the two comics into her saddlebag and exited the room. She then said goodbye to the guards, told them that Celestia was asleep, and returned to Ponyville.

Sunshine was pleased with herself – but she would not have been pleased if she had known about her mistake. She never told Twilight about the prison books because she knew that Twilight would never approve of them. No pony else ever saw them – and that meant no pony ever pointed out the small mistake she had made. Sunshine would have been dismayed to know that time was *not* stopped inside her prisons. It continued to pass at an extremely slow rate.

Rarity did not know anything about comic magic, so she truly was trapped there forever. However, Twilight had taught Celestia all she knew about the comics – which meant that Celestia knew how to escape.

Sunshine thought that time was stopped, but instead time would slowly pass. It would take years in the real world before a single second passed in the book – but that second *would* pass. Celestia would recognize where she was and

would cast the spell to get out. It might take her several seconds to figure out what happened, and several more seconds to cast the spell. But at some point in the distant future a very angry Celestia would be back.

It was only a matter of time.

Chapter 13: “So what’s the catch?”

The next morning Twilight Sparkle woke up happy and refreshed. She was still angry with Celestia for throwing her out of Canterlot Castle, but she decided that she no longer cared about Celestia at all. Celestia was part of the old way of doing things, and her kingdom was about to come to an end. Equestria was just days away from entering a bold new era. Thanks to Twilight's wisdom and leadership, everypony was going to have everything that they ever wanted. It would be wonderful.

Best of all, Twilight already had everything that *she* wanted! She had Sunshine. Every evening Sunshine told her goodnight and put her to bed, and every morning she woke up to find Sunshine standing in her room, watching over her. At first it creeped her out, but she had grown used to it. She knew that Sunshine only did it because she loved Twilight and just couldn't wait for her to wake up so they could spend more time together. *Sunshine is so fantastic*, Twilight thought happily. *Why can't Celestia be more like her? Besides, I've*

done so much for Celestia! She owes me. Yet the one time I actually ask her for something, she throws me out. I should have replaced her a long time ago.

Twilight yawned, stretched, and said good morning to Sunshine. A moment later Moondancer brought her breakfast in bed – freshly made, as always. While she munched her way through a stack of perfectly made haycakes, she remembered what Sunshine had told her the previous day.

“So how did things go with Celestia last night?” Twilight asked.

“Funny you should mention that! The princess actually sent you a letter early this morning. I told Spike to wait until you were awake to give it to you. Just a moment – I’ll go get him.”

Sunshine left the bedroom and returned a moment later with the young dragon. “Here you go,” Spike said wearily. He handed the letter to Twilight, and then plopped down onto a chair beside her bed. “You know, we’ve *got* to talk to Celestia about sending those things so early! I was fast asleep when that letter came in. Being woken up like that was *not* a good experience. She should hold off until at least noon. I’m not a mailbox, you know.”

“Join the club,” Twilight said bitterly.

"Celestia hasn't exactly been treating me very well either. She keeps making me all these big promises, and then she fails to keep them. Let's see what she has to say for herself."

Twilight read the letter. Her brow furrowed, and a look of confusion appeared on her face. "Well *that's* strange. Celestia is claiming that *I* visited her last night."

"Really?" Sunshine asked. "I didn't know you made a trip to Canterlot last night! Why didn't you tell me? We could have traveled together."

"But that's just it – I didn't! I don't know what she's thinking. *You* are the one who went to see her, not me. And look at this. Celestia claims that as soon as I showed up, we went into a private room and she fell asleep on the couch. Did she really do that?"

Sunshine nodded. "Yes, actually, she did. I guess she was tired after spending all day with the delegates. I don't think she heard anything I had to say."

"Seriously?" Twilight shrieked. "So you mean to tell me that when you finally *did* get to see Celestia, she ignored you and *fell asleep*? And then she wrote a letter where she confused you with me? Hello, Celestia! I don't know if you noticed, but I'm purple and Sunshine is white. It's kind of easy to tell us apart!"

"Maybe Celestia was drunk," Sunshine suggested.

"That would certainly explain a lot," Twilight agreed. "I am so done with that witch. That is the worst apology letter I've ever received. Next time, Celestia, *pay attention*."

Twilight lit up her horn, and a second later the letter burst into flames. The intense fire quickly consumed the scroll, and its ashes gently rained down onto the floor.

Spike spoke up. "Um, wow, that was awkward. So I'm guessing you don't want me to send her a response?"

Twilight glared at Spike. He swallowed uncomfortably. "All right, then. Got it. If that's all you need then I guess I'll be going."

"One moment!" Sunshine called out. She took a green book off the end table and handed it to Spike. "I made this just for you. I hope you like it."

Spike took the book and sighed. "Oh, wonderful. A book. Just what I always wanted. You and Twilight really are just alike, aren't you?"

Sunshine laughed. "No, Spike, it's not *that* kind of book. What you are holding is a comic – a very special comic that I wrote just for you. That comic's world is just like Equestria, but with a twist. In that world Rarity likes you – quite a lot,

in fact. She thinks that you're wonderful, and she's glad that you love her because she loves you back."

Spike turned bright red. He stared at the comic, and then looked back at Sunshine. "Is that – I mean, is that allowed? I like Rarity at all, but what would happen if she ever found out about this? Wouldn't she get mad?"

Sunshine shook her head. "Not at all. If you want you can talk to her – she's right down the hall. Rarity's not blind, you know. She knows how you feel about her and she's seen you carry around that plush toy of her. She doesn't mind."

"Well, all right then," Spike said nervously. "Thanks. This comic *does* sound pretty great. It's just weird, you know? Especially since the real Rarity lives with us now. But I'll try it."

Spike then left the room, carrying the new book with him.

Twilight looked at Sunshine. "Is Rarity really ok with that?"

"Absolutely. Why wouldn't she be? That book doesn't hurt her, and it will make Spike happy. Rarity doesn't feel that way about Spike, of course, but in the comic Spike can have things that he could never have in this world. Isn't that what the comics are all about?"

"That's true," Twilight admitted. "I'm sure

that Spike isn't the only pony out there who loves somepony that doesn't love them back. Once we release this magic I imagine ponies will use it in all sorts of ways."

"Rarity isn't the only popular pony, you know," Sunshine teased. "Just think of all of your devoted admirers! I bet they are going to want their own personal copy of *you*."

Twilight blushed. "You know, I'd really rather not think about that."

Sunshine laughed. "You should be flattered! Ponies like you. That should make you happy. It would be much worse if ponies had the ability to make whoever they liked, and none of them wanted you. You *are* supposed to be the Princess of Friendship, you know."

"That's true. I just find it deeply revolting. I don't even know those ponies! If I knew them and liked them it might be one thing, but – well, what's fair for me is fair for them, I guess. I *did* create you, which isn't all that different. Speaking of that, when are we going to release these comics to the world? I know the Moondancers have been working pretty hard on it."

"They certainly have. They are tireless workers – and they are so good at what they do. The good news is that today we are going to make the finishing touches on the master source comic.

Once it's done it will take us about two days to leverage it to manufacture millions of books. We still need to work out a distribution plan, but I think we can use thousands of Moondancer clones to give these books out. I've already begun creating the army we will need. Once we have the first definition written, all it takes is a few lines to multiply it to any quantity you desire."

"Fantastic!" Twilight exclaimed. "Let me grab my checklist and we can get started. I *love* logistics."

* * * * *

Four days later, Twilight called a meeting of the Elements of Harmony. It was the first meeting she had called since the original Applejack died. The fact that she'd spent so little time with her friends – and so much time with Sunshine – made her feel a little guilty. *I had work to do*, she thought defensively. *But all that is coming to an end. In a few days I should have all the time in the world.*

Everypony was there in the castle's map room. The two Pinkies had come – the original and the pegasus – and were sharing Pinkie's throne. Rarity was seated elegantly in her throne, and was wearing a royal outfit she had prepared

for the occasion. Fluttershy was seated quietly in her throne. She looked a bit nervous.

Rainbow Dash and the pegasus Applejack were seated in their thrones, talking to each other. *You would never know they were clones, Twilight thought. The two ponies are better friends than ever. If they were inseparable before, they're even more so now.*

Spike was here as well, seated on the small throne that was beside Twilight's. Twilight fidgeted nervously in her throne, and Sunshine stood beside her.

"Thank you all for coming," Twilight began.

"Oh, it's no problem!" Pinkie said cheerfully.

"No problem at all," the pegasus Pinkie agreed. "It's great to see you again! We haven't seen very much of the famous book pony lately."

"We really haven't," Pinkie agreed. "It's been kind of sad. You haven't come to any of our parties. Any of them! We've had, like, twelve, and you missed them all. Gummy was so disappointed."

Twilight winced. "I know, girls. You are absolutely right, and I'm so sorry about that. I've just been busy with work, that's all."

"And with raising us from the dead," Rainbow Dash added. "In fact, you've raised Applejack from the dead twice now!"

"I bet that's a record," Pinkie commented.

"Do you think she can beat it?" the pegasus Pinkie asked.

"Beat her own record? Of course she can. She's Twilight! And Twilight never fails. I bet she could raise Applejack from the dead *lots* more times."

Applejack spoke up. "Um, girls, let's not make it a third time, all right? Twice is quite enough. In fact, just once is plenty. I'd like to *stay* alive this time, if it's all right with everypony."

Fluttershy spoke up. "Twilight, I don't mean to interrupt or anything, but I heard you were writing some books. Is that true? I know we talked about it that one day when you came over. Are you really done now? Because we've all missed you."

Twilight nodded. "That's exactly what I've been working on, and yes, I am done. I know I've been neglecting all of you, and I apologize for that. But things are about to change. That is, if you all approve."

"Oh, we approve, darling," Rarity said. "I've seen what you've been working on, and it is just marvelous! It's the most brilliant thing I've ever seen."

"Is it ever!" Spike exclaimed. "It's amazing. Sunshine gave me an early copy a few days ago, and I have loved every minute of it. Why—" Spike

suddenly stopped himself. "Um, that is, never mind."

"It's all right, Spike," Twilight replied, grinning.

"Could you tell me what is going on?" Fluttershy said. "I mean, I don't want to be rude, but I'm kind of lost. Just a little."

Sunshine spoke up. "I would be more than happy to shed a little light on this situation. As you all know, Twilight has discovered a way to create things out of pure magic. All she has to do is write about it in a book, and whatever she writes comes to life. She can create entirely new worlds – and ponies can then enter those worlds and live in them for as long as they like."

"Just like that one time we became Power Ponies," Twilight added.

Fluttershy shuddered. "That was kind of scary."

"Yes it was," Sunshine agreed. "But these worlds are different. In these new worlds *you* are in control, and you can make anything happen. You can create a world that is perfect for you."

"Which sounds *totally* awesome!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "I am going to have so much fun with this magic. I can finally start having real adventures with Daring Do."

"You already did that," Applejack pointed out.

“Yeah – *one time*. But now I can have fun *all* the time.”

“I'm already having fun,” Pinkie Pie remarked. “My clone and I are best friends.”

“Exactly!” Sunshine said. “As you can see, this magic has already started to change the lives of those who are seated around this map. It has saved the lives of both Applejack and Rainbow Dash, and it has provided Pinkie with a new companion. What Twilight wants to do is release this magic to the whole world so that everypony can enjoy it.”

Fluttershy spoke up. “So, um, does that mean that everypony will be able to create things and bring them into Equestria? But what if they make scary things? I don't want to be mean or anything, but I don't know if everypony can be trusted. Some ponies aren't very nice.”

“That is a good point,” Sunshine agreed. “That is exactly why we're not going to allow them to do that. Ponies can make any kind of world that they want, and they can live in it, but they can't bring anything out of that world and into Equestria. As you pointed out, it just isn't safe.”

“I got a question,” Applejack said. “What about visitors? I mean, suppose I create a world and I want to keep out, say, members of the

Orange clan. Can I do that?"

"Absolutely. The comic will be turned to you specifically. The only ponies who will be able to use and change your comic will be you and those you specifically add to the story."

"Are there any other questions?" Twilight asked.

Fluttershy spoke up again. "Well, I have more questions. I don't know how this magic is going to work, and I don't know how ponies who aren't unicorns will be able to use it. But I'm sure that will be explained. So I guess I don't have any other questions."

"I've already written a how-to guide to answer those very question," Twilight said. "Well, technically, Sunshine and the Moondancers wrote it. But you get my point."

Twilight looked around the room. No one else said anything. "All right, then! Since that's all the questions we have, let's take a vote. Is there anypony who thinks that we shouldn't do this? Does anyone think that we should put a stop to this magic?"

Sunshine smiled. She had already taken steps to ensure that this vote would succeed. *Rarity is a clone; she will agree to whatever Twilight wants. Applejack and Rainbow Dash are clones too, so they won't object either. Pinkie isn't a clone, but*

she's been compromised. She loves the new pegasus copy of herself and she would never agree to anything that might take that away. She's going to vote yes.

The same goes for Spike. He's been spending a lot of time in that book I gave him – which is why I gave it to him in the first place. He's grown to enjoy this new magic, and he's not going to vote to get rid of it. As far as Luna goes, I've heard that she has been enjoying the new world I gave her. And Celestia is a clone now, so she's not going to be standing in the way of anything that Twilight wants.

The only pony who might possibly object is Fluttershy. Since she had such a positive opinion of it that one time Twilight visited her, I'm sure she will agree to it now. If she doesn't, though, I'll pay her a visit tonight and she will have a different opinion by morning.

Everything is taken care of. My Twilight is going to get exactly what she wants. I am not going to disappoint her again.

"I say we do it," Rainbow said.

"As do I," Rarity added.

"I'll agree to that," Applejack remarked.

"No objections here!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

"I second the opinion of the previous Pinkie," the pegasus Pinkie said. She laughed.

"I don't have a problem with it either," Spike said. "In fact, I think it will be a big hit."

"That's wonderful," Twilight said happily. "Fluttershy, you're the only one left. What do you think?"

Fluttershy paused for a long time. "I'm just wondering something. This magic sounds really, really wonderful. I've had some really nice dreams, and it would be so relaxing to spend more time in them when I'm awake. I do like all of this. But, you know, isn't it possible that ponies might want to start living in their dreams all the time? After all, I could certainly see me wanting to do that. So I was wondering what was going to happen to all the animals."

Twilight looked confused. "The animals? I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"Well, I mean, they depend on us, you know. Ponies make the seasons change. We bring in winter, and then we bring in the springtime. We help the breezies migrate, and we go get the birds that flew south for the winter, and we wake up all the cute little animals from hibernation. You remember Winter Wrap-Up, don't you? If all of us ponies start living in our dreams then that's not going to leave anypony around to take care of all the wonderful furry creatures in the world. I'm worried about that."

"Oh, I see what you mean," Twilight said. "I hadn't even thought of that. Still, that's not a problem. I can send ponies out to round up all the animals and put them in your world with you. I could also put them in other worlds too. That way there are still ponies around who love and care for them. Sunshine, you can take care of that, right?"

Sunshine nodded. "Absolutely. I can just clone more Moondancers to round them all up. It won't be a problem."

"Ok, then," Fluttershy said softly. "In that case I vote that we do it. As long as our animal friends aren't neglected."

"Then it's settled!" Twilight exclaimed. "We already have Moondancers in place all over the country, and tomorrow they will start handing out the new comics to anypony who wants one. It's going to be so great!"

Applejack spoke up. "You mean the comics are free? Really? You ain't chargin' anything for them? Not even a single bit?"

"Of course not! After all, it's not like it cost me anything to create them. Sunshine and I used magic in the manufacturing process. There's no reason to charge anything for them. We have no costs to recover."

"Then I bet they'll sell like hotcakes," Applejack said.

"You bet!" Rainbow Dash agreed. "Everypony will want to get their hooves on one, once they find out what they can do."

"That's exactly what I'm hoping for," Twilight said. "I just hope that everypony likes what I've done. I know that some of you didn't really care for the idea very much at first."

Rarity spoke up. "I know, darling, and I am so sorry about that. I don't know what I was thinking."

"It's all right," Sunshine replied. "Twilight, I'm sure that nopony will object. If anyone does then I'll just go talk to them. I'm sure that any criticism of this magic will be based on some easily-reconciled misunderstanding. I am fully confident that this will succeed."

"I hope you're right," Twilight said nervously. "I guess we'll find out, won't we? But here, where are my manners?"

Twilight levitated a large stack of books off the floor. She then went around the room and gave everyone two large books and a silver quill. "There you go! The green one is the world book, and the blue one explains how to use it. You won't need to use any magic; the quill will take care of everything. Be careful not to lose it! If you have any questions just let me know."

"Or let me know," Sunshine added. "I'm always more than happy to help."

Rainbow Dash grinned. "This is going to be the coolest thing ever. I know what *I'm* doing tonight!"

"Tonight?" Twilight asked. She glanced outside and saw that the sun was low on the horizon. "Oh my goodness – the time! I completely forgot. I was going to give Frosted Arrow one of the first copies. I'd better go do that before the comic store closes. I'll see you later, everypony!"

"Wait!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed. "Pinkie and I want to invite you to a party tomorrow. We need to celebrate your new book!"

"That sounds wonderful. I'll be there! Sunshine, put it down on my calendar."

"Consider it done," Sunshine replied.

The pegasus Pinkie spoke up. "Don't forget to invite all the Moondancers! They deserve to come too. And you too, Sunshine! We don't want to leave you out."

Twilight quickly grabbed two books off a small stack that was on floor beside her throne. She then stuffed them into her saddlebag, tossed in a silver quill, threw her saddlebag over her back, and raced out the front door.

"Well that went well," Sunshine commented. "Friends, can I get anyone some tea?"

Twilight quickly galloped through the streets of Ponyville. The sun was sinking low on the horizon, and she knew that the comic book store would close in a few minutes. Time was short.

She was surprised by how much she enjoyed running through town. It was just so refreshing – the flow of cool air running through her mane, the noise her hooves made as they struck the dirt road, and the gentle warmth of the evening sun. Twilight had spent a lot of time lately indoors, working and reading. She had missed the beauties and wonders of nature more than she realized. *Maybe I do need to get my head out of those dusty old books*, she thought.

It truly was a fantastic day. Ponies were wandering about, living their lives. Many of them stopped and stared, open-mouthed, as the Princess of Friendship raced through the streets like a crazy pony, but Twilight didn't care. She was having too much fun.

Everything was falling into place and everything was going her way. At long last, all of her friends liked her new magic. No pony objected or thought it was bad. She was about to change the world and fulfill the dreams of all the ponies in Equestria! *No pony will ever need to be sad or*

lonely again, she thought with pride. I will have fixed everything. Forever. No more pain or suffering – just endless happiness.

Twilight skidded to a stop right in front of the comic book store. Inside, Frosted Arrow had just reached up a hoof to switch the sign on the door from Open to Closed. When he saw the princess he froze.

“Wait!” Twilight exclaimed. “I have something for you! A present. Can I come in?”

“Of course,” the white pony said. “Far be it from me to turn away royalty.” He courteously opened the glass door, and Twilight walked in.

Twilight looked around the store. She saw signs everywhere, advertising comics at 70% and 80% off. She winced. “So, um, I heard you've been running a sale on comic books.”

“A sale?” Frosted Arrow asked bitterly. “We've been practically giving them away! Even at these prices the public hasn't been buying them. All anyone cares about anymore is this new magic that you've invented. You've managed to destroy the entire comic book market in the span of a couple weeks. If things don't turn around soon I'm going to be out of a job.”

He sighed. “Look, princess, I admit this isn't the most glamorous job. You meet some strange ponies in this line of work, and sometimes the

customers aren't very nice – although there are a lot of nice ones too. But *it is* a job, and it does pay the bills. This humble job is one of the few things that I had in life, and you're taking that away – not just from me, but from ponies all over Equestria. Comics *used* to be a big industry. Until you killed it dead.”

“I know,” Twilight said apologetically. She smiled. “That's why I'm here! If you could have anything that you wanted in life, what would it be?”

“I just want my job back. I'm not asking for much. It would be mighty nice to have a roof over my head and bits to pay my bills.”

Twilight waved a hoof in front of his face. “No no no. Be serious! You told me once that you wanted to be the hero, remember? You said that you wanted to be a powerful alicorn who saved the day, and lived in a castle, and had superheroes for friends. That is what you *really* want. So that's why I'm here: to give it to you. You can have the life of your dreams.”

The purple alicorn levitated open her saddlebag and took out two books and an enchanted quill. She set them down on the counter.

“What's this – your latest book?” Frosted Arrow asked.

"It's a whole new world," Twilight said grandly. "The blue book is the instruction guide, and the green book is your own personal copy of Equestria. You can live there for the rest of your life, and you can do anything that you want. You see, since it's a comic, you have absolute control over it. You can be whoever you want to be and you can have whatever you want to have. You can have vast riches and power. You can have all the friends you want. You can have dozens of castles and entire mountains made of bits. You can rule over the entire world – a world that is just as real as this one. You can make every single dream that you've ever had come true. The instruction guide explains how it's done, and it's quite simple. You don't have to be a unicorn – the quill takes care of the magic for you. All you need are dreams."

