A Tale of Two Suns, Book 1: The Two Suns

by ReynardFox531

Summary

After the Friendship Games, life at CHS has settled down. No more magical villains to face, or impending disasters. Sunset and the others can go back to living as normal teenage girls. Or as close to normal as they can anyway.

But when Sunset gets into trouble, someone she never expected comes to help her, and her life will never be the same ever again.

Notes

Here I am with another story. And this time, another new fandom. Well, not really new for me, but new for publishing anyway. I always loved MLPFIM, though my interest hibernated for a long time.

This past November, I finally got around to watching the Equestria Girls movies (yeah, yeah, don’t look at me like that), and I loved them. While catching up in the fandom, this idea came to me and I just had to write it.

For those reading my other work, I’m not quitting The Lost Boy or First Days on Earth. I really wanted to write this and I still fully intend to continue those too. Like with The Lost Boy, I have a few chapters of material drafted in advance (that really seems to be working for me) so expect relatively quick updates initially. And as per usual, this story has been cross-posted on FF and DA, as well as Fimfiction.

And as always, the cover art for this story was done by my good friend PrettySoldierPetite. If
you like it, I encourage you to check out her gallery on DA.

Disclaimer: I don’t own My Little Pony Friendship is Magic or any of the characters within. I’m just a fan writing fanfiction.
Chapter 1: Fear

"Thank you for letting me come visit," said Sunset. Sparks danced at the end of her horn, causing her to smile. "I'd almost forgotten what it's like to have my magic." Taking a step forward from the mirror, she wobbled. "Guess I'm still used to two legs."

"It's perfectly fine, Sunset," replied Princess Twilight, using her own magic to keep the unicorn steady. "I had the same trouble coming over the first time. Stairs were the worst."

Sunset chuckled. "Ditto." Taking a look around, she whistled at the surroundings. "Wow, this place is huge."

Twilight nodded. "This is only my personal library. There's a lot more to the castle than this."

"How do you find your way around this place?"

The alicorn laughed. "When I figure it out, I'll tell you."

The two ponies barely took three more steps before a golden light enveloped them both. The castle library fell away in an instant, and Sunset felt a sudden weightlessness. When the blinding light went away a second later, the pair landed unceremoniously on a carpeted floor.

"Sunset Shimmer."

Sunset's head shot up, eyes widening as she beheld her surroundings. The walls and banners of Canterlot Castle surrounded her, the same as they'd been when she'd last lived there. She was in the throne room, the heart of all power and authority in Equestria. And right ahead of her was Princess Celestia, seated upon that same gilded throne, her face completely unreadable.

Sunset's whole body froze in shock. "Princess..." she said, her voice strangled.

"Sunset Shimmer," Celestia repeated, softer this time. She stood up from her throne, climbing down and closing the distance between them. "After all these years, you have finally returned."

"Princess, I..." began the unicorn, but any further words failed to find her tongue.

"Princess Celestia, what's going on? Why are we here?" asked Twilight, just now getting her bearings.

The solar diarch turned to her fellow princess. "I apologize for the abrupt trip, but I heard from Cadance that you were bringing Sunset to Equestria. Now that she's here, you may return to Ponyville, Twilight."

Twilight was taken aback. "You want me to leave?"

"I wish to speak to my former student alone. It is a most personal discussion, Twilight," said Celestia, giving the purple alicorn a soft smile. "We have not seen each other in quite some time."

Twilight's eyes widened in understanding. "Oh, right. I understand. I'll just, uh, teleport myself back." She wrapped her forelegs around the unicorn encouragingly. "I'll see you later Sunset."

Sunset didn't want Twilight to leave, but the purple alicorn was gone in a flash before Sunset could
even voice a single syllable in protest.

Now, it was just her and Celestia.

Sunset shuffled a hoof against the rich carpet. "Princess, I want to say that I'm sorry—"

"I know you are, Sunset," interrupted Celestia. Her tone was so soothing, the unicorn almost felt compelled to sleep. A great white wing wrapped itself around her. "Twilight told me a great deal of her encounter with you beyond the mirror. I know you regret what you've done."

She pulled the unicorn closer. The close contact took Sunset by surprise as the scent of the alicorn's coat filled her nostrils. "And because of that," continued Celestia, "I believe you are finally ready."

"Ready for what?"

The solar alicorn chuckled. "Ready for what you sought in the first place, my faithful student."

Sunset's hooves practically fell out from under her. "W-What?! But princess, I... I'm not... I don't deserve that anymore. I couldn't—"

"Hush." She put a golden clad hoof to Sunset's muzzle. "I will brook no argument on the subject. You have done more than enough to earn this. But first, there's a place we must go. Close your eyes and I'll take you there."

