

Chapter 1

Initial Run, End

Celestia read the report, weeping. One third of her ponies, still loyal to her, expected dead. One quarter of her kingdom, using the old lines, rendered useless by fires – some natural, some thaumaturgic. All but four pegasi guards and one badly injured unicorn guard confirmed dead.

The undead unicorn leader still hadn't alicornified though with a hundred thousand followers screaming for Celestia's blood it was simply a matter of education, or perhaps he honestly didn't want to be a leader but simply wanted Celestia utterly dishonored and discredited before finding her dismembered.

Her tears blocked her vision, though as they ran down her face a part of her recognized the sound of them hitting the parchment. Celestia tried to blink them away, and trying not to run, she walked away. Toward the library, where Twilight had found that scroll. It would only work once per pony, but perhaps that was all that was needed.

Calling to one of the remaining guards, she said "I need to know the interloper validation that was valid two hundred years ago. Nightcall should be able to find it but he'll need help of course." He saluted, and flew in what would be the direction of the infirmary, where her remaining unicorn guard recuperated.

The alicorn regent of the sun had actually come across the scroll a couple years ago. With Luna banished and princess Twilight dead she had almost used it then. But the war hadn't broken out yet. There had been many self-destructions but the general populace hadn't turn against her yet. And too, she didn't know exactly how she could have prevented this.

But the fact that she didn't remember this happening, meant it hadn't been tried before. Twilight's first student had, Celestia recalled, been able to make time travel work for her; had adapted it to a new, multi-trip adjustment.

Levitating the scroll now, she examined the crumbling edges. It almost came apart when she unfurled it; she had missed in the younger princess' report that it had almost been destroyed. The parchment was not ripped asunder but that plus the many colored marking added would make casting the spell right the first time a little trickier. "I'll have to tell her to coax the student into copying it properly, as punishment for this vandalism."

"Ma'am." From behind the alicorn, came the unsteady voice of the unicorn guard. Turning, Celestia saw the pegasus had wheeled his whole bed around rather than try to carry him. *Good*, she thought to herself. *Faster that way*. He levitated a small scrap of parchment to her. As Celestia took it, the unicorn explained "Not sure how this helps, but the answer is clear. Two hundred and thirty one years ago, a troop of Earth guards were set upon by bandits, and they sent word using the validation their CO was given through a yak cow. It was eighty five years later when the guards started . . ." His voice faltered, probably remembering that plague was how he lost two aunts, and it was the loss of his sister that sent him to Canterlot to enlist; to stop the unexplainable plague of suicide.

The ruler set a hoof encouragingly on the guard's shoulder. "Thank you." To the pegasus guard, she added "Go ahead and get him back; this is all I need for now." He nodded, and the unicorn laid his head flat as he was wheeled away.

She looked at the carefully concealed code that would give a random royal-visitor the ears of the guards, and of the princesses themselves. "Sigma Bananna Yogurt Nails Eight Triangle Flat Earthiness." *Now, what to say to . . . myself?*

The lone alicorn left in the mainland stared a moment, and composed this message. "About this time there is an interloper; he is deathless but not yet hostile. I came from two hundred years hence, and the kingdom is in shambles; he has set a war against me because of some misunderstanding I can't get him to tell me about. Also about the time he came to power, single mares all across Equestria began choosing to destroy themselves. I don't know if they're related or not. He wasn't a pony when he got here but that's all I know of his early years. I can't come back to give better advice but perhaps that unicorn student of Twilight can help with a better time-travel spell. When the guard come back with confirmation of this code I beg of you, go to Twilight Sparkle and tell her to be on the lookout for an interdimensional traveller. The first step needs to be understanding, and the second needs to be you, over here, giving yourself better advice than I had for you."

Chapter 2

First Run, Beginning

Twilight's morning routine always involved checklists. Because there were so many documents to sign, and she was supposed to, expected to know what they were about. Though Celestia had filtered most of these so there wasn't likely to be any vast surprises but she couldn't rubber stamp them, either.

She had finally arranged the work documents into piles of 'could nearly rubberstamp', 'I need to read these for mistakes and dangers' and a small stack of 'need understanding before reading because the existence of these papers confuses me' when there was a yellow "Meep!" that accelerated towards her through a window.

As Fluttershy landed, Twilight realized how small that window was. Friends with wings were allowed some leeway about "doors" but, given the speed and how this particular pegasus wasn't accustomed to fine motor control needed to thread a maze such as that window, Twilight gathered the idea this was critically important, and let thought of paperwork be driven from her mind. The yellow pegasus looked frightened, which was not in itself uncommon but gave approximate directions to the problem. Fluttershy looked wide-eyed at the princess, blinked, looked away, swallowed, and managed to look back.

"There's a" She faltered, eyes searching the corners of the room behind Twilight for answers before the suggested "Visitor. To my property."

Fluttershy's look of quiet desperation hadn't lessened, so Twilight tried coaxing a few extra details. "What tribe?" That got a brief look of confusion before a head-shake, and an expectant look. *No? Just, no?* "So, not a pony?" A quick head-shake. "Was it an animal?" Fluttershy drew back into herself, and sought out the corners again. More quickly finding an answer this time, she came back with a squint, and a frown. "Did you try talking to it?" A sharp breath, followed by a determined, single head-shake. Twilight couldn't use this information to gauge what had frightened her friend, and didn't want to go flying headlong into the unknown in the offside chance it actually was dangerous. "What did you see, then?"

"A..." Then immediately her gaze started desperately searching the corners and walls for something that could remind the poor animal-keeper of something she probably never had: the name of the kind of thing this was.

Laying a hoof gently on Fluttershy's left shoulder, and getting eye contact again, she asked her friend to describe the parts she could describe. This time, the frightened flyer had words. "Tall. Legs, and things that weren't legs. Like, you remember Tirek when he was really big? So, imagine someone cut off his backside so he didn't stick out any past his upper back."

Tirek? How big was this visitor? Aloud, she asked "Tirek was the size of a skyscraper at that time. Was what you saw that tall?" The pegasus disappeared into her thoughts for a time, but Twilight tried to bring her back with "Was it as tall as a building? You have some really tall cedars on your property; was it near the top of them?"

Fluttershy looked up at the top of Twilight's office wall, where it met the ceiling. "It was shorter than the trees. Actually." Fluttershy's head slowly dropped, until it seemed to be in the right place to see the top of the visitor. About twenty to thirty hooves tall if her body language is right. "It was a lot shorter than the trees. Shorter than my house too, I think." She crossed her front hooves and sucked her head back, embarrassed to admit it, but "I don't think it would fit through the door though."

Possibly less than twenty hooves, if that has to be specified. If Discord, say, made himself sixteen hooves tall. . . "Wait! Discord looks approximately like that! Might it have been a draconequus?"

Head-shaking. "No tail. Also he was walking, rather heavily." Twilight espoused as how, that might be a Discord-only thing. Undeterred, Fluttershy added another headshake and "It had a flat face. No hair coat but a heavy mane, and a lot of clothes. Way more than Discord usually wears."

The princess unfurled her wings and hovered. "Do you know what a human is?" The flat face was pretty much the clincher for her. The clothes thing could mean a few things, but somehow a human had gone through a portal and not ponified for some reason. It sounded much bigger than humans were supposed to get, but there was still room for explaining that away.

2.1 Message, Dashed.

The two fliers arrived at a little more sedate pace than the one had left at. About two hundred hooves from Fluttershy's cottage, they hovered. "Okay Fluttershy, can you show me where you last saw the visitor?" The yellow pegasus rose to about twenty hooves from the ground, and cautiously floated over some of the pens, to see around to her back yard. At one corner, staring into a window, was clearly a human, covered in clothes that would have seemed normal at Canterlot-High. Though the human itself seemed to be a different breed than what she was used to.

Humans on the other side of the mirror had warm, comforting colors. They looked healthy to Twilight, who was used to the multi-colored coats of her pony siblings here. This had pale yellowish-orange skin, devoid of facial hair, and was taller and skinnier than she remembered

seeing. The dark brown hair on the top of his head was tied vaguely into a single ponytail shape, not unlike how Applejack secured her tail hairs.

Whispering an encouraging suggestion for Fluttershy to stick around a time, Twilight eased away from the cottage and called out "Hello! My name is Twilight Sparkle."

The human jumped, and whirled to face the voice. His eyes scanned the ground beneath Twilight but didn't seem to acknowledge she was very nearly in the middle of his vision. Landing carefully, to avoid scaring the human, she tried again, waving to him as his gaze wafted past her, still searching for the voice's source. Again, he jumped, and now he stared at her, disbelieving. "I'm considered a princess in this country, and since there aren't any alicorn who aren't princesses, the two words are used interchangeably. My friend over here is a pegasus; no horn, as you'll see." Here she turned her head, making eye contact exclusively with her left eye to allow the horn to be in profile.

With much less confidence, Fluttershy repeated the head motion, showing her lack of a horn, and eased herself to the ground. The human had followed Twilight's hoof motion, and went past the hovering form before coming back to it, just as the pegasus was landing. Blinking with disbelief, the human blurted out "You can talk."

Twilight was pretty sure she heard the introverted pony introduce herself, but considering the level of communication difficulties she was expecting Twilight didn't want to let her friend's natural responses be misinterpreted. "Yes, we can talk. You're in Equestria now all ponies can talk. My friend here is named Fluttershy." Old habits resurfaced, and the pegasus repeated her greeting, quieter this time. "She's really shy so she's too quiet to hear sometimes but I"

"HELLO!" shouted Fluttershy, looking like she was near tears.

"Yeah I've been talked over before too. I don't expect that purple one meant anything by it." Said the human, smiling helpfully at the homeowner, who was currently trying to verbally defend herself. Holding a hand to his ear, he interrupted her defence to add "Okay, I appreciate that you're feeling quiet, but can you pick a volume somewhere between your offended shouting and what you're currently doing?"

This time Twilight saw, her friend had gained control of herself. Holding her head straight ahead, not looking directly at the scary visitor, Fluttershy said quite audibly, "Yes. I said thank you but I know princess Twilight didn't mean anything I was just frightened by your unexpected appearance."

Looking at his own clothes, he looked back at the pair of equines and added "I'm surprised by my appearance too, but the mud seemed unavoidable at the time I was walking through it." He paused, a hand on his hip as he looked back and forth between the two.

While he was thinking of what to ask, or comment on, Rainbow Dash decelerated quickly, placing a wide-eyed Spike, roll of parchment in his claws, on the ground precisely between the two grounded mares. The human finally decided his comment was. "You're a horse." To which Dash shifted to hovering mid-rear and blinked several times at the talking pile of muddy clothes. "And a fat lizard."

Twilight quickly interjected on behalf of her own race first, "We prefer the term ponies" but was quickly followed by Spike's only slightly indignant "Dragon. We all look like this. Sorta." Before turning back to Dash to complain, after a fashion, saying flatly "That was really fast."

"Who'd you ask to bring you, huh?" Was the retort.

Twilight levitated the scroll over to herself, figuring it must have been important for Spike to come running, and to convince Dash to hurry him along. The human watched, his gaze dark and inscrutable, as Twilight unsealed the scroll and read it.

Dearest Twilight, student and princess. I have just been visited by myself, asking for assistance in making a better time-loop with Starlight Glimmer's help. Also, there is a visitor due soon, or already arrived. Other than non-pony, not-from-this-world, I have no description. Also, killing it just makes it mad, and eventually we'll be at war with this one creature. Please keep your eyes out for anything strange, and inform me of all anomalies.

The dark look had been replaced with skepticism, and the human just said "That shouldn't be possible." *I think this counts as an anomaly.* But as Twilight gave the scroll to Dash and instructed her to give it to Starlight ASAP-Meaning-Now, and was just turning to dictate a reply for Spike to send, the human kicked the ground with a toe. "Look I'm sorry. I'll ... just find some other place to go. Maybe."

Seeing the human huddle and hunch as if in a great rain, Twilight shouted at Spike "Just tell Celestia we may have found it. A human but not from where I was before." The human had already turned to leave, back vaguely towards the swamps just off Fluttershy's property, though some distance given his shambling stride. "Wait!" Twilight took to the air again to circle around until she was in front of the human. "Wait I'm sorry. I was trying to ask where you came from."

He looked up at her, face sunken, gaze hollow now. "If I said Earth, would that narrow it down any?"

Twilight lowered herself so her eyes would be at the same height as his. He was less than twelve hooves tall, and she thought her head was about ten hooves or so just now. "No sorry. We call our ground that, too. Do you know which Earth?"

The human closed his eyes, and replied "The one with humans like me." Opening his eyes again, he straightened up a bit, and made eye contact again. "I don't know how I got here, or where I lived before. But I can see parts of it in my head." Closing his eyes, he lowered his head and mumbled "Pony just means small-horse. And our horses don't talk." Gritting his teeth, he opened his eyes, thought he didn't look up. "You only eat hay, don't you?"

"Well..." A pony could subsist exclusively on cured hay and water. Hopefully with some salt, and maybe a protein source like alfalfa, which was almost a hay anyway. "We add a lot of stuff to the hay to make a meal."

"I bet you can even eat oats raw." The human was moving to shuffle back into the forest.

Again, true, but not a complete tale. "Cooking oats is perfectly normal. Can you eat cooked oats then?" The thought of food stopped the next step from being taken. "Do you need them cooked all the way to oatmeal, or is cracked and steamed good enough?"

A hopeful look of desperation was on the human's face as he turned, tried to make eye contact. "You'd do that for a stranger?" *After what I just read will happen if we turn him away?* Twilight nodded and said "I'll find a way. Let me ask if we can just cook something up here." Of course, there wasn't actually any guarantee this was the particular creature that couldn't be killed, but it was definitely neither pony nor from this world, so the chances of two such creatures showing up at the same time seemed slim.

Still hovering, hoof at his shoulder, Twilight called to Fluttershy to ask about cooking a meal for their visitor. "I don't know what humans eat." was her only concern.

The thought of food yielding confidence back to the tall visitor, he called over his shoulder, having made the turn as directed, to enter the cottage, that "We're omnivores. Similar to bears or pigs, but I don't want to eat insects or uncooked slop." Twilight noted that, as the pegasus had noted, he would not fit easily inside her cottage.

"So, um. If we cook the slop then?" Fluttershy drifted towards her own house as Spike, having written something and sent it, was turning to leave.

2.2 Six months hence

The human, named Jack, had been getting shuffled between the former-elements every day. He was moody, brooding, and often not actually good at doing work for anypony, though Applejack appreciated his height and he was actually fairly strong when he put his mind to it, but had been hinting to the princess she'd like to see him less than every week, but got fidgety, and generally uncomfortable if Twilight tried to press her for details. Rainbow Dash, who 'foalsat' the human on Tuesdays usually stayed at the farm, and she didn't seem to have any problems but she mostly napped in the trees while he fussed with some piece of farm equipment trying to dismantle and reassemble it without breaking anything. Dash would wake up a few times a day to cook food, and Celestia had agreed this was probably the troublemaker so had directed her guard to bring meals to the house he was staying at so it was never complicated to prepare something for their visitor.

The weekends saw him staying at the castle, mostly at Starlight's end on Saturday and closer to Twilight on Sunday. Thursday Pinkie tried to take care of him but she didn't leave Sugarcube Corner either. It turns out the way ponies made cupcakes still had too much hay, and even cooking it didn't make it palatable or digestible, so he would meander up and down the town streets and watch what other ponies did. No one had destroyed themselves but a few were starting to get edgy.

It was a Wednesday at Sweet Apple Acres that the first real problem arose. With Jack tucked

in for the night in the hay loft, Rainbow Dash had flown to her cloud house to sleep, and Applejack, by all accounts had gotten up early to get the human some kind of job, of direction.

It was Applebloom that came running into the castle though. "Twilight! Ya gotta come help I think the human is real badly hurt and mah sister won't say nothing 'bout what happened!"

Starlight was still a mid-morning pony, at least by the princess' understanding of that term. So as it was before seven am, only Twilight and Spike were awake. "Where are they?" Upon hearing it was the hay storage barn, Twilight took flight. "On my way then!" she shouted over her shoulder as she accelerated towards the far end of town. Even using magic to grab and direct the air, as there was still no pony using the streets yet so the wake created wouldn't disturb anypony's walk, or work, or anything.

Big Mac was outside the Apple farmhouse, looking tense, like he was on the verge of tears. She knew which barn Applebloom had meant, but to verify, she pointed at the barn, and Big Mac nodded his head as she raced past. Inside she found Jack, limbs going in every direction, laying face down in the dirt. Not moving, and not breathing either, Twilight saw. Maybe this wasn't the visitor. I thought the thing we were looking for couldn't die? It took a moment to find Applejack, as she was standing silently on the edge of the loft, looking down with a flat expression at the dead body below. "Applejack!" but she didn't respond.

Twilight eased herself up to the loft, and saw the bedding spread about as messily as the body below. Applejack's eyes followed Twilight as the alicorn landed, but there was almost no look of recognition, or indeed of anything in that face. Twilight sat down and stared at the earth pony, and still not really getting consistent eye contact, the princess finally asked "What happened?"

"She kicked me."

It wasn't just that there wasn't a mare out here, unless she somehow meant Applebloom had elevated their normal tussling a little too far, but there was no way that could be construed as a reasonable explanation of why the human was torn and broken on the barn floor. It was that Applejack's accent was as absent as the rest of her personality. "Who kicked you?"

That did get the mare's attention, though it seemed a complicated question. "The . . ." She faltered. She stopped searching for words to look carefully at her front feet. Not in embarrassment, as Fluttershy was wont to do but genuinely confused, as if where her feet were planted would explain by whom she was kicked. Taking a breath, but still looking at her orange fetlocks, said "The mare, Applejack, kicked me." Looking up the pony couldn't seem to decide if she wanted to look angry, and defiant, or embarrassed and guilty. "I remember falling, but when I landed, I heard the crack of bone, I guess, from up here." Looking again at her fetlocks, she added "and I don't know how to walk when I'm anchored by the extra feet."

Twilight was about to ask if this was Jack, but somehow she thought it best if she make the thing that looked like her friend, explicate it all herself. "Can you tell me who you are?" After a breath, she added "and what all happened this morning?"

That was definitely a guilty look. "I'm the human. When Applejack came up here to get me out of bed I tried to ask her to climb in bed with me, instead." Now the pony was looking at walls

and into crevices, trying to find the words to fill out the story. "I guess if I'd added some out-loud words, you know. But."

Whatever he'd done, she responded by kicking him clean off the loft. "So you tugged on her tail?"

That earned a half-smile, a sort of sheepish smirk. "Not tugged, I just was going to trace around ... you know, with my fingers. Sorta pull her open."

Twilight had never been good with social cues, so while she knew that humans kept everything covered, and had thought maybe he was at times keeping an eye on the lofty, happy tails it hadn't really clicked that by human standards, the mares were putting their reproductive equipment on full display. Twilight blinked slowly, spent that moment trying to imagine what she would do if something foreign tried to insert itself. *Yep, nearly kicked out myself. Startled, and if it hadn't been Applejack, or this place right here, we could have had a normal conversation about how a stallion might court a mare.* "Okay, so that obviously isn't how ponies do things. We'll need to discuss this more but first I should see if Applejack is alive."

The orange earth pony turned her head to look down again, at the human body. With that negative affect voice again, the mare responded "Not if I'm up here, I don't think."

Just then, Starlight Glimmer came galloping into the barn, took one look at the mangled, unmoving human, and chose to levitate herself past the hay bale staircase and stood beside Applejack. Both the town doctor and veterinarian came trotting in right after, neither of whom spared more than half a glance at the loft's edge where three mares seemed to be surveying the damage.

Fauna hissed, and Doc Horse's horn was glowing as he mumbled to Fauna and pointed, nodding slightly. It was the veterinarian who looked up, made eye contact with Twilight and pronounced "Seems he landed on his head. Broke his spine, died instantly, poor dear."

Not wanting "Applejack" to say something unfathomable just now, Twilight confidently replied "Thank you, I'll be making arrangements for him shortly." Looking over to Horse, as much to give him a reason to mosey on out of here, she added "Since the human was a person, we'll be pursuing Pony level of accommodations for the remains."

He nodded, and followed Fauna out. The doc would be back soon with a team to collect the mangled biped and somehow cram him into a coffin. She looked over at the earth pony mare, who still hadn't moved a hoof and Twilight found she was choking, near tears. If this was the human, than they had traded places, somehow, and it was Applejack who was lying on the ground below. Starlight, having not caught on that anything was amiss beyond a dead human, looked over to the princess and asked "I recall hearing this couldn't happen. Did Jack just die normally?"

"No." a flat, accent-free reply from the mare in the middle.

Blinking away her confusion, Starlight tried "Died abnormally?" To which Jack looked at 'her' front left hoof, and forceably 'unstuck' it from the floor, then reached and tapped Starlight on the

shoulder with the flat of her sole. Immediately after and with no odd fanfare or thaumaturgic displays, she added "That's Applejack down there. The human is still up here."

The earth pony's eyes now mostly just showing the whites, began trying to repeat the tap against the unicorn's shoulder. After about the third time the sole was mashed against the purple coat, the unicorn smirked, finally losing the negative affect and asking "Hmm?"

Twilight whispered as forcefully as she could, "Jack just put her back will find a way to fix this later!" To which the unicorn pursed her lips, and then gasped, eyes going wide just as the earth pony finally lowered her hoof again. With no plan yet at all, she mumbled, not much more audibly than the whisper but with more voice and less force, "We need to get out of here. Now."

So saying, Twilight levitated the earth pony mare, and proceeded to fly out, and made haste toward her castle. Setting the orange mare down on the floor in the sunroom just inside the balcony she'd landed on, she heard Starlight teleport into the hallway, and saw her cautiously open the door to peer in.

She completely understood Starlight's caution, but as the princess in town she couldn't afford any herself. "Jack?" the human had almost recovered his wits, and even tried to back up a step though it seemed to take a few tries to put the hoof down flat so it would take weight. "How long have you known you could do that?"

"When I heard my neck crack." The earth pony's eyes softened as they swept out across the interior of the room. "As soon as that happened, I understood how. Maybe even why. I saw." The mare blinked, taking the time to inhale with eyes closed before finishing. "I saw a series of calculations. A machine somewhere blamed Applejack for causing my body to fail me. So before I was separated from it, we traded places."

"So the human really can't die." Came the disbelieving proclamation from the hallway door. "What now?" *I'm not sure but I don't think letting a fake Applejack wander around town is a good idea.* Ideas raced through the princess' head, before it occurred to her that, now that this nation-destroying creature knew how to body-hop, it would only work to make plans that agreed with the human.

"Jack!" Which is about where her plans faltered.

Perhaps seeing her distress, Starlight called out from behind the door "You don't want to be a princess, Jack – the only reason she gets any money for sitting around doing paperwork is she's so good at it that it saves them a lot of time and energy having a skilled bureaucrat around."

Orange ears rotated to listen to the hallway door as green eyes stayed focused on the princess. *I suppose that kind of skill could be innate.* "Okay I'm sorry this happened but I don't want the residents of Ponyville to see you walking around when you look like that."

In a moment Twilight would realize Jack's slightly defensive retort said a fair amount about how his mind worked. Her first reaction was more akin to revulsion as the human said "So either you mean to ship me to some far away town where no residents of Ponyville will travel, or you intend to lock me in this building, affording me only travel to the windowless rooms. Or

by extension, I suppose, you only need to keep the orange.” The pony lifted a hoof while looking over at the unadorned back. Straightening out, the hoof lightly touched the empty forehead. ”Earth pony. Keep this orange earth pony out of sight so I can only see the bazaar by making arrangements for someone else to be the earth pony in hiding.”