Frosted Arrow's eyes widened. He looked at the comic in amazement. "Wow. That's a lot to take in. So what's the catch?"

"There isn't one. Oh, well, I guess there are a few rules. You can't take anything out of the comic; what's in the comic stays there. I had to add that for security, because I didn't want ponies creating monsters and trying to burn down Equestria. Also, you need to take good care of that book. If it gets destroyed while you're inside it then you will die. But don't worry: I created a special vault to

protect these books. Once you've created the world that you want, you can just bring it to me and I'll put it in a safe place."

"So I can have anything that I want?" Frosted Arrow asked. "*Anything?* And I can live there forever? You know that enchanted comics aren't like that, right? They're only designed to last for a short period of time, and then they self-destruct."

"I know. That's why I created this. It's a whole new level of magic. You actually can spend an entire lifetime there, and while you are there you can be anypony that you want to be. You can even be an alicorn king, if that's your thing."

"Will I be immortal?"

Twilight shook her head. "I'm afraid not. You will still age – but thanks to the transformative magic you won't feel it. Even at the end of your days you will still feel young and healthy and full of life. Now, you should live a little bit longer there than you would here, since you're probably not going to be exposed to diseases or danger. But you won't live forever."

"Woah. No wonder comic book sales have tanked! This is way better than anything we have for sale. Have you already started selling these? How much do they cost? I bet they cost a fortune, don't they?"

Twilight shook her head. "Nope. They're

absolutely free. I have ponies stationed all over the country who will start handing them out first thing tomorrow to anyone who wants one. I just wanted to come here and give you one of the first ones, since you're the pony who started all of this."

"I am? What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember? You came to me one morning with some comic books that Spike had ordered. You lectured me about how I was out of touch and had everything I wanted, and how ponies like you suffered and led miserable lives. You said that I had never experienced any real pain in my whole life."

Frosted Arrow blushed. "I'm so sorry about all that – about what I said. I don't know what came over me. I had no right to talk to a princess like that."

"Oh, there's no need to apologize. I needed to hear it because *you were right*. That was the day Applejack died, and on that day I learned what real pain was. And you know something? Pain *hurts*. Loss hurts. So after going through that terrible ordeal, I decided to fix the problem. I decided to fix everypony's pain, *forever*. No pony would ever again have to feel loss and suffering, or spend their entire life longing for something they could never have. The magic in that green book right there gives you *everything*. You once

complained that since I was a princess, I had options that no one else had. Well, now you have those options too! You have a whole world in your hooves, and you can do whatever you want in it. Your only limit is your imagination.”

Frosted Arrow smiled wryly. “Uh-huh. Sure. But the fact is, you *did* place limits on this, right? I’m sure there are all sorts of things that you don’t allow. I remember how freaked out you were over your action figures. I bet you’ve added rules that make it impossible to use your likeness, or the likeness of your friends. Am I right?”

“Nope, you’re wrong. In fact, copies of myself and my friends are already in that world. You can do whatever you want with them. You can erase them and replace them with somepony else. You can make them your friends. You can even date them if you want. You are in control now, Arrow. You can make *all* the characters in your world respond however you want them to. Once you define their character, that’s who they are going to be.”

Frosted Arrow laughed. “You’re kidding me, right? There’s no way you would allow that.”

“Why not? After all, I made a copy of Celestia, and she lives with me and manages my castle. She’ll do anything that I tell her to. It would be the height of hypocrisy for me to make copies of other

ponies for my own purposes, and yet deny that same right to others. If I can copy Celestia then it's only fair to let you make a copy of the Elements of Harmony. Go for it. No pony will stop you."

Frosted Arrow stopped laughing. He looked nervously at the green book on the counter. "Are you serious? This is a world where *I'm* in control – a world every bit as real as this one? And I can make new ponies if I want?"

"That's right! And yes, you can even write new ponies into existence. Now, if you would rather create foals the old-fashioned way then you can do that too, but keep in mind they'll be fictional and you can't take them out of the comic. If you want a real foal then you'll have to have one with a real pony. Fictional ponies can only give you fictional children."

Frosted Arrow blushed bright red. "That's not at all what I meant! I'm *not* that kind of pony. I promise that—"

"—that was the very first thought that crossed your mind," Twilight said. "I'm not naïve, Arrow. Sunshine explained it all to me. What you do in your world is your business. No one is going to police you."

"Is that really a good idea? Aren't you worried that this magic will be, well, a bit corrupting?"

“What do you mean?” Twilight asked.

Frosted Arrow paused. “Well, I’m sure you and Sunshine have talked about all the possible downsides of this, right?”

“What downsides? I don’t see any downsides. Sunshine has had nothing but positive things to say about all this.”

“Oh. Then maybe I don’t understand how this all works. Mind you, I haven’t read your instruction guide yet – you just gave it to me. But, well, I’m just wondering. It seems to me that if you give ponies these worlds and tell them there are no rules, they’ll do everything that they want. In fact, they’ll probably spend time doing things that are very illegal in this world. I’ve seen this same thing happen in video games. Some players want to be the hero, and other players want to be the villain. Once you remove all limits, ponies are going to do some dark things. Aren’t you worried that this is going to corrupt ponies and turn them evil?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it,” Twilight said. “But surely not many ponies would do that, right? I mean, it would never even occur to me.”

“Of course it hasn’t. You’re so good and moral that it’s ridiculous. But temptation is a real thing. The whole reason it’s called temptation is because it’s *tempting*. Being a good pony is all

about looking at evil and saying *no*, I'm not going to do that. It's about resisting temptation. But once you remove all reasons to resist temptation, the chances become really good that ponies are going to give into it. They're going to do things they never would have done before. Oh, sure, you can argue that none of it is real because it's all happening in a magical book. But the desires are real and the feelings are real. Even if the event itself isn't real, the experience is. This is going to change ponies, and not for the better. After all, you said that this world is every bit as real as Equestria, right? Well, if you went around Equestria killing ponies, that would damage your soul. If this new world is equally real then why would the consequences be any different?"

Twilight frowned. "Come on, Arrow. Be serious. When you talked to me the day Applejack died, you said you wanted to save ponies. At least, I think that's what you said. Maybe you said that on some other day. Anyway, the point is that you wanted to be a hero. I don't think the ponies in this world are evil. I've seen the dreams of my friends, and they're not evil dreams – they're good. Sure, I guess a few ponies might misuse this magic, but I can't relate to that kind of thinking. *You* would certainly never do a thing like that."

"Your friends are heroes," Frosted Arrow

pointed out. "You hang out with princesses and Elements of Harmony! In fact, your friends are more like caricatures than real ponies. Your friends are literally the living embodiment of generosity, kindness, laughter, loyalty, and honesty. They might as well be walking, talking *virtues*. They are so good and upright that sometimes it's painful. Most ponies are *not* the living embodiment of a virtue. Darkness is a lot closer to our hearts than you realize."

"My friends are wonderful ponies," Twilight said defensively.

"They certainly are. In fact, that's my whole point. I don't think you realize what most ponies are actually like, or how easy it is to slip into evil. But I've said too much as it is. I'm sure that this new magic will work out just fine. After all, everything that you've ever done has worked out fine. You have never failed at anything, and I'm sure this will be no different."

"I think you worry too much," Twilight said. "Just trust me. I've got this."

"I don't think we really have a choice, do we? The decision has already been made. But thank you for the books. It's a very thoughtful gift, and I am sure I will enjoy it."

Twilight hesitated. She stood there for a moment, thinking. A memory came back to her –

a memory of a dream she once had. A dream where Celestia attacked her for destroying the world.

“It will be fine,” Twilight said aloud. “Yes. It's going to be just fine. You are welcome, Arrow. Have a nice day.”

Twilight turned around and left the store. Frosted Arrow walked over to the door and turned the sign to Closed.

Chapter 14: “You want to blame this all on me, don't you?”

Princess Celestia didn't blame Twilight Sparkle for being angry with her. After all, Celestia had told Twilight to come see her if she ever needed anything, and Twilight had done exactly that. Yet when Twilight came and told her that Starswirl had murdered two of her friends, Celestia just laughed at her and pushed her away. It was a horrible mistake – one that Celestia deeply regretted. That was the sort of mistake that could ruin a relationship forever.

The princess had flippantly told Twilight to come back later. Considering how badly Celestia had acted, she would not have been surprised if Twilight had never returned at all. But the purple alicorn *had* returned. Even though hours had passed since Celestia threw her out of the castle, Twilight's mood had not improved. She was still filled with the righteous anger of a pony who had been treated unjustly.

Celestia knew there wasn't much that she could say. How could she possibly apologize?

Words were completely inadequate. It would look foolish for her to say “Oh, by the way, I'm sorry that my friend and mentor brutally murdered your two friends, and I then laughed at you and threw you out of my home. My bad. Would you like some tea?” How could anypony right such a serious wrong?

The white alicorn was surprised when Twilight wanted to talk to her in private, but she couldn't reject that request. Of *course* her former pupil was hurt, and of course she wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk out of earshot of the gossiping guards. So Celestia led Twilight to a small private room.

After she let Twilight into the room, Celestia followed behind her. When Celestia turned around to close the door, though, she felt something strike her on the back of the neck. It wasn't painful, but it was jarring – as if someone pushed her over and she lost her balance. Before she had time to respond or even cry out, the room vanished. In fact, *everything* vanished. Celestia found herself in a strange new place. The sky above was white, and the ground was a featureless gray. There were no objects to be seen of any kind – no trees, no furniture, and no other ponies. She was completely alone.

She instantly recognized where she was, but

she could not understand what she was doing here. "Hello?" Celestia called out. "Twilight, what's going on? Why did you bring me here? Is there something you wanted to show me?"

But nopony answered.

Celestia frowned. *Why would Twilight take me into a blank comic book? There must be some mistake. I'd better get out of here and go see what she wants. She is so distraught right now that she probably isn't thinking clearly. My poor student needs help.*

The Princess of the Sun thought back to her training and tried to remember the spell that transported a pony out of a comic. Once she remembered it she lit up her horn and cast the spell.

The blank world around her disappeared – but to her surprise she did not reappear in Canterlot Castle. Instead she was... somewhere else.

Celestia was standing in a large room. The floor, ceiling, and walls were made of a reflective bluish crystal. The room had no windows and no furniture. The floor was covered in a thick layer of undisturbed dust. The air was utterly still.

"Hello?" Celestia called out. Her voice echoed off the crystal walls.

This looks like a room in Twilight's castle,

Celestia thought. *But how did I get here? A second ago I was in Canterlot. How could I have been brought to Ponyville so quickly? Even stranger, it looks like nopony has set hoof in this room for years, but that doesn't make sense. Twilight has a maid who keeps her castle clean. She would never allow things to get this dirty.*

Celestia walked over to the door, stirring up a cloud of dust behind her. She opened the door and saw that the room led into a long hallway. The hallway was utterly still. There were no objects, no decorations, and no guards. All Celestia could see is an undisturbed layer of dust.

A bad feeling came over Celestia. Something was very, very wrong. The world was too still and the castle was too empty. The princess knew that her initial guess was right: this was indeed Twilight's castle. But why did it look abandoned? This was Twilight's home – and Celestia had only been gone a few seconds. What could possibly have happened?

The princess stood still and listened. She strained to hear a sound, but the only noise she could hear was her own beating heart. There were no voices, no hoofsteps, and not even the moaning of the wind. It was deeply disturbing. Ponyville was a big, bustling city, but today there was no noise to be heard. Nothing.

Celestia walked across the hallway and opened the door to Twilight's bedroom. The door creaked open. Inside Celestia saw a wooden desk with a few small items on it – but there was nothing else. The room contained no bed, no bookshelves, no end table, and not even a rug on the floor. The only thing the princess could see was a layer of dust.

Princess Celestia glanced out the open window – and her heart stopped. She immediately ran out onto Twilight's balcony. “No,” she gasped in horror. “No! It cannot be true!”

But it was true. The bustling city of Ponyville was in ruins. Its streets were broken and overgrown with weeds. The roofs of the houses had collapsed, and many of the city's fine homes were nothing more than piles of rubble. The princess did not see a single home or business that still looked livable.

Everything was overgrown, but even the weeds themselves were brown and dead. In fact, Celestia could see no signs of life anywhere. There was nothing green. The grass was dead, and there were no trees. Even the Everfree Forest was gone. Something had eradicated all life from the world.

Celestia felt her horror giving way to anger. “What have you done?” she shouted. “Who dared to do this to my kingdom? Who removed the life

from my world and filled Equestria with death?"

But nopony answered.

The princess scanned the city below but could see no evidence that anyone still lived in the city. From what she could tell, nopony had set hoof in Ponyville for a long time. There were no ponies in sight. The sky above was blue and clear, and there were no pegasi to be seen.

The truth was all too clear, and it filled her with rage. Ponyville had not been destroyed in battle; it had been abandoned. The ponies had simply... left. Since no one was there to take care of the city, Ponyville fell into ruin and was overgrown with weeds. Then something killed the plant life.

There wasn't even any wind. The air was still and cold. The sun was high in the sky, but it provided little warmth.

A thought suddenly struck her. If Ponyville lay in ruins, then surely the rest of Equestria did as well. Canterlot must be as dead as the scene that was below her.

Celestia screamed in anger. It was a wild, uncontrolled scream filled with wrath and betrayal. She did not care who heard her. In fact, she *wanted* the world to hear her. Her scream was a threat. "I will find out who did this!" she shouted. "I will find the monster who destroyed

my kingdom, and I will make him pay. This will *not* go unavenged. Do you hear me?"

Her voice echoed through the empty streets of the desolate city, and then quietly died away. But her rage remained.

The princess felt a wave of despair and hopelessness build up inside her. With all her strength she forced it back down. *No. I will not give up. Not yet. There must be some hope, somewhere. There must be a way to fix this. The situation is grim, but this is not the time to be overcome by my emotions. I am the ruler of Equestria and my ponies need me. I will find a way to fix my land and make it whole again. But first I need to learn what happened. What could have caused this calamity?*

Celestia tried to think. *The last thing I remember is talking to Twilight. When I turned my back to her she put me in a comic, and when I came out I was here. It is obvious that many years have passed – perhaps decades, perhaps more. That can only mean that Twilight imprisoned me in time. Since only a few moments passed in the comic but years passed in Equestria, time must have been flowing at a reduced rate. Clever, Twilight – very clever. But why would you do such a thing? It's not like you to attack me. I know that our relationship has been strained recently but I*

cannot understand why you would resort to such a thing. What has come over you?

A thought occurred to Celestia. If I was imprisoned in a book, then that book must still exist and it must be located close to the room that I appeared in. That means there must be a hidden area in that room. If I was imprisoned then there is a chance that other ponies – perhaps Luna – suffered a similar fate. I need to find those books and free them.

But first I must learn what happened to my world. What could have caused this? War? Obviously not, for the damage does not look like war. Disease? That is also unlikely, for I see no bodies. When I disappeared, Twilight was going to release her magic into the world. Surely, though, that is not responsible. I need more information.

Celestia walked back into Twilight's bedroom and looked at the items on her desk. There weren't many. The princess saw two books – a green one and a blue one, neatly stacked on top of each other. She saw a silver quill that was lying parallel to the books. There also was a wooden box, lined with velvet. Inside the box were small indentations that were designed to hold something. Most of the placeholders were empty, but a few of them held red crystals. Beside the box was a small crystal tripod.

The princess levitated one of the crystals out of the box and looked at it. *Interesting. These look like memory stones. They're not quite the same, though. They have a different internal structure and they are much smaller. I've never seen anything like this before.*

She looked back at the desk and studied the crystal tripod. Celestia experimentally levitated the crystal over the tripod and dropped it into place.

The tripod began to glow. The memory shard vibrated for a moment and then shot a beam of light into the air above the desk. A picture of Twilight formed. It was surprisingly clear and vivid.

“Hello, everypony!” the purple alicorn said excitedly. “Isn't this thing neat? Sunshine and the Moondancers made this for me. I can use it to record a journal that ponies can play back later! That way I can record all of my important discoveries and witty observations. Now, I'm not sure that I'll have much in the way of witty observations, but Sunshine says I'm being too modest. She wants me to use this to make a record, so I'm going to give it a shot! I guess all of the things that are going on right now *are* kind of important. I probably should send a message to future historians about how I changed Equestria

forever.”

How you changed Equestria? Celestia thought with rage. Oh, Twilight. You had better not be responsible for the devastation and death that I see outside. Tell me that this world is not your doing.

Twilight grinned. “But I’m rambling, aren’t I? Let me see. Three days ago the Moondancers started giving out enchanted comics to ponies all over Equestria. I have to say that the response has been amazing! I am so excited. Ponies love the new magic and have already started using it. Even my friends have created new worlds for themselves! It’s been a big hit. In fact, we ran out of comics and are having to make more.”

Twilight paused for a moment to think. “There really hasn’t been much in the way of problems. There area few ponies who have some doubts about this new magic – like Frosted Arrow. Sunshine told me that she would go talk to them. I’m sure she’ll be able to work out whatever the problem is; after all, she always does! I’ve never seen her fail at anything. She is *super* good at changing ponies’ minds.

“Anyway, I’ve rambled on long enough. From where I’m standing the future is looking bright! I can hardly wait to see what happens next.”

The memory faded and disappeared. The

crystal stopped glowing.

'Bright' is not the word I would use to describe it, Celestia thought bitterly. Did you actually imprison me so you could destroy my world? Is that what this is – revenge for the way I treated you? Did you truly decide to destroy my entire kingdom because you were angry with me?

Celestia placed the shard back into its position in the box. The next few crystals were missing. Celestia skipped over the gaps and levitated the next one in line. She then inserted it into the tripod.

Twilight appeared. This time she did not look as exuberant as she had before. She had a slightly troubled look on her face. “Um, hello again. Right. So, I realize that my earlier reports were pretty positive, but I've been doing some studies and I'm a little concerned. Not *super* concerned, mind you, but a little bit worried. There have been some things going on that I didn't expect, but I guess I should start at the beginning.

“As you know, ponies all over Equestria have been taking the comics that I created for them and using them to make exciting new worlds. It's been, oh, about six months since the Moondancers started handing them out. By now just about everypony has abandoned their old life in Equestria and started living in their new worlds

– which is exactly what I was hoping for.”

It is? Celestia thought, astonished. *Oh, you foolish pony. Why would you ever want such a thing? How could you hate me so much that you would wish death upon my entire kingdom? How could you be so evil?*

“There are a few holdouts, but their numbers diminish every day. Anyway, being a student and all, I got curious about what kind of worlds ponies were making. How were things turning out? Were the ponies happy? Well, naturally, I couldn't just go around and talk to millions of ponies. That's not practical. However, Sunshine pointed out that since all the comics were created from one master comic, I could use the master comic to find out what was going on in all the child comics. To be honest, I'm still not quite sure how it works. The Moondancers worked out the magic, and it's kind of beyond me. All I know is that it really does work. They were able to use it to build some really neat reports that update in realtime. They've got all sorts of statistics – how many real ponies are in comics, how healthy they are, what sort of worlds they have made, and so forth.

“But some of the initial reports are kinda disturbing. I thought that ponies would use the magic to do happy things, you know? I mean,

that's what I would do. Well, that's what I would do if I wanted to, I mean. It's just that I'm not really interested in moving into a comic book. I guess that makes me one of the holdouts, doesn't it? Personally, I just don't see the point. All I ever wanted was to be happy, and Sunshine makes me very happy. I don't need an artificial world.

“But I'm rambling again. Anyway, the trends that I'm seeing in these reports are kind of bothering me. It's true that some ponies are doing what I want them to, and that's good. But there are other ponies that aren't. Those ponies aren't going into worlds with their families; instead they're breaking apart and creating their own, private worlds. Some husbands and wives are separating and creating worlds with new versions of their spouses. Some children are abandoning their parents and making new realities for themselves. There are also some friends that are, well, separating and replacing their friends. It's really hard to understand.

“I'm also a little concerned about the type of worlds that ponies are making. There are a few ponies who are doing things that are kinda wrong, you know? But Sunshine tells me that I shouldn't worry about it. She says that everything will be fine and ponies are just trying to find their place in this new world. I guess she has a point. I'm sure

that they'll get all this weirdness out of their system soon, and will go back to living happy lives of harmony. It's probably nothing to worry about.

"Anyway, I'll let you know how it goes. See you later!"

The memory ended.