Sunset did as she was told. A storm of emotions raged inside her chest. Guilt, shame, and feelings of love. Celestia wanted this for her. Her mentor of so many years still cared about her, didn't hate her.

There was a rush of magic followed by a popping sound. Sunset felt the ground leave her, followed by a feeling of weightlessness. Another teleportation spell. Were they headed to the celestial plane, a place Sunset had only read about in books all those years ago? Could one simply teleport there, or was there more to it?

Sunset felt the teleportation spell end, and the chirping of a bird reached her ears. Her brows furrowed in confusion. When she opened her eyes, she was greeted not by another plane of reality, but by the walls of the hedge maze placed within the royal sculpture garden.

Before her was a crowd of other ponies. A dozen or more were members of the royal guard, stallions and even a few mares, all dressed in gleaming golden armor. All carried weapons of some sort, from spears to swords, all ready to use them in defense of the princesses and the kingdom.

The second group among the crowd was more confusing. They were hoofmaidens from the castle, their dark, carefully pressed uniforms so easy to distinguish. At their hooves rested chests of various sizes, but as for the purpose they served, Sunset didn't know.

"I don't understand," she said finally.

Sunset found herself lifted in Celestia's magic. The sun princess's once gentle eyes were now hard, angry. They were the same eyes that had looked upon Sunset the night she'd left through the mirror. The alicorn's normally serene face was twisted into a grimace, as if the sight of Sunset repulsed her.

"You, Sunset Shimmer, demanded power and authority far above yourself. You rejected my teachings and ran away." Celestia's eyes narrowed. "Do you remember what you told me? You said throwing you out would be the biggest mistake I'd make in my entire life."

Celestia's telekinetic hold tightened, and for a moment Sunset thought her whole body would be
crushed. "But I think it is you who made a mistake, Sunset. The mistake of rejecting me. The mistake of running away through the mirror. And the fatal mistake of ever returning to Equestria."

A guard came forward, carrying an anti-magic restraint in his own magical aura. Celestia waved it away with a wing. "That will not be necessary."

The bright sun of the day suddenly felt like a sweltering heat for the unicorn. Sweat dripped down her brow. "Please, princess, I'm sorry. I've changed. Twilight must have told you—"

"She told me many things, Sunset. She told me of what you did in the human world, the friendships you destroyed, how you planned to attack Equestria with power stolen from the Element of Magic." Purple eyes bored into Sunset, like Celestia was seeing right into the unicorn's soul. "But Twilight is young and still quite naive. She does not see what I do."

Sunset found herself pulled closer to the alicorn so that they were almost nose to nose. "And what I see," said the princess, "is a traitor and a failed student."

"B-But," Sunset argued, "What about the Sirens? The Friendship Games? My friends and I stopped the portals that were tearing the human world apart."

Celestia waved a wing dismissively. "You were doing little more than protecting yourself from the Sirens. If you were truly immune, then it was only a matter of time before they attacked you directly. And as far as the happenings of these Friendship Games, Twilight only had your word of what happened. For all we know, you were responsible for it."

"But that's not true! I—"

"Silence!" Celestia's hoof smashed against the ground, making the whole garden shake. "Pleading before me is worthless, Sunset Shimmer. I have passed judgement, and it is time for you to receive what you are due."

The unicorn was thrown towards the ground, stopping sharply only an inch above. "You wished nothing more than to be a princess Sunset Shimmer, to be praised and adored. And I, as ruler of Equestria, have decided to give you what you asked for."

The crowds of ponies parted now. Behind them stood a single pedestal, tall and freshly made. On the ground around it had been planted bushes full of wild roses. Carved deep into the pedestal’s base was a single word: Majesty.

Sunset's eyes widened in horror, voice unable to speak above a whisper. "No."

Celestia spread her mighty wings. "This garden is a kingdom. Its grand palace is the maze, its adoring subjects, the statues. Victory, Friendship, Wisdom, Love, these and others in a legion of virtues are waiting to be a proper court, for somepony to fawn over and sing praises to day and night. As you can see, the throne of this kingdom sits vacant. And from this day forward, it shall be filled by you."

"And now, Sunset Shimmer," said the princess coldly, "we must begin your coronation." She turned her gaze to the hoofmaidens. "My ladies, you may prepare her."

The trunks beside them opened, and the unicorns among the mares levitated out item after item. A silk ball gown fit for the Grand Galloping Gala was pulled over the unicorn's head.

"NO!" Sunset cried, flailing her legs in the air. She tried to use her magic, tried to teleport, to escape. But Celestia’s magic was like a fire blanket, smothering her horn and suppressing even Sunset’s best
magical efforts. Terror filled her very being. "Princess, please, have mercy! I've changed. I'm sorry. Anything but this!" Her hind legs kicked out as one of the mares forced her hooves into a pair of sparkling shoes. Another of them grabbed her tail, entwining it with a string of pearls.