Twilight shook her mane to try to shed the dark thought creeping into her head. ”Your idea of make arrangements will end up being different than how we would describe that, as you’ve already demonstrated you can trade places without reaching agreement, or even explaining what you’re doing.”

Starlight moved her head and neck into the room and looked at the orange mare. ”What do you want to do about this, Jack?”

The earth pony lifted a hoof, a little more comfortable with the motion this time, and looked at the blank sole. ”I miss fingers the most right now.”

”Maybe a griffin?” was Starlight’s reply.

”Huh? Starlight what are you thinking?” Twilight asked as she was completely perplexed. She was going to have Rarity do some sort of makeover so it wouldn’t look like Applejack, and combined with the lack of accent it should work.

”Half way point between his two assumptions. We find some volunteer willing to be an earth pony mare, who lives, or is willing to live more than two hours hard trot from here.”

Just then there was a knock the door, which Spike was handy to answer. Pointing a hoof at the interdimensional pony snatcher, the princess said ”**Please** don’t go anywhere.” She had a stern face when she said it, but her voice was shaking.

Already leaving, Starlight called over her shoulder as she nearly trotted to the stairwell ”It’s the doc, and I think the undertaker.” *Of course, somepony has to pay to deal with the dead body.*

Doc Horse had some paperwork to assert she was functioning as next of kin and had the authority to make final decisions. The undertaker, a heavy set, tall earth pony stallion, just wanted money for the rather non standard coffin. Six hundred and fifty bits. *Was it always this expensive to die?* ”Of course, I can take that out of the state budget.” Twilight summoned some parchment and wrote out an explanation of her title, and that the human had been a ward of the state so Canterlot tax monies were to be redirected.

With the uncomfortable part out of the way, Twilight turned back to the other uncomfortable part. An orange earth pony mare was just upstairs and the pony that went with the body was gone but her assailant was happily wearing her face. ”Spike, take a letter – I need Celestia’s input for this.

2.3 Royal Visitations

Big Mac hadn’t come by yet asking about her sister, but it was coming. Twilight would just have to say she died too. Oh, she’d try to explain to Big Mac, at the very least, but there was no way

she was going to try to explain this to anypony. Jack was going to drive her crazy as now she was asking all sorts of questions about what it was like to be a pony, so she, he, whatever, could be whatever he actually wanted. He also had insisted on sleeping in her bed last night. He didn't try initiating reproductive behaviors, at least, but the earth pony was snuggled up close enough as if they'd just finished.

She had just snuck out of bed, Jack still snoring, when Spike came looking for her. Waving her assistant back out, she closed the door and made towards some steps before speaking. "What's up, Spike?" Almost but not quite whispering, to signal Spike should keep his voice down, too.

"Celestia's at the door with some questions about the expense ticket you agreed to yesterday."

Well, that took a lot less time than I expected. "Thank you Spike. Please make a large pot of tea for us I fear this may take awhile." When he changed direction Twilight upped her motion to a trot, finding the elder sister of the royal diarchy looking as regal and calm as she ever looked. The guards around her looked a little nervous, but that too could be Twilight's own nervousness coloring her perceptions. "Your highness! Please come in." She waved back towards the door she had just come through. Technically she was already inside, but the foyer just inside the front main door hardly felt "inside" for all of the fact a visitor would be out of the rain, were it raining.

"Your highness." Was the regent's reply. A smirk in the voice, neither upset to call the short purple one an equal, nor angry to have been called to this podunk nudist colony. *Technically I hadn't called her yet. Was going to today, hadn't yet.*

The table in the large meeting room had enough room around it for Celestia's guards to keep some distance, unlike the map room which would have left the extra visitors crowding, which would make it more obvious they could hear everything. Of course, Celestia's guards would be professionals regardless of what they heard, but Twilight had noticed they seemed to like to keep their physical distance to match their professional distance. Spike had, in the few moments available, already dragged in an end table with five cups and a second tea pot. The first two cups were on the table, between two slightly larger tea cups.

My mind is such a jumbled mess this morning I don't even know where to start, or what I've said of our progress so far. "I normally would open with thank you for coming but I haven't, I don't think, asked to see me yet so in case this isn't about the human I should let you speak first."

The tea had just been put to steeping, so wasn't ready yet as shown by the near-water that steamed out of the pot as Celestia poured a fraction of a cupful out. As she was swishing the hot water around in the cup, Spike let himself in with a plate of perhaps four crackers *oops been meaning to buy more!* and a bowl of sugar cubes and a tiny pitcher filled to brim. "Here's some sugar and cream for you tea, your majesties." Turning to stare at the end table, he added "If you guys want cream and sugar" the dragon paused, considering the very full end table. "You'll need to get some cups off there so there'll be a place to put it." And with that, let himself back out.

This time the tea was closer to tea colored, and Celestia poured herself a full cup. "I've only gotten a couple, slightly disjointed reports about the human. One about five months ago

describing how you were housing him with certain of your friends during the week, and another about six weeks ago talking about jobs you were considering convincing him to work at.” As Twilight blinked rapidly, only not stuttering because she had lost her breath, the white alicorn continued “Made me wonder if there had been some sort of communications break down.”

”I.” What had she sent? ”I sent a third, for sure, your highness.”

The elder ruler interrupted ”Twilight, you can just call me Celestia. At the very least, because we’re both rulers, princesses, and alicorns.”

Twilight Sparkle swallowed, and nodded. Reordering her thoughts a little, she realized she hadn’t named **WHAT** she had found at Fluttershy’s cottage. ”Your hi. . . Celestia. I think I got so caught up in what you had been told by yourself was a critical threat that I didn’t take the time to explicate what I’d found.” Hoping it would calm her mind, she poured herself a cup of tea and added a sugar cube and a few drops of cream. She absentmindedly used magic to stir the steaming contents together as she continued, ”The human I found at Fluttershy’s house that day wasn’t really like the one from across the mirror. He’s taller, a little heavier of bone, and his skin tone doesn’t match anything I saw at the school. From talking to him, I gather all the humans from his world are variations of brown, from a pinkish off-white like himself through midnight black.”

”And now he’s dead.”

That’s what this is about. The bill for six hundred plus bits. ”Not exactly, your highness.”

”You know, if it would help you could call me Tia. Or Celly I don’t care.” Twilight nearly choked on her tea. ”And if he’s not dead, why are we burying him?”

Twilight exhaled hard, and set her teacup down on the table. Staring at the wall, she took a deep breath. *I’m not ready to tell Big Mac this, am I?* ”The warning that the interloper can’t die is a misnomer. It’s Applejack we’re burying but she was the human when that happened.”

Applejack is dead. Twilight was blinking back tears as the large equine across the table from her was asking how an earth pony became a human for reason of dying. ”I just can’t be separated from my body; it doesn’t matter I guess whose body it was when they die for killing me.” An orange earth pony mare, mane flowing loose, was leaning on her front hooves that had been set on the edge of the table, between the alicorns.

All the guards jumped. The unicorn that had poured himself a cup of tea dropped it, cup shattering on the stone floor. The earth pony next to him asked ”How did you get in here?”

The earth pony turned to her and said ”Walking.” Then turned back to Twilight. ”I guess that’s another, well another two magic things I can do in addition to the one you know about.”

”That’s not unicorn magic. And humans don’t have magic at all, so I understand.” While Jack wasn’t a human right now, he had initiated the body-swap while he still was, meaning it was the human that had that magic. His response when asked had been something akin to ‘I guess humans in a magical land, have magic.’ but considering how little he remembered of either his former life or how he got here, perhaps that wasn’t a full or correct answer.

"That's three magic spells, then. Since you're here, can you fill" By this time the earth pony mare had turned her green eyes to the elder alicorn's, and interrupted her by making eye contact. *Hmm, hoof contact, or eye contact. That should be written down somewhere. Maybe include it in the message for Celestia's re-up in two hundred years.* When Celestia finished, she was herself, an orange earth pony, looking up at a suddenly tall interloper. "me in on... oh. I see. And the other two?"

Still as Celestia, he said back "I can see through your eyes. And ears, and everything else. That seems to be a prelude to the other. When I notice that you can see, or hear or smell me, I can edit that. The technical answer is more complicated I think, but basically this: I told you 'you cant see me' and because you couldn't hear it was me, you believed me. And for that," At which point the white alicorn disappeared utterly.

Three of the five guards called out "Princess!" and were looking around frantically, though the other two had been following the conversation to know to look at 'Applejack' for support and guidance. While Twilight used her magic to reassemble the cup and put it back, the human grew tired of his game and reappeared.

"Sometimes I have trouble swapping back, if I'm too fast at it." So the two mares stared at each other for about ten seconds, neither moving in the slightest.

Then Celstia raised her head, and examined the room she was in. "That wasn't a dream, was it?"

To which the orange earth pony responded "Hallucination." Then tapping her chin with a hoof, she added "That seemed to be a sort of halfway point." Now looking at the larger mare, though not to swap bodies again, she explained "After I had grabbed you, but before I did anything with your ... soul? I guess?"

"And the symbolic chair sitting?"

Jack answered with a nod, then "It seems to make clear what I was having trouble specifying when I grabbed onto you. Rather than springload us past each other, we had to be labelled as to which body we were attacheed to. Then when I let go, you woke up over there."

Celestia looked over to Twilight, and when the younger alicorn had blinked her confusion mostly away, Celestia said "This is definitely the one I was warned about." To the earth pony mare, Celestia looked her up and down befor saying "We don't have any bipeds you could trade with. What would you like to be instead?"

Jack looked at a hoof, turning it over to examine the sole, and with a very defeated look on that equine snout, said "I guess a unicorn." Now looking more resolute and less forlorn, the pony looked up at the white giant pony in the room and said "Unicorn stallion."

The only guard in the room who was both unicorn, and stallion, gulped nervously. "I'd like to expressly not volunteer."

To which Celestia nodded, saying to him "Your skill in magic is too good to trade away." Looking back down to the earth pony, she said "I'll find someone soon and send them out here."

Then to Twilight, "Do what you can. I'll try to smooth things over with the Apple family today."

2.4 First Run, Middle Time

All four alicorn princesses were gathered around a table in a room with neither doors nor windows. There were tubes and tunnels to let air through, but they were magically guarded and also fairly small. As they were two hundred feet below the ground, it was cold, and the mage lights each had stuck to the ceiling seemed to Twilight to be inadequate. But it was the only way to make sure the interloper couldn't hear them.

"Five of last year's odd pregnancies were unicorns. Only one wasn't." That was Luna, who had brought most of the paperwork for this discussion.

"Stars Gliding Song has his cutie mark so genetic tests will be accurate, but he would of course have been conceived about fourteen years ago, which was approximately when the human asked for a younger horn to wear." Celestia had grown tired of the human's insistence on giving him a harem when he was still too awkward to ask any of them for a romp in the hay. According to reports Twilight had read, he didn't really even know their names but had them ranked by the pleasantness of their ... *opening*.

Cadence asked again, as she had since the first unicorn/crystal filly had been born in her city to a mare that was single, and insisted she had never accepted paramours. "If the colt proves to be the offspring of either old or new stallion's seed, how is he getting, in half a day if reports are accurate, both to, and from, the croup end of Equestria?"

Celestia drolly replied "No reason to assume any report of sighting him actually in his home is accurate."

But Luna, staring at the parchment before her, interjected "There is a more troubling concern." After a pause for everypony to turn to her, she continued reading the chart in front of her, explaining "Over a third of the ponies that destroyed themselves this past month, were expecting. Some only three or four days after conceiving, so they probably didn't know. But only two were stallions, and they were old and poor, so it almost makes sense. Less than a quarter of this whole year's self-chosen deaths were not single mares, and of those, three out of four destroyed themselves within five days of their family leaving for more than a full day."

"Yes, but why do we think that might be the human?" Cadence, trying to steer the conversation back to the phantom pregnancies.

"If" Luna started, "The human can transport himself in order to make a foal he will never meet, perhaps he also sought out other trysts, and they refused?"

Celestia's eyes darkened. "We know from the deaths of Flim and Flam, that the human can kill with a thought."

Twilight was shaking her head "If I accuse him, of anything, he gets super defensive and disappears for a week."

Celestia perked up, staring intently at the student turned leader. "When was the last time that happened?"

Twilight closed her eyes, and considered. *It had been about the two cows that moved to Ponyville. They said a colt kept coming by every other day. Paid two bits to drink a bellyfull of fresh milk. But he would always unsheath, and seemed to reach climax though he was too young for the proof of that to spill onto the floor.* That turned out to be Imperial Stout, and he was eleven now. He would have to have been three or four to see his way to their home. "Seven years ago."

"Seven years ago." Repeated Luna, now rapidly shuffling through her paperwork. Pulling out five or six pages most of the way toward the bottom, the pages rotated front to back in front of her as she re-read them. "A town with no name, just off the southern jungle."

Celestia set her head in her hoof, seeming to hold herself up by her horn rather than her neck muscles. "Everypony dead?"

Luna shook her head, *no*. "Not all. Three survivors. One was transferred to the Canterlot sanatorium, one to Ponyville's asylum ward, and a pegasus was able to be moved to Cloudsdale's Factory-Retiree community." After a meaningful pause, Luna looked over at Twilight to add "All stallions."

Eyes closed in frustration, Cadence said "A foal learns manners by getting spanked when he does bad things." Eyes open, blinking now, she looked around the room. "But as I've been repeatedly told, it's not safe to try and spank this particular foal."

2.5 First Run, End

The three remaining alicorns, Twilight, Starlight, and Celestia, were gathered in the room where the time loop spell had first been cast. In eleven hours, the twenty minute window to re-up the spell would become available. Twilight was desperately trying to convince Celestia not to pursue the particular message she had written down.

"No Twilight, I will not lose my sister again. Whatever he did caused her to bring forth her darkness and in this timeline it has completely consumed her. With the tree dead we can't be sure there'll be a way to cure or even depower her when Nightmare Moon comes back in nine hundred eighty years."

"We haven't been able to block him or destroy him or banish him. There's no reason to think trying earlier will help! Your majesty, please! When Applejack killed him, he had no idea he had access to magic. He said then, that a machine outside himself did the transfers!"

"Then I will have to kill him on the first day." Flames licked around her ethereal mane; she was close to losing control of her own darkness. Daybreaker would not listen to reason.

"If you destroy him," interjected Starlight Glimmer, "He will just become you. Then we'll come back to this timeline and the human will be Daybreaker and we'll have two humans, one older

and more experienced and the other a princess.” That wasn’t at all how time travel changed things, as if that worked, the human would just be another Celestia, and since Celestia wasn’t attached to the machine, perhaps it would work. Except then it might turn out that Celestia, the four-legged one, would need to re-up the spell to close the loop. Probably, whatever message was given by future-Celestia, had to match the one today’s Celestia felt like giving, so she’d respond the same way, and could let the excess loops of time be dropped.

For a brief moment, Twilight wondered how many times they’d already tried to tame the human, and how many times yet would be needed to hit on something that didn’t see her friends and family destroyed.

Celestia would not be dismayed. Her message to herself thus, and Starlight wrote it down in case she found a way to warn herself, just so she could keep track of the losing messages, and hopefully their order. The message then, would be as follows. "Emergency channel authorization Sigma Bananna Yogurt Nails Eight Triangle Flat Earthiness; you’ll barely have time to verify this I need you to go to Ponyville. In a day or two a human – Twilight will know what they look like – will arrive at Fluttershy’s property from the swamps at the edge of the forest. You must destroy it before it gains all its memories. I have lost my sister and my neice, and what’s left of Equestria society has become a fierce and distrustful mockery of itself. You might not be able to destroy it directly; freeze it in stone and find a safe way to dispose of the remains later."

Chapter 3

Second Run

Beginning Plus Two Days

Twilight decide to personally describe to Celestia how the human had been secured. It still didn't make sense, that she would travel back in time to tell her to incarcerate a human when it seemed his only crime was being in the wrong universe. But for now, she landed just inside the moat bridge, and began trotting through the familiar rooms to get to the audience room, where Celestia spent many of her days hearing the concerns of the ponies.

There was a line, currently about nine ponies long. Twilight gave consideration to whether she should declare royal privelege and walk up past them, or just wait in line like all the rest. But when Celestia saw it was her, she waved to the earth pony stallion speaking with her now, and when he had stopped, the elder alicorn teleported both herself and Twilight to a balcony on the back of the castle, overlooking the peak of the mountain more than any large portion of the city.

Blinking only once in surprise, Twilight began her report. "Your majesty," To which Celestia rolled her eyes before focusing intently on the younger princess again. "I've secured the statue in ropes, and chaned the ropes to the anti-magic cage it's housed in. I've buried it in a hole thirty hooves deep, and also set up some structures around the hole so if he frees himself he won't drown. But the hole is well outside of Ponyville so he shouldn't be able to attract just any pony's attention. Not even passing pegasi, as the hole is covered and that cover is both physically and magically camouflaged."

Celestia nodded, shifting her wings to ease her tensions. "Thank you Twilight. Hopefully this will be the end of whatever debacle caused me to come back looking like that." After squinting at her student a moment, she asked "Since she didn't say from how far in the future she came, I don't know how desparately I'll need to recreate the spell so I can make sure all the timelines look like this. Do you know how to make a time travel loop?"

"No, I don't Celestia. There's a scroll in the library, but each pony can only go back once, and you can only stay about fifteen seconds. The thing that almost destroyed Equestria was Starlight Glimmer's work."

Celestia stood, as the teleport had left her seated as she had been on the dais. "I'll send arrangements to see her here, then. She was very useful, if a little frightening, the last time she stayed to help me." *That would be the body-swap thing. That would be creepy, wouldn't it?*

"Is there a room I can stay at? I'd like to wander around the city streets again and I don't get out here much when I have any time to appreciate my old stomping grounds."

"Guest room seven is the largest of the ones available. Do you know where that is?" Twilight actually didn't, but remembered seeing something like it marked on an emergency exit poster on this floor. "I'll leave you here, then but find me if something important comes up." With that, she teleported away.

With nopony around she wandered in from the balcony to find it was attached to one of the smaller ballrooms. She thought she remembered where it was in the castle and made way to where she thought one of those posters was. But the poster she found was badly faded and while the exits for fliers and earth-bound ponies was still legible, the sections' names were not.

A guard was making his rounds, and was pleasantly surprised to find a princess on his route. "Ma'am." he said, then realized she'd been staring at the floorplan poster. "Can I help you find someone?" Twilight explained she had exaggerated her knowledge of the guest rooms, and with a grin the guard pointed to which set of lines would be guest room seven.

"Thanks! I'll go put my stuff away right now." Of course, she'd want everything in her saddle packs when she went out, and as she had packed lightly she had no extra baggage to leave, but it would be good both to find the room, and to ruffle the bedspread so any staff that came through would know something was up.

She didn't walk that evening, she flew. Drifted high over the city she grew up in, and considered the memories as she looked down at the buildings. Celestia was de-energizing the sun, so it was getting darker before the sun actually went behind the horizon. She'd heard from some pegasi couriers that was actually how it always was, but she waited until it was past the horizon for all the ground-bound tribes. Even Cloudsdale couldn't see it darkening, you had to be about ten thousand hooves above their average height to see it.

The moon came up from even below her current horizon, bright and clear and full. Twilight stayed aloft for an hour after moonrise, finally feeling better about Equestria's leadership, and future. Whatever this threat had been, it had been a very rare set of circumstances that led to Celestia telling Celestia to permanently imprison what to all appearances looked like an innocent visitor. Her concerns abated, and feeling refreshed and alive, Twilight circled the castle to find the same out of the way balcony to land on. When she let herself in, she realized the ballroom wasn't quite empty, as a pair of the castle staff were ... having an interlude in the dark, previously empty room. Trying to quickly recall Starlight's invisibility spell, and apparently succeeding, she quietly flew up and around and past the couple to finally find her way to bed. *That was sure embarrassing. I hope I never get walked in on while I'm with my future colt friend!*

3.1 Second Run Complications.

Her things all in her saddle packs, Twilight left the room to find Celestia. It was ten minutes after sunrise, so she had a notion of which part of the castle to find her in, and that she should have a few minutes before the chores and bores of the day overtook her.

Guard and staff alike recognized her and let her pass with no comment. Celestia had apparently retired to her bedroom for a few minutes to retrieve something. Knocking on the door, Twilight heard no reply. Opening the door, she saw Celestia, looking utterly dazed and devastated, staring at an empty section of wall between a fireplace and a supplies-shelf. "Celestia?"

She walked in and saw that while the alicorn was breathing, the wings were drooping a bit and there had been no reply, not even an ear twitch. "Your highness?" which also received no reply. Walking around so as not to startle her, in case Celestia had been drugged or something similar, she was now far enough around she should be in the peripheral vision of the large pony. Now she did whip her head around, following the movement but not making eye contact yet. "Are you alright? Can I help?"

Now the eyes did find Twilight, and the white alicorn said in utter disbelief "You're a horse."

Twilight blinked. "Yes ma'am. Also an alicorn, and a princess."

The larger alicorn blinked in reply, equally confused. "That was your voice. You were calling for yourself?" Celestia still hadn't moved more than just her head, a little bit.

"You're also a princess." Twilight took a couple more steps in towards her mentor. By now the guard outside had stuck his head in, having heard some of what had been said.

"This thing is female?" was her reply, and finally moving, to stuffed her front right hoof towards and under her seated parts. After fishing around for a moment she brought her hoof up to examine what she had found down there. "What on earth is wrong with my?" She didn't finish as she was too confused by what she found, which seemed to just be her own hoof.

Suddenly Celestia's eyes went wide, whites showing all the way around the irises, and her horn exploded with a fury that cracked the stone wall she was seated next to, and addition to knocking things all around the room off their place and onto the floor. *An alicorn infant with no control of their magic.* "Hello." Twilight hesitantly said. "My name is Twilight Sparkle." The alicorn had been startled by her own explosion, but was already back to staring at her hoof, trying to move it a little without moving the leg it was attached to. "What's your name?"

Without hesitation or looking away, she replied "Jack."

Complications Plus Five Years

"It's not that simple, Twilight." Luna said, staring at the now unearthed, unchained statue of the human Celestia had petrified. "Celestia didn't use a standard petrify spell; in order to make

it complicated for our enemies to de-petrify this creature, she spell-locked it with something personal to herself.”

Twilight had of course studied spell-locks. They never fully faded, and they could never be completely copied. As a side effect, the spell could only be undone by someone who fully understood the whole spell, meaning either the unicorn that cast it, unless they forgot what they locked the spell with, or in the case of some unicorn guilds, they had standard phrases and images for different levels of participation, so an advanced unicorn could undo the spell of a journeypony, but a novice would have no chance at undoing the work of that journeypony.

”You’ve tried any shared secrets you two might use for this?” Officially, the princess had taken ill, and been sent to a hospital that had the needed capacity to deal with a sick alicorn that weighed nearly five times the average Equestrian.

”Of course.”

Twilight hadn’t expected these years had been wasted, but was hoping Luna would add a ‘but’ to that answer. ”Starlight has finished preliminary examination of the timeline we’re in. This wasn’t the first time Celestia went back, and if we can’t find some way to redo the spell, this will be the permanent timeline.”