Celestia wanted to scream. *How dare you! Twilight, how dare you burn down my kingdom to move my subjects into worthless fantasies. You have a lot to answer for. I expected better from you.*

The princess was tempted to crush the memory into powder, but resisted the urge. She needed the crystals as evidence for when she put Twilight on trial for treason. Celestia placed the memory crystal back into the case and got out the next one. She then played back the memory.

This time Twilight was happy and full of life. "Guess what? Sunshine was right! It's been a year since my last report, and everything has settled down. Families are back together again, friends are reunited, and ponies are using their worlds responsibly. Everything is going exactly the way that I wanted it to. It looks like ponies really did just need a little time to get settled down.

"I have to admit, the first time I saw these new numbers I asked Sunshine if they were right. They just seemed too good to be true! But she

assured me they were correct, and I trust her. It's such a relief to know that things are fine. For a while there I was worried that I had made a horrible mistake, but now I see that I was right all along.

"I'll come back later if I have something else to report, but it looks like the transition to the comic worlds is just about over. I don't anticipate any problems from this point out."

When the memory ended, Celestia frowned. *You are far too trusting, Twilight. It is not wise to blindly believe everything that you are told. Good news given to a monarch should always be treated with suspicion. Few ponies are willing to tell the truth to their rulers, especially if it is a truth they do not wish to hear.*

The next memory shard contained another happy Twilight. "It's done! It's finally done. Every last pony in the whole world is now in my enchanted comics. When I started this project I didn't realize that it would take a couple years to make the transition; there were a number of holdouts, especially in other countries. But Sunshine was able to fix everything. I really couldn't have done this without her! She has been amazing and so supportive.

"The whole world is abandoned now. That means it will finally suffer the fate it so richly

deserves: it will fall into disrepair and then collapse. Even the animals have been removed, so the ecosystem is going to collapse. Do I feel about about this? Absolutely not. This world is a terrible place that has been filled with centuries of pain and suffering. Just ask anypony! The new magical worlds I have created are much better. It is time for this world to die.”

Celestia could not take it any more. “How dare you!” she shouted. “How dare you replace reality with some foolish, meaningless fantasy! Yes, there was pain in my world – but there was also hope, and joy, and friendship, and harmony. How could you teach ponies to abandon a life of meaning and replace it with a permanent daydream? You were supposed to protect this kingdom! How could you destroy it?”

But Twilight could not hear her. She kept rambling on. “Now here's something odd. The world's entire population has been relocated into comics, with one single exception: Celestia. For some reason Celestia is still in Canterlot, moping around in her castle. She won't go into a comic and she won't talk to me. She just mourns the loss of her kingdom. Celestia is entirely alone – and boy does it make me happy to see that! I haven't forgotten the fact that when I needed her, she wasn't there for me. In fact, when Starswirl killed

Applejack and Rainbow Dash and I went to her for comfort, Celestia threw me out of her castle! Now *she* is the one who gets to experience the crushing loneliness that I lived with for so long. If she wants to spend the rest of her life crying in her decaying castle, then I say she deserves it. Sunshine has always been there for me, and Celestia has done nothing but let me down. To this day Celestia has never once tried to visit me and improve our relationship. So, Celestia, if you want to rot then you go right ahead. See if I care."

When the memory ended, Celestia stared at the crystal in amazement. *So Twilight thinks that I am still in my castle in Canterlot? But that pony cannot be me, for I have been trapped in a comic for many years! The pony in Canterlot must be a clone. But if Twilight thinks that she's real then she must not know what happened. That means Twilight is not the pony who imprisoned and replaced me. That, at least, was not Twilight's doing. Twilight may have destroyed my kingdom and ruined the lives of my subjects, but she did not put me in prison.*

The only pony who could have done it is Sunshine. She must have decided that I was a threat to Twilight's plans, so she disguised herself and trapped me in a book prison. Very clever. I knew she was an abomination the moment I first

saw her. How many other ponies did she replace in order to further Twilight's plans?

A thought occurred to Celestia. Sunshine did not kill me; she put me in a book. There are probably other ponies who are trapped in prisons as well – there could be hundreds or even thousands. That means there may still be hope! Perhaps I can find these ponies and free them, and then we can rebuild Equestria. A great deal has been lost, of course, but if there are still living ponies then we have a fighting chance. I can only pray that my sister is still alive.

The next few memory crystals were missing. Celestia took the next available one and played it.

“So it's finally done,” Twilight said. She was obviously tired. “It took years – more years than I care to count – but Sunshine and the Moondancers have completed their search of the entire world and gathered up every last enchanted comic book in existence. All of the comics have been brought here and stored in the Vault that's in the basement. The Vault now has every single enchanted comic that we've ever made. It also has the master source comic for all the new worlds, it has the comic that defines Sunshine, and it has the definitions for the new Applejack and Rainbow Dash. They're all there. Even my collection of memory stones is there.

“The Vault should last forever. I've got guards down there to protect it – not that there's anypony to protect it against. No pony has exited their world and returned to reality in months. I think they're all in there for good. There are no threats left in Equestria to worry about. In fact, the world itself is dying. In a few centuries all the cities will return to dust, and in a few thousand years every trace of our existence will be gone. It will be like the pony race never existed at all. I will have won.”

Not if I have anything to say about it, Celestia thought angrily. I will not allow Equestria to die.

Twilight continued rambling. “At first I wasn't sure if we could even find all these books. I knew it was important to protect them, because if the books are destroyed they will kill any ponies that are inside them. But the world is a pretty big place to search, you know? It seemed like an impossible task – until Sunshine came up with a spell that let us locate them. I really never should have doubted her. Sunshine was able to use the spell to find the books, and she used thousands of Moondancer clones to go get them. It was a lot of work, but we're done now.

“But that got me to thinking. Since we can use magic to *find* comics, it made me wonder if we can also use magic to tell the difference

between real ponies and clones. After all, there *must* be a difference, right? Real ponies exist on their own, but clones depend on a magical link between themselves and the comics. It should be easy, but when I talked to Sunshine about it she said that she's tried and it just isn't possible. I don't know; maybe she's right. Maybe it can't be done. I guess it's something I can look into.

“After all, I have all the time in the world now! My work here is done. All of the fantasy worlds are stable and happy. The ponies in them are doing well and are leading safe, happy, and productive lives. There's nothing left in this world – except for Celestia, who apparently intends on crying herself to death. She's so weird, you know? Now that I've won I almost feel sorry for her – almost. Then I remember how badly she treated me when my friends were murdered, and I don't feel sorry after that.

“I really don't know what I'm going to do next. I think I might stay here and watch this horrible world decay. That sounds like fun. I can protect the comics and continue my studies on enchanted comic book magic. I guess I can also keep records for the next generation.

“Oh – did I mention that? The report that the Moondancers made for me says that real ponies are getting together and having families. That

means there really *is* going to be a next generation! I was a little worried at first that ponykind would die out, but apparently not. I have to say that I'm a pretty lucky pony. Every time I start to worry about something, the numbers get better and things work out. Maybe Sunshine is right: I really *do* worry too much."

The memory ended.

No, you fool, you don't worry enough, Celestia thought angrily. Why do you put so much trust in Sunshine? Friendship is not the same thing as stupidity, Twilight. Apparently you still have much to learn.

Celestia looked at the box. All of the following crystals were gone. There were only three left, at the very end.

The princess took the first one and put it in the player.

This time Twilight was very different. Celestia noticed that she had grown. She was no longer a small pony; she was now almost as large as Celestia was – and she was filled with blinding rage. The muscles in her neck were tight, and her eyes were points of fire. She looked like she was about to kill somepony.

"It was all a lie!" she screamed. "A lie! None of it was true. Sunshine has been faking the numbers for *twenty years*. I've never been so

angry in all my life! Everything that I've believed about this project has been wrong. First of all, ponies are *not* getting back together. Every pony is in their own world. Families, friendships – they're all gone. Second, ponies are *not* having children. Oh, they're having ponies, all right – fake ones. The *real* ponies are dying off. The entire older generation is gone, and more ponies are dying every day – and that doesn't include all the ponies who somehow found a way to get themselves killed. I don't know how they're managing to do that in a world where they control everything, but apparently they have found a way. Their stupidity is staggering.

“And I'm not even going to mention the kind of worlds that ponies created for themselves! These ponies are so depraved that they would make even Sombra blush. It's a disaster! The number of ponies that *haven't* become evil tyrants is really, really small. Apparently what ponykind *really* wanted was to become supervillains.

“If I had known years ago that this was happening then maybe I could have fixed it. Maybe I could have put some kind of limits on the books, or forced ponies back onto the right path. But you know what? Sunshine *lied to me*. Now it's too late to do anything! Thanks to Sunshine the

entire pony race is lost.

“But wait – there's more! Sunshine has done even more to betray me. It turns out that it really *is* possible to tell the difference between real ponies and clones. The spell is incredibly easy – and Sunshine knew the spell and hid it from me for years. I actually had to discover it myself. And guess what? *All of my friends are clones!* Even that stupid Celestia in Canterlot is a clone.”

A voice called out from behind Twilight. The voice was full of pain; Celestia could not hear the words, but she could hear the tears and sorrow. But Twilight was unmoved by the heartfelt plea. The purple alicorn turned her head and screamed. “Shut up! I don't want to hear it. You *betrayed me*, Sunshine. I don't want to hear your pathetic excuses! I should never have trusted you in the first place. You aren't my friend; you are a monster. Don't you dare try to explain yourself to me!”

Twilight turned around to face Celestia again. “That pony is pure evil. I had been wondering why all of my friends were still so, well, friendly. The answer is obvious now: Sunshine replaced my *real* friends with clones that were programmed to be loyal and agree with everything I ever said. I haven't had any real friends for years; all I've had were stupid clones who pretended to like me and

pretended to love me. My whole world is gone – and *Sunshine took it from me.*”

Celestia shook her head. *How does it feel to be betrayed by somepony you trusted? I trusted you, Twilight, and look what you did to Equestria. You cannot blame all of this on Sunshine. You created her and you allowed this to happen. I blame the fall of Equestria on you.*

“Do you hear me?” Twilight screamed. “I don't have any friends! Sunshine killed then all and replaced them with copies. I don't have anything that's real anymore. My world – my happy world – was all a lie. There's nothing left but pain now, and I'm all alone. Sunshine took everything from me.

“Well, what am I supposed to do now, Sunshine? How am I supposed to live with myself? I've lost everything that I ever cared about and everything that I ever wanted. What's next in your evil master plan to ruin my life?”

Celestia could hear Sunshine sobbing in the background. Twilight just kept screaming. “I can't fix this! No pony can fix this. Equestria is dead and it can't be brought back to life. I don't think ponies even know how to live in reality anymore! I need my friends – but wait: my friends are gone, aren't they? *Thanks to you, Sunshine.* I hope you're happy with yourself.”

The memory abruptly ended.

The princess placed it back into the box. She suddenly became nervous. *Wait a minute. Once Twilight discovered the truth, why did Sunshine not confess what she had done? Why did she let Twilight believe that she had killed her friends, when she obviously didn't? Sunshine did not kill me, and I am sure she did not kill the others either. The logical thing to do would be to tell Twilight that her real friends were trapped in comics. Sunshine could release them and Twilight would have her dear friends back. But yet I was not released. Why was I not released?*

With great trepidation, Celestia levitated the next crystal and put it into the player.

This time Twilight was even more upset than she had been in the previous memory. Her mane was a mess, the feathers in her wings were ruffled and out of place, and her face was stained with tears. Twilight just kept sobbing. She could barely talk.

“So, um, this morning I woke up,” she began. “And, you know, Sunshine is always there when I wake up. Every morning she's there standing over me. She's – she's the first pony I see every day. But this morning when I woke up she wasn't there.”

Twilight swallowed. She tried to pull herself together, but she failed. “She wasn't there! I know

I was mad at her yesterday and refused to talk to her, but she wasn't there. After our big fight she just left, and I didn't see her again. So I went to her room, and – and – that's where I found her. She was – on the floor.”

Twilight tried to wipe away the tears from her face. It didn't help. She could not stop crying. “I, um, I – I know it's my fault. I should have seen this coming. One of the things about clones is that you have to be careful when you define their core nature. If you embed a command that they cannot achieve, they will self-destruct. It's like creating a contradiction in terms. The clone will realize they cannot accomplish what they were created to do, and the magic that sustains them will tear itself apart. A real pony could accept it and move on, but clones are more fragile. They're just not good at failure. The only way to prevent it is to rewrite their core definition.

“I... never did that with Sunshine. It never crossed my mind because she always seemed so happy. At least, I thought she was happy. But she wasn't, was she? She must have been miserable since the day I created her. She spent her whole life lying to me, just to keep me happy. She actually went around *killing ponies* and replacing them to make me happy! That's how frantic she was. She even killed *Celestia*. She was so

desperate to keep me happy that she assassinated the ruler of Equestria.”

Twilight could not stop crying. “I am such a horrible pony! Look at what I did. I was so lonely that I destroyed the whole world. But it wasn't my fault, you know? When Applejack died, nopony was there for me. I was all alone. Only Rainbow Dash came, and she was just there to push me into resurrecting Applejack. She wasn't there because she cared about me. No, *no*pony actually cared about me. Celestia promised to be there, but when I really needed her she threw me out of her house. So I created a friend for myself so I would actually have somepony. But I am such a monster that the only way Sunshine could keep me happy was by replacing my actual friends with clones. I am *that bad*.”

“And now Sunshine is dead. What am I supposed to do now? I literally have nopony left. All I ever wanted was somepony to care about me, but there isn't anyone left. Oh sure, I could create a fake pony, and I could give that fake pony some fake feelings for me. I could have that fake friend tell me what I want to hear, but that's stupid. I want a *real* friend. But I'll never have that again.”

The memory ended.

Celestia was torn. On the one hoof, she genuinely cared about Twilight. But then there

was the fact that she had destroyed Equestria and turned the entire world into a decaying ruin. *At least now you understand what you have done, Celestia thought at last. I am just sorry that things went this far before you learned the truth. I wish I could have talked to you long ago and guided you down a different path. I could have spared you all that pain. But you brought this upon yourself. You claim that you have no friends, but that is not true. I tried to visit you the week that Applejack died, but you would not see me. All of your friends came, and all of your friends were turned away. You were the one who chose to replace them with Sunshine. They did not abandon you, Twilight. You abandoned them.*

There was one more memory shard left. Celestia placed it in the crystal tripod.

This Twilight was even older and larger than the last one. She was now equal in stature with Celestia. The purple alicorn had a look of pain and sorrow about her. She looked like she had not been happy in a long time.

"This is the last entry I'm going to make in this stupid journal," she said. "There's really no point anymore. It's been eighty years since I started all of this, and it's pretty much over. Equestria is completely dead. Even the plants have died. I thought that the cities would have

decayed faster, but I guess the absence of weather, animals, and active plant life have caused what's left of them to be preserved. There's just nothing actively tearing them apart. The ruins may continue standing for eons – a testament to my foolishness.

“Nearly all the real ponies are dead now. The only ones left are ponies that were young fillies when I started all of this. They probably don't even remember the real world anymore! They'll die in the next few years, and then that will be that. I will be the last pony in the world.”

Twilight sighed. “The last pony. You know, I thought that Cadence and Luna would live for a long time, but that didn't happen. Boy, that was sure a disaster, wasn't it? But I don't suppose I can blame them. A pony gets used to living in enchanted comics, and eventually forgets that when they come back into the real world they have limitations. That's why ponies almost always get killed when they come back to Equestria.”

Killed? Celestia thought with horror. My sister is dead? Cadence is dead? Everypony in existence is dead except for Twilight? No – I refuse to believe that. My sister is not dead. Surely Sunshine imprisoned Luna and cloned her, and only the clone died. But Twilight can tell the difference, can't she? But – no. My sister can't be

dead. I just got her back; I can't have lost her again so soon. Twilight, if you took Luna from me I will tear you apart. nopony hurts my sister!

Twilight was still talking. "I suppose I'm lucky, in a way, because I've never been able to forget that the fake worlds are fake. That's all they are, isn't it? Fake. I finally created my own world – I had to. You can't live in Equestria anymore; for one thing there's no food or water. But it's all so fake. All it has are fake ponies with fake feelings, who say whatever fake things you want them to say. I hate it. I just ignore them and live alone, with my books and my studies of magic. What else is there?"

"I wish I had never done any of this. I wish I had never created these stupid books. But it's too late to go back now."

When the memory ended, Celestia replaced it in the velvet case. *Well, at least I know what I need to do now. One of the earlier memories said that all of the comics were stored in a vault down in the basement. I need to find Twilight and talk to her – if I can do that without killing her for what she did to my sister. Then, if she survives, we can find the prison books that Sunshine created and free the ponies that are trapped there. Once they are free I can work on rebuilding this world. I do hope that Sunshine trapped some stallions. If she*

didn't then we really are doomed.

Celestia exited Twilight's bedroom and made her way down into the castle basement. The last time she had entered the basement it was filled with magical equipment. This time it was completely deserted.

In the far wall was a massive iron door. To Celestia's surprise, there were no guards by it. The princess walked up to the door and tried to open it. The door opened freely; it was not locked.

I suppose that it would be pointless to continue to guard it, Celestia thought. After all, Twilight is the only pony left. There aren't even any animals who might threaten these books.

When Celestia opened the vault, she saw that the area inside was pitch black. Celestia lit up her horn to provide light – and gasped. The room was *enormous*. Celestia was standing at the top level, on a walkway. The room itself stretched on for miles; its far wall was out of sight. When she peered over the railing she saw that the room extended down for hundreds of feet.

There must be millions of comics in here, she thought with amazement. Twilight was not kidding. Apparently she truly did gather every book in the world.

Celestia jumped over the railing and flew down to the ground level. Before she reached the

floor, she noticed that there was a pattern of hoofprints in the dust. Somepony had been down there recently, walking around. But who was this pony, and where did she go?

Without disturbing the dust, Celestia gently flew down over the ground and followed the prints. The trail led her to a glass case that was along one of the walls. Inside the case were two books. The first book was a large, beautifully bound volume that was neatly entitled MASTER WORLD. The second book was a thin, rather flimsy comic. Someone had scribbled TWILIGHT'S WORLD on its cover.

Celestia looked at them. *Hmmm. The first book must be the master comic that Twilight used to make all the others. Since there are no real ponies left in the enchanted worlds, that book is not going to help me. The second book is almost certainly the world that Twilight created for herself. That is where I will find her.*

Celestia opened the glass case – and then heard a voice call out behind her. “And just what do you think *you're* doing?”

Celestia turned around and saw that Twilight was standing right behind her. It was jarring to see how large she had grown. “Twilight!” Celestia exclaimed, startled. “I’m sorry – I didn’t see you there. Where did you come from?”

Twilight frowned. "The guards told me somepony was in the library. Don't you know this area is off-limits?"

"Guards? I didn't see any guards."

"That's the whole idea. Now tell me: who are you? Clones aren't supposed to be able to leave their comics, you know. The last clone left in the world was that stupid clone of Celestia that used to live in Canterlot, but she died years ago. So who are you and how did you get here?"

"I'm the real Celestia," the princess quietly. "I know you have a spell that can tell the difference. Go on – test me. I am not a clone."

"Oh, sure," Twilight said sarcastically. "I'm *totally* positive that you're the real Celestia, who just happened to appear out of nowhere after, like, a hundred years. But I'm bored out of my mind, so why not. I need a good laugh."

Twilight's horn lit up, and she stared at Celestia for a few seconds. Her eyes widened in shock. "I can't believe it. It isn't possible! It really *is* you. You're not a clone! But – how? Where have you been all these years?"

Before Celestia could say anything, Twilight became enraged. "Hold on just a second. Let's talk about that, shall we? Do you realize it's been *ninety-two years*? Ninety-two years, Celestia! Where have you been? All this time I've needed a

friend and mentor, and *you* have been absent. And you show up *now*? What is your problem?"

"I was in prison," Celestia said, clearly irritated. "On the day that Starswirl killed Applejack and Rainbow Dash, you came to visit me. I said that I did not have time to talk to you right then, and told you to come and visit me later. That night you returned. I tried to apologize to you but you refused to listen. You asked to speak to me privately so I led you into a small room. The minute we were alone you cast a spell on me and trapped me in a book. I just now got free."

"That's a lie!" Twilight shouted. "I didn't go back and visit you that evening. I was too angry with you. Sunshine is the one who—"

Twilight froze.

Celestia nodded. "Yes. Exactly. I believe she disguised herself to look like you and then came to see me. She put me in a prison book and must have replaced me with a clone. Twilight, I was only in that book for a few seconds, but while I was there decades passed in Equestria."

"So *that's* what she did," Twilight said. "Sunshine never killed anypony – instead she put them in a time stasis. But she must have somehow messed up the formula and allowed time to pass."

Celestia nodded. "That is my thought as well.

But Twilight, that means there is still hope. If she put me in a time prison then she surely did the same thing to many others. Your friends may still be alive! If we can find their prison books we can set them free and start undoing the damage that you have done to my world."