She flicked the appendage in protest, trying to stop her. "Let me go! Let me go!" Her head was yanked back when a pegasus mare pulled a brush through her mane. "Stop!"

The mares didn’t even react, as if Sunset hadn’t spoken at all. Not even the unicorn’s struggles seemed to deter them. They simply brought her flailing limbs back under control without even really trying.

Eyes wild, she turned to the assembled guards. "Somepony help me. Help me! Don't just stand there. I've changed!"

None of the guards moved an inch, their faces neutral as they watched the spectacle before them with unblinking eyes. Eyes filled with judgement, but devoid of compassion. Eyes that screamed traitor, thief, monster, demon.

Why wouldn’t they help her? How could they sit by and do nothing?! Didn’t they understand what Celestia was going to do to her? Didn’t they care? There just had to be somepony that would help her, save her. There just had to be.

The hoofmaidens forced her head up as they slipped a gold-chained necklace around her throat. At its end was a solid gold depiction of Celestia’s cutie mark interlocked with a silver crescent moon.

Sunset’s eyes went to the sky. "TWILIGHT!" she screamed with all her might, "HELP ME! TWILIGHT!"

Celestia watched her former student’s desperate struggles, her face completely impassive. “Twilight Sparkle will not hear you, Sunset. There is no use in fighting. Soon, you’ll be a princess, just as you wished.”

Sunset kept fighting. She fought and fought against the magic that held her, fought and struggled like a madmare, screaming and shouting for the hoofmaidens to stop this insanity even as they continued to dress her like a life-size doll.

Jewel-encrusted bracelets were slipped around her forelegs, each bearing a heart of turquoise colored crystal. Earrings studded with gemstones were clasped to her ears. Her fiery mane was tied up into an intricate style, held together by diamond hairpins. It was every bit of finery one would find on a Canterlot noble.

The magic, the clothes, the jewels, threads of the great gilded net that had her completely ensnared. A tiny amber fish caught by a giant magenta-eyed fisherman.

When they finally stepped back, Celestia was beaming. "Wonderful. Sunset, you will make a fine ruler here. But as princess, you still need a crown." Her eyes moved to the ground beside her. "Thankfully, I believe we have one that will do just fine."

A smaller trunk was levitated, and from it, Celestia pulled out something Sunset recognized. It was the fake crown she'd substituted for Twilight's, still as lackluster and somewhat misshapen as it had been the first time.

Celestia lowered it onto Sunset's head, tucking a few loose strands of her mane back into place.
"There," she said with a satisfied smile. Sunset was lifted far off the ground now, placed upon the cold, unforgiving stone of the pedestal, facing the eastern sky.

Her body was forced down into a graceful curtsy by Celestia's magic. The silk dress pooled around her legs, the necklace sinking low enough to rest on the pedestal.

"Princess, y-you can't do this. Please, I-I'm not that mare anymore." Tears began pouring down her cheeks like rivers, right before the unicorn broke into full sobs. “I don’t want to be stone.”

The solar diarch's face fell. "Sunset Shimmer, you shouldn't make such an anguished face at your coronation." When the unicorn continued to sob, Celestia sighed. "Guards, hold her face still while I cast the spell."

The unicorns among the guard added their own magic, contorting the muscles in Sunset's face so it was frozen in a serene smile, her eyelids forced closed.

She screamed, sound and air blasting out her nostrils. She wanted to live. She wanted to live and laugh with the people and ponies she cared about. She screamed and screamed, for mercy, for forgiveness, for her very life.

“From this day forward,” intoned Celestia, “I, Princess Celestia of Equestria do crown you, Sunset Shimmer, the princess of stone prisoners. And onto you, I give a new title. I crown you Princess Majesty, ruler of the royal sculpture garden.”

Celestia's horn flared, and Sunset felt the numbness overtake her. She lost feeling in her hooves and legs first, flesh and blood and bone turning to solid rock. She felt the added weight as her tail was petrified. It spread so quickly. Her flank went numb, then her shoulders, and then her chest.

Whatever air she had to scream with was trapped forever when her lungs turned to solid granite. Her heart froze in mid-beat. The spell traveled up her neck and to her head. Her mane froze before her face, pushing her head down further into the pedestal.

One by one, she was deprived of her senses. The feel of soft silk on her coat. The lingering taste of oatmeal, her last breakfast. The smell of the grass, of the roses surrounding her. The sounds of the world, of distant, happy songbirds. Each and every one of them faded away, gone forever.

All that she knew, all that she had left, was sight, the glow of the sun filtered through her eyelids.