”How long do we have? The whelp is learning magic, maybe the spell wouldn’t know which soul was operating the body, and the fake Celestia could fill the roll.”

”Would that even work? Time travel spells are really difficult. Anyway Starlight can’t tell that yet she’s mostly focusing on trying recreate the spell so we’ll know more about what our options for salvaging the timeline are.”

Luna closed her eyes, and energized her horn. Opening them, a thaumaturgic blast smacked into the statue to no effect. Without looking away from the statue she said ”The great difficulty with time travel is the energy that needs to be funnelled into the spell. My sister had control of the needed power; what remains is to teach the whelp running amok in that body of hers, to direct the spell aright.

3.2 Second Run, End Minus Ten Years

Tiajack, as she had taken to calling herself, was drunk. Over the last two generations, her position as a princess had been radically altered so it would be safe to let her out of the ”haunted” castle wing. The general populace believed she was a powerful goddess who had long since lost interest in the ponies she had created. In exchange the other five alicorns, Twilight, Starlight (who had finally achieved enough popularity to alicornify in what likely would have been her final decade), and of course the Crystal Twins, who looked as close in age as Celestia and Luna had looked but were in fact mother and daughter, all needed to wear heavy cloaks in public. Luna occasionally assured the pair that after another half millenia they would scarcely notice the difference. Of course, Luna had never had foals, so perhaps Cadence’s insistence that Flurry would always be

her little filly would prove true. Flurry worried that the eldest alicorn would make use of her status as a god.

Twilight reminded them all that he already did.

The drunk 'princess' was throwing a party. As she herself could down a 55 gallon drum of mead and still walk a straight line there was a great deal of booze, and most of the other party goers were hammered as well. Entering the party were the disguised alicorn mares, and a chosen male student of what had been renamed "Unicorns challenged" as Celestia was no longer available to teach anypony, gifted or otherwise. Trailing behind them were ten mares from every guard branch, ready to do anything to fix this broken timeline.

It was Cadence who approached the alicorn. Tiajack had never exactly hit it off with Flurry, and Luna was described as "cold at both ends" whereas Twilight had never been forgiven for her tirade after Tiajack drunkenly kicked the statue of himself into multiple pieces, making unpetrifying Celestia impossible without killing her. Starlight Glimmer kept the greatest distance, feeling that as keeper of the critical time travel magics she needed to remain the least injured.

"Hey Flur... No. Cadie." Cadence tried not to wince. Her husband had called her that, but as a normal unicorn he had died nine decades ago. The lumbering booze barrel sloshed herself to an upright posture. To Tiajack's credit, despite having just cracked a third barrel she didn't overcorrect and fall back down. "This must be some serious cloak and dagger nonsense. You aren't here to dagger me are you?"

Cadence spared a quick glance at her cloak. "No auntie. I want to offer a trade. One that's been needed for a while." Diamond Spark, the young unicorn stallion, had been instructed to stay out of Cadence's sight, and more than a hundred hoove away from the alicorn. This should give Cadence an element of surprise when the offer was presented in full.

"You know I'm drunk, right?" The alicorn tried to look conspiratorially over one eyebrow and nearly swayed herself back onto her side. Cadence nodded. "Either you think I'd never agree sober or there's a trick involved."

"I promise you'll get to have as many parties as you want. And we'll stop complaining about the body swaps." Cadence sat nervously, tense that her peripheral vision not give away the sober unicorn stallion standing right behind her somewhere.

The alicorn breathed heavily, and levitated over one of the empty barrels. Sucking several drops of mead out of it she put it back, knocking over the one it had been sitting on, and looked around for her recently opened barrel. As there were several earth ponies refilling their cups Tiajack had to wave and call to them to hurry up and finish. When they had put the barrel back down she levitated that over, and took a long drink from it, setting it back down only about halfway to the still-thirsty gaggle of ponies.

"What do you get out of it, then?"

Cadence smiled, answering "We've decided on who we want to be our immortal leader." It had been a thing Twilight and Tiajack had argued about before. Tiajack said it was better if

the figurehead didn't change, and the strings behind the curtain would have more freedom. But really, Tiajack didn't want to lose actual godlike powers and still be a mare in bed. "He's a stallion, so that will simplify things."

Booze finally catching up with her, Tiajack had trouble focusing on the hot alicorn from the frozen north. "I'm already immortal, you know."

"So, there's no problems, are there?" Cadence waited for the alicorn to fade from awareness of her surroundings, after which she swept her gaze across the attendees. Perhaps twelve stallions, seven or eight mares. It had gotten out that mares lost their self respect after attending these parties, and stallions thought that meant only the most desperately in-heat mares attended anyway. Staff had to pay mares a fair amount to show up since their half of the stories were nearly true. But the scales could be tipped, yet. "He's bringing his harem of ten mares, which you'll get to keep."

The guardsmares had been told it would only be for ten years. That was sort of true. If nothing went awry, this timeline would end, and not continue. But Twilight didn't know what she personally would experience at that time.

Chapter 4

Third run, Beginning

A brilliant flash interrupted Celestia's court. Fortunately the earth pony couple seeking divorce had already finished today's discussions and what appeared to be a business pony with a plan had not yet approached off the steps.

The flash brought with it a white alicorn, long stately horn and several flashcards tucked into the feathers of her left wing. The cutie mark clearly indicated it was in fact, herself. She made eye contact briefly with today's Celestia, and smiled perfunctorily. Then looking around at other ponies also stationed on the dais, called out "Maybe one of you is named Sprintpoint?"

The pegasus guard by that name snapped to attention, and regarded the speaker in confusion before declaring "Ma'am?"

The first of the flashcard floated out to where the new Celestia could read it. "Please verify visitor code authorization Sigma Bananna Yogurt Nails Eight Triangle Flat Earthiness, and get back to the normal Celestia when you've proven it valid and marked it used." Dropping that flash card, she began to levitate the next, and read it to 'today's Celestia' "I'm from 200 years in the future, and you did not choose well last time. Starlight Glimmer" Here she stopped, to look up at the seated royal "That name is supposed to be familiar? You could go talk to? Okay good." Back to her flashcard. "Glimmer will attempt in another hundred years, to send herself a memoryplate with some notes. If that doesn't work, prepare a spell with." Here the flashcard dropped and a third floated into place. "ms. Glimmer, to re-up this spell at the two hundred year mark. Critical that you and glimmer remain alive and healthy for those years. The interdimensional threat is only a large threat if somepony kills him" Here the future Celestia looked up and explained "That's why I'm here; he agreed to let me be Celestia if he could go back to having a horn back there to bang mares with. Anyway, uhm." Looking down at her flashcard, time traveling Celestia caught up with her notes and continued "Twilight Spik-something knows what hue-mins." Again, she looked up to make eye contact. "I'm sorry, I don't know how to say that. Twy Light will know one when she sees it." And again from her notes. "Creature is functionally unkillable; ply him with mares and mead. Also he will need Griffon diet until he dies."

The last flashcard drifted to the floor and Celestia quickly fumbled for the last one. "More notes if there's time. Spell will autocancel anyway. Humming doesn't know magic until forced;

spells are body swapping by touch or eyes, hearing through ears out to one hundred hooves, canceling interpretation of himself. ” Here again the Celestia’s had eye contact, as the future copy explained ”Invisibility, unless you’re more than a hundred hooves.” Finally back to his notes, ”Two last, all listed in order of discovery, he maintains the place that doesn’t exist. Dragging ponies there lets”

Current celestia had felt the weave of time, the bent of magic, gathering to this moment. Future Celestia, whatever awaited her at home, was no longer here as a huge candescence swelled and grabbed future Celestia, burning an outline in the retina, but nothing more remained. Not even the dropped flashcards, one of which had fluttered down the steps, remained to offer any proof of what had just happened.

4.1 Third Run, meetups

Celestia had rapidly assembled a small crew, including two chefs that could make a griffon meal, two daughters of some loyal but retired army ponies, five different kinds of booze and two bottles of popular, softer drinks. The whole retinue landed in front of Twilight’s castle in Ponyville. Celestia, under her own power, pulling along a number of non-flyers quite unannounced drew stares, but Celestia tried to ignore the gasps. Rather than staying in the public eye for any longer than necessary, she simply opened Twilight’s main door, and led the retinue in.

Twilight was just coming out from a hallway, and stopped right in her tracks. ”Celestia! You **are** doing something!” Followed by a brief frown, and she started giving her retinue orders. ”Kitchen is to the left then right, you’ll see or possibly smell it from there. Let’s set up down this hallway there’s room for everypony.”

Even though she knew it would be over interpreted, Celestia had to call out ”I know you’ve questioned my efficacy before Twilight, but that’s not quite how I expected to be greeted.” As soon as the former student stopped and made choking sounds, Celestia dismissed her concerns. ”It’s fine, Twilight, thanks for adapting so quickly. Though I’m curious as to what you thought I was or wasn’t doing.”

Now walking backwards through the hallways, Twilight explained ”Starlight woke me up extra early to say a wooden box, almost the size of an armoire, with a mirror in the center appeared in her room.” Celestia was about to comment on it being a memoryplate, containing the important notes of 300 years of memories. But Twilight continued without much pause, explaining ”She said there were notes written by woodburning, saying it was imperative she stop you, and where to find you to stop you but since you’re here, and not in the swamps, I guess you got the message too.”

Celestia was considering adding that she had been stopped by ... whatever that thing operating her body had been. But Twilight was ramping up in her position as Hostess, and had figured out everypony’s job except the daughters. ”I think that’s everypony except you two ladies”

"We're the" Heavy Boots started out. When she faltered, Artillery Tread finished with "The entertainment." delivered much more flatly than Boots attempt at a smile and and eye contact.

Twilight was about to provide a leading question in the form of a sidelong glance and a belching sound, when the entire crowd was interrupted by Starlight Glimmer's voice, ringing out clearly even before she pushed a door open. "I found the visitor he seems" But cut herself short when she looked up to see Celestia's rather substantial bulk blocking the doorway they had just come through. She immediately backed up and turned sideways, initiating a shield spell and shouting "Look whatever you're planning it's a bad idea!"

Behind her, stood a tall, skinny biped with pale blue eyes, and a flat face. The daughters in particular looked startled; perhaps their instructions had been ill conceived. "Starlight, I promise not to hurt him" Technically most of the message had been unclear about the sex of the visitor, but if he wanted mead and mares, that mostly assumed a stallion of whatever species he was from. Trying to make eye contact with Starlight through he shield, she added "I can leave and let the rest of you decide this, if that would make you more comfortable?"

Starlight paused, whites showing, as she glanced around the room. Lowering the shield, she suggested "Can I talk to you outside? Teleport, please? I'll be right along I think."

Thinking back on the meeting this morning, there was no doubt this level of concern was warranted. Celestia turned to Twilight, then said to the daughters, "You're up next, I guess." And teleported out.

4.2 Much Smaller Magic Mirror

Starlight turned to the ... human, lacking any better moniker, and said "You'll be okay here? It looks like they have food here. Let the host" Here she pointed a hoof at Twilight Sparkle, who was primed and ready to introduce herself if there had been an actual gap. "know if you can't digest the food we're not used to things like you, okay?"

The two legged thing, covered in mud soaked clothing, nodded, and asked "Is this usually how you greet strange visitors from" His voice faded, unable to find a name for where he had come from.

"I assure you the zero other times something like you crawled out a swamp they got a perfectly fine meal and a warm bed later. Speaking of later," At which point she teleported away too.

The human, again lacking a better description, stepped into the room and looked at his still dripping clothes. Twilight took a quick look around the room and realized, rather oddly for Ponyville, every creature in the room had a fair number of items coving some part of their body. Taking her boots and crown off, which she hardly needed to be recognized in this crowd used to working with the main princesses, and called out "Hey, human.. uhm." She paused a short moment, but he didn't offer a name, so she continued. "You look like a mess with all that mud.

We have no idea what your people look like so if you just, you know, want to take the mud off we can just wander around that way. Nothing unusual about it in this town.”

The two soldier mares quickly followed suit and removed their flak jackets and lace-up boots, setting them in a pile by Twilight’s crown and boots which was all she had been wearing as she hadn’t planned on leaving the castle yet so saddle pads wouldn’t really be called for. And the human started stripping dripping, smelly layers from his body. About four layers for the top and three for the legs, counting the boots that only covered his “back” legs. He paused after unclasping his rump coverings, saying “I don’t have. Well. I guess you wouldn’t know about that.”

He went ahead and took off his rump coverings and thankfully didn’t pile them with the still clean clothes. But rather quickly Twilight knew what he was concerned about. This human didn’t have a sheath. She didn’t, of course, know if that was normal or not but it meant that even if he wasn’t *unsheathed*, he still sort of flopped around at eye level for most of the crowd, effectively unsheathed.

Twilight decided that if it had been an injured stallion, who lost his sheath in the war, or something, she wouldn’t ask him why he was flopping around mere moments after the hostess had said it was fine to take off the awkward belt so . . . *he was sheathed just fine. Nothing odd here.*

He was making his way to the table closest the door to the kitchen. “I’m smelling smoked salmon. You guys eat salmon? Things will get awkward if you can only offer me alfalfa meal.” Twilight inwardly grimaced. *Can’t eat alfalfa? Even as a meal additive?* But about that time the door opened and the earth pony stallion and pegasus mare that were just cooking said fish (Twilight couldn’t think of a single creature in Equestria that both wanted to eat a fish, and wanted to cook it first).

“Sir.” said the stallion, setting his plate at a table. The mare set a dish next to it that seemed to have steamed grains. A little rice, a little oats, and some lentils, by the smell of it. Odd concoction, but Twilight seemed to remember hearing some griffons discussing competing recipes for what this probably was.

Celestia came back in just then, Starlight not following so Twilight would have to ask later about it. Celestia offered a warm smile at the human, asking how the food was. The human’s mouth was full so he was stuck just ‘uhmhm’ing with a nod while tapping the spoon at the rice. “Good, I’ll leave you to your meal then. It seems my two young guards” She used a fore hoof and a wingtip to indicate Heavy Boots and Artillery Tread, “will be staying here, so I imagine you’ll have to share quarters with them for at least a while.

The two young mares smiled sweetly at Jack, and while the table mostly blocked the view Twilight, sitting against the wall, could tell that, in fact the human was unsheathed now, if wasn’t before. About the time the human was noticing it, Twilight hit on the idea of summoning a bath towel. “I’m sorry I didn’t think of this Jack! The metal chair must be awfully cold her wrap this around yourself.”

The human grabbed the towel from the air and stood to make a sort of impromptu skirt, tucking the far end into the near end to hold it in place as he sat back down, definitely too embarrassed to say anything, and his flag pole nearly undoing the knot he'd just put in place.

Celestia turned around and started back out, calling "Princess Twilight, a moment of your time?" *Well, this will either be informative or the peak of confusing.* They walked at a casual pace until they were back outside her castle, and Celestia looked over her shoulder at something on, or behind the wall, before walking another seven or eight hooves away, the pointed to the ground in front of her, even farther from the castle.

Seating herself on the gravel walkway, Twilight started with "You know I have other spare bedrooms if—"

But was quickly interrupted with "No, they're supposed to be sleeping together I just want to give Romeo the chance to think it's his amazing charm. I need you to keep an eye on Starlight. You remember how to cast a debuff spell?"

"What do you think got into her? What spell is she going to cast, do you expect? She's not still going to mess with your plans for ... your two guards?"

Celestia inhaled, and as she sighed, her head drooped, and her eyes closed. "No." Eyes open, slowly they focused on the here and now. The elder alicorn raised her head as she turned to look at the younger. "I've told her how to make a don't-sleep spell. And she won't be leaving her room and will probably lose track of time."

"She'll die on day fourteen." Twilight felt sick. Not only was this confusing, somehow this day had put her friend, maybe more than just the one, in grave danger. Swallowing, symbolically flushing her fear out of her mind, she asked "What do you want me to do?"

The alicorn's eyes looked hard, though the voice was still soft. "I don't want it to go past day ten or eleven. She'll need time to write down what she saw, compile a report that all the princesses will need a copy of, and maybe she'll need to dive back in." At the look of confusion and bursting question on Twilight's face, or at least that's how she felt as Celestia's expression softened. "The memoryplate is fairly detailed, and once it starts playing back it stays locked to the timeline as it just was. If she lets go it will start over. Good for testing several hypotheses out to a year's time but I want to know approximately what it will look like when the plate was first made, which is somewhere between one and three hundred years from today."

It took Twilight several mental iterations to catch some of the larger implications of that order. "You're expecting the human to become a threat? Or is this completely unrelated?"

"The human." Her face hardened, lips pursed and eyes held tightly shut for a moment. "He can't be killed, and apparently if we mishandle this circumstance, especially very early, he turns into a spoiled foal, and focuses on breaking all his toys that have displeased him."

"Meaning the ponies of Equestria." Celestia nodded at Twilight's insight.

4.3 Third Run, Year Ten

Pinkie did a spit take, root beer painting the table they sat at, and not a little sticking to coat and mane of the purple unicorn across from her. "You want me to tell them *What?*"

Starlight seemed to be expecting this, and was not visibly fazed. "To prepare to have a foal by the human. Don't worry humans are too different, they won't actually have a foal." At the earth pony's open mouthed look of astonishment, she added "Tell them it's to save Equestria."

Pinkie put her mug down, and thought for a moment. "Will it actually save Equestria? I don't want to exaggerate just to provide you with better blackmail material."

The unicorn's eyes unfocused, the nose and ears pointed at something over Pinkie's shoulder, though when she looked back, it seemed to just be the side of the restaurant they were at. When Pinkie looked again at the unicorn, she was making eye contact normally, though still looking a little wistful and distant as she replied "Neither is it directly true, nor is it an exaggeration. There are lots of ways this could go wrong, but none of the ways it could go right don't involve your sisters."

The earth pony took another drink of her root beer, this time swallowing as normal. "So, how do I arrange this date? Picnic out at the edge of Sweet Apple acres, everypony bring an extra towel so we can all get comfortable?"

Starlight shook her head. "No, no. Outwardly they just all come over for tea, or something. Just have a small event at Twilight's castle. But they need to not overreact when the human tries to climb up on one of them."

Squinting, the suddenly skeptical earth pony asked "Doesn't he have, like, four mares at his beck and call already? And I thought I overheard Celestia's letter say she'd find and send more if he asked?"

The unicorn levitated the crumbs of her slice of cake off the plate, answering "That will come out that day. But if it's too obvious he won't open up, and if it's too confrontational he'll get mad." The crumbs were sucked out of the air as Starlight's eyes unfocused again, squinting to see some long lost memory.

"You're not guessing, are you? This is that 'limited vision of the future' thing you won't talk about?" Pinkie drained her cup and slapped the small mug on the table. "Which one of us will it actually be?"

The horn whipped and whistled, so quickly did Starlight shake her head. "No, it's not that simple. This is one of those delicate crux moments. It could go a dozen ways and I have to be careful how I influence, or don't influence everypony's decision." Her lip trembled now, a tear forming. "If I do it wrong, one of you will wind up dead. I can force it to be Maud, and that will all work out but that's not a better future, ten years out anyway, than not losing a Pie pony." When the waitpony came to the table to retrieve the empty plates, Starlight called out to him "I'm done with the softdrinks. I need a glass of fortified wine. Tartarus get me a shot of bourbon to go with it."

Pinkie spoke angrily to the waitpony for no apparent reason. "Well I'm not done with soft drinks. Get me another root beer, and double the root." Everypony who lived in Ponyville was used to Pinkie's speech patterns, so he calmly responded and walked away to get the drinks.

"If it's you or Maud, then Marble will be the one get him to open up. That's actually the best ending because he grows up a lot but it's also the hardest to hold onto. One wrong sneeze or ear twitch and Limestone is dead and the human turns evil." Starlight's head was listing to one side, her voice growing a slur in anticipation of the afternoon's just deserts. "I think I can steer it to being with Marble first though. That will mean Limestone and he will have a long term fling." The head didn't raise, but the eyes focused again, found Pinkie Pie. "About five, maybe six years. We'll learn he likes lactating mares a lot, but by the time her foal is a year and a half, she'll want to see less of him so she'll start playing Maud with him. Not moving, not speaking, just standing, waiting. And he'll grow bored, and they'll grow apart leading to a long marriage with some stallion I've never seen around here yet, but their foal will attend this school."

The waitpony had just brought back the ordered drinks. Starlight floated out the coinage for the repaste, no tip since she was spending tax money to arrange this. As soon as the stallion was out of hearing range again, she finished with "Cherilee will be dead by then. Some sort of backlash with the human; she's not dead if Marble develops a relationship with him."

Pinkie stared at the sky without raising her muzzle, so she could rehear what Starlight had revealed. *Pinkie OR Maud?* "You know he sleeps with me every Thursday, right?"

Starlight finally sat upright again, and levitated the wine glass to her lips before replying. "He just snuggles with you, though, right? Literally sleeps with you?"

Pinkie giggle-snorted. "Not for the first three minutes."

Starlight took a gulp of the wine, and dumped the shot of bourbon in to replace the volume. "Oh."

4.4 Third Run, Year Twenty

At the eastern most end of the Whitetail Woods, Trixe had parked her wagon. By the compost pile of manure, uneaten food scraps and ash from the campfire, she'd been parked out here a while. The official run had been ten days ago but still a few determined leaves had stayed on their branches, which rocked and whistled in the occasional gusts. As the pegasi had been relocating many smaller clouds, the sky was a dingy overcast gray; this was Starlight's fault as she had warned Rainbow Dash, who still worked for the Weather Patrol though she had retired with honors from the Wonderbolts, that there was a fifty-fifty chance the human alicorn would start a massive forest fire.

But she had come here to stop that, though there seemed to be a one in three chance her first friend would die of a heart attack for trying to help. Walking through the crisp, crunchy leaves to close the final gap, Starlight again reminded herself that if she saw her friend die, she must

not cry. That would incite a series of misunderstandings that would cause the alicorn stallion to declare war on pony kind, and it would last for years.

As Starlight crossed the invisible line, into the camp proper where Trixie Lulamoon had kept everything swept clean, she heard a shutter slam shut. She hadn't realized the unicorn had been watching her approach, but as the door opened a brilliantly brushed, faded blue Trixe stepped out, deep violet eyes blazing violently. "Decided to slum it with the mortals today, have we?"

Starlight unfurled her wings, and looked over her shoulder at them, as she closed them back against her side. "I'm sorry I haven't been able to visit lately. I guess I got busy." Her voice sounded hollow, careless even to herself. *I've gotten nothing but flak, but it's because I have been manipulating everypony.* Starlight summoned a percolator, and seeing the lack of real firewood, some of the larger twigs she could see off in various directions. *I understand why they're mad. But I also know I've seen everypony die at least once. And that was before I was granted artificial immortality.*

Once the firewood was arranged in the firepit, the Great and Powerful deigned to speak again. "I suppose I should thank you, for setting me on the road to real magic." And with that, the firepit was alight, though only some of the drier portions of bark were burning so it would be several minutes before the fire would be hot enough to brew coffee.

Starlight set the coffee pot down next to the fire pit, and sat herself down in front of it, across from her first friend. *This isn't going to be easy, is it? Why must that accursed human require I be the one who becomes immortal? Wasn't I screwed up enough already?* Aloud, still in that flat, worn out tone, she said "I'm going to need your help."