"Your world?" Twilight echoed. "What do you mean, your world?"

"What part do you not understand?" Celestia said angrily. "I am the Princess of the Sun, the ruler of Equestria. Over the past ninety years you managed to destroy this world and kill nearly everyone – including my sister, who I will never see again *because of you*. My world is *reality*. Your world is those foolish fantasies of yours."

"How dare you!" Twilight shrieked. "You think this is all *my* fault?"

Celestia immediately realized she had made a mistake. No one had rebuked Twilight in a lifetime. She was damaged, upset, and emotionally brittle, and would not respond well to that approach. As angry as Celestia was with Twilight, she needed her help. She had to resist the urge to fight with her.

Celestia tried again. "Twilight, listen, we can fix this. We can free the trapped ponies and use them to start a new pony race. I know the world is dead, but we can bring it back to life again. A lot

has been lost but we are not without hope.”

“This all is Sunshine's doing!” Twilight said bitterly. “This is all *her* fault. If I had known how badly things were going then I would have made corrections right there at the beginning. If I had known how my friends *really* felt then I would have done things differently. I never asked her to replace my friends with fakes, you know! I never told her to lie to me.”

Celestia knew she was going to regret this, but she spoke her mind anyway. “Twilight, listen to me. I believe we can fix this world and bring life to it once more. Before we can do that, though, we need to establish the fact that these enchanted books are evil. They destroyed Equestria and corrupted ponykind. We need to get rid of them entirely. Even if Sunshine had never existed at all, this was still the wrong course to take. It was *always* wrong to replace reality with a fantasy. That mistake was yours and yours alone.”

“It was *not* a mistake!” Twilight shouted. “Don't you see? Reality is terrible! Reality is full of pain and disappointment. Ponies like *you* just let their friends down. Trying to bring back the real world is a dumb idea.”

Celestia's irritation turned into anger. It took all of her self-control to hold her temper. “You

don't understand. I saw your memories, Twilight. You long for something that is *real*. You want love that isn't forced. You want friends who choose to be your friend. Yes, Twilight, I know that life can be painful. That's what friends are for, remember? You always said that you could overcome any challenge with the help of your friends, and that has proven true time and time again. When you and your friends work together, you not only overcome challenges; you learn and grow. You become a better pony. Tell me, Twilight. What have you learned about friendship during these past ninety years? You are the Princess of Friendship – or, at least, you were once. What is your report? Can you honestly tell me that the path you have chosen has led to harmony and lasting relationships?”

Twilight glared at her. “You want to blame this all on me, don't you? You want *me* to accept complete responsibility for the death of ponykind. You want to hear me say that I killed them all. That I'm a monster. Is that it?”

“That's not what I was saying at all,” Celestia protested. “I know you didn't do this intentionally. I know you weren't trying to destroy the world, and that it was all a mistake. But before we can fix this we have to agree that it *was* a mistake. We have to put an end to the fantasies – forever. We

have to choose reality. That is my point.”

“No. I won't do it. This is Sunshine's fault – she lied to me. This is the fault of all those stupid ponies who took the wonderful gift I gave them and used it to become monsters. This could have turned out well. There is nothing wrong with this magic. *I'm* not the one who chose to misuse it.”

“But you did allow it to be misused,” Celestia pointed out firmly. “Twilight, you are royalty. It is the job of monarchs to watch over their subjects and keep them safe. Sometimes that means we have to protect them from those who wish to do them harm, and sometimes that means we have to protect them from themselves. That is why laws exist.

“In some ways subjects are like children. When a filly is young, its parents nurture it and teach it how to grow and become a responsible citizen. They refuse to give the filly sharp objects because the child could hurt itself. The parents limit the child's options until the child grows and becomes more responsible. They do this for their good.

“You, Twilight, failed to do that. You gave your subjects powers that they never should have had, and when they began to misuse them you did not step in and protect them. You are their ruler, Twilight. It was your job to *be the parent*,

and you failed to do that. Even after you found out that Sunshine was lying to you, you still did not step in and correct the situation.”

“It was too late!” Twilight protested.

Celestia shook her head. “It was *not* too late. Only twenty years have passed and there were still many ponies alive. You could have brought them all out of the comics and forced them to behave. You could have made them go back into reality and resume their old lives. It would have been a painful adjustment, but you wielded far more power than they did. I know it hurts to discipline an unruly child, but there are times when the child needs it. The fact is you did nothing, Twilight. You failed them.”

“No!” Twilight shrieked. “It's not true. I didn't fail them! I won't let you call me a monster. That's what you want, isn't it? You want to get rid of all these books and restart reality again. Then when ponies in the future ask 'What happened?', you will tell them how you saved them from the evil overlord Twilight, who destroyed all of Equestria. I'll go down in history as the worst pony who ever lived.”

“Twilight, stop it. That's not what I want at all, and you know it. I'm telling you that you made an honest mistake, but there's still time to fix it. We can repair the world – if you agree that what

you did was wrong. You must help me destroy these books and repair Equestria.”

“No!” Twilight screamed. “These books are all I have left. I’m not going to let you take them from me.”

“This is *not optional*,” Celestia said angrily. “I *am* going to destroy these books.”

“You can’t. If you destroy a book while a pony is in it, the pony dies.”

“*There are no living ponies left in these books.* You know that as well as I do. Only the prison books contain life, and I will free those ponies before I destroy their prisons. Twilight, one way or another I *will* put an end to what you have done and burn these enchanted worlds. I would prefer to do it with your help, but if I must I will do it alone.”

“You’ll do it over my dead body,” Twilight shouted. She energized her horn and lunged at Celestia.

Chapter 15: “Death is somethin' that even you can't prevent.”

Applejack was more than a little nervous. For her whole life she had been an earth pony, and she had always been proud of that. True, there were some stuck-up aristocrats who looked down on earth ponies. Some thought that they were the least of the pony races because they couldn't do magic and they didn't have wings. Yet that was Applejack's heritage, and she was proud of it. She never had a desire to be anything other than exactly who she was. Applejack worked the land, tended to her family's apple trees, and lived a good life. She was content.

Then that infamous tree fell on her and killed her, and Rainbow Dash talked her into getting a pair of wings. It was certainly nice, but in a way it just didn't feel right. Applejack was an *earth pony*, not a pegasus. She worked the land; she didn't fly over the clouds. But now things had changed even more. Starswirl the Bearded – a pony who had died almost a thousand years ago – had transformed her into an alicorn and taught her

everything he knew about magic. Applejack was about to use a magical spell to jump a hundred years into the future, and she was not happy about it.

Magic was one thing that Applejack never really cared about. That had always been Twilight's business. The purple alicorn spent endless hours in those dusty books of hers, studying and reading and writing tedious essays. It always struck Applejack as kind of boring. She already had her life passion: her family and her apples. She knew more about apples than just about anypony – and now she knew more about magic than even Twilight Sparkle herself. She knew all kinds of spells that could do all kinds of things. She even understood why the spells worked. Some of the spells she knew were so arcane that they would only be of interest to – well, ponies like Twilight.

All Applejack wanted was to be an earth pony again. She wanted to go back to her old life – to the way things were before that blasted tree fell. But the only way to fix Equestria was to go into the future and then go back into the past, and that meant she had to use magic.

What a mess, Applejack thought. Maybe when all this is over I can go back to the way things used to be. Only I guess that ain't gonna

happen, because when I save the original there's gonna be two of us. That's going to be mighty strange! I wonder how all my kinfolk will react at the family reunion.

All of this crossed Applejack's mind in an instant. The orange alicorn looked at Starswirl one last time, checked to make sure that Rainbow Dash was standing right next to her, and then lit up her horn. *Now that's an odd feeling*, Applejack thought. *I didn't even have this body part a few minutes ago, and here I am using it as if I've had it all my life. Casting spells feels all tingly and weird. Do all spells feel this way, or just the time travel one?*

A glowing sphere appeared around the two ponies. Applejack concentrated on the spell and poured more magic into it. The sphere began to glow brightly – and then the world around them vanished. In fact, a *lot* of things vanished. The barn vanished. Sweet Apple Acres vanished. All the grass and trees vanished. The clouds vanished from the sky. Even the sun itself vanished. All that was left was the ground beneath her hooves.

Applejack stared at the ground and frowned. “Now that's weird. The ground ain't made of dirt anymore. It looks more like some kinda fused glass. I've never seen anythin' like it. Where did that come from?”

"You think *that's* what's weird about this?" Rainbow Dash replied. "So the ground changed – big deal. I want to know what happened to the rest of Equestria. Isn't there supposed to be a farm here? And where are all the trees? This doesn't look anything like Ponyville! Are you sure you just took us a hundred years into the future? Because this looks more like a hundred *million* years."

"I'm pretty sure. I've cast that spell lots of times. It's never gone wrong before."

"What are you talking about? You've never cast a spell before in your whole life! You've been a unicorn for, like, ten seconds. Time travel is *not* something you do on a regular basis."

"Oh. Right. Of course – I meant that Starswirl cast that spell lots of times. I guess I'm gettin' the two of us confused."

"Please don't do that," Rainbow Dash begged. "We already have a friend who's a bookish magical nerd pony. I like Twilight and all, but we don't need two of her."

"I'm sure she will be delighted to hear you say that – especially since we're about to have two Applejacks and two Rainbow Dashes. Speaking of that, where are you plannin' on livin' when we get home? Do you think your old self will let you move in with her?"

"I hadn't really thought about it. Eh, it doesn't matter. After all, Twilight's got lots of space in that sweet castle of hers, and I can always move in there. I'm sure she won't mind. She let Rarity move in, didn't she?"

"So where is that castle?" Applejack asked. "I don't see anything around for miles. This really don't look like Equestria at all."

"But it's *got* to be. Right? I mean, it's not like we stepped through a magical mirror into an alternate dimension. There must have been some kind of big disaster after we left, and everything got blown up. Well, we wanted to see if the future was bad, and now we know: the future is *super* bad. So now all we have to do is go back in time and fix everything. You *do* know how to go backwards in time, right?"

"Sure. I've done it – I mean, Starswirl's done it lots of times."

"Are you *sure* you know how? Maybe we should have practiced that spell *before* we came here. Because if it turns out you forgot something important, we are going to be stuck here. And this is not a fun place to be stuck."

"I'm positive," Applejack said firmly. She paused. "At least, I'm pretty positive. I guess we'll find out when we give it a try."

"Great! Then let's go. Ponyville, here we

come!”

“Now hold on a minute! We can't go back until we know what happened. We've got some work to do first.”

“What do you mean?”

Applejack waved a hoof at the horizon. “Look at this place! Do *you* know how this happened?”

“Does it matter?”

“You bet it does! For all we know, Twilight decided *not* to release her books after all. This could have been caused by anything. Maybe there was some kinda war or somethin'. Maybe disease wiped everypony out. Maybe the sun exploded. The point is, we can't go back in time and prevent this disaster *until we know what the disaster actually was*. We've got to know how things got this way.”

“Oh. Right. I see what you mean.” Rainbow Dash grinned. “You know, maybe this is all Discord's fault. Maybe he got bored and blew everything up.”

“I highly resent that accusation,” a familiar voice said. A snake-like figure slowly materialized in front of them. The oddly-shaped being looked like some kind of malformed dragon that had been made up of leftover parts of other animals. He had a deer antler, a goat horn, a snake tongue, a lion's arm, an eagle's claw, and other assorted

odds and ends.

“Hello, Discord,” Applejack said. “Fancy meetin' you here.”

“Actually *you* are the real surprise,” Discord replied. “I had given up all hope of anything interesting ever happening in this dimension again. Then you two showed up! After all this time, too. I'm glad I left the light on for you.”

“Do what now?” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “You mean *you're* responsible for all this?”

“Oh, not at all! When I learned of this unhappy occurrence I was as surprised at you. Surely you must realize that if I did destroy the world, it would be ruined in a far more interesting fashion. This apocalypse has *boring* written all over it. Where are the giant-sized beavers? Where's the chocolate rain? No, I had nothing to do with this. Celestia is the one who decided to burn the world to the ground – quite literally, actually.”

Applejack frowned. “I find that just a bit hard to believe.”

Discord pretended to be offended. “Why, Applejack, how can you doubt me? Aren't we friends? And friends trust each other, don't they? Here, why don't I take you to Celestia. I'll let her explain everything.”

Discord snapped his eagle talon. The three of

them vanished.

The group reappeared at the bottom of a giant pit. The pit was enormous – it stretched off into the distance for what looked like miles. The rim of the pit was high above them. The pit itself was empty, and its floor and walls were made of fused glass. There was nothing to be seen.

Well, *almost* nothing. Rainbow Dash shrieked when she saw it. Lying on the ground were the skeletons of two alicorns. The bones were about thirty feet apart and were in terrible shape. Their wings were crushed, their horns were shattered, and most of their bones were broken.

“That's awful!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed.

“Actually, my dear, that is Celestia,” Discord corrected. “Your friend Twilight is over there. The two alicorns had quite a fight! Oh, I wish I had been there to see it. It must have been truly epic. Not only did they manage to kill themselves, but they took out the whole world with them. Even the sun itself did not survive. It gives the term 'collateral damage' a new meaning, doesn't it?”

Applejack was horrified. “That ain't possible! Why would they fight?”

“Excellent question,” Discord said. He snapped his eagle talon, and a royal golden throne appeared. He sat down in it. “Let's start at

the beginning, shall we? When all of this nonsense started I was in my own chaotic dimension – a wonderful place, by the way – taking a well-deserved nap. Being the Lord of Chaos can be so demanding. Ponies come to have such high expectations of you.”

“I’m sure they do,” Applejack said dryly.

“As I was saying, one day I decided to poke my head out and see how things were going. And do you know what I found? All the ponies in the world had abandoned their lives and moved into books! *Books*, I tell you. I can’t imagine a more boring fate. I was gone for two months and everyone went batty. You know, if their poor little lives were missing excitement they only had to ask. I can really be quite the entertainer! My rates are very reasonable.”

“Books aren’t *that* boring,” Rainbow Dash said defensively. “I’ve had a lot of fun reading books.”

“Yes, *reading* books,” Discord said. “Not *living* in them! I considered trying to talk to Twilight about this irritating development, but I knew it would be useless. After all, Twilight is the Princess of Books. Living in a book is probably paradise to her. I’m surprised she didn’t think of it sooner. So I decided to abandon Boringville. I attempted to take dear Fluttershy with me, but

Sunshine had replaced her with a brainwashed clone.”

Discord sighed. “I had no choice but to leave Equestria and try to find a more interesting apocalypse. Let me tell you, there are some great ones out there. I'd be glad to give you the tour, if you're interested! Just remember to not make fun of the Super Mutants. They can get a bit testy.”

Applejack held up a hoof. “Hold on just a second. So Twilight *did* release her books, and everypony moved into them. I get that. But what in tarnation happened to Equestria?”

“As I said, I missed the fight itself. But the explosion was so vast that even I noticed it, and I wasn't even in the area at the time. It appears that Sunshine had trapped Celestia in some sort of time prison. When Celestia finally escaped, she confronted Twilight and the two ponies got in a big fight. The fight went on for days. In the end Celestia must have realized that she couldn't beat Twilight, because that's when she used the sun as a weapon. I don't know what she was trying to do; my guess is the spell didn't work right. In the end she blew up all the books, destroyed the whole world, vaporized the sun, and killed herself – and Twilight *still* didn't die.”

“But she's dead now,” Rainbow Dash pointed out.

Discord nodded. "Twilight did die of her injuries eventually, a day or so later. I have to say, it was all rather shocking. I have never seen two ponies who hated each other so much. I thought you ponies were supposed to be all about love and harmony! I'm quite disappointed in you."

"Hey, this wasn't *my* fault," Rainbow Dash protested.

"Oh? Is that so? Weren't *you* the one who pushed Twilight into inventing this magic into the first place? This whole idea would never have occurred to her on her own. If you ask me, you are *precisely* the pony who is responsible for this."

"That's not fair! All I did was ask Twilight to save my friend. I didn't ask her to have the whole world move into books, or get in a fight with Celestia! That was her doing."

"Believe what you must," Discord replied.

Applejack spoke up. "So Celestia destroyed the sun? But if that's the case then why is there still light?"

"As I said, I left the light on for you. I thought there was a slim chance that something interesting might happen here again, and if it *did* happen I wanted to be able to see it."

"So this light is your magic?" Applejack asked.

"Of course it is! Who else could provide this

level of service? I admit it's not up to my usual chaotic nature, but consider what I'm working with. There simply isn't a lot of potential here anymore."

"Well, thank you," Applejack replied.

"So can we go now?" Rainbow Dash asked. "I think we know what happened. Time to head back to Ponyville."

Applejack shook her head. "Not just yet. I want to talk to Twilight first."

"But she's dead!" Rainbow Dash pointed out. "Dead ponies don't have a whole lot to say."

"That's *not* what I mean. I want to go back in time to a period after the fight, but before she died. I'd like to have a word with her before we try to fix this mess."

"Seriously? Why would you want that?"

"Think about it. Twilight was the pony who created this blasted magic in the first place. She lived through everything and she fought Celestia. I'd like to find out what she was thinking right before she died. That might help us to convince the old Twilight to not make the same mistakes."

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "Whatever. It sounds like a big waste of time to me, but you're the magical alicorn here."

"Now wait just a minute," Discord said. "I'd like to point out that Rainbow Dash is literally the

last pony left in the entire world. The last *real* pony, anyway. Shouldn't she get to make the decision?"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Fine. Rainbow, are you comin' with me, or are you gonna stay here?"

"I'm coming with you," Rainbow said quickly.

"There – it's settled. What about you, Discord? Are you up for some time travel?"

The draconequus yawned. "I find this whole timeline to be positively boring. Go ahead and reset the future. Nothing of any consequence will be lost."

Applejack smiled. "You miss Fluttershy, don't you?"

Discord stood up. He snapped his talon, and the throne disappeared. "I have no idea what you are talking about," he said with a slight smile. He then vanished out of sight.

"Well, that's that," Rainbow remarked. "Can we get going now?"

"You're in a mighty big hurry to leave!" Applejack commented.

"Of course! Have you seen this place? It's, like, totally terrible. I want to get back to my friends. This isn't exactly a great place to hang out."

"I know what you mean. C'mon, let's get out

of here. Time to go talk to Twilight.”

Rainbow flew over and stood beside Applejack. Applejack then lit up her horn, and the two ponies vanished.

* * * * *

When Applejack and Rainbow Dash dropped back into the timestream, the scene around them changed ever so slightly. The sky, the ground, and the air were all the same. There was just one difference: they were no longer alone.

When Rainbow Dash saw Twilight, she immediately screamed. She averted her eyes and tried very hard not to throw up. Applejack had a very different reaction: she rushed over to her fallen friend and tried to help her.

There wasn't much she could do, and she knew it. Twilight's wings were crushed, and most of her bones were broken. Her horn was shattered and there was a large gash in her side. There was blood everywhere. Twilight herself was unconscious – thankfully. If she were awake, she would have been screaming in pain. If she was still alive enough to scream.

Applejack lit up her horn and got to work. She couldn't use magic to set bones, but she could stop the bleeding. She knew it was useless;

Twilight's internal organs were badly damaged, and she would be dead very soon. But she had to do something. She couldn't just leave her suffering like that.

Applejack finished by casting a spell that would remove all pain from Twilight. She then hesitated. "I'm going to wake Twilight up," she said aloud.

"I think Celestia's dead," Rainbow Dash said with a strained voice.

Applejack glanced behind her and saw the crushed body of the princess. "I'm not surprised. Discord did say that Celestia died first. I can see why. Given how injured both ponies are, I don't understand why Twilight survived as long as she did. Alicorns must be made of pretty tough stuff."

"I am going to be so sick. Do we have to do this? This is the most gruesome thing I've ever seen – and I saw your severed head. Whenever I see Twilight again I'm going to think of – that," she said, pointing with a hoof. "I'm going to have nightmares for sure."

"I know it ain't easy. It tears me all up inside to see our friends like this. The only reason I ain't a mess is because I know we're gonna fix all this and keep it from ever happening. It's like what Starswirl told us – once we're done, the timeline will be changed. Celestia and Twilight will never

go through this.”

“But that's not going to help us! We went through it. These memories are going to haunt us for the rest of our lives.”

“This won't take long,” Applejack assured her. She lit up her horn and cast a spell on Twilight.

The purple alicorn moaned. Her eyes struggled to open. She opened her mouth and coughed. Blood came out.

Rainbow Dash winced.

“Twilight?” Applejack said gently. “Can you hear me?”

Twilight looked at her. She struggled to speak. “I – I can't feel anything. My whole body is numb.”

“I know. I cast a spell to get rid of your pain.”

“I wasn't complaining,” Twilight replied weakly. “I've been laying here... for a while. I don't know how long. All I could feel is... pain. I couldn't move.”