And when that too was stripped from her, Sunset Shimmer fell into complete darkness. Nothing around her except herself, herself and a black void.

Sleep wouldn’t come. There was just the sense of wakefulness. She was always awake, but unable to move. Always able to think, but unable to act, or even to feel true rest, unable to be at rest, body and mind trapped in that one last adrenaline rush, in that sense of utter terror that permeated her being when she was still flesh and blood.

How long had she been like this? Time itself seemed to stand still with her. Seconds, minutes, hours, they were all rendered meaningless in the endless and unmoving nothing.

And then, there was a flicker of light. Sight and sound returned to her in the form of a little window, framed by Celestia’s golden magic. A pair of ponies were approaching.

"I can't believe it's been eight months," spoke somepony sadly. Twilight, it was Twilight's voice! "The guards still haven't found anything?"
"No" came the reply. That was Princess Celestia. "There has been no sign of Sunset Shimmer. I still have them searching all of Equestria."

"It's not fair," lamented Twilight. "She comes back for the first time and then she just disappears!"

But she hadn't disappeared. She was right here! Couldn't Twilight see her?

"I know, Twilight," soothed Celestia as the pair trotted closer. "Had I known it would happen when I left her in her old room, I would have never let her go."

Sunset saw Celestia wrap an affectionate wing around the smaller alicorn. "But you must not focus on these things. You have many new duties as the princess of friendship that require your attention."

"I suppose you're right," sighed Twilight. She came to a stop before the pedestal, keeping her distance from the wild thorns. "Is this a new addition? I don't recall there being a statue at the center of the maze."

"Yes, I had her placed here a few months ago." The white alicorn gave a soft smile, but as she looked right at Sunset, the smile never reached her eyes. Instead, there was a glimmer of private, wicked amusement.

"Majesty," read Twilight. "That's an interesting name."

"Majesty represents the nobility of spirit as well as blood, an image of royal grace and dignity," explained Celestia, slipping into a lecturing tone Sunset was all too familiar with.

"Why is she wearing my crown?" asked Twilight, eying the tiara.

"She wears symbols of all four of us," said Celestia. "In this way, she represents the upholding of order and balance," Celestia pointed a hoof at the necklace, "love," pointing at the crystal hearts around her forelegs, "and friendship," she pointed to the crown.

"Majesty holds these things deep in her heart," she continued, "and displays them for all to see. But she is still a mere unicorn, so Majesty bows humbly—"

"To the eastern sky. She's bowing before the rising sun and moon every day and night, signifying her allegiance to you and Luna as the eldest alicorns," finished Twilight. "That's a really clever touch."

"I'm sure the sculptor will appreciate your praise, Twilight," chuckled Celestia. "Now I think it's time we return for tea. You go on ahead. I wish to spend a few more moments in the garden."

"Alright, princess." Twilight turned to leave, and all Sunset could do was scream. She screamed and screamed for Twilight to come back, to save her from this. She wasn't Majesty. She was Sunset Shimmer! Didn't Twilight recognize her? I'm right here, Twilight! It's me!

Celestia, who had watched Twilight leave, turned back to face Sunset, giving her a knowing look. "Rule wisely, Majesty. Your kingdom depends on you to make the right choices."

And with that, the golden window was gone, and Sunset was plunged even deeper into the darkness. Her soul screamed inside Majesty’s shell, screamed and sobbed even while Majesty remained serene and smiling.

Within the stone prison that had become her body, her screams echoed into infinity.
Sunset Shimmer awoke with a jolt, falling out of her bed and onto the floor with a resounding crash.

"Owww," she groaned. Rubbing her throbbing head, she untangled her legs from her sheets and got up. "That's the last time I let Pinkie and Rainbow talk us into a late night horror movie marathon."

Movie marathons, even late ones, were a common pastime among her group of friends. When Twilight had joined in, their selection grew to include a number of sci-fi and historical films, as well as dog movies for Spike. But this time, it had been horror.

To be more specific, it had been a mummy movie marathon, beginning with, of course, the original classic from 1932 starring Uncanny Karloff, and moving on from there. At first, Sunset had been all too happy with the selection.

She'd never seen them before, so that was a plus. Ever since coming here, her movie watching experience was limited. She'd gone to a few at first just to get a better sense of the culture around her. Modern films entranced her, her eyes not yet trained to spot CGI like every other person her age, or technical age, anyway.

But at the same time, she rather liked old films. Equestria's film technology was decades behind the humans, still using black and white and film projectors, an industry truly in its infancy. So to her, those older, classic movies offered a feeling of comfort and nostalgia beyond their normal entertainment value.

Clearly, though, several hours of films about men getting ritualistically buried alive for the heinous crimes and blasphemies they'd committed had made an impact on her psyche.