Trixie levitated a fire poker off her wagon and stirred the cookfire into a somewhat more useful configuration now that it was properly burning. Saying nothing, and not looking up from her campfire, she put the firepoker back. Though it was still early afternoon, the cloud cover meant the fire's light illuminated the difference between her mane hairs that were still a youthful silver, and those that were an aged gray. Staring again into the fire, she finally replied "Last time you said that, we were almost robbed by those bandits that Flim & Flam had been cheating of their money."

Nodding, Starlight teleported a few more heavy sticks that she hoped were dry, as she levitated them into the fire. A few sparks flew into the air and crackled as they fell. "I remember. The fight between the two sets of crooks was fated to spill into Las Pegasus and a lot of ponies would have been hurt in the cross-fire. But I had already checked that you wouldn't die if I asked you." *I always check if a pony will die when I talk to them. I've myself attend everypony's funeral so many times I forget no pony has died in this timeline yet.* She placed the percolator onto the fire. It wasn't hot enough to cook on, but this coffee pot had been bought at a second hoof store expressly for this chat, because it was going to take a while to get her friend *My good friend. My first friend after I swore off being a manipulative liar.* Trixie to unwind, and open back up to her.

Still not looking at the newly uplifted unicorn, Trixie said to the fire "It's been two years you know."

"I . . ." *Have been busy? Have a lot of friends vying for my time? I've been completely absorbed by that stupid memoryplate I sent myself. The only reason my ribs aren't showing is I've been using forbidden forms of alicorn magic to sustain the vitality of my immortal body.* Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and looked up again, now meeting those grayish eyes. It wasn't clear at first whose eyes were tearing up, but as more of the world turned to mush, Starlight Glimmer jumped over the cookfire, and grabbed up the long neck of her friend, who was currently getting Starlight's mane wet with her own tears.

When she trusted her voice again, she said "I've been so caught up trying to predict every branch of the future, that I've forgotten to live in the present, where all of you are."

Trixie spat out her reply. "Why can't Celestia just freeze him or lock him away in a cave outside of the Crystal Empire?"

Their sides together, Starlight had to remind herself not to extend a wing over the unicorn's back. They hadn't finished patching up their hurts yet, and Trixie was overly sensitive to an overreach of affection, having been burned by too many selfish ponies. And Starlight's biggest downfall had always been knowing how to take power that had been 'left on the table' as it were. "It's been tried. In fact that's why I had to become immortal, was Celestia screwed up and died, so I had to warn myself to warn her to not choose that path."

The unicorn turned to look at her friend; equal parts curiosity and wariness showed in the tense lips and perked ears. "Those time travel things. They are really short messages, right? How do you see branches if you got one message?"

Now she did hug the unicorn with a wing, and folding back at her side, said with a smirk on her face "No it's not that style of message. Do you know what a memoryplate is?"

Trixie's mouth made an 'oh' of surprise as her horn lit up. Behind them, a shutter unlatched and opened, and out floated a picture frame, showing a road disappearing into the distance. When it was held in front of the purple alicorn, the picture was replaced with another, and another. Not a fully moving picture like her own had been, but this was clearly a photo album of a trip. She saw herself, and Trixie's wagon as it was then. She saw from the angle that the viewer was in the traces, and Starlight was on the roof, then beside the viewer. *This was that trip. Our first road trip together. Nearly our last.* Twenty something years ago. "Yeah. Like that." Starlight almost started crying again.

"I paid eighteen bits for this spell, though I was able to help some." Turning the road scene this way and that, Trixie added "I acquired the pieces for the frame later. Practiced some of your magic lessons to weave the various metals into something suitable."

As the memoryplate was put away, Starlight explained "I sent something akin to that, back to myself. But I got clever. Your memoryplate, because it is of scenes in your past, will never change. Mine shows me what I assembled in roughly three hundred years. Except everytime I let it reset, it shows me a different timeline. The set of memories I was just then on the path to acquire."

Before the shutter was latched, two camp cups were brought out, and Trixie tried a few drops of the coffee. It was still much too early and barely looked like tea. Starlight held a foreleg against Trixie's shoulder, and then teleported the coughtea back into the pot. As the percolator was put back on the fire, Trixie asked "How does it know which timeline to show you?"

I should inscribe this onto the wooden frame. "It doesn't know anything but what I'm about to get myself into. So I convince myself to do a thing, be a way, find myself in a place. Then I look again. But I have to actually convince myself, or instead of seeing what the world looks like when I do a thing, it shows me what would happen if I thought about doing the thing that I didn't actually do." *Which can be very different than not trying, and still different yet from trying not to.*

"Does it take a long time to remember three hundred years?"

Starlight nodded. "Initially it took three and a half, almost four days, nonstop, no sleeping or letting go, to see it through to the end. But again, I got clever. It wears out, losing a day's worth of memory for every day that goes by. By the time it's time to send it back, it will be empty, and I'll have to summon the real memories, of what actually happened, when I finally get there." *And I noticed that when I watch myself watching the memoryplate, it looks to me like the memoryplate is empty. I'm glad I won't force myself to rewatch some of the horrors that have nearly happened.* Then another thought crept up; what if those blank memories were even worse? In the wrong circumstances, the human had proven unspeakably cruel.

"Have you ever had a future where you had no future?" Trixie's nose was facing out into the forest, straight ahead, but the left ear was trained on the alicorn's muzzle. The right ear would twitch at times, as new thoughts fought with old ones and she tried to decide what to actually ask her immortal friend. Why can't we all have immortality? Everypony in this place dies. I've even been to Celestia and Luna's funerals a few times.

"Because of how important it seems to the elder sisters to get this report in the first place, they've promised me immortality. So even if I had hit upon the perfect set of responses during my natural lifetime, and the human was tamed, I need to live long enough to get the memoryplate back to myself to prove what needed to happen." Foregoing the firepoker, as her magic was strong enough to manipulate burning coals now, the alicorn shuffled and stirred the burning wood, and also extinguished every crackling ember that leapt out towards the dry leaves just beyond the rock circle. "So if it happens, and it has, that I reach a hoof to activate the memoryplate and it disappears, I know I'm on a road to personal destruction."

Looking over to her friend this time, Trixie asked "Is there a 'safe default' that will always work?"

A weak smile crept across Starlight's face. There was a message written by wood-burning on the back of the cabinet, that explained how to utterly avoid the deaths of anypony important in trying again next time. "You want to know what it is? Utterly ridiculous, but if Celestia concedes to the human, most things are kinda okay."

That took a bit of time to process, and she looked down at the percolater, deep in its cycle of popping noises as the coffwater returned to drip again over the grounds. "What kind of leader

does he make?"

"None. He leaves the day to day things for Celestia to continue taking care of. Which means all of it. We would all have to pay more in taxes, and Ponyville itself will turn into a haven of scum and villany and beautiful mares. But ultimately he just wants to mount any mare he sees, and to be the sole decider of who he'll spend his nights cuddling with."

The fear that darkened the blue unicorn's face shouldn't have been a surprise. She had during her lowest times, traipsed very near to those circumstances herself. It was why she was wary of the power-hungry. "Don't those parts of town have a lot of crime?"

Now it was Starlight's turn to feel her countenance darken. "No." She snorted in defiance, accidentally blowing a booger into the fire which sizzled as Starlight explained. "He does something, and what, is exactly why I'm here today. But he makes himself the sheriff, sort of. Ponies will come to him and he taps them on their chest. Then he'll call for the pony being brought in chains to be brought to him. Again, he taps that pony on the chest and then one of two things happen. Either the pony drops dead, and the former human, usually not alicornified he's just a unicorn in that future, he turns to the victim and explains where their stolen property is. Or he goes back to the first pony, or a third pony that wasn't expecting to be found out. And taps them on the chest, and then that pony drops dead. The pony brought up on charges will be let go or Jack gets mad and starts wreaking havoc by killing all the ponies there." *And everytime I try to devise a way to ask him what that tapping is about, the memoryplate vanishes until I agree with myself not ever to ask him. Myself.*

"So you're asking me to die." She looked, not frightened, or patriotic, or confused. Just crestfallen, as she stared into the embers in front of her.

"No." That wasn't exactly true. Of the twenty times she had run through her final plan to procure Trixie Lulamoon's help, three of them had shown Trixie's lifeless body, and two mare had seen her being levitated to the hospital emergency room. One those had seen Trixie resuscitated, the other had not; one in four chance she will die. *But in three out of four possible runs, my future memories show princess Luna getting all the right mares, with all the needed training and foreknowledge to satisfy and pacify the human.*

plus two days

The donor unicorn had been a pale slate gray, with brilliantly orange eyes, and bright slate blue mane and tail. His cutie mark had been a beaker and a caliper, but that had faded within a week, and this pony had no cutie mark. Interestingly, the human form, where Bunsen Measure still lived, had not acquired any variant of cutie mark.

In order to stave off any requests for a newer, fresher, younger unicorn stallion being forced to don an aged, less than optimal body so the human would be able to keep up on his pasttime without slowing down, Celestia had quite artificially uplifted this donor unicorn to the alicorn

tribe. Jack was now immortal in the conventional way, in addition to being undying in the previous manner.

So when Trixie let herself into the castle, she followed the sound of canned music to a room that amounted to a studio apartment, and found an alicorn stallion trying to dance, for lack of a better word, while practicing levitation drills such as Trixie remembered from the fourth grade. In two corners were small cots, suitable for Artillery Tread and Cloud Carver to sleep, and in the center of the back wall was a larger, deeper, clearly softer bed with a heavy comforter over what looked to be woolen sheets. There was no other furniture aside from the table in the center that had the manual for the levitation drills, and a mixture of materials such as stone, wood, and crystal carved into various shapes all painted with multiple colors so an instructor could tell if the object was being held still, being turned, or was simply upside down.

Oddly, there was no record player. The music seemed to be coming from six literal cans, three sizes attached in a stack, with the other three in another part of the room. The cans were facing the human, one stack just in front of his bed, and the other at the wall between the openings that functioned as doors. In actuality this room had only three walls, with the fourth being the end of a hallway that wound around one outside edge of Twilight's castle. Whether the wood/crystal edifice that stood in the hallway, wider than the missing wall, had been added after the Human's arrival or had always been set up like a backwards choir box Trixie couldn't say, as she'd never been inside this building before.

The younger mare, a pegasus, was nibbling on a head of lettuce, and could be construed to attempting to make eye contact, or perhaps that dull, uninterested look meant nothing at all. The other mare, almost as old as Trixie herself, she knew of - an earth pony who had trained with the royal guard, though there were competing stories as to why she had no rank or record with them. She sat stoically, watching Trixie with her eyes but not moving her nose from straight ahead, which happened to be pointed at the alicorn.

He finished his drills, and put everything down, turning now to smile at Trixie. When the magical glow shut off, so did the music. "Hello? Who sent you?" He held a foreleg out to shake hooves, but upon realizing he would need to use his hooves to walk closer first, he put his hoof back down, took the several steps needed, and still put his hoof out from a little too far away. "I'm the human, you've probably heard of me I suppose."

Trixie shook his hoof, and tried to think of something to say. Starlight had just said she shouldn't need to offer herself, and Jack usually treated visitors like actual ponies. It was only when he disappeared into the closet that somepony turned up injured or dead, or just missing. Trying to push the thought of injury out of her head, she asked about his magic. "I'm a professional entertainer, and I was hoping to ask about your music - as a unicorn I might be able to duplicate your spell and these cans certainly can't hold the melody in them?"

Nodding, he tried to absentmindedly levitate the stack of cans from the outer wall, behind Trixie. It fell over, clanged, and mostly spun until the alicorn stopped to stare intently at it, causing it to levitate to head height. "That just doesn't feel like what you'd want to do to move

things.”

As the cans were set carefully on the edge of the table Trixie explained “Moving things, and levitating them, are indeed different spells. There’s a lot more energy, and thus focus, needed to physically move things, where levitation just needs a bit of a nudge after you get it to a weightless state.”

He muttered noncommittally then pointed a hoof at the back of the cans, which were, Trixie saw now, never intended for storing things, they were simply round, hollow sections of metal. Something akin to the skin of a drum had been secured to the back of each of the three cans. “And the music is definitely a ‘moving things’ spell. You guys almost have ahold of this knowledge, but sound is the result of air forming waves, smacking into things at a speed and with a force. When that something is your inner ear, the vibrations are interpreted. But when they hit a solid wall, they bounce off, making an echo.” The back of each can glowed and vibrated as they were commanded to produce the sound of different drums, each hit once, and a stringed note, perhas as from a guitar.

Trixie hadn’t actually intended to get involved in a discussion of magic, least of all from some otherworldy creature that had trouble with fourth grade magic drills. But if she went on the road again, this really would be useful. Though probably it would require too much focus, if it was a force spell, rather than a casting of memories, like the projector spell family. “How do you know to move it so it will make sound?”

The alicorn sat down, the forgotten wings slumping halfway to the ground. “That’s really easy, actually. So, first remember the sound – a song, a note, someone’s voice. Now imagine, as carefully as you can, that there’s a plexiglass wall.” Stopping for a moment, he pulled his head back a bit and looked at Trixie in confusion. “You probably don’t have those. You have glass, but that’s both strong, and stiff. I want you to imagine the glass is so thin, so pliable, than you can poke it in three places, and watch the ripples, like a pond’s surface, interact. Water, I imagine, won’t quite work it’s too unyielding. So, this sound you want, it’s going through this ripple capable sheet of glass. What you see in your head, move the back of the speaker the same way.”

Trixie tried it; staring at the smallest can, speaker, whatever it was called, she remembered a specific sound. Tinny, distant, a high, scratchy replica of Starlight Glimmer’s voice came out. “I guess I was more worried about the reunion than I thought.”

The human/alicorn thing nodded. “Now, each can is good for a different range of sounds. Try again for each of the speakrs, you’ll probably find the middle one good for voices. The high notes, piccolo, that sort of thing for the tweeter on top, and the base for the deep rumbling sounds.”

Trixie did as requested, and indeed the middle one almost sounded like her. The can at the base, the large one, made her sound like she was on the far side of a cave that was filled with water. “So, you keep track of each sound separately, and send different sounds to different cans?”

He squinted, and looked over at his stack of magic drums. “Not really, I guess? For some things, yes. But mostly I just send everything to all three, as I said that’s what it feels like I’m

doing, and the speakers themselves do a better job repeating the sounds they're good at, and the off-kilter sound is drowned out by the better representation from the speaker better suited to it."

Trixie was about to thank him for his time and ease back out. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to learn, and Starlight had said it wouldn't matter what she went in there thinking, the hoof on chest thing would happen, and when it was over she could tell Starlight what happened. Trixie wouldn't really have been upset if nothing like that had happened, but Starlight had been a good friend, if mostly absent of late.

Shaking her hoof, he asked "Entertainer? Musician? What's your name, and or your stage name?"

Polite smile plastered on her face, she answered "Trixie Lulamoon, but I just go by Trixie, though my fans remember my tour as the Great and Powerful."

His eyes unfocused, drifted away from her, back a couple times before he could make eye contact with Trixie again. "I've actually heard a song about you. Somewhere. I think. What was your childhood like?"

Trixie hadn't had to speak with non-ponies very often. That this creature in front of her was not a pony was made obvious by subtle word choices, which Trixie decided to correct, and see if that would trigger the feared event. "Foalhood. Ponies say foalhood, and everypony."

He slid his foreleg forward, bumping his fetlock against the base of her neck. Trixie might have complained about her personal space, or more likely said something about that wasn't his hoof. But she couldn't, because not only did the alicorn disappear, so did the room, and she realized after a breath, herself.

She was on an open plain, covered with short grasses, none of which looked familiar, and a gravel road winding off into the distance. It came from a small town. Again, the architectural choices looked unfamiliar; the buildings too narrow and tall for a pony to be comfortable there. Running, crying, was a blue unicorn, no cutie mark, that could conceivably have been intended to be her, though at that age her coat and mane were more nearly the same color. They went separate directions within half a year of getting her cutie mark, but few alive knew her at that age so she assumed this was something inside the head of the human.

As the filly ran past, even through Trixie down the gravel road, notes of music rang out from nowhere, and everywhere. Something halfway between a guitar and a flute rang out, and shortly after that a beautiful mare's voice called out, singing after the filly who apparently had been chased off for some feigned transgression.

The plans melted, coalescing into a near-jungle but Trixie was on the edge of it, those odd grasses growing just here. Under a leaf that covered more surface area than needed, stood a defiant looking not-Trixie filly, now covered in mud, scrapes, and dried snot she stared angrily past Trixie into the distance, where that gravel path could be seen going its way, which wasn't here. The mare singing commented that she, presumably the not-Trixie filly needed a hug, to be loved. "Her mama wasn't good. Nothing was, in her childhood" *Foalhood*, said the Great and Powerful, silently, to herself. *Can the human hear me in here?*

From above, motion was visible through the dense growth. Curiosity overcoming anger and fear alike, the filly ran deeper into the forest to find what was falling so slowly through the canopy above. It turned out to be a pegasus who was many shades of pale brown and tan. His cutie mark was a wagon whose wheels were Equestrian bits. He landed, and his cart, which was able to keep even with the flight as the stallion looked for firm dry ground to land on, now made eye contact with the fascinated filly. As the mare sang about the Everfree forest, the stallion pointed deeper into the jungle, and held a wing out. As he began to walk, the filly fell in beside him, literally under his wing, which that mare was singing about and Trixie was almost tempted to say as how that's a phrase we use, it doesn't mean literal wings of a pegasi.

Now the filly was older, bigger, and had Trixie's cutie mark. She was levitating the cooking utensils into place around the cookfire, and the stallion motioning to her as the mare sang words into his mouth. "Don't let anyone tell you you're not special"

Another scene, this one back on those plains. Not-Trixie was levitating several blankets, apparently in some sort of dance, or presentation, as they slid and flew around her, and she would step forward, or back, her mouth moving though the music continued unchanged.

There were more scenes, flowing by rapidly, as not-Trixie grew both in power and stature. The pegasus stallion had forgone his smaller flight-capable wagon for what was clearly Trixie's show wagon, though the paint was horrendously bright, clashing, and in the setting of a calm forest frankly hideous. "World is a cruel place. Trixie, you'll be great one day."

By now not-Trixie was grown, and pulled the wagon by herself, as the stallion was old and weak. While that part of the scene didn't change, the background melted and flowed through five different small towns. All of them could have been places Trixie had done her show but all of these scenes had those tall, narrow building proportions.

Not-Trixie stopped, and gave a startled look back at the top of the wagon, where the stallion was sleeping. As not-Trixie hopped up wheels, window sills and nailed-knickknacks to get to the roof where the stallion was gasping for breath, Trixie realized the mare was singing about this stallion getting sick. "with his last breath, he don't forget what I've taught you"

Lips of the stallion, and mare singing matched again, as laid a hoof against not-Trixie's leg. "No one's better than you, Trixie." He closed his eyes, and exhaled, repeating himself, and did not inhale again. Trixie was crying, if that were possible when she didn't have a body, her tears falling in time with the not-Trixie filly pulling the blanket over the stallion's head, and climbing down, resolutely pulling the wagon, alone now.

Jack moved his fetlock off Trixie's neck, his eyes getting a bit moist, his lips almost ready to tremble.

The suddenness of the return to the real world almost startled Trixie enough to jump or shout, or even pee herself in fright. She didn't do any of those things, but it was for a split second, a near-thing. She looked over to make eye contact, and wondered for a moment where this creature might have come to the conclusion that had been her life. "My parents were both amazing, loving ponies. And my mother is still alive in a suburb outside Baltimore."

Trixie blinked away tears, unsure how long they had been there. Jack turned to his right, calling after the gap between the wall and the extra wall. "There, Glimglam. That what you were looking for, to see if I could do that and not leave the mare looking to kill herself?"

Starlight poked her head around the wall that acted as a door. "Destroyed herself. We don't use that other word." Trixie turned, tried to focus on her friend. *She is my friend, isn't she? Even if she's an immortal god now.*

It was strange, having a body again. It had only been four or five minutes, but it felt so real, even though nothing during that song really made any sense. "How long did he have me?"

"Four seconds."

Trixie looked over to the trophy wives, and realized they looked exactly as they had when she had shaken hooves with the stallion. She put on her best professional smile and turned to go.

plus five days

While the fantastical layout of giant mushrooms, royal purple sky, and oddly melodic frogs made it clear this was a dream, Trixie said it felt as real as the shared hallucination the human had shown her. "But that it take only seconds, only the waking mind can conceive of such detail quickly."

Starlight was distracted from the meeting by the beauty, and unreality of Luna's "meeting room" dream. But trying to add something useful to the discussion, while staring at the stars hanging like from from vines that were draped around the mushrooms, "She described a fully dissociative vision; can you make dreams like that? Thus, can he make visions where you're present normally?"

Luna looked over at the couch Starlight was reclining on, and wrinkled her nose a bit before squinting and unfocusing her eyes at the same time. Immediately, the world slowly floated away. She seemed to be tilting, that is, looking down rather than out, but there was no sense of 'down' or 'tilting' as her perspective rotated around the table. In the chair where she had been sitting, was a pink earth pony. Not a specific pony, but a sort of avatar stand-in for the idea of a pony, and this one was pink, had a pleasant expression, and wasn't looking at or away from anything. Starlight heard her friend turn to Luna, and ask 'where did she go?' but found Starlight couldn't offer any meaningful response as she had no more mouth than she had hooves.

After not too many seconds, that world faded away, and melting into place was the real world, of a couch made of a mushroom that had been grown sideways and precisely crushed, so a pony could recline on it. A flat mushroom, small for this place, was in front of her *again* and on it was her drink.

Starlight sipped whatever was supposed to be in her imaginary drink. It was a little bit spicy, heavy, and burned all the way down. She wondered if it even existed, or like the star fruits,

were only a thing Luna perceived when she needed to have a calm, if lucid dream. Putting the imaginary cup back down, she asked "Why choose one over the other?"

That, Trixie had an opinion on. "The human wished to show the Great and Powerful, what he thought of, when he heard my name. But he did not know anything about me, and was not trying to engage me in discussion, only show me what popped into his head when he heard my name" Sometimes she switches to third person as a defense mechanism. *That can certainly lead bystanders to assume her past was as rough as was portrayed to her.*

Luna summoned some sort of drink for herself, and both levitated and held it in her hooves, saying "What purpose has he to bring visions so terrible a pony would destroy herself rather than remember them? Why have we seen no sign of violence in the waking actions of this creature?" while looking through the steam coming from her cup.

Remembering some of the long sobbing sessions with Fluttershy over the years since the human arrived, Starlight offered "His world is really hard on people. It might just be he doesn't know his own emotional strength."

Luna's eyes roved over to Trixie. "Thou hast met. Hmm." Briefly the princess of Dream closed her eyes, reopened them and making eye contact with Trixie again, started over. "You've met many unsavory ponies in your professional career. What sort of pony do you find the human to be?"

Trixie looked over at the alicorn and raised a hoof, mouth open to speak, then faltered. Putting her hoof back down she again made to speak, then looked quizzically off to the distance, thinking a moment before looking down to admit "He reminds me of Snip, and Snails. In a certain way." Uncomfortable telling this part of the story directly to the nighttime half of the diarchy, Trixie looked up to explain to Starlight "You know they still think they're in love with me? Take a few minutes to try to court me every time I do a show in Ponyville."