“I know. You're injuries are pretty extensive. I did what I could, but there ain't a whole lot I can do.”

“I'm dying,” Twilight said flatly. “I just don't know... what happened. Celestia couldn't beat me. I was too strong. I could have hurt her, but I didn't. I held back. I wanted her to see that the

fight was futile. I wanted her to... give up. But then she did something.”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. She still couldn't look at Twilight. “Discord said Celestia cast a spell on the sun or something. Only the spell went bad, and it blew up the whole world.”

“Discord?” Twilight said. She coughed again. “He's here? Wait. Who are you two? All the books are gone. There shouldn't be any ponies left.”

“Oh right – sorry about that,” Applejack said. “That blue pegasus over there is Rainbow Dash. She's the original, actually. Not a clone or anything. I'm the first Applejack clone that you made. You created me after the original died.”

“But... you have a horn.”

“Yup, I sure do! I still ain't used to it. Starswirl gave it to me so I could travel through time. He was worried that your book project was really dangerous, so he sent Rainbow Dash and me into the future to see how things turned out. So here we are.”

“Through time?” Twilight gasped. “*That's* what he did? I thought he killed you!”

“*Killed* us?” Rainbow said. “That's crazy! Where in Equestria did you get *that* idea? Starswirl would never kill anypony! He was awesome. I liked him.”

“Sunshine was the one who told me...”

Twilight stopped. A look of anger appeared on her face. "Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid! Why did I trust her? I was... a fool."

"I take it you've had a falling out with your friend," Applejack said.

"She betrayed me," Twilight said bitterly. "She replaced my friends with clones. Lied to me. She was horrible."

"I kinda figured. You know, Starswirl thought that Rarity was a clone. I guess he was right. He was convinced that Sunshine was bad news and that your comic magic would lead to disaster. I gotta say he was right on the money. The future is a much bigger disaster than I ever imagined."

"But you can... fix it," Twilight said. Her breathing labored. "Make it... right."

"Now don't you worry none," Applejack said soothingly. "That's exactly what I'm gonna do. Rainbow and I are going to go back in time and stop that tree from killing me. Then—"

"No," Twilight gasped. "Don't... do that. Make a new future. In a book."

"In a *book*?" Applejack said incredulously.

"Think about it. The real world is... bad. Full of pain and death. Can't you see? The only way to be happy is in books. In books you can... stop bad things from happening. This world is just... trouble. Don't try to save it. Make a better one."

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "You know, she kinda does have a point."

"No she doesn't! Look, Twilight, I know you're fond of books and all, but I think you've lost your senses. I am *not* going to spend the rest of eternity harvestin' fake apples from fake apple trees, and living with a fake family in a fake world. I want somethin' *real*. Those books of yours are just fantasies – nothing more. Why in Equestria would I want to live in a daydream?"

Twilight struggled to talk. "Its... better. No loss. No death."

Applejack shook her head. "Twilight, you ain't thinkin' clearly. Look, I know that life has pain and problems. That's just part of it. But that's why you have friends – they help you get over the rough parts. I know there's bad in this life, but there's good too. The trick is not dwellin' on the bad or lettin' it define you and change you who are. Instead you have to overcome it. That's what you've always done before, and it's helped you grow stronger and become a better pony. Trying to avoid pain by living in a daydream is just foolish.

"Besides, it don't work anyway. I understand that you don't like death. I don't like it either. But don't you see? Death is somethin' that even you can't prevent. No matter what you do, your

friends are still going to die. The best you can do with your book magic is replace them with copies that do whatever you want them to do. Are fake friends with fake emotions really what you want?"

Twilight looked at Applejack. "Aren't you... a clone?"

"I surely am, and I hate it. And what's more, *you* hate it too. You're still angry with Sunshine for replacin' your friends with clones, and I bet it's because you want the real thing. You can't tell me that you believe a clone is just as good as the original. I know that you hate the bad parts of this life; I get that. We all feel the same way. But what you really want is something real. And you can't get that in a book."

"But... my friends. If you fix the timeline, they will still die. I'll still... lose you. I can't bear that."

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "She does have a point, you know! Twilight's an alicorn. She's going to live for thousands of years. *You* might live that long, since you're a magical pony created out of a book, but I'm sure not."

"I'm sorry, Twilight," Applejack said. "I know you love your friends, and I know you don't want to lose 'em. Bein' an alicorn has both good and bad, I guess. It just depends on how you approach

it. I know you won't be able to keep us forever – but since you'll live for so long, you'll get to have more friends than I can even imagine. You'll meet all sorts of ponies. Now I admit it would be hard to make a friend when you know you're gonna outlive them by centuries. And it's true that since you're gonna live for so long, it will be really hard for you to relate to anypony. Yeah, I see the problem. I would tell you to go and talk to Celestia about it, since she seems to handle it ok, but I know she's kinda, um, dead right now. I wish I knew what to tell you, but this is way beyond me. I'm just an earth pony, after all.”

“No you're not. You're... an alicorn,” Twilight pointed out.

“Oh. Right. Yeah, there's that. But my point is, even your books can't keep your friends from dying. I know you want a world that's free from pain, but this magic can't do that. What you ought to do is *fight* the pain instead of fleeing from it. Twilight, you've got friends! Why, you had friends all over Equestria who loved you and cared about you. You didn't need to create a fake pony to be your friend. When you had problems, your real friends could have helped you overcome them. *Real* friends give you something real to hold onto. Something you can trust.

“Let me ask you a question. When you are

feeling sad and upset, what would you rather do: go to some fake pony in a book, or go to your real friends in Equestria? Because if I take your advice, there ain't ever gonna be any more real ponies again. Is that really what you want?"

Twilight looked at Applejack. Tears began to form in her eyes. She struggled to speak. "I want... my friends back. I've been... so alone."

"Then that's what we'll do," Applejack said.

"I'm... so... sorry," Twilight said weakly.

"I know," Applejack replied.

Twilight did not respond. She was gone.

* * * * *

After Twilight died, there was silence. Applejack sat by Twilight's body and looked at her, lost in thought. Rainbow Dash flew around in the air. She was nervous and antsy.

"What are you doing, anyway?" Rainbow Dash finally asked. "I'm pretty sure she's dead. She's not going to answer any more of your questions."

"I know," Applejack said softly. "It's just really sad, you know? I never thought I'd live long enough to see her die. I always figured I'd go before she did."

"You *did* die before she did. That's how all of

this started.”

“That's true, ain't it? I guess you're right. I just hate seeing her like this.”

“Then let's go back in time and fix it! That's the plan, right? It's not like there's anything more we can do here.”

Applejack stood up. “You know, you're taking her death awfully well. You don't seem all that upset about it.”

“That's because I refuse to accept the fact that Twilight is dead. When you and I go back in time, Twilight is going to be alive again and none of this will have ever happened. This is all, like, a bad dream or something.”

“I wish this were just a dream. I really do. But you're right about one thing: we are going to fix this. But first there's one more thing we've got to do.”

“Aw, c'mon! What now? What could there possibly be to do in this empty world? We're the only ponies left!”

“I need Twilight's memories,” Applejack said. “I need to know what happened between the time we left and now. That way when we go back in time and talk to our friends, we can explain to them how the world was destroyed. Somepony needs to remember this timeline.”

“Can't we just tell them that it's bad and

leave it at that?"

Applejack shook her head. "That ain't a good idea. I can't tell Twilight to not do somethin' without tellin' her why. It would be too easy for her to think that I was wrong, or that it wasn't really that bad, or that this time it's gonna be different. I need her memories. That's the only thing that would convince her – I mean, really convince her deep down."

"I dunno. It kinda seems like an invasion of privacy. Are you sure Twilight wants you to have her memories? Aren't they kinda personal?"

"I'm not going to get *all* of her memories. I just need the memories from the day I died until the day she died. All those memories will be of events that the old Twilight will never experience. They'll be from a Twilight in a different timeline."

"But won't there still be lots of personal stuff in there? I mean, you're going to learn all sorts of things about her that she probably doesn't want you to know."

Applejack looked at Rainbow Dash. "You do realize that this whole thing started when you took my memories and gave them to a clone, right? *Twilight* was the first pony to take a pony's memories – from *my* corpse, as a matter of fact."

"But she didn't take them for herself! She was trying to recreate you. It's not like she

grabbed them and put them all in her head."

"That's true," Applejack agreed. "Instead she put 'em in a stone and then stuck them on a shelf in her basement, so she could access them whenever she wanted."

"C'mon – you know Twilight's not like that."

A thought suddenly occurred to Applejack. "Wait a minute. This isn't about Twilight at all, is it? You're still upset that Twilight accidentally gave me some of *your* memories!"

"And I don't want that to happen to her," Rainbow Dash said. "I know what it's like. It's bad."

Applejack nodded. "All right. So suppose that instead of doing that, we just take Twilight's body back in time with us and let Twilight extract her memories from her corpse. Would that work?"

"Ew! That's gross. Are you crazy? Why would you even suggest that? Just use a memory stone."

"I ain't got a memory stone. And I sure don't see any laying around here."

"So make one," Rainbow said. "I mean, you've got your comic definition, right? You can use that to just poof one into existence. Problem solved."

"I guess I could do that," Applejack admitted. "Then when we go back in time, we can give that stone to Twilight. She can then have very vivid

memories of losing all of her friends, being betrayed by Sunshine, descending into madness, and then dying a slow and painful death after being attacked by her mentor Celestia. I'm sure she's *really* gonna enjoy that. There's no chance at all that might cause permanent psychological damage."

"Fine," Rainbow Dash muttered. "I give up. But aren't you worried about losing yourself? I mean, you've already got Applejack's memories – the original, I mean – and you've got my knowledge of flight and my memories, and you've got Starswirl's knowledge of magic. Now you're going to have Twilight living in your head too. How are you going to keep from going nuts?"

"It's easy. I'll just create a partition in my head and I'll store all of Twilight's memories there. If I need them I can access them, but they won't be a part of who I am."

Rainbow frowned. "You know that's not a thing, right? Ponies don't work that way. I'm pretty sure that's not possible."

"Maybe not for a real pony. But I'm fake, remember? All I need to do is change my definition, and pretty much anything is possible. That's how I became a time-traveling alicorn. I just need to do a little bit of writing."

"Did you bring a quill?"

“Nope. But I don't need it. I can just use magic.”

“Oh. All right, fine. But hurry up, ok? I want to get out of here.”

* * * * *

Applejack spent the next hour working on the memory transfer. The first thing she did was change her own comic definition. That proved to be trickier than she realized. It was true that she was a fictional pony, but all the changes that she wanted to make had to conform to physical limitations in the real world. In Equestria she was flesh and blood, and her alterations had to respect that.

What Applejack was attempting to do was very tricky and highly experimental. Her old earth pony self would have been completely lost. That sort of deep knowledge was beyond her – but it was not beyond Starswirl. Applejack was able to harness his vast understanding of magic to find a solution. Applejack would be able to carry Twilight's memories without being lost in them. Or so she hoped.

Once that task was done and her mind was ready, Applejack began transferring Twilight's mind into her own. It took a long time. Twilight's

mind was broken, and there were pieces of memory everywhere. Applejack struggled to only take the memories that were recent, and leave behind the ones that took place before Applejack was killed. It wasn't easy and it proved to be very taxing, but she was convinced it was necessary. Somepony had to remember this timeline, in order to make sure it never happened again. The record of this terrible era could not be lost.

Applejack did not want to carry this information forever. Once she fixed the timeline she wanted to write all of this down and then purge it from her mind. But for now this would have to do. *If the ponies of the past doubt me, I can just show them the memories. That will be far more convincing than words on a page.*

When it was finally done, Applejack shut down the magical connection between her and Twilight. She breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, I'm glad that's over with!"

"It sure took long enough," Rainbow Dash remarked. "So can we go now?"

"In a minute. I've got to rest a bit. Magic ain't as easy as it looks. It takes a lot out of you."

"Fine, fine, go ahead and rest. We need time to come up with a plan anyway. Once we go back in time, what are we going to do?"

"Prevent the accident that killed me, of

course!”

“Ok, great. We'll start with that. Then what?”

“Um, I guess then we'll go talk to Twilight.”

Rainbow Dash shook her head. “Nope. Bad plan. What we need to do is gather everypony together and have a big meeting. Rarity, Fluttershy, Pinkie, the original Applejack and the old me – they need to be there too. Oh, and the princesses should come. Cadence is probably busy, but Celestia and Luna should be able to make it.”

“Why in tarnation would we do that?”

“Um, maybe because an alicorn from the future just came into town and accused Twilight of destroying the whole world? Don't you think that's going to stir ponies up?”

“I guess you have a point,” Applejack admitted. “Maybe it *would* be best to tell the story to everypony. That might help Twilight understand.”

“It's not just about Twilight, you know! Once you've told the story, everypony will have to decide what to do.”

“What do you mean? I'll tell Twilight to never, ever invent the book magic. It's easy.”

Rainbow shook her head. “No it's not. The book magic is *not* bad. Sure, the way it was *used* is bad, but the magic itself can do a lot of good. It

did create you, after all.”

“It also created all of this,” Applejack said, waiving a hoof around. “I don't see anything good that came out of it.”

“But that's not the magic's fault! Look. You died, remember? You *died*, and you were gone. Now, thanks to this magic, we are about to go back in time and save your life. The *original* Applejack is going to live again thanks to that book in your saddlebag. Is *that* a bad thing?”

Applejack paused. “No, I guess not. But the cost of saving my life was awfully high, if you ask me.”

“Yes, there's good and bad,” Rainbow admitted. “But I think we need to talk about it with everypony. Maybe we can control this magic! Maybe we can limit it and use it for good. Maybe instead of using it to make fantasy worlds, we can use it to create things in *this* world – like food for hungry ponies.”

“You know, you seem strangely thoughtful today,” Applejack remarked. “You usually ain't much of a philosopher. Are you sure you're not just tryin' to avoid the blame for pushing Twilight into inventing this magic in the first place?”

“Of course not!” Rainbow protested. “Ok, well, *maybe*. Celestia is going to kill me for all this, isn't she? I am so, so dead.”

Applejack suddenly realized something. "Wait a minute! *You're* the one who pushed away Twilight's friends after I died. You wouldn't let anypony come and visit her – not even Celestia. I remember it plain as day. That's why Twilight got so lonely and felt abandoned, and that's why she created Sunshine. And Sunshine was the one who replaced her friends with clones and led to the destruction of the world. Why, Rainbow Dash, if you had just let Twilight have some company that week, none of this would have happened! Equestria would still be here."

"I know," Rainbow said painfully. "I admit it was a mistake, but seriously. How was I to know that telling Celestia to come back later would kill everypony on the planet? It's not like I did it on purpose! And wait a minute. You weren't even there! You were dead at the time. How could you remember what happened?"

"I have Twilight's memories," Applejack said.

Rainbow sighed. "Can we get out of here? I want to go home."

Applejack smiled. "Sure. Let's go pay a visit to Sweet Apple Acres. I need to have a conversation with myself."

Rainbow Dash stopped flying in circles and landed right next to Applejack. The orange alicorn then lit up her horn. The pair of ponies was

enveloped by a glowing magical sphere – and then both of them vanished.

Chapter 16: “I know this has gotta be a lot to take in.”

A moment later, Applejack and Rainbow Dash reappeared in the past – but what they saw took them by surprise. “I think we did something wrong,” Rainbow Dash commented.

Applejack instantly knew what the problem was. She face-hoofed. “I can't believe I did that! What was I thinking?”

Applejack and Rainbow Dash were in the basement of Twilight's castle in Ponyville. The room was completely empty. There was no furniture, magical decorations, or even any chairs. It was just an empty room.

“Did this happen because we time-travelled from the castle's ruins?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“I think so. When we went back in time we stayed in the same place – only, y'know, I thought we were a lot further below the surface than this. I'm just glad we didn't reappear in the middle of a wall or somethin'. That would have been awkward.”

“No kidding. So what do we do now?”

“I guess we—”

At that moment the two ponies heard hoofsteps coming down the stairs. Applejack groaned. "I guess there's no gettin' around it. Looks like our plans have changed. I have a feeling this is going to be mighty awkward."

Applejack and Rainbow Dash waited. As the seconds went by the hoofsteps grew louder. A moment later Twilight Sparkle walked into the room. "Hello!" she said cheerfully. "I didn't hear you come in. What are you—"

Then she froze. She started at Applejack and her mouth fell open. "What in Equestria happened to you?"

Applejack sighed. "It's, um, kind of a long and complicated story. The short version of the story is that Rainbow Dash and I are from the future, and we've made a trip back through time to stop Equestria from being destroyed."

"Only we appeared in your basement by mistake," Rainbow Dash added. "We were actually aiming for Sweet Apple Acres. So, sorry about that."

"Wait a minute," Twilight said. "You're from the future? But that doesn't make any sense! Time travel only lets you appear in the past for a brief moment and then you disappear. But I don't see you disappearing. And how did Applejack become an alicorn?"

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "Starswirl the Bearded did that. He gave her a horn so she could cast his time travel spell. Oh – and you're the one who gave her wings. Which is awesome, by the way."

"Starswirl the Bearded? But he's been dead for centuries! How could you possibly have met him?"

"Like I said, it's a long and complicated story," Applejack replied. "And I will explain everything – honest. But right now I've got to get to Sweet Apple Acres. If I don't then a tree is going to fall on me tomorrow and get me killed, and then an awful lot of bad stuff is going to happen."

"That doesn't make sense either! If a tree killed you then how are you still alive?"

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "Oh, that's easy. After Applejack died I pestered you day and night until you brought her back to life. You finally did figure out how to do it, which is cool and all, but after you invented that new magic you kinda went crazy and lost your marbles. In the end you and Celestia fought each other in a huge epic battle and killed everything in the whole world. There wasn't even any grass left."

"I did *what*?" Twilight exclaimed.

Applejack could see that Twilight's good mood had evaporated. She now looked worried

and distressed. *I guess I would be too*, Applejack thought. She raised a hoof. “Look. Rainbow Dash ain't the most diplomatic of ponies, and she left out a lot of details. But I promise I'll explain everything, right after I go kill that tree. Twilight, do you think you can round up the whole gang? I'd like to explain the story just once, and everypony needs to hear it. And can you see if Celestia and Luna could come? They need to hear it too.”

“Right,” Rainbow Dash said. “We need to convince Celestia not to kill you. That *really* didn't turn out well.”

“Is this some kind of prank?” Twilight asked. Her voice trembled, and she looked like she was on the verge of tears. “Because if it is it's *not* very funny! Why are you being so mean to me?”

Applejack shook her head. “No, it ain't no prank. I wish it was, Twilight, I really do. Here, let me show you something.”

Applejack lit up her horn and projected an image into the air. The image showed the distant future. There was nothing in the image at all – no grass, no trees, no buildings, and not even the sun. The only thing Twilight could see was the hard ground and an empty sky.

“What's that supposed to be?” Twilight asked.

"That's what Sweet Apple Acres is going to look like a hundred years from now," Applejack replied. "It's why we're here – to stop that future from ever happening."

Twilight took a step back away from Applejack. The purple alicorn looked terrified. "That's impossible. There's no way I would destroy the world! I would never attack Celestia, and I'm positive she would never attack me! You've got to be mistaken."

Applejack shut down the memory. "Believe me, this ain't no mistake. It's all very real. As I said, I'll explain it all to you, but I've got an errand to run first. You will get everypony together, won't you?"

"Why would I do that?" Twilight asked defensively. There was a hint of panic in her voice. "This is obviously some kind of ridiculous lie. I'm not going to waste anypony's time on this nonsense!"

"Really?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Why do you doubt the Element of Honesty? I mean, c'mon, she's an Apple. Applejack would never lie to you."

"That's not the Element of Honesty! Look at her. She's got *wings* and a *horn*. The real Applejack doesn't have either of those things. This is clearly just one of your stupid pranks. I bet Discord is involved in this somewhere."

"You've got to be kidding me! Does this really seem like the kind of prank I'd pull? Even Pinkie wouldn't come up with something like this. My pranks tend to be more practical – and they're actually funny. I'm not seeing any humor here at all."

"That makes two of us," Twilight replied testily.

Rainbow Dash frowned. "Fine, fine. Then let me ask you something. What would you do if Applejack died?"

"I don't know. That's not really something I like to think about."

"Well, think about it for a minute. Suppose that she *did* die, and suppose that I asked you to bring her back to life. How would you do it?"

"But that's impossible! It can't be done. Once a pony dies, that's it. You can't bring them back."

"That's exactly what you told me in the other timeline. But then I pestered you for days and you had your big breakthrough. You finally remembered the Power Ponies comic book. That's when it all came together."

"Power Ponies?" Twilight asked, incredulous. "What in Equestria have they got to do with anything?"