Sunset supposed the films had reminded her of the stories some of the guards told her once when she was young, that the ponies in the royal sculpture garden were petrified prisoners. The guards had laughed when they told it to her, but she certainly hadn't. It had given her nightmares for three days and made her avoid the gardens for even longer.

When she'd finally told Celestia about it, the princess had assured her of the opposite with a gentle laugh, before taking her to the workshop of the royal sculptors to prove her point, showing her the still-in-progress Victory.

Celestia...

As much as Sunset could blame this particular nightmare on the movie marathon, though, she knew it was part of a larger problem. This was merely the latest in a series of dreams she'd been having on and off for a week.

All of them shared the same theme: Sunset returning to Equestria and finding an angry Celestia. Every time, she faced punishment. With the first one, it was being thrown into the deepest and darkest dungeon in Canterlot, left utterly forgotten and alone. The second nightmare had banishment to the sun.

Then she'd had one where she was made to ascend. Only the result was her turning back into the raging she-demon, and she was subsequently thrown into a volcano, much like Queen Chrysalis all those years ago.

And then there had been one where her horn was broken off at the base, the stump burned, and she was sold into slavery to the Diamond Dogs for the rest of her days, left to become a broken mare, dying of lung disease.

Despite all the progress she'd made in making friends and fixing what she'd done, Princess Celestia
was one of the ponies Sunset had yet to face. Writing in the journal again after so many years had been hard enough, but with the school under threat, she'd found the strength. The fact that Twilight had responded instead had been a blessing of sorts.

But as time went on without any contact, her guilt and shame at facing her mentor was joined by a new emotion: Fear. A fear had gripped Sunset that, should she ever return to Equestria, she would face the sun princess's wrath.

After all, Twilight had mentioned that the magic journal had been in a donation pile. Clearly Celestia didn't want anything to do with her former student anymore. And why not? Sunset had been so awful when she'd left, and Celestia had been so angry. So very angry.

Adding more fuel to the fire was the fact that Sunset was a felon by Equestrian law. Even if her friends had forgiven her for her actions at the Fall Formal, it didn't change what she did. And, technically speaking, by being in this world, Sunset was a fugitive.

There were days when she missed Equestria. Oh sweet Celestia, there were days. She missed her magic, her hooves, the taste of grass and hay. Her last "visit" so to speak had been so brief, but only made her miss it more. The thought that she'd never even see it again, never be able to cross the portal without...

She shuddered at her most recent nightmare. It just added on another layer of pain, knowing she'd probably gotten herself not only kicked out of Canterlot Castle and Celestia's good graces, but permanently kicked out of her native dimension.

Letting out a sigh, Sunset ran a hand through her red and yellow tresses before moving over to her window. Darkness still blanketed the city. Down below, the streets were quiet, while up above, the stars twinkled. They didn't shine as brightly here as they did in Equestria, and such a thought only made Sunset feel worse.

Her hand automatically reached out for the magic journal sitting on her floor, a part of her wanting to contact Twilight, to reach for her emotional support.

But just as quickly as the impulse struck her, so too did she resist, hand pulling back to her side. Talking to Twilight about it wouldn't really help, not for this. If anything, Twilight would try and force the two to meet, and Sunset's heart just wasn't ready for that, wasn't ready for her fears to come to life.

Twilight is young and still quite naive. She does not see what I do. And what I see is a traitor and a failed student. The words echoed in her head, every syllable feeling like a nail being driven into her gut.

Walking back to sit on the edge of her bed, Sunset rested her head in her hands, rubbing her tired eyes. How long was this going to go on?

With each nightmare being different, Sunset had grasped onto the hope that perhaps, when her guilt-plagued imagination ran out of horrifying ways for Celestia to punish her, it would all end.

"Then again," she grumbled, "with my luck, my subconscious will probably switch to showing reruns."

Looking up from her palms at the glowing screen of her phone clock, she saw it was only 4:30 AM. Letting out another sigh, she got to her feet, gathered her sheets from the heap, and fluffed her pillow.
Sleep would be hard to come by. But Sunset would try anyway, try to dig out those little, precious nuggets of rest. She had places to go in the morning.
Troubles Past and Present

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own MLP: FIM or any of the characters within. I am just a fan.

Chapter 2: Troubles Past and Present

It was a cold February day in Canterlot City. Snow had fallen earlier in the morning, one of winter's continued efforts to reassert dominance. The crunching of shoes on frozen water could be heard everywhere.

It was a Monday and a teacher work day. Seven girls and one purple and green dog were huddled inside the warm confines of Carousel Boutique. But rather than shopping, Sunset and her friends were loading boxes with various items of clothing.