Starlight had heard some of this story; probably all of it but not all in one telling but rather words cast aside over the course of her long friendship with the elements of harmony. "You think they still blame themselves for the ursa minor event?"

Trixie nodded. "I'm not able to follow the logic but even though they're both married to fine earth pony mares they've known all their lives, and Snails has a young foal in school now but something snaps each time they hear my voice."

Luna took a sudden gulp of her steaming drink and set the cup back down. "Arrested development, 'tis called. Similar in its way to PTSD." At the blank blinking stares of her company, she looked up to explain "mental disorder certain of our guard develop when sent into danger." After this pronouncement, she sat up straight, folding her her wings into a more formal against-her-side arrangement. "We need to know how, in addition to why, he travels to such disparate ends of Equestria. Starlight?" The recently alicornified unicorn set her up back down and made eye contact with the princess. "Can you convince him to bring you, or any one of his other friends, with him when he travels on an unexplained excursion?"

The future memories, the 'memoryplate' as the spell calls it, only shows others, such as herself, what she physically will see, and of those experiences, only the ones she'll think to include at the end of the timeline. There was never any sound, nor certain indication of what was running through her head, and certainly not the contents of her dreams, though she knew already several determinations, such as 'I'll do exactly as Luna suggests' resulted in the disappearance of the cabinet; death and failure lay down that path just now. But looking a week out, she had found the predetermination of 'explain to Luna what I know, and would like to do' had seemed best. What had she learned, both in her past, and her prospective future, about getting details about the times he went missing?

"He gets pretty cagey. I think he's afraid we're going to find a way to lock him down so he can't leave." This earned gritted teeth and flattened ears from the large midnight blue pony.

Luna pawed impatiently at her bench. "Then offer to help him. Offer whatever he seems to want to let you come along. I want to know what the spell looks like, and what he's trying to do there."

4.5 Third Run

year 21

It had turned out the human just wanted to have anonymous, casual sexual relations so he could feel like he had some control over his life. He was using the accelerated hallucinations, which he called 'dragging her to the place that doesn't exist' to frighten the mare that lived alone at any random house, then he'd summon some handsome avatar to 'save' the mare, who threatened to dump her back into her morass unless she promised to help a friend of his. End vision, human plants his flagpole, then leaves thinking she must think him, personally, to be a rotten creature so he never goes back to find out that the real dilemma had been she thinks she saw her filly eaten by cockroaches while a winter storm froze her front legs to the ground and she had to break them off and walk bipedally to drag herself and her filly's corpse to some variant of shelter. Then when she 'woke up' she had no idea how to live when no one else remembers the sudden storm, and the filly doesn't know to be terrified of odd scritchng noises.

Twilight had offered to follow Jack around, and issue royal decrees to any mare he told her he wanted to mount right now. But as with showing off how the teleport system worked, he'd felt this was an ill intentioned attempt to curtail his free spirit. But after several demonstrations in which each of the ponies still known as the Elements of Harmony had agreed to play extra hard to get and go into a shared vision, they had cried uncle at points that Jack found perplexingly early.

So far as the health reports collected from through the kingdom since that excersize showed, he had not gone back to that particular tactic. However he still disappeared into his closet once

or twice a week. Attempts to get him to suggest other things he could be given, or be allowed to take, that would make him feel complete had been met with complete silence.

This morning the alicorn, who was by now comfortable with both magic and flight, launched himself into the air from just in front of Twilight's front door. This was because it was Tuesday, and Rainbow Dash was providing nominal adjustment advice and care. Of the elemental ponies only two said they thought they had a relationship with the stallion, Applejack and Fluttershy, but he still liked have a full rotation, so he said.

Rainbow was still in bed, more because she liked naps than any expectations about the human alicorn. Jack let himself in, and set about making tea. The guards still brought him meals rather than give him a stipend for being an undeclared prince, but they hadn't arrived yet.

"Make sure you set cups only on surfaces that don't look fluffy" was muttered from under the covers." As three weeks ago he had set a cup down, and not realized where it went until two minutes later. Of course, his hoof 'caught' on the edge of the bench but it was a recent addition, and Rainbow had not taken the time to harden it, so non magical things like earth ponies and tea cups would, and did, fall through. She had not bought a replacement yet.

To say there was a knock at the door would imply the door, made literally of cloud, was a thing you could knock on. Pegasi who had both grown up in the clouds, such as Cloudsdale, and worked in Weather Patrol for more than a decade, could consciously 'turn off' their pegasus magic in just one hoof, allowing them to poke a hoof through harmlessly, which has at times been used as a knocking mechanism. Starlight Glimmer, having barely even been among the winged for half a decade, could not have thought to do such a thing, so she shouted through the door instead. "Hello! You two decent? Just wandering through to make a pest of myself."

Starlight considered that perhaps she did this too often, and the look of panicked distress that had been on her face as she landed a moment earlier might have implied to onlookers that she didn't actually know if being here, now, like this was a good idea or not. But she never let the human see her falter. Rainbow Dash just felt annoyed that something was dragging her out of bed when there might not be any need. The alicorn with a human's soul grit his teeth.

Door, open, Starlight rushed past the perfunctorily polite pegasus whose house this was, and was inside, standing beside Dash when she looked over to Jack to proclaim "You were about to fling a plate out the window, and it would have landed on Cloud Kicker, who's on the ground picking wild daisies this morning."

Eyes darkened with frustration and anger, the human responded "You don't use your future-magic to pester any other pony in town to this degree. And if you'd give me a daily stipend instead of sending the goons to bring me cut grass, which in your winterless lands I could find myself, that I could just buy Rainbow a new teacup."

As the stallion's muscles tensed, bunched in a full-body fist, Dash looked up and blinked in surprise at her luncheon date. "I haven't told anypony about that incident. If I was worried you were going to run me out of kitchenware I would have said you and I need to go back to meeting at AJ's barn."

The stallion bared his teeth, still looking at the other alicorn. "The only reason you don't let me get a job is you can't stand to have things happen that aren't precisely under your hoof." Breaking eye contact he stomped over to Dash's bed, sort of.

Seeing his direction she piped up with "Don't take this out on my house! It's not my fault you're a rotten hoWWWch!" The mispronunciation of the equine moniker was caused by the set of teeth heavily pinching Rainbow's tail, but it was too late.

Snarling, the human whirled and kicked the wall. He had never been on the weather patrol, no indeed worked a day anywhere else since his arrival, but his hooves disappated a large section of wall and his front hooves fell through the floor, leaving him stuck there, somewhat splayed out and a picture that had been hanging from that section of wall now resting on his rump.

Dash turned, intending to verbally chew the stallion into pieces, but was stopped shorting after making the turn to face him by a fetlock wrapped tightly around her nose. With this delay, the former human flapped his wings, leaving the picture to fall off to a section of floor inadquately hardened to hold a normal picture. Standing next to open air, with holes and falling picture frames at his feet, he shouted without looking at either mare directly. "That's right! No fighting with the unkillable two-legger! Might get killed just for saying hello!" Turning around as quickly as Dash had a moment ago, he leapt into the open air and flew away, though he was barely fifty hooves out when he dropped down out of sight.

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, she let of of Dash's nose and turned to her and held her foreleg out, as if to offer to hug the distraught homeowner. Dash didn't try to smooth her face out at all but stared in contempt and horror at her remaining visitor.

Lip trembling, tear forming, Starlight put her hoof back down, and lowered her head to say "He was pretty worked up. He would have snapped at you like that, and instead of going to a salt lick to drown his sorrows, he would have caused Cloud Kicker to die of fright, then walled himself up in his room for a week, no visitors." After a moment, getting no response, she looked back at the hole in the wall, and to the home owner a couple times before stating "I don't know how to fix cloud homes, so I don't know I can offer directly that will ease our friendship."

Rainbow Dash squinted tightly as she rubbed her nose with her front left, eventually saying "It's cloud. I can grab some and stuff it back in." Now she was hovering, considering the hole in the wall. "Normally I would chase him down, see what I needed to do to make it right." Dash tried making eye contact with the visitor, who was resolutely watching the hole. "If our friendship was that easy to break we'd have never made up after I found out you cast a numbing spell on me back when I was a filly."

Starlight looked over nervously at the reference to her early days of solving offenses with world shattering overreactions. Starlight didn't think she had ever caused a pony to die, at least not in the timeline as it left when she surrendered to Twilight. But it was still a sore spot.

4.6 Third Run, Year 30

Starlight stumbled out of her quarters, inkwell floating behind her. The door magically slammed shut as she cast about for something missing. Turning left on a route that would take her back to the front door to Twilight's castle, and thence to the option of taking any of the incoming passages, she made what could almost be described as a vocalized gurgling sound. As her quarters were on the second floor, it might not normally have surprised her to see Spike floating straight up from outside the hallway's railing, but just now it earned a sideways jump, and the wide eyed stare of an equine who fears for her life, whites taking up more real estate than the pupils.

"Hey Starlight we've sorta been looking for you. Busy with the alicorn stallion?"

Eyes only relaxing a little, Starlight said, still curled sideways as if mid-jump "Ouhwrlifto Startwi fine despolatically noaueauough."

The hovering green form dropped his muzzle a little, and might have perked his ears more straightly if he had equine style external ears. As it was, after a breath he nodded. "I'll get twilight. Don't run off I'll tell her where you were." And pointing a claw at the floor in the middle of all four of Starlight's hooves, he flapped less and dropped out of sight. An attentive visitor in that hallway would have heard the scrabble of claws against crystalline floor, but Starlight Glimmer was, at this point in things, neither attentive nor properly speaking a visitor. She did in fact seem to forget after a moment her directives to stay someplace findeable, and she began stumbling her way to the staircase again.

This time, not floating, but racing at speed, and not green, but a paler form of purple came up from the floor below. Princess Twilight spent no time trying to discuss things with her student. As soon as the princess had a clear shot, an energy beam smacked Starlight in the side. Twilight landed beside the still oblivious alicorn, and tried shouting at her to get Starlight's attention. "Starlight! Listen, Starlight!" The named pony turned and looked at the other purple alicorn, and trying to take in the weight of it, said something that may have been the previous message, repeated. It had about the right number of syllables though the emphasis seemed in different places. In any event Twilight responded by explaining "I've hit you with the debuff. You can sleep now!"

While Starlight looked looked oddly at the hoof that seemed to have attached itself to her chest, her breathing sped up, and her eyes fluttered. Trying to make eye contact with the pony that just saved her life, and failing because he eyes were so unfocused right now, she tried to tap the ground she was standing on, bending front and back legs just a little, as if to drop to her belly but stopped only an inch shorter than she had been standing. Twilight nodded, tapping the same place on the floor, and telling her it was safe, that she could sleep now.

Starlight dropped to the floor, eyes closed, and wiggled and kicked a bit, trying to find a comfortable position without leaning against the wall or crushing her wings with her nominal weight. Seeing this, Spike landed and walked back to Starlight's door. Opening it he glanced in for visitors, and seeing none, held the door open as Twilight levitated the lightly sleeping alicorn to

her bed. As the covers were slowly eased back from floating state to sitting on the pony, Starlight eased out until she was laying flat on her left side, and she pressed her head into the pillow, breathing easing into a normal sleep pattern.

Twilight had grabbed the lonely ink bottle, and set it on a surface where she found the lid, which she put on now, and looked briefly at what the ink had been used to write. There were three pieces of paper, and as was common it started out in normal Ponish. Each one had a header, and was filled with observations from what must be all remaining two hundred and seventy years until Starlight would send the memoryplate back to herself. The first quarter of the first page, labelled 'give no stipend' started out in recognizeable Ponish and drifted into vaguely recognizeable chicken scratch by the end. The second page, labelled 'big stipend' started out with chicken scratch that might have been readable but the content could not. '1w2m 2do-ppr says 3 gone was it the?' and by the end, had converted to a shorthand that Starlight had worked out with herself so she could make some semblence of sense if you had her particular world view, and could read her shortquill writing. Page three was labelled 'argue the stipend' and ominously had nearly two dozen lines that contained an explanation point, which she had pieced together was borrowed from Ponish and not part of her fever dreams or even the shortquill writing.

Quietly closing the door Twilight explained to Spike as they descended the stairs "It looks like she's pursuing how much freedom to give to the human. I wonder if he could be given a job yet."

"After three decades? Has he ever asked about work before?" Spike decided to hover in the air, over the railing rather than walk in front or behind the princess.

"Not to me, but I think he just likes listening to me, and not so much talking to me."

Third Run Guesses

In order to reduce the liklihood the human would "teleport" and hide just at the edge of his invisibility/hearing range, Celestia had suggested meeting in a particular meadow, and let Rainbow Dash and Luna decide which meadow, and they met in the evening on a Friday. The human seemed to like spending longer times physically near Fluttershy, who was still his Friday mare.

Celestia was seated directly on the grass, her mane flowing in an ethereal breeze none could feel. She had listened for about half an hour, as Starlight gave her report, about ten minutes per choice, on the long term effects of 'cutting loose' the human. In the trees, some hundred and fifty hooves away, Rainbow Dash pretended to snooze in a tree, though as with Luna, seated on a cloud that was just barely above treetop height they watched for signs of the alicorn stallion. No other ponies were present, not even the guards though both princesses had charmed stones that would teleport in a half dozen, should there be sudden need.

"In summary, Starlight? If we tell him to get a job because we've decided he's a bad tax write off, he slowly forms an army that will declare war in about one hundred sixty five years, but during that time seems to remain with just one wife and one mare-friend. If we keep upping the

amount of money directed his way so he can get what ever he asks for by the second or third time he asks, he'll keep his love life hidden and, and I quote, 'very few' mares will destroy themselves and he almost but not quite joins society as a participatory member but costs the kingdom at least three times as much"

"Four" Starlight interrupted, staring intently at her sheet of chicken scratch. Looking up at the elder diarch, repeated "Closer to four times per year."

"..four times as much as we spend on him now, which I'd like to point out is about two and a half times what keep for myself." Starlight had started to explain why the princess that operated the sun only needed a modest sum to keep herself happy but as she looked at Celestia, she ceased her hoof waving, and closed her mouth. With a small smirk, Celestia continued. "If we make him explain every expense, and refuse randomly between two out of three, to as often as three out of four times he asks for more, the expense of ostensibly keeping him happy drop by half because if we don't keep finding and replacing his daily mares he accidentally kills another mare about every week, with no further reporting on if he takes a shine to any further mares."

"Plus he declares open war on you about two centuries from now." Starlight pretended to glance down at her notes again, but her eyes were glazed over, and didn't even try to follow the lines of what had been intended as text. "nearly half a chance of killing you before I send myself my cabinet." Looking up, tears forming at the memories of all the funerals she would attend in all the futures, she finished with "Presumably falling down from there into generic 'acquiesce completely' future only, you know." She blinked away the tears, and dropped her nose to a neutral height, staring into Celestia's ribcage. "Only without you."

"Which has before been projected as still less expensive than giving him every material comfort, but tending to form a sort of separate country, in the plains below the mountain Canterlot is built on." Starlight nodded, still not seeing the world in front of her. "Have you considered just giving him a literal stipend, and letting him budget for it?"

Starlight snapped out of her reverie, but did not have an answer. She looked briefly at each of her notes, and shook her head. "I expect, your highness, it would be halfway between giving him nothing, and giving him all the money." Now making eye contact, Starlight shuffled and reseated her wings, bringing herself fully into the here and now of managing this unmangeable brute. "If we force him to grow up, he eventually declares you to be the enemy of all ponies, and many will believe him depending on how independant he's become and for how long. If we let him stay as our dependant he sinks further into his degeneracy, taking his drugs of choice by force if we don't have any ready - alcohol, sleep, or of course plump, dripping mare parts."

Celestia made a sort of clicking sound with her tongue, then replied "Too bad we couldn't get him hooked on simpler pleasures. I wouldn't mind keeping a fat tub of lard as rolly and polley as he cared to be for the sake of avoiding war."

Starlight quickly shook her head, explaining "No. No, if he gets more than about forty pounds over weight he gets mad at everyone, himself included, and disappears. Some versions have him seen in the badlands just outside the Griffon kingdoms, living on sparse grass and riverwater

alone, until he's as hard as a rock and ribby, but only one time out of ten does he come back not still angry at all of us." Looking into the sky as the eastern half started to fade, the sun within reach of the western horizon, Starlight continued "I think he's likely to take offense on the assumption we were fattening him to destroy him with kindness. He doesn't build up an army as quickly, but you start losing your guard pretty quickly. Plus a fair number of those futures you kill him, or he just takes your body and we can't find you."

Now it was Celestia's turn to look sad, to look at her hooves dejectedly. "I'd happily kill him with kindness, so I guess that's not a misjudgement on his part." As had happened in other discussions like this, Celestia fixed her gaze firmly on Twilight's student, who had broken the laws *No, **would break** in the future.* of physics and causality to save Celestia's kingdom. And asked again, "You've found no way to destroy him? Not even geld him from some of his magics?"

Starlight blinked slowly as she shook her head sadly. "No, your highness. And trying just assures he takes you from us, and in some futures he vindictively gives your body to some goat-bearded mountain pony, then steals a random unicorn stallion and starts over, carving out his kingdom outside some city he doesn't like."

Rather than accepting nothing had changed, this time curiosity got the better of Celestia, and she asked another question. "I've fortunately never been body swapped. Have you?" With a sheepish smirk, Starlight Glimmer nodded. "Is it complicated? What does it feel like when it happens?"

Starlight quickly looked around the meadow, then at the two setries, who had not moved to signal anything this whole conversation. "Well," she started, blushing. "You don't feel the process, or anything. You're just a stallion now."

A hoof raised quickly to cover Celestia's impish grin. "That could feel awkward."

"Very. His favorite game, if he's been with his daily mare twice already, is during the third time, to change places with me." A nervous smile accompanied Starlight's inability to keep anything like eye contact. "Just when he was two or three thrusts from finishing."

Now the wings were spread wide, and the sentries were in the air, hovering, waiting. "I suppose that ease of transport is why you've advised I not speak with him myself. Thank you, Starlight Glimmer. And take care, we can't lose you."

The lesser alicorn waited until the diarchs were turning and climbing, before she herself rose to meet Rainbow Dash, who had seen the giggling, and lolling heads as they talked. "Do I at least get to know what's so funny?"

At first Starlight wasn't going to say, but Dash was his Tuesday mare, though she had requested a chance to be rotated out once Starlight's memoryplate said a particular would work well with the degenerate wizardly stallion. "Yeah. Has ever made you thrust the last few times before climax, when you were together?"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Oh, that." After a half dozen wingbeats she added "I'm always afraid to tell him it scares me the way everything feels. I know he enjoys it like nothing else but

I'd much rather not focus on making all those muscle contractions happen. Especially if it meant getting that close to a pony I didn't love."

"Or know." mumbled Starlight. If Dash heard, or thought she heard, or didn't hear but knew something was said, she didn't respond.

4.7 Third Run, Year 287

"I'll be back in two days, I doubt you could damage anything important!" Twilight was levitating no fewer than five pieces of luggage as she rose into the air.

Starlight decided she would rise straight up, and see her off from four hundred hooves up. She had never had the time or inclination to experience the joys of flight the pegasi all went on about. Too, thinking about flying well made her miss Rainbow Dash, still. "Dunno about that Twi; last time I both set your castle and fire **and** flooded it."

Just as Twilight Sparkle started north, she shouted over her shoulder "There's a couple barrels of whiskey due today let him knock himself out or something."

Landing, Starlight looked at the dark gray sky, the unlit trees, the still lit street lamps. *I prefer post-sunrise, thank you.* and so thinking, she made her way back to her bed.

In the morning, when the sun had warmed the castle's breakfast nook to reasonable temperatures, Starlight took some tea and toast out to nibble on while reading yesterday's newspaper. Memories of horrible, and wonderful headlines would help put the other events into perspective as to when they would happen. Mondays the human would be snuggling with Starry Skies, a unicorn in the eastern mountains. She wasn't prim, or beautiful, or highly educated like the human's first Monday mare but she was a unicorn, and was willing to let the guard paint the quasi eldritch symbol on her pantry door. The human finally let out a few details about his teleportation doors, and that they could be made faster if he knew there was a unique thing to the "door" he was opening.

It had been Flurry Heart he'd told that to, and she got permission to tell her great aunt Tia. Jack and Flurry weren't dating anymore, hadn't for six years now but before she had to remake and resend her memoryplate she needed to write down a suggestion that the two alicorn be introduced perhaps a little sooner. *It's not like she's taken a colt friend from any other corner of Equestria.*

Tuesdays was back to the castle, as Cloudy Flowers took time off from her duties with the Wonderbolts to maintain duties that were usually closer to the ground. *And she thinks cloud houses are too ostentatious for working class ponies.* When the hundred and twenty gallons of whiskey was delivered, it occurred to Starlight that the pegasus had probably never had anything stronger than a cider, if that. *I'll warn her not to drink it the way the immortal godking does.* But she did pour herself a triple sized shot into her wineglass as she went about the day cleaning and

cooking in preparation for whenever he'd get bored and come back. Spike didn't really fit in the hallways anymore so he usually lived in the caves below Canterlot Castle.

By late afternoon Starlight was feeling very good about her job cleaning Twilight's castle, although she couldn't find the rough stones she kept tripping over, she hadn't fallen down or onto anything or even spilled her second wineglass of that whiskey. It was in this mood that Starlight answered the door to find Braided Flute, a direct descendant of Fluttershy, and nearly the same colors, asking about the alicorn stallion's whereabouts.

"Well, I mean it's Monday, right? I would expect he's still in the Eastern seaboard." The land her four times great grandmother had owned had gone to this pegasus, in addition to Friday duties. *Which were not for some days yet. So why is she here...?*

"Yes Starlight, I know what day it is. And also what digested whiskey smells like, by the way. But he was in my house an hour ago." Deep blue eyes blinked at Starlight, who had to blink back to process that.

"What! It's." A breath taken to try to straight her thoughts out. "Okay, has he already been .. uh?" A suitable double entendre escaped the slightly tipsy alicorn mare.

"No, Starlight. He didn't seem interested. I would have let him, but he was angry, not horny." After waiting a moment for that to process, the pegasus continued. "He said he wanted to find the rest of you. That was his exact phrase, 'the rest of you.' Then he stormed out through the dishwasher." Stories about the particular thought-doors the deathless stallion used had started to make more sense after he opened up those years ago. The symbols weren't strictly necessary, they just made travel faster and easier for him. "Since I didn't seem to be among the 'rest of you' he was looking for, I mostly expect you probably are."

Since the whiskey barrel had been set up in the larger meeting room, the mares could hear the chair that was kicked aside, following a squeaking sound that Starlight, at least, immediately recognized. *It's not like that chair was in the way of anything, even if he's sucking on the spigot like a birthing mare's tit.* But regardless of initial feelings both mares made motions to get to the party room to verify their fears.

There was the alicorn stallion, greedily gulping down the whisky as fast as it was pouring out, his lips wrapped around the spigot so he wouldn't lose a drop. Turning it off, he stepped back and reared, nose in the air and trying to finish swallowing the firewater. *Oh, dear. I've never seen him start an evening with a bellyfull.* Hoping to ward off any angry unpleasantness, she turned her rump towards the interloper and held her tail high and to her left. Somehow she was having trouble remembering how to 'wink' without actually peeing, which, once he was drunk the former human would take as a come-on, but he often didn't right at the start of his parties.