"Pinkie Pie was able to take cupcakes out of the comics, remember? That told you it's possible

to create things with pure magic. Which I guess is something that Discord does all the time, now that I think about it, only you never thought to talk to him. Anyway, that's when you decided to write Applejack back into existence. You just created her in a comic book and then copied her memories from her corpse into her new body. Then you grabbed her out of the comic, and there she stands."

"I guess that *might* work," Twilight said slowly. "It just seems awfully far fetched."

Applejack spoke up. "I know it does, but it's true. Rainbow ain't lyin'." The orange alicorn levitated open her saddlebag and took out her definition book. She then gave it to Twilight. "That's the comic you wrote to bring me back from the dead. I was the first pony that you created."

Twilight took the comic and read through it. Her eyes widened when she saw the contents of its pages. "This... this is pretty groundbreaking." A look of wonder appeared on her face. "This is real, isn't it? There's too much new magic in here for it to be a prank. Do you mean that I raised Applejack from the dead using this book?"

"Not exactly," Applejack replied. "What you actually did was create a new Applejack that was an exact copy of the old one. The original one was

still dead; I think you buried her body in your basement somewhere. I'm more like a clone."

"This is so amazing!" Twilight said enthusiastically. "Here is the passage that defines your wings – oh, and over here is the unicorn definition. I never dreamed any of this was even possible! This could change Equestria forever."

Applejack nodded. "It sure did. When you released this magic into the world, you started a chain of events that eventually led to the death of everypony. That magic is downright dangerous. It has got to be stopped."

"It's not all bad," Rainbow Dash protested. "I think Sunshine was the real problem. If it hadn't been for her things might have turned out ok. As long as Twilight doesn't make that same mistake, I think we'll be safe."

"Sunshine?" Twilight asked. She looked up from the comic. "Who is Sunshine?"

Rainbow snickered. "Apparently you decided that Celestia wasn't chummy enough for you, so you created a duplicate of her and turned her into your own loyal servant. Sunshine lived across the hall and did anything you told her to do. She was so supportive that when your real friends told you that you were losing your marbles, she put them all in prison and replaced them with mind-controlled clones. She was your best friend."

Twilight blushed. She gave the comic back to Applejack. "I would *never* use this magic to create a friend for me."

"Really?" Applejack said, as she took the comic and put it into her saddlebag. "Because that's exactly what you did. You decided that you were all alone in the world, and you didn't have any friends that you could talk about magic with. So you decided to make yourself the perfect friend. Someone who would always be there for you and support you."

"It does *sound* tempting," Twilight admitted. "Now that you mention it, I guess it would be nice to have someone to talk to. You don't know how difficult it gets sometimes, when I make a new discovery and have no one to share it with. This new magic has all sorts of great possibilities. The more I think about it the more excited I get! Would it really be *that* bad to make a new friend?"

"It was *way* worse than simply 'bad'," Rainbow Dash replied. "It was *way* bad. It killed everypony. *Literally!* You were the last pony on the planet, and Applejack and I found you just in time to watch you die. Speaking of which, it's great to see you alive again. I like you better that way."

"This is all so confusing," Twilight said. "I

don't even know how to react to all this. At first I was upset, but now I'm just excited. This magic has so much potential! I don't see how it could possibly go wrong. That comic book is one of the most exciting discoveries I've ever seen. I really, really don't believe it could destroy the world, but I guess I need to hear your story before I tell you that you're wrong. I'll go round up the gang while you go to Sweet Apple Acres and, um, stop yourself from getting killed. Once everyone is together you can tell us the story of the future."

"Before you tell us *we're wrong*?" Applejack said.

"Did I say that out loud?" Twilight replied. "Sorry. I didn't mean it that way."

"Look," Applejack said, her voice hardening. "I—"

Rainbow Dash nudged her. "C'mon, we've got work to do. This isn't important right now. I'm sure you'll have no trouble crushing her soul later."

"I told you this would happen," Applejack said. The orange alicorn was clearly irritated. "This is why I wanted Twilight's memories! Do you see now?"

"Wait," Twilight said. "You have my memories? How did *that* happen?"

"Oh, Apples grabbed them out of your

corpse after you died,” Rainbow said casually. “She thought they'd come in handy.”

“She did *what?*” Twilight exclaimed. “Applejack, those are my private memories! I didn't give you permission to do that. And since when does Rainbow Dash call you 'apples'?”

Applejack sighed. “Since you brought me back from the dead. All Rainbow Dash does anymore is hang out right next to me. She never gives me a moment's peace. I think it's guilt or somethin'. Anyway, we'll see you later, Twilight. And it really *is* good to see you alive again. Even if you do think we're a pair of nitwits.”

“Thanks – I guess. But when you get back, you and I are going to have a talk about the whole memories thing. I'm *not* comfortable with that.”

Rainbow snickered. “You know, Twilight, that's an excellent point. Maybe Applejack should just give *you* those memories. After all, they're your memories, right? Why should she have them?”

Applejack whacked the blue pegasus on the back of the head. “That's enough, Rainbow! When we get back from the farm I'll tell her and everypony the whole story. Then Twilight can decide if she wants to remember what it felt like to have every bone in her body broken and then die a slow, painful death.”

"It can't be that bad," Twilight said.

"Once you see these memories I'll let you make that decision," Applejack said coldly.

* * * * *

When Applejack and Rainbow Dash left Twilight's castle, they flew through the air and made their way to Sweet Apple Acres. High above them, pegasi were busy pushing angry-looking clouds into position. The storm was now just a few hours away. When Rainbow saw the clouds, she shook her head. Applejack knew she was thinking about the coming storm and the awful damage that it did. But Rainbow didn't say anything.

The two ponies made it to the farm in just a few minutes, and landed in the clearing in front of the barn. Beside them, about twenty feet away, was the tree. It was still standing.

"I hate that tree," Applejack said. "Just look at it! You'd never guess that it was thoroughly rotten inside. It looks all nice and sturdy. But sturdy it ain't."

"Exactly my point! How was I supposed to know that it was bad? This whole accident wasn't my fault. I don't know anything about apple trees! That's your department."

"No one is blaming you, Rainbow," Applejack

replied.

“Then why do I feel so bad?”

“Feel so bad about what?” a voice called out. An orange earth pony trotted out of the barn and walked toward them. When she saw the two of them she got a strange look on her face.

The orange pony studied them for a few seconds. “All right. I recognize Rainbow Dash; why, I’d know her anywhere. But who in Equestria are you? I know my Apple kinfolk pretty well, and I’m positive there ain’t any alicorns in the family.”

“Oh my goodness – you’re alive!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. Rainbow rushed over to the original Applejack and hugged her. “You have *no* idea how good it is to see you again. I thought I had lost you forever.”

“Um, hello to you too,” the original Applejack said. She hugged Rainbow Dash back and then let go of her. “That’s nice and all, but I just saw you five minutes ago. Remember? You wanted to make sure that the farm was ready for that storm that’s gonna hit tonight. I told you that everything was fastened down tight.”

“And I believed you,” Rainbow Dash said bitterly. “I believed you and flew away, and didn’t give it another thought. Then that blasted storm hit and destroyed your barn and weakened that tree. The next morning you went out and kicked

the tree, and it killed you. It killed you, Applejack! It was horrible. There was blood everywhere, and—”

“Hey now, it's ok,” Applejack said, surprised. “I don't know what you're talkin' about, but I'm just as right as can be. I haven't been crushed by no tree.”

Alicorn Applejack spoke up. “But you *would* have been crushed, if we hadn't come back in time to save you. That's why we're here. Rainbow Dash and I are from the future.”

“Oh. Really? Just how far in the future? Are you from tomorrow?”

“Not exactly,” Rainbow Dash said. “More like a hundred years.”

“A hundred years! Why, you don't look a hundred years old to me.”

“That's because we didn't start out a hundred years into the future. At first we were just a few weeks from, well, right now. Then we traveled a hundred years into the future. Then we traveled back in a time a bit, because everypony was dead. It's kind of complicated. I've been doing a lot of time travel with your clone.”

“My clone?” Applejack asked. She turned to the alicorn. “Is *that* who you are? Some kinda copy of me?”

Alicorn Applejack nodded. “Twilight took

your death mighty hard. Well, everypony did, I reckon. So Twilight created a copy of you and gave it all your memories and personality. I'm basically your clone."

"You have all of my memories?" Applejack asked

The alicorn nodded. "Yup, all of 'em. I'm as much you as you are, in a way. Only I've had a little work done. Rainbow wanted a flyin' buddy, and I figured I'd give it a shot."

"I see that," Applejack said, as she looked at her clone's wings. "So what's it like to fly?"

"It's pretty nice. I like it more than I thought I would. But to be honest, I kinda miss bein' an earth pony. Magic and flight just ain't who I am, you know? It feels phony. And if there's one thing I can't abide it's phoniness."

"I hear you. I guess you and I are a lot alike. So what tree is going to kill me tomorrow?"

The alicorn pointed. "That one right there. But don't worry – I've got this."

The orange alicorn fired up her horn and blasted the tree with a powerful bolt of orange magic. The tree immediately went up in flames.

Applejack's eyes widened as she watched the fire consume the tree. Smoke poured up into the sky. "Um, are you sure that was a good idea? I don't know how y'all do things in the future, but

I ain't real big on forest fires."

"I *hate* that tree," the alicorn said angrily. "It killed me – well, you, actually – and it ended up killin' everypony in Equestria. Do you know what the future is like? It's *dead*. Everything in the whole world is dead! Not even a single blade of grass survived. And it all started with that stupid tree. If anything deserves to go up in flames it's that rotten piece excuse for timber."

As the alicorn spoke, the tree snapped and fell over onto the ground. "Huh. I see what you mean. That tree *was* kinda rotten! A good storm could'a been just the thing to weaken it. I recon maybe you did save my life. But didn't you say the barn collapsed too?"

"Yup," alicorn Applejack said. "All the support beams are shot. They've gotta be replaced."

"All of them?" Applejack asked incredulously. "How did that happen?"

"You've got termites."

"Termites? I guess that would explain a lot. But – hold on, that's terrible news. I've gotta take care of that immediately! There's wood everywhere here on the farm."

"Don't I know it," the alicorn said. "After Twilight raised me from the dead I had all kinds of work to do. The first thing—"

The conversation was interrupted by cries of panic and dismay. A small herd of ponies rushed into the yard.

“What's goin' on, sister?” Apple Bloom said.

“There's a fire!” Granny Smith yelled. “Quick, somepony, do something!”

“I'm on it,” Big Mac hollered out.

“Hold on, everypony!” alicorn Applejack shouted. “There's no need for alarm. I'll put out the fire. Just calm down!”

The alicorn lit up her horn and zapped the burning tree. A moment later the fire went out. Thin tendrils of smoke continued to drift into the sky, but the flames were gone. There was nothing left of the tree itself but a charred hulk.

“What in tarnation was that all about?” Granny Smith asked. “Applejack, why are you burnin' trees? Don't you know that's dangerous?”

Apple Bloom spoke up. “Wait a minute. Who's that orange princess? Is she some distant cousin of ours? I didn't know we had royalty in the family!”

“I'm not your cousin,” the alicorn said. “It's a mite more complicated than that. You see—”

She was interrupted when a rainbow streak soared across the sky and landed right in front of the group. “So where's the blaze?” Rainbow Dash asked, panting. “I came as soon as I saw the

smoke. I can have a whole troop of fireponies here in minutes. What happened?"

Rainbow then noticed the other Rainbow Dash, who was hovering in the air beside the alicorn. "Wait a minute. What's going on here? Who are *you* and where did you come from?"

"This is all your fault," future Rainbow said through gritted teeth. She got right in the face of her past self. "If you had just done your job then none of this would have happened! You were supposed to *save lives*, you moron!"

"Woah woah woah," past Rainbow said. She scooted back a bit. "I'll have you know that I'm *great* at my job. Do I even know you?"

"Great, huh? You're so 'great' that you didn't even notice that tree was rotten. Thanks to you, that tree fell on Applejack and killed her! And now I have to live with that guilt."

"Applejack looks fine to me," past Rainbow pointed out.

The original Applejack spoke up. "These two are time travelers, Rainbow. Apparently the tree was gonna fall on me tomorrow, after the storm. They've come back in time to stop it."

"Seriously?" past Rainbow said. "You mean she's my future self? Then why is she such a jerk? Did a tree fall on her too?"

"Calm down, everypony," alicorn Applejack

called out. "I know you've got a lot of questions. I'm gettin' together everypony at Twilight's castle and I'm gonna tell the whole story. So if y'all will make your way there I'll explain what happened."

"Sounds good to me," Applejack replied cheerfully. "Except – what about the barn? I don't want to see it destroyed. We kinda need it."

"What's this about the barn now?" Granny Smith asked.

"We've got termites," Applejack explained.

"Termites! That ain't good. Big Mac, you've got a barn to fix!"

"I'm on it," Big Mac replied.

"Thanks," Applejack said. "I'll come back and help as soon as I'm done at the castle."

"Can I come with you?" Apple Bloom asked. "I wanna hear the story!"

Alicorn Applejack shook her head. "Um, sorry, sis, but the story is kinda gruesome in parts. I think it might be better if you stayed here and helped your brother."

"Aw, *please*?" Apple Bloom begged.

Applejack looked curious. "Gruesome? You mean because a tree fell on me?"

Future Rainbow spoke up. "No, 'gruesome' because everypony in the *whole world* dies. Then Apples here dragged me to go talk to Twilight. She actually had this long conversation with her while

Twilight was dying, with blood everywhere and—”

The alicorn quickly put a hoof over Rainbow's mouth. “As I was saying, the memories I'm gonna show y'all are not appropriate for little fillies.”

“Memories?” Applejack echoed, surprised. “You mean you're gonna show us *memories* of the future? You can do that?”

“Sure can.”

Applejack turned to her little sister. “Maybe it would be best if you stayed here on the farm. I'm sure your brother can use the help. But don't worry. When I get back I'll tell you the story. All right?”

“Oh, all right,” Apple Bloom said sadly. “But hurry back, ok?”

* * * * *

It took another two hours for everyone to meet at Twilight's castle. When Twilight sent a message to Celestia and Luna the princesses were busy in Canterlot, attempting to arrange a meeting between the griffons and the ponies of Saddle Arabia. They came as soon as they could.

Since there was a delay, the two Applejacks went back to Sweet Apple Acres. The alicorn was able to cast a spell that removed the termite

infestation, and Big Mac and the original Applejack then repaired the damage that had been done to the barn. By the time the princesses arrived in Ponyville the barn was ready for the storm.

Everyone gathered inside the map room. Twilight, Fluttershy, Rarity, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash were all there, seated in their thrones. Spike's throne was empty because the young dragon was on an extended visit to the Crystal Empire. Alicorn Applejack and Rainbow Dash hovered in the air above the map. Future Rainbow kept her distance from past Rainbow.

The last two ponies who arrived were Celestia and Luna. They both teleported directly into the map room.

"Thank you so much for coming," alicorn Applejack said. "I know this has gotta be a lot to take in."

Celestia gazed at the orange alicorn with a look of wonder. "That is certainly one way to put it! When I received word that a future Applejack had traveled back in time to save Equestria from disaster, I found it difficult to believe. Yet here you are."

"And I see that Rainbow Dash has joined you," Luna commented. "I find it strange that you two were chosen to make the journey through

time and convey this message. I never imagined that either of you might become time travelers.”

A familiar voice interrupted. “Oh, it's so lovely to see everyone together again! How I do love these touching reunions.” Discord materialized out of nowhere and appeared directly beside Twilight's throne. He bent his body over her throne and stared at Twilight, grinning. “And to think that these two ponies traveled all this way just to see you! You must be so honored.”

“Discord?” alicorn Applejack said, surprised. “I thought you were busy in your dimension! I don't recall askin' you to join us.”

“And miss out on all the fun? Why, what kind of friend do you take me for? Speaking of which, I'm glad to see you made it back in time safe and sound. Time travel can be a bit dicey at times. You appear to be more competent than I thought.”

Alicorn Applejack frowned. “You can't expect me to believe that you remember the conversation we had in the future! That's ridiculous. It hasn't even happened in this timeline! You're just messin' with us.”

“Believe what you want, Apples. I will say, however, that if you still want to visit those Super Mutants, my offer remains on the table.”

“Super Mutants?” Fluttershy said. “I've never heard of those creatures before. Are they nice?”

Alicorn Applejack waved a hoof. "Don't let him distract you, Fluttershy. He's just bein' Discord. As I was about to say, the reason I've asked y'all to come here today is because we need to change the future."

Celestia nodded. "That is what Twilight told me in her letter. She said that after you died, Twilight invented some sort of book magic that let her bring you back to life. However, that magic also led to a series of events that ultimately killed everypony in Equestria. Is this true?"

"Yes ma'am. But let me start at the beginning. It all started with that blasted tree."

* * * * *

Using Twilight's memories as illustrations, alicorn Applejack told the story of how Equestria came to be destroyed. She explained how Twilight invented a new type of enchanted comic book, which she used to create her. Applejack then told the group about the creation of Sunshine and the resurrection of Starswirl. She showed the group how Twilight gave the magical comics out to the whole world, and how the world became empty and abandoned. She then told them how Celestia was finally freed from her prison, and how she battled Twilight for the future of Equestria – and

how both of them were killed. She finished by playing back the final conversation that she had with Twilight.

The whole group was visibly affected. They were all struggling to hold back tears – especially after watching Twilight die. Twilight, however, was the most distraught. Her earlier enthusiasm over the new type of magic had completely evaporated. She was more than just dejected; she was in complete despair. She desperately wanted to believe that it was all some kind of misunderstanding. She just *couldn't* have done those things. That just wasn't her.

“That is so sad!” Pinkie said, with tears in her eyes. “I don't like that future at all.”

“Me either,” Fluttershy said firmly. “That Sunshine was an awful pony.”

“She certainly was,” Rarity agreed. “To think that she replaced us all with clones – and just because we dared to disagree with Twilight! I had no idea that Twilight was so sensitive.”

“I'm not,” Twilight protested. “Honestly. I don't know what came over me. I would never do any of those things. I'm not a bad pony.”

Future Rainbow spoke up. “Except you kinda *did* do those things. And it turned out pretty bad. Which, y'know, is why we're here.”

Celestia spoke up. “Twilight, if you truly were

feeling lonely then why didn't you tell me? There are many ponies in Equestria who would love to talk to you about magic. I'm sure that Moondancer would gladly talk to you about any discoveries that you have made. You're more than welcome to visit her whenever you like; I'm sure she would enjoy seeing more of you. Even Trixie would probably welcome a visit from you."

Future Rainbow rolled her eyes. "Oh, right. *Trixie*. That's exactly what this timeline needs: more of the most stuck-up pony in Equestria! If Sunshine had ever met Trixie, she would have been one of the first ponies to go. And don't even get me started on what she would do to Starlight Glimmer."

"Trixie's not so bad," Twilight replied defensively. "I still think there's hope for her. But, ok, I see your point. Maybe I do need to spend a little less time in my books, and a little more time with my friends. I know I have friends out there – I guess I just forget about them sometimes."

Applejack spoke up. "So where did everything go wrong? What's the real problem?"

Future Rainbow stared angrily at past Rainbow. "It all started when *she* failed at her job and didn't take care of that rotten tree! That *is* her job, you know. If she had just taken her job a little more seriously then none of these things would

have happened.”

Past Rainbow shot an angry look at her future self. She started to speak up, but Applejack held up a hoof. “That’s enough, you two. I never imagined you’d have such a hard time gettin’ along with yourself. You ponies have got to make peace with yourself.”

Pinkie Pie spoke up. “I bet I would get along with myself! In fact, didn’t Applejack say that Sunshine created a clone of me? That sounds so amazing! Do you think you can do that again?”

“I dunno,” alicorn Applejack said. “Life in Ponyville got kinda crazy after you teamed up with your flying clone. I’m not sure if the world ready for a second Pinkie Pie.”

Applejack interrupted. “We can have that conversation later. Let’s stay focused on the issue at hoof. The whole reason you and Rainbow came here was to fix whatever went wrong in the past. Well, here we are in your past. So what went wrong? What’s the *real* problem? And don’t tell me it was the tree, because trees fall all the time without causin’ the sun to explode. Why did *this* tree destroy everything?”

Future Rainbow spoke up. “Because it killed you, of course! Isn’t that obvious? I couldn’t take the thought of you being dead, so I begged Twilight to fix it.”

“And apparently she did,” Applejack replied. “But it doesn't sound like my clone did anything bad. She just went back to the farm and resumed her old life. Sure, she let Rainbow talk her into gettin' a pair of wings, but even that don't seem to have done any harm. It looks to me like if that's all that happened then we wouldn't be havin' this conversation. So where did things go wrong?”