Sunset suppressed a yawn as she packed away a green sweater. She'd hardly gotten much more sleep after the nightmare. Thank goodness for coffee. She'd never been one for it, far too used to tea from years spent with Celestia. But she'd tried it more than once for late nights tearing through school assignments and plotting various schemes.

Her intake had only increased with the rash of nightmares, and she’d found herself resorting to even stronger blends to keep fully awake. She loved her friends, but she'd rather not let them onto her particular problem, not yet.

As if I didn't have enough problems, now I'll probably have to add 'caffeine addict' to the list.

"I'd like to say thank you again, girls, for helping me with this," said Rarity as she batted at one of her purple curls, drawing Sunset from her thoughts. The boutique had been closed, the usual merchandise moved out of the way to make room for folding tables practically overloaded with garments of various colors, styles, and sizes.

"It was no trouble at all, sugarcube," replied Applejack as she sealed another box.

"Same here," added Sunset, folding a winter coat before packing it away.

Next to her, Twilight was sealing her own box. She pushed her falling glasses back up onto her nose. "I think it's really nice that your store is giving all of these clothes away to homeless shelters."

"They were old inventory," explained Rarity. "But they were still perfectly serviceable. My manager was actually going to throw them out before I made the suggestion."

Rainbow Dash let out a chuckle as she worked, packing and sealing boxes so quickly Sunset would have thought it was a competition. "Let me guess, you charmed him into it?"

Rarity bristled. "Rainbow Dash, you make it sound as if I seduced them, which I most certainly did not! I simply pointed out how it would not only benefit those in need, but that it would also be excellent for promoting business." She let out a humph of annoyance. "And, for your information, my manager is a woman."
Rainbow blinked. "Really? Then who's that guy that I see coming out the back room when we stop by here? The one in the three-piece suit and pink shirt?"

"Her brother," said Rarity flatly.

"Um, Rarity, can I have this scarf?" asked Fluttershy as she picked up a small red item. "I've been meaning to get one for Angel."

"Of course, darling," replied Rarity with a smile, glad for the diversion. She moved carefully and meticulously. Every one of her boxes had the tape perfectly centered without a single wrinkle. Out of all the piles they'd accumulated, hers was the smallest. "I don't think I would have been able to get this done today without your help."

"Not at that snail's pace you wouldn't," shot back Rainbow. "We're supposed to be heading to the movies after this, remember? You need to move faster than that."

"Yeah, A Buffoon's Life is playing!" said Pinkie happily. She was referring to a biographical film, which Sunset thought was odd for her to choose when she'd first heard Pinkie mention it. But then Pinkie explained how it was about Ponyacci, her favorite comedian of all time.

From seemingly out of nowhere, Pinkie pulled out a little clown doll and held it aloft. "Don't you want to see it again, Little Ponyacci?" She moved the plush toy's head in a nod.

"Pinkie, you've seen that movie three times already!" complained Rainbow. "We should go see something else."

"I thought we could go see Jog in the Sky," said Twilight quietly. "My, um, my brother gave me tickets this morning." She pulled out an envelope containing several brightly colored slips of paper. "He said I should see it with all my new friends."

"Isn't it that movie based off that book by Jade somethin' or other?" questioned Applejack.

"Jade Singer," Twilight corrected. "And yes." Her face split into a bright smile. "It's my favorite book of all time. Jade Singer is so brilliant. I've been waiting for it to come out for so long and you wouldn't believe how disappointed I was when it was delayed and..." she paused, noticing her friends staring.

Her smile turned sheepish. "And, um, it's okay if you girls don't want to see it. It's just Shining went to the trouble of getting them and I was waiting for a chance to bring it up."

Applejack laughed and put a muscled arm around Twilight's shoulders. "It's alright, sugarcube. I reckon we can go see it today. Like you said, your brother already went to the trouble to get those for us, and it would be a shame to see that go to waste." She looked at the others. "Right, girls?"

Fluttershy gave a quiet nod. "I'd be glad to see it with you, Twilight."

"I haven't read the book, but if you really think it's that good, then I'll definitely go see it," added Sunset.

She'd heard of it, of course. People talked about it quite a bit, even though it had come out years before Sunset even got to this world. But at the time she'd been more interested in surviving, learning about this world, and then her dreams of conquest, so cultural reading was largely tossed aside.

"Oh, she does," said Spike flatly from his corner of the room. "She once went on about it to me for an hour and a half. A solid hour and a half!"
"That's not fair, Spike," protested Twilight. "I took breaks to drink water!"

A round of laughter broke out from everyone other than Twilight, whose cheeks now glowed pink.