After a moment of hesitation, Braided Flute copied the alicorn mare, and presented herself, tail clearly out of the way of even of clumsy, half hearted attempt. The stallion seemed to notice her now, and already slurring, said "Cloudy! Didn't I just see you? Is this the same town as I was in before?"

"Hello Jack. Yes, I live on my grandmother Fluttershy's farm." Neither mare moved a muscle.

The stallion looked around him as if he had travelled to the wrong house. "This is the castle, right? Are they .. there are two castles."

"Yes, Jack. Twilight lives in the center of Ponyville. I live near the edge."

It was about this time he realized they were winking their nether lips at him. Waving a hoof vaguely in their direction he said "You might as well put your tails down I'm too angry to be distracted and I don't know what." Here he stopped, and looked so fiercely at Starlight she almost peed at him after all. "Do you know where the other four are?"

"Oh!" Starlight said, lowering her tail and hesitantly turning to face the wobbly looking stallion. "You mean the alicorn mares. That's who you're" Her face went cold, and she vaguely realized she couldn't feel her hooves.

"Do you need any help, Jack? I'm just a pegasus mare." The stallion blinked, eyes unable to focus on the nonmagical pony. "If you want any help, I'll be around. What room do you want to find me in?"

The stallion ground his teeth and said with a snarl "If I need help I suppose there'll be fewer caskets needed if I don't have to stumble far. You!" He tried to point with a wingtip but missed by nearly twenty degrees, and also threw himself off balance. Staggering to regain some semblance of composure, he said "Mare! Can you summon some blankets so she can wait here?"

Starlight, even in her stupor, could picture exactly where half the blankets in Twilight's castle were, having straightened them all just today. Four throw-pillows, two queen-size sheets, five blankets and a heavy comforter burst into place between Braided Flute and the wall. The pegasus leapt through the air, wings directing her to land just in front of the impromptu bed, which she spent scarcely half a second arranging then plopped herself onto her back, one wing trying to stick out artfully, and covered her neck, left shoulder, and most of her head except the ears. All her hooves were pointing straight up into the air. "Alright then I'll be napping here. Let me know when you want me."

"Do you know what they're talking about, hmm?" A shudder passed through the stallion, though whether it was because of what he'd just found out or the whiskey hitting him in force now Starlight dared not guess. He took a step towards the mares, though it took several tries to line up the rest of his hooves into a normal arrangement afterwards. "Asked a door to show me tha' Cadance gal. Haven't seen her since Flurry and I broke up."

As he tried to take another step, and bumped into a table causing it to screech as it skidded an inch or two in response, Starlight tried to think of some way to redirect this conversation towards something the former human would find happier, but in her own stupor she wasn't able to come up with anything reasonable. "I hadn't heard you actually broke up. I bet if you developed a strong relationship with a mare, Celestia would eventually uplift her so you wouldn't have to. . ."

The alicorn stallion screamed, and as he did so, an energy beam approximately split-pea-soup green spiraled, not straight out but spiraled off from an angle out of his horn, which dissolved

a section of the wall behind and to her right. The crystalline wall thrummed a short, deep note in response to the blast, and to her credit Braided Flute gasped but did not move. Given the noise that covered her gasp, she genuinely looked like she was napping, and Starlight hoped to use her as a distraction, though she had yet to make a working 'start lactating' spell that worked non-destructively on mares.

"Found four of 'em. Sprised you weren't there since you're my handler."

Starlight's first response was to defend herself, 'that's not true' but arguing would only escalate his anger. Her second response that she barely bit down in time, was something about 'hey look a sleeping mare is she lactating lets find out' but realized that is exactly what a dangerous agent's handler would say right now. Again her time with the booze kept her from coming up with something more profound, or at least less dangerous. What came out of her mouth was "If you kill me there'll only be one marefriend that remembers what hands look like."

"You were all so eager to forget, weren't you?" He used a force-levitation spell to move the table, causing it to move with enough force to crack in several places as it hit the wall. This time, the pegasus did not react. "I found four of your tallest, all conspiring on how to destroy me. Not anything else, all this time you could have said how angry you were, or you could have asked me to leave your sight if I'm so ugly." These considerations, of course, were almost exclusively from Starlight's input, which had been that he would simply get more dangerous. "Think they found a way to disengage my transfer. Make killing me safe again."

Starlight didn't think telling him just now that they would ask her first, and she could advise them if it was indeed safe. And a part of her understood his anger. For all the deaths she had seen, for all that she understood why Celestia didn't have too many friends amongst the mortal races, Starlight wouldn't right now choose to die, to solve it. Age normally, die in another few decades, yes.

Starlight fell into a reverie as she contemplated not only her own death, but the funeral of her daughter Diamond Starburst, who died a hundred years ago of old age. Or Diamond's much older brother Starburst Glimmer, born to her by Sunburst, who had lived himself to be a hundred and thirty two. She missed her daughter.

The stallion's alcohol fueled rage erupted in magical form before tears could cloud Starlight's vision or mind. Eyes glowing so brightly it was painful to look at, he erupted into flame, and the table was now on fire in addition to being cracked. As he opened his mouth to scream again, there was a second, larger burst of heat and the flames didn't retreat all the way to his body. The flames quickly shifted from orange through blue to a sort of yellow-white that seemed to poke out in spikes, as if each flame was under its own separate pressure, rather than one open flaming pony, as the Elements, so long ago, had described of Twilight the time she lost her temper about Pinkie's nonsense.

Starlight considered the magical ramifications of the flames being under pressure, and realized almost too late that he was literally going to blow. She had a light shield up from the second burst, but as soon as she heard the noise of the flames retreat, without any change in heat output

she poured all her concentration into a thick shield spell, and lifted herself by levitation rather than her wings. The explosion knocked her unconscious though as she lost any input from her senses she had time to realize her shield had impacted with the wall behind her and probably broken though while the wall was still solid.

Her subconscious had maintained the spell to at least some degree, and she regained her senses laying against the inner surface of a her magical globe, which had embedded itself into the wall of a not very nearby house. In the distance, some four hundred hooves away, was a giant bonfire reaching six or seven hundred hooves into the sky. A dozen houses nearby had caught fire when flaming debris had landed on their thatched roofs.

Another death. It (*he*) had exploded too quickly, Starlight thought, for Braided Flute to have gotten out. While no further flaming debris was falling out of the sky, a certain purple alicorn was dropping quickly. Landing beside her, the disbelieving look of scorn was all Twilight Sparkle could offer. "You're home early."

Twilight took a deep breath, and eased her forehead into her hoof. Eyes closed, she said only. "Starlight."

As the weather patrol ponies rushed rainclouds into position, a particular pegasus, yellow, fluffy, and with deep pink mane and tail eased down from the sky to stare at the two purple alicorn mares. At this point, Starlight was overtaken with sickness and vomited up any remaining whiskey, all her stomach acids on tap and what had probably been her daisy sandwich.

Starlight was thus unable to see that Twilight had not raised her head to ask her "Did you at least leave some for our alcoholic guest?"

It was Braided Flute who answered, with a fairly calm, flat "Yes ma'am, he definitely had a belly full before setting the rest on fire." As Starlight raised her head she saw that Flute's tail was singed and only half as long as had been a moment before. The rest of her seemed none the worse for wear. Braided Flute pointed a hoof to the wetness at Starlight's feet and said "Partially digested; has a smell that doesn't change whether it's inside or outside."

Twilight let go of her face so she could tap hooves with Braided Flute, then turned to Starlight. "As to being early, Flurry let us know she had seen from some distance that our subject had been hiding inside our huddle. The conversation at that moment was Luna's conjecture about how Jack could transfer when he was startled, such as being killed by a blow to the back of the head with no warning to him. Celestia wanted to know if that might enable us to permanently kill him and I guess he stormed out right at that point."

Starlight tried nodding and almost lost her lunch a second time. "Was pretty angry." she managed, throat still raw from the acidic exposure.

Twilight looked around at the town, rain having already started in earnest. "So, where is he now?"

While Starlight racked her brain, it was Flute who offered "He blew up, so he won't look like he has."

Rainclouds in place, melted, burning slag that used to be Twilight's castle now down to only two hundred hoof flames, an off-white pegasus eased down near the trio. "Braid, good day to you." it was Cloudy Flowers, her cutie mark of white, flower shaped clouds barely visible against her probably-blue coat. Her tail was several colors of blue in no particular order, and her mane had several colors of pink as you might see in a sunset, all faded pastels. Looking now at Starlight in particular she asked "I assume this is my colt friend's doing?"

As she didn't have a colt friend, she meant the former human. Starlight considered how the memoryplate seemed to suggest death transfer worked, and said to the Wonderbolt "If you're still you, and it's clear Flute is Flute still, I actually don't know who he looks like now."

"Yes Cloudy it was him." Said Twilight, immediately followed by Braided Flute who added "Drunk and angry and set fire to himself."

"The memoryplate." Now it was Starlight Glimmer's turn to set her forehead against a supporting hoof. Although it made her dizzy enough she briefly wished she hadn't done that. "I've lost all the notes from previous timelines."

Through gritted teeth Twilight Sparkle announced "If he shows up in the next thirteen years we need to go fully to the backup plan. We can't afford a war so he wins by default."

"Hopefully I can construct a suitable cabinet and memory plate. I think Sunburst..." Faux pas out of her mouth, Starlight started crying freely. Clearly she not only had too much to drink, but too much to think too. "That house he lived in. I have notes there for the spell." She looked over at the still burning slag. "In case this happened I have a few places with notes on the important parts. Spike has a copy too."

Twilight looked at the two pegasi present, saying "Official proclamation, and you're welcome to repeat it to whomever you want I'll back it up and tell the diarchs soon. If you meet the former human, the alicorn tribe offers full apologies for any miscommunication, and in response Celestia will step down, in whatever sense he wants that to mean." Blinking back tears, she took several ragged breaths before shimmy-shaking her neck, which spread to her shoulders. When she had reseated her wings, she said to Flute "Can I crash at your house tonight? Starlight you want to share the guest bed?"

Flute nodded gravely, Starlight shook her head carefully. "I." She managed to make eye contact with Cloudy Flowers. Somehow the other two seemed too dangerous to her delicate condition just now. "I have Trixie Lulamoon's cart. I've kept it up so it's a suitable house for a while."

A dark blue earth pony mare with pale green eyes and a creamy looking round sandwich for a cutie mark was trotting over. "Hey you guys survived that. What'd'ya do princess Twi, tell him he owed back taxes for the whores you paid off?"

Starlight coughed in laughter, Twilight just glared quietly, and Cloudy Flowers offered "Moon Pie, well met."

The human's Thursday mare, probably but not for sure a descendant of Pinkie, and not afraid to be called Blueie if it made her deathless friends smile, moved her head off center to make

a point of looking at Flute's singed tail. "You were pretty close to it. Hopefully not too close?" before turning to the still hovering wonderbolt "If this is well met, I hope we never ill meet!"

"I was taking a nap, Moon Pie"

The blue mare nodded decisively and asked "Okay so, but before, or after?"

Twilight's eyes were glazing over as she tried not to follow this conversation, but Flute answered her saying "Before. He was still drinking, getting himself all worked up."

Now it was Bluie's turn to look at the still burning slag. "He worked it up, alright."

Now Twilight did a full body shimmy shake, spreading droplets onto everypony but Starlight, who was in front of the princess. "So, who wants to go to the bar and get hammered? I guess I'm buying the first round since I think my property taxes just plummeted."

Starlight mistakenly said "I don't think my headache could get much worse. So sure. I can get the second round."

Chapter 5

Fourth (?) Run, Beginning

A stone edifice, with oak segments housing a glass plate just below eye level, had just appeared in Starlight's bedroom. The sound of it appearing, much louder than a simple teleportation spell, woke her up, though at 7:30 the sun had been up a while, as had Twilight. However, calling to her didn't garner any responses, so Starlight had to get up and go look at the box.

It had writing on it. Some carved and hastily backfilled – these were above and to the sides of the mirror. They explained the memories were your own, and to change what happened, you must actually believe you will behave as you're testing for. Some of the writing had been burned in with a red hot poker. These letters had a bit more character to them, in addition to having the crumbling backfill as the charred backing was the intended result. At least artistically; this seemed less artistic as it was a list of banned spells under "just in case." These included momentary and extended mind control, both very different from the thing she tried a couple years ago to speed up her 'friendship lessons'. One was a 'never-sleep' spell, with warnings that a pony dies somewhere between day twelve and fifteen, and next to that was the debuff for not sleeping, and below that was a 'sleep right now' spell, with a warning that the first half hour was surgery-compatible, the next hour and a half was deep sleep, and barring intrusions the pony should remain asleep, right there, for another ten or eleven hours.

If the mirror (*it's a poor mirror* Starlight thought to herself. *Maybe it's just glass, but there's no picture in the frame yet.*) is at 6'oclock, at 9'oclock was a blank side, marked by a tall rectangle, above which was burned the words in small print, 'save for eternity' whereas the 3'oclock side had the quickly carved words, backfilled with what she was sure was midnight-blue crayon wax, 'three hundred years ago, equestria will be destroyed. three hundred years from now, equestria was saved'

Twilight still hadn't come up to see her, so it possibly wasn't even from or about her, but only Starlight. The directions said 'lay a hoof to see, remove to reset to now.' So, she laid her front right on the glass, which suddenly had a look of a window, and she saw a moving scene, as the window bounced down the stairwell of this castle to the kitchen, where a terrified Fluttershy was cowering behind an upset looking Twilight Sparkle, who was scowling at a royal guard stallion of the pegasus tribe, who was in the hallway. The mirror stopped, then travelled past them to

see that Celestia was standing in the crowded hallway, having squeezed in from the larger, main hallway where she would have had room to turn around. Celestia looked delighted to see the window, and tried to turn, and to wave it out, but that didn't work, so she teleported away. Then the glass pane showed Celestia standing on a balcony near the top of the castle, outside. Celestia was pointing in approximately the direction of Fluttershy's cottage, and the mirror tilted several times between Celestia's face, and the distance she pointed towards. Celestia leaned down so close to the window pane that her muzzle disappeared, her left eye taking up a third of the view, larger than life. Then she withdrew, and then she flew away, at which point the window pane showed a view rising, rising, the speeding towards fluttershy's cottage, but the whole middle of the trip was blurred and in a couple seconds she saw, slopping through mud, a two-legged, flat faced, tailless thing. It had front limbs but they didn't have hooves, though they weren't like Spike's claws, either.

Again the vision blurred, and the window was landing in front of the castle to show the doors opening, and again it blurred to show all the elements of harmony gathered at the map/table, and the window next to Twilight and the... tall thing was, muddy clothing and all, across the table next to applejack. All the ponies looked nervous, and thing at the table looked astonished, nervous, and giddy as it took all that filthy clothing off. And walked around behind the pane of glass, which tilted to follow, showing Starlight's own cutie mark, and her tail, which was being pushed aside so *Am I seeing this right?* the thing's rather short *Though otherwise adequate, I suppose* flagpole could be pushed *Why would I let him do that?* He seemed to be done, now, resting his head on her back, and the other ponies were still there, looking at him about the same way they had at the start.

Slightly creeped out, Starlight pulled her hoof off the window pane, which darkened into a mediocre mirror immediately. From outside her room, came a frantic call from princess Twilight, asking Starlight to come down. Now.

At a trot, Starlight hurried out the door, down the stairs, and turned back, calling out where Twilight was. It was an unfamiliar stallion's voice that answered "past the lesser kitchen, ma'am." *If that's that particular guard!* In the hallway connecting what in a major thoroughfare would have been the staff pantry and the main hallway that connected all the other hallways, was Fluttershy, almost at the point of tears, trying to brace herself against Twilight Sparkle, who was unloading her nervousness at the sudden strangeness of the intrusion by scowling rather carefully at the *Yes, same guard* pegasus who apparently had just called for Starlight.

"Ma'am, princess Celestia is desperately looking for you." So she walked up to, even past the guard to find, in that narrow connecting hallway, princess Celestia, mane not really flowing because of the lack of space.

"Starlight! I've just been visited by myself 200 years from now. Apparently you have the finishing touches to make a certain incredibly dangerous visitor not destroy our nation. Have you been contacted by yourself yet?"

"A box arrived, your highness." Things were definitely taking longer in the real world than the

plate had suggested. "It had some dangerous spells written on one side, and a blank spot to take notes on another side." Celestia looked concerned. She asked for a description, and Starlight gave her a brief version of all of it, including that this meeting had been abbreviated, but also some creepy stuff happened later, without specifying what. *The pane didn't show this* as Starlight turned back to Twilight. *Does that mean it was wrong?* "Do you know what kind of thing it is, that she's looking for?"

"A human. Two legged, claws a little like Spike's but the claw part is tiny and the toes for each are pretty long." She gave a few other descriptive hints, which didn't sound too far off.

Turning back to Celestia, her face looked grave. "Something terrible must have happened. Alright, we'll start over then." Now was the happy greeting she'd seen in the mirror. "Starlight, I need to explain a couple things quickly, then we can start on our journeys." True to her vision, Celestia tried to turn and failed. Almost giggling at her predicament she grinned back at Starlight as she cast teleport spells on them both. This was the balcony, no in-between steps being skipped. Not yet, anyway. "My instructions were, that on some previous iteration of my time-travel spell I had extra-doomed Equestria by trying to save it. You had to create a second time loop." *and there's the hoof, pointing to Fluttershy's cottage* "The human should be making it's way up from the swamp, out there. He will find Fluttershy first, or maybe already has I didn't hear why she was visiting with Twilight."

"What do you want me to do?"

Celestia sat down. This hadn't been in the vision, but truthfully it might not be an important detail. "If I screwed up again, I was told there's a vaguely suitable fallback plan. I yield all power of my throne to the interloper, and focus on you and I surviving to give better advice next time." Then she briefly explained the memoryplate spell, and how sending an inanimate charmed object didn't break the upper bounds of information that could be sent. "Probably it is constantly realigning to the timeline as it currently is. So you can test hypotheses by convincing yourself you're going to react a certain way, and watch the outcome. Then convince yourself you'll do the opposite and spend the same amount of time watching that to compare. Or just watch three times in a row, that should expose how vulnerable to external influence the outcome is."

She was standing again, pointing toward the swamps outside of town, and explaining that Celestia would in due time, find the right kind of immortality for Starlight's circumstances. "If I don't promise you that, and keep up on it, then if the thing disappears, you won't know if it's because you've happened upon the perfect set of reactions and there won't be any need to send yourself that memoryplate, or if you . . . made a mistake, and got yourself killed."

With her hoof down again, Starlight explained to her about being rutting in front of everypony. "That kinda seems to be in keeping with the message I had for myself. Please Starlight, consider that you and I both, hundreds of years from now, created a time loop and desparately sent messages to ourselves to stop this upcoming war, and the best way seemed to be simply, not to fight." The hoof went up again. "Please, please Starlight I'll send someone to take your place. If you find out early what kind of " Celestia faltered. "What he wants, I'll ask around for that, but

for now, you don't have to encourage his degeneracy but you have to understand I'm forsaking my crown and my throne to him, so you can't fight his" Again, she faltered, and the hoof came down a final time as she choked out "Just survive while we gather what we need."

5.1 First Contact, Take . . . Five, I Suppose?

The trip was blurred because it was monotonous. Or it would have been, if Rainbow Dash hadn't stopped her. "Wow don't see you up here too often. I should tell you, Celestia is looking for all of us, maybe you should turn back."

Starlight couldn't bear even turning her head to make eye contact. She wanted to scream, but Rainbow wouldn't know anything about this yet, and Starlight didn't want to take the time just now to explain. "I was just there. Yes, get everpony to the castle she's got" *No way to even break it in a little bit is there?* "news."

Off she went, and the other she went off too. The *Just like I saw. That's creepy already.* human was slogging up from the swamps, and was almost to solid ground. It saw her float towards the visitor, and when Starlight said, at a distance of twenty hooves, "You look lost." it looked a little upset.

"You're a horse."

"Pony. Also a unicorn; most unicorns can't fly but I'm, well skilled at magic."

"A talking horse."

"Pony. Talking pony. What should we call you?" She hadn't moved, and was still levitating herself. She tried to remind herself not to hurry. While Starlight knew this was a repeat, the human thought it was the first and only time this would happen.

"Jack, I guess. I don't know how I got here." He also didn't believe his world had magic "So no talking, floating small horses. I guess pony means small horse, so like you said."

Fluttershy's pigs were grunting, and the chickens were trying to make an argument with them. Perhaps the easily frightened pegasus had left without giving them their breakfast. It would have to wait until later, as Starlight offered "We can get you cleaned up, maybe find some different clothes. Is it okay if I levitate you there?" At the blank look of question, she rephrased herself with "To float you the way I'm floating me. The princess, well one of the four, live right here in town and I should introduce you to her, and her staff." I hope that word choice doesn't come back to bite me. *What was I supposed to generalize them as? They aren't courtiers or nobles or anything like that.*

He agreed, and no pegasus interrupted them on the way back. Celestia had left, and once the two of them were inside, she set them both down. He looked at his mud covered feet and said "Sorry about the shoes."

"It's fine, we'll have to clean the rest of you too." She led him to the map room, where, as per the vision all the elements, or whatever their title was, were in their special chairs and Celestia had already left. Starlight briefly introduced them, and walking around to stand beside Twilight, said his name for them, and he waved the frog of his front hoof at them all. *Here we go.* "So, I have some important things to say, because as it turns out, this has happened before, and it didn't go well for us."

He grimaced, and leaned back, almost but not quite stepping away. "Humans have already been here, have they?"

"No!" blurted out Twilight. "It was actually you each time"

Still holding his hands to his belly, shrinking defensively, he asked "You mean there's multiple versions of me?"

Starlight answered with "Not exactly. I guess you have magic too, and we mistreated you so badly that you mostly destroyed our whole land." Skepticism mixed with his distaste. "So we've used our magic to warn ourselves before you got here, that we need to not let you get angry with us."

Twilight, again with "What Starlight is trying to say, is our princess, well I mean the biggest princess. Except it's not really by size or even age but the princess we all follow is taller than I am and a lot older."

Rainbow angrily interjected "The big cheese is giving you the crown. Congratulations you're the new ruler of Equestria." Princess Twilight was wearing her element-crown, which Starlight totally hadn't noticed before because she didn't think of it as a tiara of political appointment, but only as a magical artifact. But now she wasn't wearing it, because she had set it on the map table in front of her, as far away as she could easily reach.

The human looked fearfully at the crown. "Do I have to wear it?"

Twilight didn't answer this time, but as she looked down at the symbol of her power, magical and political both, Starlight answered him. "No! In fact you don't have to do anything you don't want. What we're saying is you can, in fact do whatever you want." *There was that look I saw. Hope, I guess lust, and fear that this is a trap so he can't ever gain his powers that he doesn't know about or believe in.* "Now, we will probably pester you, at some point, for each thing you say you want, or do because you want to, but in order to never make you made, we're all your humble servants."

He was prying off his mud, and from what little she could make out of it, human shoes weren't anything like pony shoes. As he started taking layers of clothing off his upper half, he asked again if he could do 'whatever he wanted' Had the others been warned? She'd seen this happening before.

And there he was, walking around behind her, just like she'd seen. No pony reacted so they probably had been told what to expect. And as with the monotonous flight time, the fully two

minutes hadn't been properly represented, though eventually he stopped moving, and she could tell she was dripping both his fluids and her own.