Rarity spoke up. “I believe it was that horrid Sunshine. She's the real villain of this story! Why, the moment any of Twilight's friends voiced the tiniest dissent, she sneaked into their homes and replaced them with mind-controlled clones. It's dreadful – positively dreadful!”

Fluttershy spoke up. “Rarity has a good point. Sunshine does seem to have been rather mean. Isn't she the one who put Celestia in prison? Why, if she had just left Celestia alone then she would never have gotten into that fight with Twilight.”

Luna spoke up. “Speaking of that fight, sister, I must say that you are not without blame in all this. I know these crimes were done by your future self, but even so: what were you thinking, trying to harness the sun as a weapon? Did not Starswirl warn you of the terrible consequences of such a desperate act? What did you think would happen when you unleashed its power

upon Twilight? Surely you must have known that it would destroy the world. The consequences of that spell are only too well-understood."

"Wait a minute," Twilight said. "You mean Celestia used a *known* magical spell to attack me? I've never heard of a spell like that!"

Celestia sighed. "It is a well-kept secret – for reasons that should be obvious now. Starswirl made me promise to never learn it, but I suppose it is obvious now that I did not keep that promise. Yes, I know the spell. It can only be wielded by one such as I, who is in tune with the sun."

"Interesting," Discord said. "Very interesting! You've got a naughty side. And to think all these years I thought you were hopelessly boring. I suppose I should have been tipped off when you invited me to the Gala. But tell me something. Was that spell's dreadful effects really just an accident? Did it *really* go wrong?"

"It – did not go wrong," Celestia said at last. "That spell was designed to destroy everything. It was meant to be used as a last resort. When I saw that I could not defeat Twilight in battle I must have become desperate. Perhaps I thought that I could recreate the world after I destroyed it. I do not know. But I should never have used that spell. It was a foolish choice."

"Well, it's quite understandable," Discord

said. "After all, you had been in prison for 90 years, and you just found out that Twilight had destroyed your kingdom. It's no wonder that you were a little testy! Speaking of that, I realize we're all busy pointing hooves at poor Sunshine, but isn't it true that Twilight created her? Sunshine didn't create herself, did she?"

"That's true," alicorn Applejack replied. "She was Twilight's creation."

"If that is true, then isn't it also true that Twilight created every aspect of her? Her personality, her desires, her sense of right and wrong, her focus in life – all of that came from Twilight. Isn't that right? Yes, I understand that Sunshine imprisoned all of Twilight's happy little friends. I understand that Sunshine put Celestia in prison, and flooded the world with those boring books, and lied to Twilight about what was going on. But Sunshine *was* Twilight's creation, wasn't she? Isn't it possible that Sunshine acted the way she did because *that's what Twilight wanted?*"

"But I would never want any of that!" Twilight exclaimed.

"Then what *did* you want?" Discord asked.

Alicorn Applejack spoke up. "She wanted a loyal friend – somepony who would never disappoint her."

Celestia shook her head. "I believe there is

more to it than that. What Twilight truly wanted was a world without pain. That's it, isn't it? When Applejack died it made Twilight realize how painful life could be. She began to think about what it meant to be an alicorn – to live on for centuries and have to watch your friends die. Twilight came to believe that she could fix all the pain and suffering in Equestria by creating new fantasy worlds. In these make-believe worlds everypony could have everything they ever wanted. She would put an end to death itself.”

Luna spoke up. “But it did not work. Twilight could not keep her real friends from dying, for even she cannot defeat death. All she could do was replace them with clones that could only give her artificial feelings and forced sympathy. This magic could not give her what she wanted.”

Alicorn Applejack nodded. “I think you've got it. As you said, it was a pretty silly thing to do. But pretty much everypony in Equestria made the same mistake. All the ones that Sunshine didn't put in prison took the comics and made new worlds for themselves. They then used 'em to do pretty awful things, until they all died. Things just went from bad to worse.”

“Which is also easily foreseen,” Luna commented. “It is all too easy for a pony to give into their darker instincts, even in the best of

times. I know firsthoof how tempting the darkness can be. If ponies were given a world without consequences then things would take a very evil turn indeed. It is no wonder the future turned out as it did.”

“Stop it!” Twilight shouted. Tears were running down her face. “Just *stop* it, ok? I haven't done any of those things! I know my future self did, but I promise I'm not her. I would never, ever be like that! If I had know what would happen I never would have invented that stupid magic in the first place. I never wanted to hurt anypony. You have to believe me! I don't want to – to become that pony. I don't want to hurt my friends.”

Celestia immediately teleported over to Twilight's side and wrapped a wing around her. “It is all right, my dear little pony. I know you must think that all of this is frightfully unfair. You are being blamed for actions that you have not committed. But Twilight, you must remember that we all love you and care about you. We will work together to make sure that you never become that monster.”

“I'll never use magic again,” Twilight said bitterly.

Alicorn Applejack spoke up. “I don't think that's the right answer. Twilight is the Element of

Magic; it's who she is. If she uses her magic in a good way then it can help a lot of ponies. We've all seen her use magic to save Equestria. However, if she uses her magic for selfish reasons then things can go wrong pretty fast. Remember that one time she enchanted her doll with that spell and caused a riot? The problem ain't the magic. It's what you do with it."

"Which is what I've been saying all along!" future Rainbow said. "This enchanted comic stuff can be used to do a lot of good. It can feed ponies, and help those who don't have very much, and do all kinds of good things. We shouldn't destroy it anymore than we should throw Twilight in a dungeon somewhere. We should use it to help Equestria."

Fluttershy spoke up. "Throw Twilight in a dungeon? Is that our plan?"

"Surely not!" Rarity replied. "That sounds frightfully unfair. No matter what dreadful things Twilight may have done in the future, she hasn't done anything yet."

"I am *not* going to throw Twilight into my dungeon," Celestia said firmly.

"Are you sure?" Twilight asked. "Maybe – maybe that would be for the best."

Future Rainbow rolled her eyes. "C'mon, Twilight. Get real. That isn't going to fix anything."

Applejack spoke up. "If you ask me, the whole problem is that Twilight tried to fix her problems by replacing reality with fantasy. That's when everything started going wrong. Maybe if we just don't do that, everything will be fine."

Celestia spoke up. "That is certainly a wise place to start. This new magic should be used to help this world, not replace it with a make-believe dream. I believe I also need to have some talks with Twilight about how to handle life as an alicorn. I did not realize that the loss of her friends was weighing so heavily on her. Since she is going to live for a long time, there are matters that we need to discuss."

"Thanks," Twilight said. "But I promise I haven't been obsessing over it."

"Not until I got killed, anyway," Applejack commented. "Y'know, it's kinda flattering to see just how much you all care. I had no idea you would go that far for me! Maybe I'm just biased, but this new magic don't sound all that bad. Maybe there's some way we can use it without destroyin' everything."

Luna spoke up. "It *would* be wonderful to speak to Starswirl again. I do miss him. He was such a wise pony."

Alicorn Applejack spoke up. "You do realize that this book magic destroyed all of Equestria,

right? There were literally no survivors. This magic is downright dangerous.”

“I agree we would have to be careful,” Luna replied. “We would need to put together a set of rules on how to use it wisely. Perhaps a Code of Conduct.”

Celestia nodded. “The magic should also be very restricted. Until we understand how to use it and have taken precautions against its abuse, the secret should only be known to a small group of highly trusted ponies. We would need proceed cautiously and be aware of any potential downfalls. We may never be able to release this to the public.”

“I agree,” Rarity said. “Now, let me be clear of one thing: I do *not* want to be replaced by a clone. In my opinion there should only be one Rarity in this world. But I can see that it could be a great benefit to many. We just want to make sure that it never gets out of hoof.”

“What fun is that?” Discord asked. “If you ask me you should *embrace* the possibilities. Think of all the delightful chaos you could spread! Why, it's positively enchanting.”

“That is exactly what we want to *prevent*,” alicorn Applejack said firmly.

“What a pity. Here you have a wonderful chance to spread a little chaos into your drab little

lives, and all you can do is start talking about rules and guidelines. Leave it to ponies to take all the fun out of magic.” Discord yawned. “This meeting is getting too boring for me. Let me know if anything interesting happens.” He then snapped his talon and disappeared.

“It *has* been a long meeting,” Celestia agreed. “It is going to take a long time to write new laws to govern the use of this magic. That is not something we can accomplish today.”

“So that's really what we're gonna do?” alicorn Applejack asked. “After all that's happened, and after all the suffering and death this magic caused, you're *not* gonna destroy it?”

Celestia shook her head. “I believe this magic can be used for good – much like Discord himself. At one time he was a force of chaos, but now he is our ally. This magic *can* be used responsibly. If things do start to go wrong then we can act immediately to take whatever action is required. The future will not be like the nightmare that you witnessed. Since we are aware of what might happen, we can guard against it ever happening again.”

“If you're sure,” alicorn Applejack said reluctantly. “We'll just need to have some good rules in place, I guess. And enforce them pretty strictly.”

Twilight spoke up. "I bet the first rule will be to keep *me* far, far away from it," she said bitterly. "I clearly can't be trusted."

"I would not say that," Celestia said gently. "But I do think that everypony who uses this new magic will need to be watched. All of us are prone to giving into temptation. You are not the first creature who gave into temptation and destroyed the world. All I ask is that you don't do it again."

"I did *not* destroy the world," Luna said heatedly. "As I recall, it took you less than five minutes to defeat me and send me to the moon. Your precious world was left very much undestroyed."

"I was talking about Discord," Celestia replied. "He used his chaotic magic to turn all of Equestria into his playground. Remember?"

"Oh." Luna blushed. "Sorry, sister. My apologies."

"So what now?" alicorn Applejack asked.

"It's time to party, of course!" Pinkie Pie said enthusiastically. "Although it would be an even *better* party if there were *two* Pinkies. I don't suppose you could make that happen, could you?"

Alicorn Applejack shook her head. "Sorry, Pinkie. I have a hunch that the princesses are gonna want to have a talk about that first. I'm

afraid that the ethics of clonin' a pony – even if the pony is willin' – are kinda unclear. Just give 'em some time, Pinkie. I'm sure they'll work out all the details soon enough.”

“Oh, all right,” Pinkie said. “Can't blame me for asking, though!”

* * * * *

Once the party was over, Twilight invited the two time travelers to live with her in her castle. Applejack invited her future self to live at Sweet Apple Acres, but Twilight begged her to stay at the castle instead. When she asked why, Twilight explained that she really wanted to spend some time with the alicorn. After all, the alicorn knew all of Starswirl's spells – even his unpublished ones – and had a deeper understanding of magic than any other pony in Equestria. Alicorn Applejack had no interest in magic whatsoever, but she did care about Twilight. She reluctantly agreed to live with her for a while and teach her what she knew.

The orange alicorn was tempted to take the easy way out. She knew that she could simply transfer Starswirl's knowledge directly into Twilight's mind, but that was another piece of magic that needed to be discussed. She wasn't

going to use that trick again until Celestia's council had created some guidelines on its use.

As for Rainbow Dash, she agreed to live with Twilight because she was still unable to get along with her past self. At the party Fluttershy had tried her best to get the two Rainbows to make up with each other, but it didn't work. The future Rainbow had watched Twilight die just a few hours earlier, and she was still too emotional about the timeline she had witnessed. She would eventually learn to get along with herself, but it would not happen quickly.

After they reached the castle, Rainbow Dash headed off to bed. When Twilight went into her bedroom, alicorn Applejack followed her.

"Do you need something?" Twilight asked.

"No, but I think you do," Applejack replied. "You look positively unhappy. In fact, I haven't seen you happy in a long time. Not since before I died, I guess. It's just been one thing after another."

"You expect me to be *happy*?" Twilight said incredulously. "I'll have you know I was perfectly happy before you showed up. I was just going about my life without a care in the world. Then suddenly I found out that I was on the road to becoming a monster straight out of Tartarus." Twilight started to tear up. "I thought I was a good

pony, Applejack. I really did. But apparently not. It seems that I'm just one bad choice away from becoming a supervillain."

"Hey now," Applejack said. She put a hoof around Twilight's neck. "I know today was a lot to handle, but tomorrow's gonna be better. Tomorrow morning no tree is going to fall on me. You are never going to create Sunshine, and your friends are never going to be replaced by clones, and you and Celestia are never going to fight each other. Everything will be different now. Best of all, you're not alone. You've got your friends right here, and we're gonna look after you. When the hard times come, we're gonna be right by your side. It'll be all right – you just wait and see."

"Maybe you're right," Twilight said. "Maybe I need to just wait and see what tomorrow brings. After all, I've got my friends. Right?"

"Right," Applejack replied.

Twilight climbed into bed, and Applejack turned to leave. As she was heading out the door, Twilight's voice called out to her. "So what was she like?"

"What was who like?"

"Sunshine. You have my memories, right? What was she like?"

Applejack hesitated. "Are you tryin' to ask me to give you your memories back?"

"Oh no!" Twilight said hurriedly. "No no no no no. I do *not* want to remember becoming a monster and destroying the world. Or the whole dying thing. You can keep that memory to yourself. But I would like to know a little bit more about Sunshine. It sounds like we were pretty close."

"Hmmm. Let me think. Um, she was nice, I guess. At least, she was nice to you. She liked you a lot – but then you wrote her that way, so no surprise there. In fact, she was kinda obsessed over you. She took care of you, she ran your house, she tucked you into bed every night, and every morning when you woke up Sunshine was standin' there right by your bed. It was a bit weird."

"That sounds kinda creepy. I really let her do that?"

"Yup," Applejack replied.

"So tell me something. Why didn't I give Sunshine a moral code? I mean, I understand that I created her to make me happy, but why didn't I give her some guidelines? After all, once I found out what Sunshine had been doing I wasn't very happy at all. Sunshine really should have seen that coming and taken it into account. It seems to me that I just didn't design her correctly! What I *should* have done was told her to make me happy

without resorting to lying or doing other evil things.”

Applejack's eyes narrowed. “You are *not* going to create a new Sunshine. Absolutely, positively not! Do I make myself clear?”

“Didn't you say I had servants?” Twilight asked innocently. “And guards? And I got breakfast in bed ever morning?”

“Don't even think about it,” Applejack said firmly. “If you want a cook then you can go out and hire a *real* pony, and you can pay her *real* bits – not bits made of magic. That's the way we do things here in Equestria. I am not going to allow a repeat of what happened last time.”

“Oh, all right,” Twilight replied. “Can't blame me for asking.”

“Goodnight, Twilight,” Applejack said. She closed the door behind her.

* * * * *

The next morning, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Twilight were sitting in the kitchen eating breakfast. There was a knock on the door.

Twilight looked puzzled. “I wonder who that could be?”

Applejack groaned. “I know exactly who it is! I'd forgotten all about him. Let me go talk to him.”

"Who is it?" Rainbow asked.

"Frosted Arrow."

"Oh. I don't remember him at all. Do I know him? Was he in our timeline?"

"He works at the comic book store," Applejack explained. "He's here to deliver some comic books to Spike."

"But Spike is at the Crystal Empire," Twilight replied.

"I know. That's why I'm going to go handle this. The last thing you need is for a working pony to convince you that you're a pony of privilege who doesn't care about others, and that everypony has a right to your magical powers. You can be a bit too impressionable."

"I'm what?" Twilight asked, confused.

"Just eat your breakfast and try not to save the world while I'm gone," Applejack replied. "Sometimes it's best to *not* give ponies what they want."

Applejack then lit up her horn and teleported out of sight.

Twilight looked at Rainbow Dash. "What was *that* all about?"

"Beats me," Rainbow said. "She's the one that has all your memories. I'm, like, a totally innocent bystander. I would never approve of taking somepony's memories and giving them to

someone else. Can you pass me another haycake?"

* * * * *

Frosted Arrow was about to knock on the castle's door again when it suddenly opened. What he saw made him gasp and drop his delivery. An orange alicorn was standing in the doorway. She did not look happy.

"Um, hello," Frosted Arrow said. His heart was beating wildly. He scrambled to pick up the comic books he dropped. "Um, I'm so sorry to bother you. I didn't know Twilight had company. Princess Twilight, I mean."

"She does not have company," Applejack replied. "I live here."

"Oh. Well, uh, good for you. That is, I didn't know there was a new princess in Equestria. I mean, I'm assuming you're a princess. Since you have a horn. And wings."

"Let me guess. You are here to deliver some comic books to Spike. I'll make this easy for you: Spike is out of town. Just give the comics to me and I'll make sure he gets them."

"Thank you," Frosted Arrow said nervously. He handed them over to the alicorn, who took them with her hooves.

"And another thing," Applejack continued. "I don't want you to *ever* come around here and lecture Twilight on how she's a stuck-up pony who doesn't care about others. Oh, I know you look down on her and think she's just awful. I'll have you know that she's done more to save ponies like you than any other creature in all of Equestria! You have no right to come around here and tell her off. Do I make myself clear?"

"What?" Frosted Arrow gasped. "I swear I've never, ever talked to the princess – not even one time! I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Just see that you behave yourself. I know you don't like to hear this, but Twilight can be trusted with her magic. Well, for the most part, anyway. There are lots of ponies who *can't* be trusted, and giving them superpowers is just plain stupid. I don't think I'd trust you as far as I can throw you – and I bet I can throw you mighty far."

"No need for that," Frosted Arrow said hastily. "Have a nice day."

The white stallion turned around and galloped away as fast as his hooves could carry him.

Applejack smiled. *I may have been a bit too harsh on him*, she thought to herself. *He's not all bad. He did try to stop Twilight, after all. Gotta give him credit for that.*

Applejack looked out over the horizon. The sun had risen and the storm was gone. Today no tree would fall and crush her. The future looked bright. Equestria was going to take a different path this time – she would make sure of it.

True, she didn't know what was going to happen. The world was going to change; the magic she had brought back to the past would make sure of that. But she had a feeling that this time the change would be for the better. Perhaps Celestia was right. All that this new magic really needed was a pony to look after it and make sure that it wasn't abused – and Applejack could be that pony.

After all, Applejack was artificial. She was controlled by her comic definition, and she knew it. She could make sure that she was incorruptible and immune to temptation. She could be the voice of reason, the pony who made sure that abuses never crept into the system. Before she had merely been the Element of Honesty. Now she was a great deal more.

And best of all, she would never grow any older. She would live as long as her comic continued to exist – and with the right spells she could make that book last forever. As long as Equestria lasted, she would be there as its watchful protector.

Which was a big step for a humble apple farmer.

Epilogue: The Author

A half-billion miles away from a brilliant yellow star, a crater-scarred asteroid tumbled through the black void of space. From the outside it appeared to be just another lifeless rock. True, it was nearly five hundred miles wide. That offered plenty of room for a colony on the surface, or perhaps a robotic mining operation, but this asteroid was home to neither. There wasn't as much as a single hoofprint on its surface. It was simply another iron asteroid – until you took a look inside.

For this particular rock contained the most prized treasure in the galaxy: the fabled hidden city of Sapphire. Many alien races had spent centuries looking for it, but no one had even come close to finding it. Some had begun to doubt that it even existed. The galaxy was a big place, and there were many hiding places – but inside a rock is, perhaps, one of the best ones of all.

There was no access to the city from the asteroid's surface. The only way to enter Sapphire was by magic; even the best matter transporter known to science couldn't transport a being through a hundred miles of rocky iron. The

unicorn race that built the legendary city were experts at magic, for it was their specialty – and theirs alone. No other race in all the universe could perform magic. That was why unicorns were so highly sought-after – and why they made themselves so impossible to find. They had no desire to become anyone's servants.

Sapphire, however, was not the home world of the unicorn race. That honor was claimed by another planet, which was located half a galaxy away. The brilliant blue city in the heart of that metallic rock was instead their greatest achievement: it was the home of the Order of Writers. The Writers were unicorns who had been chosen to wield the most powerful magic known to ponies: the magic of the quill.

All unicorns could perform magic; there was nothing special about that. But the best and strongest magic of all was conjured up with ink and paper. Only a select few – less than one in ten thousand – were permitted to wield this, for with the stroke of a quill one could accomplish nearly anything imaginable. Some ponies were corrupted by this power and became evil, which is why the Order strictly controlled access to its great secret. Few ponies had the honor of becoming Writers, and those few lived in the city that the unicorns had carved out of the heart of a

rock. Although the entire unicorn nation benefited from the works of those Writers, the magic itself (and the temptations it brought) was kept well out of reach.

The city of Sapphire was magnificent. Her buildings and streets were made out of a beautiful blue crystal that could be found nowhere else in all of nature. The magical crystal was filled with vibrant energy and lit up the cavern with a gentle white light. In the center of the sprawling city was the Home of the Order – the place where the top Writers met to discuss their work and plan for the future of civilization itself. Around the Order were the city's five sectors – Agriculture, Industry, Science, Research, and Education. Beyond the factories, workshops, and businesses were the private residences of the city's half-million ponies.