"In all seriousness, darling," said Rarity as her giggles died down. "It really would be a tragedy to waste that kind of gift. I've heard there's a great deal of anticipation about that movie. I can't imagine procuring seven tickets on the opening day was an easy feat." Rarity rolled her eyes. "And at least it's not something based off that dreadful vampire series."

The bespectacled girl cringed. "Oh please, Dusk? Those books were an insult to good literature. I only got to the first one and I actually felt tempted to burn it. Me, burn a book!"

Sunset nodded her head. That particular series had only helped cement the low opinion she'd had for her fellow students at the time.

As one, the group looked to Rainbow. The athlete seemed disappointed for a second before voicing her opinion. "I'm in."

"You're sure you're okay with it?" asked Twilight, not missing that moment of hesitation.

"Sure," Rainbow said firmly. "Not exactly what I'd planned on, but I'm in. Besides, Twi," she added with a cocky grin, "You're like, a giant bookworm. So if this is your favorite book out of all the other books, then it's got to really be something."

Twilight's blush returned. "Thanks... I think."

"I'd take it as a compliment, Twi," said Applejack with a chuckle.

"This will totally be awesome!" shouted Pinkie with a burst of confetti from who even knew where, and making Fluttershy jump several inches off the ground.

"But, um," asked Fluttershy, taking deep breaths to slow her rapidly beating heart, "what about Ponyacci?"

"Well, Dashie is right, I have seen it a lot. And while I love Ponyacci," she held the little clown doll out at arm's length and did a twirl, "I also love sharing in other people's joy! And this is going to be full of joy! Twilight's joy!"

"Thanks, girls," said Twilight. "The showing is for two-fifteen, so we should have plenty of time."

"Not if Rarity has anything to say about it," scoffed Rainbow, bringing the argument back around. The fashionista huffed, her cheeks tinged red with anger. "I simply want the boxes to be perfect. There's no need to be sloppy in packing them. This is an act of charity, after all, and we should put care in how we send them." She began to write on her latest box, but the marker in her hand wouldn't work. "Oh dear, this one dried up."

Spike marched up to her, marker clutched in his mouth. "Here you go, Rarity."

"Thank you, Spike." Rarity scratched behind his ear as a reward. She glanced over at Pinkie Pie's efforts. "Pinkie, dear, I don't think you should be packing balloons."

"But balloons make people happy!" argued Pinkie, giving a little bounce as she continued the task of fitting another one into the space. "Wouldn't it be awesome if they all came out when someone opened these?"
"But couldn't they break in transit?" asked Twilight.

The smile that had been on Pinkie's face diminished just a little. "Oh yeah. I hadn't thought of that."

"Don't worry, Pinkie," assured Sunset as she worked through her own stack. "I'm sure the people at the shelters will be just as happy to get these as they would balloons."

Soon, the seven were almost done packing the donations. Sunset was placing the last few items in her remaining box. She held up the small jacket. "Are there a lot of kids at these shelters?" she asked, turning to Rarity with a frown.

Rarity nodded solemnly. "Sadly, there are children there. I saw a few the last time I donated some of my old work."

Applejack grimaced. "If there are, I hope they're with their families. Better to be together than alone in a place like that, I'd think."

Sunset nodded slowly as she put the jacket inside and sealed the box. "Yeah," she said, her voice tinged with sadness. "Being an orphan stinks." She paused, before whispering to no one other than herself, "no matter what world you're in."

Twilight, close enough to have heard her, tilted her head. "You're an orphan?" When Sunset looked over at her in surprise, Twilight flinched. "I'm sorry, that was rude of me, wasn't it? But the way you said that, it sounded like you were speaking from personal experience, and—"

"It's okay," assured Sunset, raising her hand to cut off any more rambling. "And you're right. I'm an orphan."

"Hey now, wait a minute," said Applejack. "I know during the holidays you said you weren't close to your parents, but I always thought they were still around."

"I didn't lie, AJ," said Sunset. Applejack's green eyes stared back at her, unblinking. Sunset squirmed. "Not... really?"

Applejack's stare didn't waver.

"Okay, okay," admitted the former unicorn. "I did know my parents, and I'm an orphan. I was really young when I lost them, so I guess I never got to be real close to them, not the way other ponies and people are. I just... I didn't really want to get into it back then."

"What happened?" asked Twilight. The lavender girl gave a pause. "If you don't mind my asking," she added hurriedly. "It's okay if you don't."

Sunset looked at the six girls. Curiosity burned in their eyes, curiosity mixed with sympathy. "No," she said firmly. "I might as well tell you. I owe you a full explanation anyway, since I sort of lied before."

She took a seat on a nearby chair. "It was when I was seven. One night, my parents and I were in a hurry to get to the train. I don't know what it was about specifically. All I remember is everything being packed up. Along the way, I got separated from them."