It was Rarity who cleared her throat, and said that the guards would be escorting a few chefs to the castle by mid day, so it would be know what he could eat, if pony food proved not to be up to the task of meeting his needs, or if he had favorite or hated foods, to note that too. "So, good sir, it is likely up to me to make you some coverings, and since you came in wearing fine clothes I assume you will want to wear something when meeting with the general public. I'll need to measure your, well take measurements so I can sew something together."

The human muttered acceptance, then stood upright again, and looked around the table at all the mares. "Really? I get to just have whichever one of you I want?"

It was Rainbow Dash who responded to that, with "If that's what it takes."

He asked for a towel, and Twilight summoned one from somewhere, which he used only to dry his equipment, then offered it to his partner, who accepted it, folded it and proceeded to sit firmly on the floor, with the towel against her opening. Looking down at her, he said "So, do I get to ask why I'm so special?"

Applejack had that answer. "Nope. Leastwise not fer a few days. Turns out you can be dangerous, but only if we push ya too hard. So, you get to live it up fer a while."

5.2 Fourth Run, Year Twenty

Twilight Sparkle sat her notes down on the picnic blanket, and looked over her friends. All the original elements, and Starlight who had verified the human would not respond to anything said today. She wasn't sure what she had said to Trixie Lulamoon or Lyra Heartstrings, but two years income for this one day had probably helped.

Applejack had been the first to start to roan out, although rarity's mane had started to follow suit. It was the practical workpony that spoke first, diving into the meeting. "We're all sure he ain't hidin' in the bushes? Seems he can be invisible."

Twilight reiterated what Starlight's memoryplate had shown, that he wouldn't lose his temper no matter what was said here. "And we've all known about the short-range invisibility for six years, and that he can hear through our ears at that range for about as long."

Dash snickered into her pastern joint. "And all the rest of the senses. Have we ever tried setting up a midnight tryst on his routine walkways just to act as a diversion?"

Starlight, seemingly more somber and bleak for every trip taken to that memoryplate, nodded and said "It only has about a fifty-fifty chance of working. Partly because ponies don't take all that long, so timing it without detectable cues so that they start while he's actively listening is a little rare, and I think he sometimes goes on walks to get away from ponies altogether so he isn't actively listening at all."

Pinkie asked "Do we know all his magic powers yet?" as she stole a cookie out of the as of yet unopened picnic basket.

Twilight was double checking her notes, written in a sort of made-up code in case the human was looking through her eyes as she updated them. Having no great pressure to learn to read Ponish, he still wrote himself notes in his native writing system which Twilight had diligently bashed her forehead against its seemingly arbitrary uses and abuses of its own rules of spelling. But she wrote everything in his language now, so he would have that much less mental pressure to learn Ponish, making these coded notes that much more impenetrable. After listing them again, she answered Pinkie Pie. "Some of these he hasn't found yet, but hearing through our ears, which can be extended into editing our labelling system, so we don't know we can see and hear him, that's the invisibility, and he can summon a hallucination of his choosing but only upon one pony at a time, though it seems to be highly compressed."

As that was the end of the things he had learned already, she paused for a moment, during which moment Starlight interjected "In a couple years, I think, after he's been caught forcing a mare to accept his attentions, he'll explain to me something important about that. But with no sound I just know he'll talk about it."

"And on to the things he hasn't learned, and they're the parts that make him so dangerous." Twilight paused long enough to make eye contact with each of the mares here. "He can teleport using almost any flat surface, preferably with chalk or other marking substance, to get to any-place he can describe. Such as a residence where a lone mare can be found, or the princesses' bedrooms, or nearly anything else."

Pinkie put down her cup of juice to avoid a spit take as she startled giggling. "I'm so used to him showing up right as I get into bed I haven't thought about what they must have been thinking when he dropped his invisibility thing."

Rarity weighed in with "I can't wait for this timeline to run it's course and be corrected."

Rainbow Dash offered a bland 'two hundred years' to which Fluttershy pointed a hoof at Starlight and corrected Dash with 'three hundred'. Starlight smiled at the pegasus and told the group "We've learned a lot of important things; that he has low self esteem and almost no self confidence paired with his inability to die, which in this timeline he won't learn of until he dies the first time some decades hence, but anyway he quickly develops his 'take what you can when you can' attitude thinking it will all evaporate any day."

Applejack had fished the teapot out and had poured herself a still-steaming cuppa as she asked the unicorn "That's a thing I ain't got through mah skull yet. Ya just said, he cain't die, then you said he's gonna die."

Twilight was quicker to answer, having seen the playthroughs over Starlight's shoulder. "The body you see can be made to die, but when that happens, the human occupies another body. If somepony runs him through with a spear, than that pony becomes the human in all but body."

Starlight, having dissolved into a thousand-hoof stare, added "He can swap manually at any time, with no warning or resistance. He just doesn't know that yet."

"Have we tried ways o' disablin' him what ain't considered killin'? I seem to remember the palace gardens decorated with troublesome ne'erdownells."

Starlight nodded, answering Applejack with "We think that's why this backup plan was put into place; one of the runs she turned him to stone, meaning the human had Celestia's body and probably no idea how to undo the petrification spell."

Nibbling on a muffin, Fluttershy asked "What would the perfect timeline look like?"

Twilight looked to Starlight, who had her eyes closed and nose lowered a bit, but after a moment the unicorn, eyes still closed, answered. "We'll need to, as quickly as we did this run, make it clear he has no need to fear, and to feel certain his needs will be met." Here she did open her eyes, and made eye contact with the yellow pegasus. "Including his more uncomfortable ones. I'm not sure how best to tackle that since he's too caught up in his own pain to form a natural relationship with a healthy pony, and an unhealthy pony that would accept his behavior would almost certainly cause him to augment his needs elsewhere."

Rainbow Dash wanted to know "How come it's dangerous to just tell him he'll eventually develop these odd magics?"

Twilight answered first, "He gets drunk with power."

But it was Fluttershy, who expanded on that thought, saying "A saying he has from his world, is power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Dash wrinkled her face. "And making him absolute ruler of Equestria on day one gives him somehow, less power, than telling him he's a rotten creature but we'll look the other way because all our attempts to make him pay backfire on us?"

Rarity, having just poured herself some tea and was stirring in a sugar cube replied "Two decades, and what laws has he decreed? Even his afternoon middle of the park trysts with strangers aren't declared proclamations; he just expects not to be dethroned by his subjects, and look, we haven't." Looking up at Rainbow Dash now, she finished the explanation "He's no leader. The political position given him has almost no value to him. So long as the ponies in charge to a good job, and no ponies complain to him they're being mistreated, he trusts the system is working, and he just strolls through life looking for the next pleasure."

"There's an open secret." said Starlight Glimmer, eyes closed again. "One future in three, about a hundred years from now, when the pony he was granted is getting too old to appreciate his mares, he asks for a replacement and that triggers a war. About one pony in ten decide to back him, and he either carves out a section of Equestria for 'free ponies' to live, or he focuses all his energies on destroying the royal guard. Usually but not always leaving the two sisters to rule over an empty castle." She opened her eyes again, taking three successively quicker, deeper breaths before turning to face her friends. "I'm working on trying to ease up on it, so eighty years from now he can confront the sisters about how they run things and once, but I've lost it. But once he took that clear knowledge, and traveled to a bunch of towns, big and small, and queried a bunch of ponies. In that future, he was willing to believe that we're doing an okay job, and he

never starts the war. In others I think he just keeps not seeing whatever is going to bug him, so we're just putting it off."

Rainbow Dash, decorated member of the Wonderbolts, suggested "Maybe if the guard are the problem, he can travel with a troop of guards, talk to them about their job, watch them do their job. Maybe he'll find the problem faster that way?" To which Starlight nodded, and closed her eyes again.

Rarity put her tea cup down and moved over so she was sitting beside, against Starlight. "You're more withdrawn than usual, dear. Can I ask what's the matter?"

When Starlight opened her eyes, and staring straight ahead. "I've seen myself attending each of your funerals. Some of them don't seem to change much; in order to send myself the corrected notes I have to live for the next three hundred years, and I know how many years you all have left." Perhaps trying to stave off questions about who, or when, the purple unicorn looked to the purple alicorn and said "Even you, Twilight, you nearly got yourself killed a few times already, and a month from now there's a dicey day coming up."

"You'll warn me" Twilight started to say, eyes wide, to which Starlight started nodded decisively, explaining there were some clear markers to which she could respond by teleporting the alicorn out of danger.

Pinkie, having scarfed down her share of the muffins, cupcakes, and doughnuts already, laid down and curled up as if to nap. "So, back to the human. Do you ever get the feeling he wants to do more than just stand behind and fill you up? I've always wanted to ask him what he really wants but the most he's ever done is pick a leg up so it's the inside of my legs brushing against him instead of the back of them."

"Plus laying against your spine when you're in bed." added Fluttershy, who then shrank back to look at everpony else, in case it had only been her the human did that with.

Rainbow Dash said "He asked me to do a thing, once." Several heads, including Starlight's, rose to observe the explanation. "He laid on my bed, and asked me to stand over him, then once he was unsheathed, or whatever, he asked me to sit down on him. Except he actually wanted me to sort of stand, poised near him so he could rise up to bang against me."

Squinting, Starlight considered the flier's words, and said "He hasn't turned evil because even now, he doesn't believe he has any power."

Whereas Applejack's response was "Ah always wonder why sometimes he knees are all scuffed up. Ain't never any damage to his pants so it's somethin' to do with mares, just ain't been one o' us."

5.3 Year Eighty Five

The human had suggested twenty years ago, that he'd like some 'solid plans' made about how to replace his body with a unicorn colt, or stallion. Given that a week before his Monday assistant

had quit, citing unworkable condition, he'd probably stumbled upon the body-swap mechanism and let the existence of it percolate before suggesting he'd like a younger body.

So it was now that a deep golden-yellow unicorn with silver tail and bronze mane, stood smirking at the princess of the day, Celestia, who was explaining "This will simplify our budget; no need to buy colts to keep at the ready and so long as you can avoid getting killed, most sicknesses that affect ponies shouldn't be too difficult for you to recover from."

The unicorn asked "Do I need to go looking for ways to disconnect the one tube from the others, so I can keep sewing wild oats? I assume you don't want me trying to raise foals when I don't remember the mare's name half the time."

Celestia's countenance flattened. And she responded without her normal levels of polite enthusiasm."For reasons I don't want to go into, we're leaving your behaviors up to you. The only two mares you'll make alicorn foals with are Cadence and Flurry Heart."

The unicorn's eyebrows responded, but he said nothing. The other alicorns of the kingdom, minus Flurry Heart, stepped forward to a semi circle, Cadence on the former-human's far left, then Luna, Celestia a bit to his right, and Twilight Sparkle to his right. When Celestia's horn began glowing, it wasn't the polite, small glow, or the bright five-thousand-lumen overcharge glow, but a dancing, jumping, dynamic light as if a celebratory sparkler had been lit on her forehead. It also didn't have the normal hue, but was a slightly yellowish color, and as the other ponies lit their horns, the color and effect matched. No connecting beams, but the effect got bigger, and brighter until nopony trying to look in on the ritual would have been able to see the unicorn in the center.

Then all magic dropped, and Celestia, sweating, lowered her head and started panting. While the others weren't visibly sweating, Twilight and Cadence both carefully stretched and moved their necks, while Luna did a full body shimmy shake, and picked up and set down her hooves.

The stallion in the center flapped his wings a couple times, and watched as he folded them, then unfolded and refolded them against his sides. As Celestia was still panting, Luna spoke up, saying "Since wings are new to you, we recommend a two week training course, with certain of our pegasus guard. We are aware you would not fight in our army, but we feel bringing you up to speed quickly on the ways of the winged would serve your interests best."

One eye half closed, he responded, facing Celestia at first. "You wouldn't have planned that unless you had some trick up your sleeve." Turning now to look at Starlight Glimmer, her adult daughter Joy Burst standing beside her, looking like the older pony of the two. "Or you're trying to hide something."

Starlight trotted out of the shadows, and offered a hug to the newly uplifted alicorn. "Not hiding. We're hoping to find something you're hiding, but we think neither you nor I know what questions to ask."

He switched which eye was half-lidded. "I'm not going to get as many mares next time around, am I?"

Joy Burst cackled, but Starlight only sighed. "We'll get you what you need. And that's hundreds of years off, isn't it?" Turning to the collected alicorns, she said "Thank you, your highnesses, I'll see him to the training grounds."

The stallion agreed to go, and as the pair passed the other unicorn mare, Joy shouted at them "I need to get back to Dad's bedside. Hope you can make it back."

As the daughter turned to walk out a different door, Starlight could almost, but not quite, be heard to mutter "He's got a couple weeks left."

Once outside the castle, under the open sky, Starlight called "I'm going to teleport us." And that was all the warning the stallion got before a loud crack and the double pop of displaced air saw them under the open sky again. But there were no buildings around but some tents, and milling around in front of them were six pegasi. One wearing a neatly pressed jacket with insignia of some sort though it was not a Wonderbolts uniform. And two mares, and three more stallions, none of whom had anything but a sheen of sweat covering them.

The alicorn looked at the sky, guessing out loud "Late morning, right?" which only received a nod from Starlight. Once they had walked within sixty hooves of the uniformed fellow, he turned, and flew over to greet them, Starlight first.

"We've been out once today, I didn't know what time..." But at this looked over at her traveling companion, and noticing the arrangement and number of limbs, re-positioned himself to be primarily facing the alicorn. Starlight introduced him, saying "Sandstorm, this is Jack, the human I've told you about."

The shook hooves, and Sandstorm began reciting his practiced introduction. "Since you grew up on the ground, a number of aspects of flight will seem unnatural to you. We've put together a two week course to get pegasi who grew up on the ground ready to participate in cloud-based economies, and you'll understand how to stay on course during severe weather."

With a hoof on his shoulder, Starlight explained "You'll get a solid slab-sided tent so you can do your chalk doorway thing if you need to see a familiar face at night, and the usual chef-run will happen, they've been told to expect you out here."

He pointed his nose at the other trainees. "Those are normal ponies. Am I going to be made fun of for not eating chopped grass stems the way you all do?" Despite the low tone, Sandstorm should probably have heard all of that, but he chose not to respond.

Starlight assured him "They've been warned don't worry it'll be fine. Just a couple weeks like a normal pony and then you can come back to Twilight's castle if you want." She stepped back, and not getting any further complaints, she nodded to the new alicorn, and teleported away.

Sandstorm offered a smile, used his nose to indicate a trip to meet the other trainees. The three stallions were Windswept, Daisy Chains (whose cutie mark was just chains tied in a bow, no daisies to be seen) and Raincloud Kicks (whose cutie mark was only a dark cloud pouring prodigious amounts of water to regions off-mark). The mares were named Filaris Puffball and Coralwing Draft, both of whom were hesitant to make eye contact with the newcomer.

"Alright, breaks over. Second, or for you, first run through. Fly over there" Sandstorm indicated an orange 'x' on the ground a hundred hooves distant. "Then there" now he indicated an oversized cat-tower's shelf, another forty hooves further and more than thirty hooves off the rocks they were walking on "All four hooves on that ramp, and glide down with your hooves not on the ramp."

Jack was, technically, the first in the air, but he only went up about three hooves distance and mostly stayed there, trying to figure out how to produce forward motion. Chains leapt into the air but his flapping caused him to come back, so he landed awkwardly as Puffball flew slowly, decidedly, and successfully around them. Sandstorm pointed to the former human, and called back to the ground. Standing beside the alicorn, he unfurled his wings, and pantomimed flight. "Fold them this way on the upswing," the fold caused the wingtips to point back as well as down. "And then roll the leading edge, this bone here" he pointed with a hoof at the front most edge of his wing "forward just a bit, and you'll grab air and push it back."

The alicorn stallion followed the pantomime several times before putting speed and force into it. He was flying in a straight line and just stopped beating his wings for a moment to fall onto the 'x'. Wincing at the hard landing he repeated the gesture but with less 'roll' which meant more of the energy went into forward motion. Then he turned using his hooves before gauging the distance to land on the top of the ramp. It was distracting that, following his line of sight, the edge of the mountain top Canterlot was built on could be seen. It was still fifty hooves away and not a danger unless he badly overshot, but it made mental calculations a little more time consuming.

Which he didn't have because Coralwing was nearly falling out of the sky towards the ledge he was standing on. He leapt first, put his wings out second, and realized on his third wingbeat he should have just coasted. Even folding his wings in a bit, he wasn't quite falling fast enough, and only his back hooves touched the ramp. This not only caused him to tumble forward but fearing another very hard landing, he flapped furiously, which because of the partial tumble, pulled him forward more than up, so he for a moment panicked that he was about to fall off the edge, some four thousand hooves straight down to his demise.

As the human landed chest first, scraping his right shoulder just at the elbow, which on ponies were more or less on top of each other, he remembered he wouldn't need to worry about dying if he fell, and also wondered if, even unskilled, he couldn't figure out hovering before he fell the full height.

He managed the small jump to get on the ramp, now last in line, and tried to hover, which wasn't hard but he wasn't hovering relative to the ramp, only to the ground below. Once all the trainees were back at 'camp' the instructor went over the uses of wings, and how to turn or stop. With a better understanding of how they'd failed, Sandstorm sent them through the small course again. On the third, or for the others fourth, try they were able to look like they'd intended to achieve success, though Jack felt he was still overreacting to everything.

The morning was now late enough that Sandstorm called a lunch break, and it was at that time the two chefs brought his oatmeal, which he said needed to be cooked even though other

ponies argued that what they normally did with oats constituted cooking, but he had continued to ask for cooked fish, even though it wasn't strictly necessary but he missed being an omnivore, and timothy hay, raw. The two gallons of water he sucked down had various mineral and vitamin supplements added because some experts thought the timothy 'hay' was inadequate for pony nutrition, the moreso because he only ate oats 'cooked into oblivion.'

In the afternoon they focused on maintaining concentration while at height. Filaris Puffball clearly knew how to fly but had never been more than a couple hooves off the ground, as she was sweating as the troupe hovered at eighty hooves in the air. Windswept was going through the motions, not drawing attention to his skill but having absolutely no difficulty meeting expectations. Daisy Chains was fearless and reckless and also skillless and a little hard of listening. The human thought Raincloud Kicks was the unusual one, because he had the muscle as if he'd been a skilled flier all along but clearly he was unfamiliar with the use of wings. Currently he was floating up, then he'd stop too much and drop down, and have to work extra hard to go up, and would under or overcorrect when at the prospective height.

The human found his own transformation seemed to come with fully formed wings; if he knew what to ask of them, he had the muscle for it. So when Sandstorm called out "Okay, keep this height we're going to land on that ledge over there" he found that so long as he didn't look down, he could maintain height, and land on what at one time had been part of some building. Perhaps the castle was supposed to be extended this direction?

And once again they flew back, leaping out into the air before spreading their wings, then gathering about eighty hooves (it had been decades since the former-human had used then-human measurements since nopony knew how many hooves to a "foot")

So far, and for the first day of either fourteen or ten, this seemed reasonable, nothing was being done that would result in injury if one of the fliers were to catastrophically fail. But in the evening, the crowd gathered around a small campfire. It was more symbolic than warm, as it wasn't cold enough to need a fire and nopony needed to cook their food. After listening for a time it occurred to Jack the gathering wasn't strictly about learning to fly, as no one would question a pegasus on whether they actually were a pegasus simply because no one ever saw them in the air. This troupe wanted to get Sandstorm to talk, and he only agreed to it if he could torture some civvies first.

Coralwing asked "Have you ever been in a war?" which Windswept somehow found funny. Sandstorm shook his head and explained there hadn't been a war in this timeline in centuries, though he understood that Twilight Sparkle had once been in an alternate timeline where she needed to defeat Somber, an evil unicorn that tried to steal princess Cadence's throne and kingdom from her.

Jack piped up, hoping he could participate, and not start the war he'd been told was common to his appearance. "You've probably heard I supposedly started a war in a nearby timeline?"

Sandstorm calmly looked over, and didn't respond beyond that. Windswept however, said "Do you know what it was about?"

The former human shook his head, but added "I know I was... uncivil to mares I tried to court, and that could have lead to some fights that I guess would be so one-sided it started a sort of uproar, but I think I've put together I also got mad at Celestia for something."

Coralwing Draft asked the alicorn "Are you angry now?" and before he could answer, Daisy Chains added "Aren't you worried she'll turn you to stone when you make your move?"

Rainclouds leaned over and opined to Chains that "Discord was able to break himself out of stone, I think I heard there was a Nyx cult" which opinion itself earned snickering laughter from the mares, though Jack couldn't parse why. "that studied to do it for a different criminal."

When Daisy Chains muttered back "Execution is the only believable response." the human had to wonder not just about these two stallions, but the entire crowd. How much of this is scripted? But the mares didn't goad him any further, and Windswept was watching Jack but not fearfully, nor expectently, but simply as if he had the speaking token now.

So he chose to ask Sandstorm "I'm sorry, I don't want to freak anypony out. Am I not supposed to say anything more about this?"

Somewhat brusquely the instructor bolted out "I'd been told they were all briefed. You proceed as you feel best about."

Now all the students were watching him, and he found he was sweating. "In a nearby timeline, yes when I first got here Celestia turned me to stone because the previous run's Celestia said I was irrideemably destructive. That resulted in Celestia dying when we traded places which I think caused the statue of me but containing Celestia to explode. A lot of details got lost."

Chains raised his chin, and nearly shouted "What happens if someone just runs you" at which point the alicorn finished with "through with a" which perhaps is not very finished at all. The alicorn Chains now stared at Windswept and Rainclouds to ask "What are you doing over? Oh." finally looking at his own face.

With eye contact made again, the alicorn stallion explained "Pretty sure that happens. You wind up a dying pony, and I'm holding the tool you killed me with."

After a moment, after staring at Jack's lack of a cutie mark, and finding his own back on the rump he was wearing, he started laughing uncontrollably, bashing his right wing against Rainclouds Kicks, who grinned a little confusedly and tried returning the gesture.

Puffball had a wide-eyed look of fear, though she didn't look like she was about to bolt. Coralwing was cautious but not terrified. Windswept spoke up only to say "I read the memo, but I don't understand it." Sandstorm took that opportunity to ask "How long have you been an alicorn, son?" to which Jack could just make out Windswept, as he tucked his nose in between his front legs, mutter "daaaaad." extending the moniker to three or four syllables. *That explains the flight skill, then.*

The alicorn looked up at the still well lit sky, though the sun itself had fallen behind the mountainside. "Six hours, eight? How long we been out here?"

[Placeholder: Nope, still don't know what the open secret is. Guess I'll come back to it.]

5.4 Fourth Run, Year 200

"I hope you're not offended that I'm not sharing my notes with you." Outside the sometimes war-room, sometimes ritual-room, in a hall big enough to be called a ball room by its lonesome but for the multitude of locked doors, a giant white-ish alicorn pony called to a metallic coated stallion.

The former humon rolled his eyes. He had popped in to see if Flurry Heart was visiting, as they were courting after a fashion again after she left him in a huff five decades early. The young non-princess alicorn said the brute was too slovenly and wouldn't pick his hooves or put away his used dishes. He said to his confidants she had found him in the broom closet with a maid, though the servant she kept for reason of her foal had been employed as a magical de-icer operator.