The metropolis ran like well-regulated clockwork. Each pony had their role and place in society, and they carried it out with precision and expertise. But the role of one pony in particular was about to change. On this fateful day he was on his way to a meeting – and that meeting would change his life forever.

* * * * *

A thin, green unicorn was standing in the Square of the Author. This pony had a dark blue mane, a brown saddlebag filled with books and papers, and a quill for a cutie mark. The pony's name was Moonstone, and he had been a Writer for ten years – ever since his graduation from the Academy and his acceptance into the Order.

Moonstone was very proud of his cutie mark. Most Writers had cutie marks in the field of magic, which made sense; after all, writing was simply the manipulation of magic. But only a few ponies had a cutie mark in Writing itself. That was a sign that you were destined to be one of the very best. Ponies such as Moonstone were sent off to training as soon as their cutie mark appeared – and Moonstone had been eager to get started. All he had ever wanted was to be a Writer, and his cutie mark was a dream come true.

It was true that it had not been easy. Training was rigorous, for the rules of the Order were strict. Many ponies could not handle the discipline, and there were some very talented writers who washed out. Some were broken by the process and a few of the unstable ones went insane. But the best ones survived – and now Moonstone was standing here, in the heart of Sapphire. It was truly an achievement he could be proud of. He knew there were a billion unicorns

out there who would have given one of their hooves to be standing where he was.

The Square was located in the oldest part of the city. The ground beneath his hooves was made of giant gleaming blocks of blue crystal. Each one of the hundred-ton blocks had been magically conjured into existence by the city's engineers, and had been put into place more than three thousand years ago. Despite their enormous age, the blocks looked untouched by time. The comings and goings of millions of ponies had failed to make a scratch in that resilient, artificial material.

To the north was the enormous headquarters of the Order – a sprawling building that covered several square miles. It, too, was made of blue crystal, but it was a darker and more regal shade. The building conveyed a sense of majesty and decorum; it towered over the square and dominated it.

All of these things were impressive, but they were not what visitors to the city came to see first. This was a city of Writers, after all, and all writers had a similar passion. The true attraction was right there in front of him, in the center of the square: the statue of the Author.

Moonstone knew the legend. Thousands of years ago there were three pony races: earth

ponies, pegasi, and unicorns. Those races were governed by two alicorns, one of whom rose the sun and the other rose the moon. During the days of these alicorns an Author arose who gave the gift of Writing to ponykind. That was when the Order was founded and everything changed. Ever since then the stylized image of the Author had been printed on everything the Order ever created. Her statue stood in their square, as a memorial to her genius and her contributions to ponykind.

It was a beautiful statue – there was no doubt about that. The Author stood high on a pedestal and was three times the size of any living pony. She was rendered in bronze in loving detail as she looked out to the horizon – presumably to the new future that she had brought into the world. The statue captured every feather in her wings and the look of determination on her brow. Everyone knew what she looked like. She was famous.

Of course, Moonstone also knew that the Author was fictional. Despite what little fillies were told, the unicorn race was the only race that had ever existed. Even if ponies had wings – which they most certainly did not – it would be impossible for those wings to generate enough lift to raise a pony into the air. Physics was quite

unforgiving. The unicorn race had created enough airships to know what was required for flight, and ponies simply could never fly. They weren't birds, after all.

Besides, the whole story was ridiculous. Planetary bodies moved around the sun on their own; they were not pushed around by mythical alicorns. There was only one pony race – the unicorn – and there was no evidence there had ever been any others.

Still, somepony had to have invented Writing. Since no one knew who it was, Moonstone was fine with crediting it to some unknown Author. After all, why not? Somepony deserved the credit. It would have been nice to know the real story, but it all happened so long ago. In fact, the truth probably didn't really matter anymore. At this point it was all academic.

Moonstone glanced down at the watch on his hoof. It was still too soon; he had another five minutes before his meeting with the First Speaker. Moonstone hated being early, and he hated being late; he had made it a point his whole life to arrive exactly when he was supposed to. The Order emphasized discipline, and he was determined to follow a rigid schedule. A pony could not be sloppy and remain a Writer for very long. A single out-of-place detail could destroy an entire world.

Sometimes the rules of being a Writer weighed on him. There were so many regulations in the Code. Many of them he understood, but others he disagreed with. For example, if you used a book to create an artificial pony, that pony had to be treated as if it were real. You could not treat it as a machine; instead it had all the rights of real ponies.

That rule never made any sense to Moonstone. Ponies that were created from books *were* machines. It was foolish to pretend that they were real when they were so clearly not. There were times when Moonstone wanted to create artificial ponies and give them the will that *he* wanted them to have, instead of using the predetermined definition the Order had created that allowed the pony to choose its own future. These ponies were *not* real; treating them as equals was just silly. But that was the rule, and breaking that rule meant immediate expulsion from the Order. It was one of the most sacred rules of the Code.

Then there was the fact that some of these artificial ponies were allowed to join the Order and create books of their own. They could even marry real ponies and have families! Moonstone thought it was all insanity. Real things were real and artificial things were artificial. There should

be a strict separation between the two. Yet the Code had remained unchanged for thousands of years. He was not sure that was wise, considering how much the pony race had changed during that timespan, but he had seen that challenging the Code was a good way to get fired.

But enough of that. It was time for his meeting.

* * * * *

A pony ushered Moonstone into the First Speaker's office, showed him to a chair, and then exited the room, closing the door behind him. Moonstone was a bit nervous. Not only had he never set hoof in this office before, but the First Speaker was not present. *Should I be in here alone?* he thought. *Is this some kind of test?*

The office was quite beautiful, which he did not find the least bit surprising. The walls and ceiling were fashioned from ancient timbers, and the floor was covered by a plush burgundy carpet. Two of the walls were lined with bookcases and filled with old, rare books. Moonstone recognized some of them as the rarest and oldest books in existence; a few were more than three thousand years old. Moonstone had heard that the Order still had the First Book in its possession. He had

never seen it, and he had never heard of anyone who *had* seen it. The Order itself refused to comment on the matter. As far as he knew it was just a legend, like the stories of the Author. But still, he wondered. He knew there were some secrets that were reserved for those at the very top.

Moonstone was sitting in a very comfortable chair. There were three of them in the room. They appeared to be hundreds of years old, and were crafted of a mysterious dark wood. He had a feeling the chair cost more than he made in a year.

The desk in front of him was enormous. It was made of the same dark wood and looked immensely old. The desk was completely immaculate; there was nothing on it whatsoever. Not even a single scrap of paper could be seen.

Hanging on the wall behind the desk was a large painting of a beautiful golden city. The painting captured Moonstone's attention, for he had never seen a city like it anywhere in the galaxy. At the center of this golden metropolis, looking oddly out of place, was a crystal castle. It had a very peculiar design. The base of the castle looked like a tree, made out of crystal. In the tree's branches was a purple building. At the top of the structure was a starburst of some kind.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a voice called out from

behind him. Moonstone turned around and saw that the Speaker had teleported directly into the office.

Moonstone immediately rose out of his chair, but the Speaker motioned for him to sit back down again. "That painting is more than a thousand years old," he replied, as he walked behind his desk and took a seat. "Very few ponies have ever seen it. Even fewer know what it is depicting."

"It is indeed beautiful," Moonstone said. He then hesitated. "It's also a bit odd, if you ask me. The golden city is beautiful, and the castle is lovely, but the two do not go together. Why would the painter seek to take those two very different styles and combine them into one? They don't compliment each other; they clash."

The Speaker chuckled. "You always speak your mind, don't you? Tact has never been one of your strong suits. Perhaps that is why you are so good at what you do – you question matters and you seek to truly understand the nature of reality. So tell me, Moonstone. Do you know why you are here?"

"I have heard rumors that I am about to be promoted, but I have no direct information. I am hoping that my hard work and dedication is going to be recognized. I do not mean to boast, but I

have accomplished a great deal in the ten years I've served the Order."

"Indeed you have. In fact, you have done so well that there is somepony who would like to meet you. You have caught the attention of my superior."

Moonstone looked confused. "Your superior? I don't understand. You are the First Speaker! The Speakers do not have a superior. You and your peers control the Order and decide its future. You answer to no one."

The Speaker sighed and shook his head. "Come, Moonstone, you know better than that. What about the Overwatch?"

"There is no such thing," Moonstone replied. "Oh, sure, I've heard the stories. Legend says that the Overwatch gave ponykind the Code many thousands of years ago, and that they continue to keep an eye on Writers and enforce the Code with an iron hoof. I realize that this story may scare little fillies, but it simply isn't true. There is no mythical group of immortal alicorns who is watching over us. If there were it would make budget requests and would be in the news from time to time. The whole idea is silly."

"Is that really what ponies believe nowadays?" the Speaker asked. "Apparently we have done too good a job protecting our secrets."

I may need to revisit our curriculum. Some things should not be forgotten.”

Moonstone felt a trifle nervous. “Secrets?”

“As I was saying, there is a pony who wishes to meet with you. This is a very great honor. In fact, I don't think you truly appreciate how great an honor it is. No one has met with this pony for more than three hundred years. The last pony who had that privilege was the legendary Platinum Rose. I don't think I need to remind you of *her* illustrious career.”

Moonstone felt his nervousness growing. He knew he was a good Writer, but he couldn't hold a candle to the work of Rose. “I understand. Who am I meeting?”

The Speaker looked very grave. “You are meeting the Author.”

“The Author?” Moonstone gasped. His heart began to beat wildly. “You mean *the* Author? The pony who invented Writing? But – but how is that possible? I thought she was a myth! A fairy tale! A bedtime story for fillies!”

“Not at all. It is possible, my young pony, because this world is not what it seems. You see, there is a great secret that the Order has kept since its foundation. There is some knowledge that is only known to a select few. Normally you would never be told of this, but since you are

going to meet the Author it is impossible to keep it from you. The truth is that the legends that you have heard, of the three pony races and the birth of Writing, are all true – but they are not tales of *this* world. Instead they are tales of the Overworld, which is where the Author lives. This entire universe is artificial. We are living in a book.”

“No,” Moonstone protested. “It can't be! Only madponies believe that. This world is *real*. It has to be.”

The Speaker shook his head. “I am afraid not. We are the creations of the Author. She wrote us into existence, just as you and I have written our own worlds. Do you see now why the Order insists on treating all ponies equally? I know you have chafed against the restrictions in the Code, but you must realize that there is no real difference between you and the ponies that you write into existence. We are *all* artificial. The only real world is the Overworld, where the Author lives. And you are going to go there and meet her.”

Moonstone pointed a hoof at the painting. “Is that – but no. That's not the Overworld, is it?”

“It is indeed. That is the golden city of Ponyville, the capitol of a land called Equestria. It is where the Author lives.”

“But how can this be? Our civilization is

thousands of years old! No pony can possibly live that long.”

“No *unicorn* can live that long,” the Speaker corrected. “The Author is an alicorn, and alicorns can live for a very long time. But there is another fact that you do not know. Time does not pass at the same rate in our world as it does in the Overworld. I do not know the exact relationship, but I do know that a very long time can pass here, while only moments have passed in the Overworld.”

“Wait a minute,” Moonstone interrupted. “If that is true, then does that mean that when I return here centuries will have gone by? Speaker, I have a wife and two fillies. I don't want to return to find them dead.”

“I am aware of that. The Author has the ability to return you to the same moment in time you left. I do not understand how that is possible; the Order has tried to reproduce this magical trick and has failed. But the Author knows far more about Writing than any of us ever will. She is immeasurably old.”

Moonstone's head was spinning. “This is a lot to take in,” he said weakly. “My whole world has been overturned.”

“That is why we keep this knowledge a secret. Some ponies go mad when they learn the

truth. Others go mad when they merely guess it, which you no doubt witnessed in your training. These truths are not easy to accept. Normally this information is taught in small pieces over a long period of time so that the recipient can acclimate to it. But I am afraid that our time is short. The Author is waiting.”

“One moment. The Author – you keep calling her that, but I know she must have a name, even though no name is recorded in any of the tales. What is it?”

The Speaker frowned. “You will *not* call the Author by her name. She is the one who created this world, and she deserves your deepest respect. I will be accompanying you on this trip to make sure that you don't make fools of us. We are not the only book that she has written, you know. In fact, I believe we are one of her newest worlds. You will behave yourself.”

“Of course,” Moonstone said hurriedly. “But I *must* know. What is her name? Who invented Writing and created this world? Whose statue is out there in our courtyard?”

“All right, young pony, I will tell you. But this is one of our most closely-guarded secrets. Only the very highest ranking Speakers possess this knowledge. The name of the Author is Applejack.”

“Applejack,” Moonstone repeated. “It's a

remarkable name. It certainly goes along with her cutie mark. I've always wondered why her cutie mark was three apples, instead of a book or a quill or something. I thought it was symbolic of the humble origins of Writing."

"That's just the explanation we give to pacify the inquisitive. The truth is that the Author is an actual pony named Applejack who has apples for a cutie mark. There's nothing symbolic about it. It's who she is."

"Fascinating. Imagine what she could teach us! I have so many questions for her."

"And you will keep them to yourself," the Speaker said firmly. "You are going to the Overworld to *listen* to her, not to question her. Do I make myself clear?"

"Of course. I understand my place. But how do we reach the Overworld?"

"We don't. It is impossible for us to travel from here to there. The only way to visit Ponyville is for one of its citizens to reach into our world and grab us. I know a spell that will alert them, and will cast it to get their attention. Are you ready?"

Moonstone got out of his chair and stood to attention. "I am ready."

The Speaker walked around his desk and stood beside Moonstone. He lit up his horn and

filled the room with a deep purple light – and a moment later the two ponies vanished.

* * * * *

The two Writers appeared on the balcony of Twilight's castle. Spread out below them was the gleaming golden city of Ponyville, which stretched out to the Everfree Forest in the distance. Long ago, the city had just been a small rural outpost in the countryside – but that was before the invention of Writing. The town had since grown and become the capitol of Equestria, the largest and richest city in the world.

Moonstone walked over to the edge of the balcony and gazed down at the city below. The streets were filled with ponies – not just unicorns, but ponies of all types. Earth ponies walked up and down the golden sidewalks and talked to each other. In the sky there were pegasi, busy pushing clouds into position. Moonstone was amazed to see how easily they flew through the air. It was like magic.

Of course! Moonstone suddenly realized. *That's it – that's how they can fly. It really is magic. Their wings are just a small part of the equation; they must have some sort of inner enchantment that gives them lift and speed. Why*

didn't I think of that?

His thoughts were cut short when he saw an orange-colored rainbow streak across the sky. As it raced closer, he saw that it was actually the trail of an enormous orange alicorn. The alicorn landed expertly on the balcony a few behind them. "Howdy, y'all!" she said cheerfully. "I'm glad you could make it. My name is Applejack. Welcome to Ponyville."

Moonstone looked at her in shock. She did indeed have a pair of enormous wings, and she did have a horn, and she was much larger than him. She looked exactly like her statue in the Square. But she was also surprisingly earthy. Applejack was wearing an old straw hat that had a hole in the top for her horn. Her cutie mark was a pair of three apples, and she had mud on her hooves. She did not look the least bit regal.

The Speaker immediately bowed. "It is an honor, your highness. We are truly privileged to be invited into your magnificent kingdom."

Applejack laughed. "My kingdom? I'm afraid you've got your story wrong. This here is the kingdom of Princess Twilight Sparkle. Personally, I just call her Twilight. I've never been big on titles myself. This kingdom used to be ruled by Celestia and Luna, but they passed on a long time ago. I still miss 'em, though."

Moonstone looked amazed. "Celestia and Luna? I have heard legends that there were once ponies who raised the sun and moon. Is that where the legends came from?"

"Legends? What are you talkin' about? Oh, right, I forgot. In your world the planets move around the stars all by themselves. That was a tricky bit of design, by the way. I had to have Twilight's help to get that to work. The reason I did it was because your world only has unicorns. Unicorns just ain't got the power to move stars around. You need an alicorn for that."

Moonstone gasped. "Alicorns can move the stars?"

"Sure can! Twilight does it every morning – she raises the sun, and then she raises the moon at night. Sometimes I'll take over for her when she goes on vacation or wants to sleep in or somethin'. We help each other, you know. We've been friends for an awfully long time. When I go on vacation – which ain't often – she'll sometimes come down and help out on the farm."

"The farm?" Moonstone asked.

The Speaker glared at him. "Please pardon his impertinence, your grace."

"It ain't no problem," Applejack replied. "Besides, the farm is one of my favorite subjects. You see, I'm an Apple. The Apple family has been

running Sweet Apple Acres for many generations. We have the finest apples in all of Equestria – and the best apple cider you've ever tasted. I'm a farmer, you know. I was actually doin' a little apple harvestin' before you two showed up. I may be gettin' old but I can still buck apples with the best of 'em."

Moonstone stared at Applejack's muddy hooves. "You mean you harvest apples with your, um, bare hooves? Why not use magic? Wouldn't that be much easier?"

"It ain't about what's easy. Sure, I reckon that if I wanted I could harvest all the apples with just a spell or two. Or I could just hire ponies to do it for me. But that would defeat the whole point. Raisin' apples is somethin' that I love to do. And when you love something, you want to do it yourself, with your own hooves."

"I'm sorry," Moonstone said. "I don't mean to ask so many questions. I know you are the head of the Overwatch, and you have brought me here for a reason. You just weren't what I expected. I mean no offense."

"Why do you think I brought you here?" Applejack asked.

"I honestly don't know. I did not expect any of this."

"It's simple enough, if you think about it.

Moonstone, you've got talent. That's easy to see. You're gonna be a real asset to your world. The problem is I'm a little nervous about you, because you ain't got any balance. All you ever think about is your books. It's all you care about, and it's been your whole life ever since you got your cutie mark. I don't know how you ever found time to get married and have fillies. You're kinda obsessed about writing, if you know what I mean."

"Well, of course," Moonstone replied. "Writing is my cutie mark. It's who I am. If I want to excel at my work and make a contribution to society then I need to be wholly dedicated to it."

"Nope," Applejack replied. "You got it precisely backwards. Writing is dangerous, Moonstone. It's the most dangerous magic there is – even worse than dark magic, if you ask me. It always has been, since the very beginning. In fact, when that magic was first created we had a meeting to decide what to do with it. I said we ought to destroy it. I thought it was too dangerous to ever be used wisely."

Moonstone gasped. "You wanted to see your own invention destroyed?"

"My invention? I didn't invent it! Twilight did. I just – oh, it's a long story. The point is, I've seen this magic destroy the entire world. I know what can happen if it gets misused. It can be a powerful

servant, but it's a horrible master. Once it gets inside your soul it can destroy you. It can make you forget what really matters.

“Writing is just a tool, Moonstone. That's it. It's a tool you can use to improve the lives of other ponies. As long as you keep that in mind, you'll be ok. For the most part, I guess. But once the magic itself becomes your goal and your focus, you've lost track. That's when ponies start to do terrible things. There have got to be things in your life that matter more to you than writing. You need something real to hold onto – something that ties you to reality and reminds you of what matters. You need a lifeline.”

“A lifeline?” Moonstone asked.

“Of course,” the Speaker replied. “That is the whole point of the Code – to separate what is real from what is artificial, and to keep people from getting lost in fantasy. All the greatest writers have had a 'lifeline' to the world. They've had a way to keep from getting lost in their own creation, and to remember why they created it in the first place.”

“And for you it's apples,” Moonstone said.

“And my family,” Applejack added. “I don't know what I'd do without 'em. They're why I do what I do. I gotta keep Equestria safe for them, so they can have a future. I've seen what the future

can be like if you make the wrong choices, and it ain't pretty."

Moonstone looked at Applejack with new respect. "Is that why you came here all muddy? It makes sense now. You were trying to show us that being a farmer is an important part of who you are. You're not Applejack the Author. You're Applejack the apple farmer, who also writes books. And you want me to be Moonstone the father, who also writes books."

"You got it," Applejack said. "Sure, I could'a come down wearin' some fancy dress, like the ones that Rarity used to make before she passed on. But if I'd lectured you on the importance of being humble while wearin' a crown of gold and a gown of silk, well, I kinda figured the message would get lost. If you're gonna talk about humility and all then you need to look the part. Besides, I like this hat."

Moonstone grinned. "You know, you're nothing like what I expected – and I'm glad. You're an amazing pony."

The Speaker glared at him. "And when we return to Sapphire we are going to have a long talk about etiquette and manners."

"Oh, it's fine," Applejack said. "Twilight is the princess around here, you know. I'm just the farmer. Now c'mon in, y'all. Let me give you the

tour and then we can talk a spell. There's a lot that we need to discuss. Oh – and I guess I'd better wash my hooves. Twilight hates it when I track mud into her house. Rarity always used to get onto me about that.”

Moonstone hid a grin. He and the Speaker followed Applejack inside the castle and then closed the balcony door behind him.