Finding a flurry, no capitol letter, of alicorn kerfuffling about he nosed about to hear what war they were winding up to fight, or avoid, and found they were speaking in code, supposedly alone in their own castle, about his own hide. Starlight Glimmer, also present, had recognized some cues that said he would have arrived. She still hadn't told him how her clairvoyance worked, but she looked right at his invisible hide, and offered to sit with him while the princesses wound up their magical timepiece.

All the princesses froze, and waited. So he shrugged, and sat next to the immortal unicorn, and made the both of them invisible for a while.

"Since you're so dangerous if angered, and so useful is comfortable, we've had to put a lot of consideration into how to greet you, and at this point that involves two minutes of discussions between the princesses, now and then."

Sometimes the official-leader slash prince of Equestria took advantage of his status, and just started nuzzling strange mares, or the more likely familiar ones like this one, who had been his Saturday assistant for eleven or twelve decades before he started spending his days flying abroad, seeing the rest of the country. Now, though, he was tense. Wrapping a wing around the slightly shorter unicorn, he said "I've known this was coming. It's not like I think I would be better at recommending how to deal with me, but I feel like this day represents the day you put me in hobbles."

Quickly straightening her neck, Starlight forced a polite, small smile into her voice. "We've tried that. I've been able to peek into the folded strands of time, seen a lot of ways we've messed up our relationship with you." She watched the four princesses' veritable dance of carrying notes from various tables set up at the edges, discussing not in whispers, which they all knew sometimes first hoof their conqueror could hear clearly, but in odd code phrases, chosen in secret over the last two decades. Starlight herself had been invited, was teleported in, and out by precise spell so as not to accidentally grab a human who was closely hugging a conspiritor. The cave was dark, and after half an hour the air started to go stale.

"I have only your word though, and sometimes this place terrifies me." This was whispered, despite the fact that his 'invisibility' unlike Starlight's actual spell, caused those vaguely close to not understand they had heard or seen anything.

"You also have all your magic." She matched his volume, reassuring the terrible god of destruction there need be nothing to fear from the future, or an alternate past leading to this point. "The reason two of us have folded our timelines is because we keep making such simple mistakes, and you keep overreacting to them."

Finally the three shortest princesses eased back, and Celestia turned to where she had seen the former human last. He allowed himself to be seen, and to acknowledge the warning. He was not expecting though, that as two unicorn guards, some other unicorn colt he didn't see running around before, and three pegasi guards walked off to through a locked room, that six mares, each vaguely young, and in their prime, two from each tribe, came out from another locked door, an earth pony and a unicorn trotting, and the other four walking quickly, decisely, towards the alicorn stallion. Twilight Sparkle had already come back to the middle of the room, and had laid down on her right side, to watch, or to invite the stallion. Cadence was lowering her head, watching for any movement from him, and Luna had simply sat down to face him.

Starlight had practiced a dozen different lines for this moment. Some caused the stallion to run in terror, with a tiny chance he'd start a war with the griffons, obliterate the hippogriffs, or just declare Sandy Egg Ewes to be his private kingdom. Sometimes her words caused anger to go with the fear, and she'd seen her memories of him blasting wildly with raw energy, turning invisible, which was undetectable in hindsight so she had to guess by the fact no one could find him as he ran for the door that's what was happening. About half those gestures of Starlight resulted in Celestia dead before the spell was cast, and a portion saw her killed after she got back two minutes later.

This seemed to work safely though, regardless of how many times she practiced it, then watched her memories show what had happened as a result. Speaking a little faster than usual, so as to get all the words out, and calmly, almost in a monotone, to reduce assumptions about her meaning, she said to the stallion, as reached a hoof out for his sheath, "We appreciate that you almost trust us. And I meant what I said, you'll be fine next time, but I want you to feel fine this time, too."

The mares would receive twenty thousand bits each if he didn't run off. They had been told more about how to make him believe they were interested than about how much was riding on their success. But it worked. When the two faster mares reached him, they shoved their lips and tongue all around his sheath, and as the two pegasi flew up to hover near his head, he shoved his nose against her teats, watching Starlight stand over princess Twilight, who pretended to nurse from the immortal unicorn.

He had already finished his first session before Celestia got back.

5.5 Fifth Run, First Trip

Celestia remembered which guard was near, that could handily verify her authorization code, and wouldn't be needed for the few minutes the princesses were talking. As soon as the glare of the

spell wore off, she pointed, though she couldn't remember his name, though she remembered his funeral would be about fifty eight years later. "You! Go verify this code, and let her" She pointed at herself, who had not yet finished parsing what was going on. "know if the code is valid. Sigma Bananna Yogurt Nails Eight Triangle Flat Earthiness. Now go."

Future Celestia turned to next-run Past Celestia. "Time is of the essence because it turns out this loop was set up an hour or two too late. From the swamps, coming toward Fluttershy's cottage is a two legged, hairless currently very muddy thing, called a human. Twilight will know what it is quickly enough but it's not from beyond the mirror and it's capable of destroying Equestria, mostly accidentally."

Future Celestia looked to see there was some degree of understanding in past Celestia's eyes. Once she knew she was listening to herself, she continued. "He doesn't know he has magic powers, but they make him utterly immune to any form of punishment. This last time I decided to just give in, let him have the crown. All he wants is a bunch of mares in bed, but he's too awkward to ask for that he just starts taking later, when he realizes that maybe he can."

"If you get him on your side, in just over two centuries he'll defend the kingdom from another invasion from Chrysalis but if you get him angry he can easily kill any pony with a touch and about thirty seconds of false memories. For the first year, get him whatever he says he needs to be comfortable and safe, and just expect he'll want a different mare for each day of the week. Starlight has all the insight be sure to ask and support her; she said she almost saw Scootaloo, that's the filly's name I haven't met her, Scootaloo fix him up but you can't wait for the human to take her, you need to force her to pursue him or it won't work. I don't know age ranges you might let it sit a time but not too long."

"When he turns into an alicorn – again ask Starlight – try to steer Flurry Heart and he together it will improve everything. Lastly there's something he hates about the guards but not you so promise him he doesn't have to dismantle any political pillars or institutions he should complain about his fears; then he won't kill all your guards."

Past Celestia blinked several times, then eased into her formal stance of proclamation. "How long do I have?"

"Human is here now, Fluttershy, you come back in two hundred years, Starlight will need immortality, she comes back at three"

The spell ended, and she came back to the sight of the pegasus guards peeking through the doors that had been opened just a crack. *Well, as I recall there is quite a show going on out there.*

Side show

The 'magic' or machine, or whatever it was, let him hear what ponies around him heard. And that mare definitely heard a screeching noise. She didn't respond to it, but she heard it and no pony around heard it.

As it was Sunday, Jack officially spent the day with Twilight Sparkle, and today they actually were together, walking through ponyville to eat at the Sugar Cube. She always wanted to eat Sunday lunch here because both she and her date remembered Pinkie Pie, who worked in this building when it was a bakery.

Twilight always got nervous when the human said something off the wall like "What's weird about that mare walking across into the grooming shop?" The moreso when she couldn't tell what he was talking about. He almost seemed to forget when the waitpony came out to their table and he ordered the griffon scramble. She wrinkled her nose at the thought of him still eating human food. *Diced rattlesnake, and the eggs from three different types of animal.* But as soon as the wait pony had taken her order for a daisy sandwich and alfalfa tacos he was back to trying to clandestinely stare a hole into the pink and white earth mare's mane.

She watched her as the door closed on her peppermint-pink tail, and thought *she's too skinny for him to chase down* but out loud said "I didn't notice anything. What did you notice?"

He shrugged, and sipped at his whiskey. She calculated distances, and figured that with the table they were seated at, that mare would walk outside his perception altering distance within two strides of the door. With her out of range, the lecherous prince began to let his mind wander off the grooming door, but he didn't say anything or watch any other mare's plot, even when Firebrand Puffball brought out the food. Twilight knew she had recently had her third foal and was probably lactating, which those same perception magics let him feel her teats as they bounced and jiggled against her thighs just delivering food.

But he just looked and smiled at her, and she smiled back. Twilight remembered they'd met under vaguely good circumstances but didn't spare the brainpower to remember it now because he wasn't thinking about that, he was thinking about a sparsely built earth pony mare, who was now exiting the building. The stallion quickly swallowed his food and said "She's back, but. . ." and didn't elaborate.

Pony peripheral vision was keen enough she could pretend to be watching the pegasus stallion loading up a flightcart full of crates, while actually keeping track of the faded pink and white-striped mare. If she had not been able to, she wouldn't have been convinced the alicorn stallion was on to anything.

He jumped, kicking the table with a knee and almost knocking Twilight's cider over. At that exact moment, a young earth colt at the table next to the couple had made eye contact with the mare in question, who looked back and nodded once, almost imperceptibly. The colt made a point of lowing his nose to pretend to watch his plate of untouched greens and the pink mare quickly trotted off, down the street.

"Telepathy?" Twilight whispered, not sure what form their communication might have taken aside from that it was invisible to her.

The prince of lechery shook his head. "No, verbal. Shouting, pretty loud but obviously too high a pitch for us." He eyed the colt, and was not more successful at being clandestine than he had for the mare, but they both were oblivious to the goings on around them.

"What was said?" She had to consider her word choice still, even if he said they were shouting that obviously was relative. And the colt was sitting close enough he could have heard normal conversation if he'd been paying attention.

Again, he shook his head. "I couldn't make out individual words, let alone the sentence, but I felt him say it, and they can both hear it." He sat very straight, and stared off across the street, his nose more nearly pointing at the rock climbing gym than the grooming establishment. But his eyes were unfocused as he heard all the perceptions of ponies in range. "Screw this I'm asking him."

Twilight jumped out of her seat, hoping to keep the asking in the realm the rest of the ponies moved through and lived in. But after gulping down the remaining two thirds of his shot of whisky, he practically fell out of his chair to reach a hoof out and touch the colt on his right side.

They both fell still; eyes glazed over, breathing even, some sort of instant trance.

Twilight had positioned herself to either grab the colt, if he tried to stab himself, which she expected though had never seen it happen, or more likely for a physical fight to break out between the two males, which would expose her to flying hooves and teeth but should help reduce injuries over all.

But the time they were together in that place that didn't exist stretched past half a minute. When the alicorn moved again, it was to jump back so hard and fast his chair was knocked over. The colt did not jump out of his chair.

He melted, oozing and dripping a clear fluid all over the table, gravel, and seat as his body dissolved and began silently evaporating. The prince was looking around, not latching on to any particular onlooker.

Twilight almost vomited, then she rounded on the prince, who didn't even look at her. "WHAT DID YOU DO?" Twilight understood he could kill with a touch; had been warned for the past two centuries not to allow him to become infuriated because he'd 'pull out all the stops' but everything she'd heard and seen also implied it was strictly perception alteration. The victim would die of a heart attack, or choose to destroy themselves within a couple days of 'returning' so how had this colt just turned into a small puddle of clear goo?

"I ripped his exoskeleton off."

Hissing through clenched teeth, she corrected him "Ponies don't have exoskeletons; their bones are on the inside exactly like yours are."

He pointed a hoof at the mess, which now that the colt had finished melting, left behind a small stack of what could arguably be three or four pieces of chitin, if pony sized bugs were buying plates of salad in Ponyville and then not eating them. "That one did. Bet the other one did too."

As the alicorn started wandering in the direction the pink striped mare went, Twilight stared at the clear goo and said, possibly out loud but she wasn't sure, "But when Pharynx took over for his older brother there had been no sign of Chrysalis, or newly hatched changelings for decades."

The proprietor, and the waitpony that had brought them their food were looking rather upset at the mess Twilight was staring at. The former human was playing 'invisible' and not yet out of range to convince Twilight she couldn't see him, so she was forced to discuss the larger implications of this puddle of goo with the restaurant owner. Who, she now realized, was concerned on behalf of the terrified customers at tables around them.

Screeching Exoskeletons

Strigidae strode purposely to the mayor's office. The guard had been bought off, replaced by force already, or was being distracted until the younger, hungrier drones could help provide the force to replace them. Ponyville was again, praise the Queen and her eternal crown, completely defenseless.

The drone, currently wearing the face of one Peppermint Bark (who had not tasted very sweet but she had definitely been a satisfying meal) bumped into some pony as she crossed the road again. But as soon as she realized she'd struck an unseen pony it was gone, and no one said anything. *Just as well.* Two more twists of the sidewalk and she would be at the door to Stallion Mayor's office.

The problem, Strigidae found, was that the office suddenly had lost its doors. Not, there were holes in the building instead of closed doors, which she would have worked with if the stallion could be convinced, but the walls were unblemished by any window or door whatsoever.

Just as her dorsal vessel was starting to increase hemolyphal pressure, something much worse happened. All the ponies in ponyville stopped. Then they turned, and stared at her.

She tried to direct them elsewhere "Oops wrong building where is my mind!" she said aloud, turning and making for another vaguely round building. It would be a warehouse used by city employed staff, if she recalled aright.

Strigidae's mood was not leveled, unless one used that word destructively, by the shrill incoming call saying "Your message has been received and you have the all clear." *Of course it was he already said that.*

"You can hear that." said every pony in town. Which shouldn't have been possible because the farther ones were actually far enough away she should hear them later, unless they had started speaking before the ultrasonic trill had come to her. Or at least more than a couple seconds before the nearest ponies started speaking.

In the back of her mind she could hear queen Chrysalis saying 'just a generic looking' ... something, but before that could register as a full thought, there was a drone in front of her. It had pale violet eyes, and its feet were covered in something, as if ponies had gelled a changeling into place. It looked up at her, as Peppermint Bark was tall and thin amongst ponies, and drones were short and stout amongst most earth ponies. This drone looked up at Strigidae. She had never seen terror on a drone's face before, and she hoped the ponies couldn't recognize it for what it was, but she certainly could.

Speaking of ponies, there were gone. The world had gone eerily silent, empty of everything except the buildings, this drone, and herself. She found her hooves were stuck, and when she looked, the same gray, smooth gel – almost rock like – held her disguised feet against the ground unyieldingly. "That's an interesting sound you make."

This came from a heavily clothed biped, with deep woodgrain brown mane, no muzzle, and a nose that stuck out a little like a beak though it clearly was just a nose. He had a flat, angled sort of thing in his hoof, except with all those separate foal-feathers it looked halfway between a land squid and a griffon's claw gripping it. She couldn't place the body shape until she remembered some of her history lessons. First the draconequus came to her, but of the known example, each limb was a different style, and it had a tail. But the human! Didn't the ponies have laws about humans?

She had mostly rumors to go by, if this was that creature, but she'd been planning to have useless sex with a pony, it wouldn't hurt her any to have sex to salvage the mission, or even just to save her own hide. "I can make many interesting noises, if you'd like to learn more." She'd seen a woodcut, and an old faded photo of a pony who lived with the human for a time. She was orange, and fat, and had green eyes. 'Peppermint Bark' erupted into green flame, with the change back to 'Applejack' following so quickly you wouldn't have seen the insectoid chiton between the flames.

The human froze, though Strigidae thought it more bemusement than either fear or lust. Now he was laughing, indicating her new form with that *its a box opening leverage bar, isn't it?* thing in his hand. "Nice try, I suppose. But she looked more like this."

The glued down drone erupted in green flame. She was pretty sure it was a double flame, which didn't make sense, but she concentrated instead on the shape before her. The pony was wide, but not from a lack of work, rather an excess of it. Heavy bone structure, and more muscle than her limited time in Ponyville had shown her on any pony, even of the earth tribe which tended to have a bit more simply because they couldn't cheat.

She had no way to know from here, how that translated to the particulars of Applejack's external opening, but she made her best guess about what a thing that looked like that, would like about a pony, and went with large, puffy and extremely muscled, as she made the change to match the still-terrified-looking disguised pony in front of her. The human chuckled, and began poking with those claws at the back of the now mirrored Applejack.

Placing the short end of the pry bar against the perfect Applejack's back, the human said "A friend told me that you don't have an exoskeleton." Then began tapping the angled section, digging into the flesh of the pony who now had more whites showing than irises, and was panting, though not otherwise moving.

The fear was getting to her, and Strigidae was pulling desperately, risking injury as she tried to break free, and was dangerously close to breaking the pony fetlock joint instead. Break three of the four, and her pain would match her fear levels as she tried to stand still for her captor on shattered legs. At least pony legs would withstand more abuse than a changeling's.

Gathering its wits together for a moment, it used the still extant combs on the inside of its skull to trill out, too high for a pony to hear, and too late to remember when they had, "I've been found out abort! Run! Danger, run!"

There was a loud crack, as an upper backplate broke free from the Applejack in front of Strigidae. Goopy hemolyph, red instead of white or clear, oozed and plopped down. The mare's chest was mishappen, now that the matching chestplate had nothing to anchor to. Without looking up, the human asked "Would you teach me that language, if I asked?"

Strigidae's training to take advantage of every desire her prey showed came to the fore. Even though her current form wanted to vomit, an experience wholly unfamiliar to an insect, she nearly sounded coy and sultry, saying "I could teach you many things, if you come with me. We could learn them together in my hut." *Hut? Do ponies live in huts?* Shouldn't I have said home? 'come to my home' Strigidae was only slightly relieved she had not said hive, as that would trigger defense mechanisms, at least in ponies.

One of the longitudinal plates on the damaged Applejack's front left legs came out, clattering on the pavement. "I don't believe, and even if I did you've been outbid, as you can only be one mare at once, but I can get them all with fairly short deadlines." The human began driving the long edge upward, trying to find the curved rear plates that held the back legs in place.

As the weight on the damaged front left caused another segment to crack and break, not falling off but sticking out under the belly, a compound fracture, Strigidae shook her head, willing the vision away. This makes no sense. In disguise the injury follows the design! You can tear flesh off but would need to remove all the ligaments to expose the bone under the muscle!

As if hearing her thoughts, the human drove the pry bar deep into where a drone's leg muscle is, and he pulled counter clockwise, towards the tail and caused two compound fractures halfway down the leg as well a complete failure of those muscles to hold her up any longer, spreading the weight across the three still functioning legs, which caused a cascading effect as a hoofring, roughly equivalent of a fetlock, to snap free and slide up, now constricting the next ring up. "You keep all your flesh on the inside, we keep it in the middle. Skin does a good job dealing with this kind of damage."

Strigidae would have said anything, maybe even and meant it, if she thought it would be the magic phrase. But he had not expressed interest in sexual liasons, and indeed had expressed no other interest beyond taking a pony's exoskeleton off while she watched. What she did try to say, would have been "You can't skin her alive, that is unponyishly horrific!"

What she actually said started out 'ou cunn' but found her vocal cords and tongue were burning, as stomach acids, bile, and that bit of hay-bacon she'd tried to eat this morning to "blend in" was forcefully oozing past, and dripping out of her mouth as fast as red pony-hemolyph-goo was oozing out of the other Applejack's many injuries.

The human had walked around to Applejack's right shoulder, and had caught the pry bar on the leg/back transition plates. Strigidae quickly spit out the remnants of her pony stomach, and shouted "What do you want? Do you want to know where the queen is?"

Pry bar still sticking out of the mare's shoulder, the human stood up straight again, nearly twice as tall as this mare had been, and stretched upward to straighten his back before turning to look at Strigidae. "I'll quote a famous play. An infiltrator had said, 'do you expect me to talk?' and goldhoof had said 'no, epoxy number seven, I expect you to die.'" Then pushed on the pry bar causing Applejack's leg to pop free of the body. There was hardly anything left, and the drone, still looking like Applejack on the outer crusts, fell apart.

Strigidae was surrounded by ponies. Walking, chatting, noises everywhere. She was in the street still. The middle of the street where she'd bumped into some pony, and he was still there, glaring at her. Strigidae might have registered that it was an alicorn stallion, which was so rare she couldn't think of an example anywhere in her history or training lessons. But she couldn't notice such details, because she was only seeing how big the road she was standing on looked, and how dark it was getting as the road rose up at an ever faster pace to swallow her whole.

A stallion had been slowing his heavy cart of barley, seeing that two ponies crossing the road in front of him had collided, and were still staring at each other angrily for the ten seconds it had taken him to reach them. Then the pink mare dropped, and as she dropped to the road, she melted into nothing, although several black metal bands, like a wine barrel was held together with, remained behind, clattering in the goo. Several bystanders would later remark they'd heard him shout "That wasn't a pony at all" though he didn't remember any such thing when asked by royal guards.

5.6 Fourth Run, Year 223

"So in short, it would seem that in this case, having a sometimes evil bipedal destructive force of nature is more effective at protecting from changelings than Discord was slowing Tirek down." Twilight lowered her clipboard, flattening the scraps of parchment back onto its surface, looking at the four other princesses.

Flurry Heart, named princess of the southern reaches not two years before Chrysalis began her final assault on Equestria, flicked her tail in annoyance, and made a 'hmmphh!' sound as she looked away.

Celestia grinned gently and offered "Mostly because the human declined their offer to become allies, where Discord had thought there was overall a good chance for personal gain working with Tirek."

Luna was aghast at that wanton violence in the report of the war, but did ask "Didst melt the queen? Chrysalis is forever gone from our lands?"

To which Cadence muttered something about Luna not listening to what wasn't said the way she listened to what was. But Twilight had to admit, eyes roving away from anything that might feel like personal contact, that "We never actually found the corpse. Of course, the way the human terrified them into dying the goo they left would evaporate within several hours leaving

what looked like a spilled bucket of craft paste, all dried out and it wasn't ever predictable how much biomatter would be detectably left relative to biomass prior to termination. Still, it's been over a year and with the telepathy spells Flurry developed we think we would have heard those trills they use to communicate in secret."

"Unless Chrysalis was the last, and or she believed unequivocally she was the last." Said Flurry, miffed perhaps that she was asked to put her entire guard retinue at risk before she had any chance to train her own ponies to the job. Looking down and tapping a front hoof, she added "And I guess we need to split up. It's Wednesday night and I agreed to start taking Fridays with him."

Twilight jumped up, and then quickly checked her enthusiasm, tipping her nose away as she cautiously asked the princess of the Southern Reaches, "How do you feel about that? How do you want me to react?"

Celestia looked sad, thought though not utterly crestfallen, just perhaps sullen and disappointed. Cadence was smirking but trying to position her head so her daughter wouldn't see. Luna was clearly undecided on the matter, and was withholding judgement until the two youngest princesses discussed it in front of her. Flurry Heart looked up, her eyes the tiniest bit wetter than usual. "Do you think it will work out? I've taken a tour of the property, and he showed me in a vision what he remembered of it." She looked away, embarrassed. "And her. I remember the coat colors but of course I was still young when she passed away."

"That is why you bought the chickens, and the willow sprouts. You seek to recreate the abode of the element of Kindness." Luna sounded impressed, though her nose hadn't moved any closer to Flurry Heart.

"I think it's a good move for the country, of course. You're soft on the inside as well as the outside, and that's what he told me he liked about Fluttershy." Twilight said as she levitated her clipboard to her saddlebags.

Flurry smirked, still looking away. "You mean my passage, and my chest fluff?"

Twilight rolled her eyes. "No those both count as the outside. Your heart, Heart. When you're feeling good about things you're a genuinely good pony to be around, and very considerate. It's what he needs to finish growing up, and I think he's really missed it." Blushing now, she added "Both softnesses. I guess immortality makes more than just your heart harden." Luna's mouth split as if to laugh, though no sound quite came out. Celestia however was chuckling heartily into her fetlock.