Fluttershy let out a gasp. "That's horrible!"

"Separated how?" asked Twilight.
Sunset leaned her head back against the boutique wall, closing her eyes. She'd long ago set those memories aside, buried them deep within, like stuffing them inside a box up in a dusty old attic.

Now, she'd found the box again, and opened it up. Everything came back to her, sights and sounds and events under the watchful gaze of the Mare in the Moon. Slowly but surely, they all came back.

Little Sunset Shimmer stirred, the sound of rolling wheels filling her ears. The seven-year-old filly shifted on the little blanket underneath her. It was comfy enough, but she wished it were her bed.

But they had to take a trip. Daddy had gotten some special letter about work, and they had to leave for the train right away. What it was about, where they were going, or for how long, Sunset didn't know.

All she knew was that it was very dark out and she was a very sleepy filly. A sleepy little filly that didn't like being woken up until morning. She'd just ask her mommy and daddy when there was daylight.

The sounds of the wheels had changed, no longer the clack of cobblestones, but something smoother. She could hear her parents voices as well, just barely, muffled and unintelligible through the wagon walls. Mixed in were the sounds of their hooves, growing louder as they seemed to pick up speed.

The amber unicorn curled up tighter, eager to return to her dreams. Then there came a loud thud, making the unicorn jump. Sunset lifted her head groggily, blinking as she tried to figure out the source of the noise that startled her.

The door to the wagon was swinging free. Sunset got up slowly, trotting past the boxes and chests her parents had packed, right up to the open doorway. The door latch must have come undone, she realized. She vaguely recalled Mommy saying it was loose when they were packing up.

She could see Canterlot in the distance, its huge towers shrinking by the second. They had gone onto a bridge, one she recognized. It crossed one of the bigger mountain streams in Canterlot, big enough to safely call it a river.

The bridge had been rebuilt only a few months ago, and Sunset had come to like it. Since it was new, it still had several knots in the wood, particularly towards its sides. One of the bigger ones looked like a dragon's head. On the few occasions they went over this bridge, she'd always wave to Mr. Wooden Dragon Head.

Poking her head out, she wondered if she could spot him. She should at least wave goodbye to him, since they were going away.

She squinted her eyes. The river under them glowed in the reflected light of the full moon, but there were still plenty of shadows strewn over the wooden surface. Where was Mr. Dragon?

The wagon tilted to her right, coming within a hair's breadth of the low rails. Sunset felt the wagon jerk, running over one of the wooden knots. Behind her, a trunk slid forward, bumping into her flank and sending the filly off balance.

They hit another bump, making the wagon jolt even harder than before. Already unsteady on her hooves, the shock sent her tumbling out the door, rolling right off the edge of the bridge over the rail before slamming into the water below.

The bridge arced over the water, and while it was taller than most of Canterlot's bridges, the distance...
to the river wasn't too far. Certainly not enough to cause anypony serious injury. Even still, the impact succeeded in knocking all the air from her lungs.

Most ponies that took such a fall would have gotten out straight away. The current was average most of the year barring spring flooding. In fact, it was slow enough that the only reason it hadn't frozen was magical heating charms placed in all of Canterlot's streams.

But that only applied to adult ponies. Sunset was just a filly, and she hadn't really learned to swim beyond the basic knowledge of moving her legs.

Try as she might, her desperate splashing only just managed to keep her head above the water, and the current was still carrying her away.

"MOMMY! DADDY!" she called out, looking up at the bridge. Her parents' voices were even more distant now, words still indistinct. She saw their silhouettes against the moonlight. They looked engaged in an argument of some kind. "Help!" she called again, just barely keeping herself from sinking.

Even with the heating charms, the water was so cold. It had already soaked completely through her winter coat, making her teeth start to chatter.

She flailed her little legs as hard as she could, but they just weren't strong enough to fight even the river's moderate current as she was swept further and further away. "Help! Mommy, Daddy, help me!"

Her voice seemed lost over the volume of her own splashing. Her parents still couldn't hear her.

As Sunset was carried downstream, she could only watch the moonlit forms of her parents gallop off into the night, wagon and all.

"Eventually I managed to grab a rock and pull myself out."

As Sunset opened her eyes, she could see the assembled girls giving her looks ranging from sympathy to shock. Fluttershy was on the verge of tears, arms wrapped tightly around her torso. A veil of silence had fallen on the whole room.

Which was promptly shattered when Rainbow spoke up.

"You fell in the water and they didn't fish you out?!!" she screamed. "How did they not hear you?"

Applejack snorted, signifying her agreement. "What kind of lowdown, rocks-for-brains fools would just run off and leave their daughter like that? Why, if something like that happened to Apple Bloom I would've jumped in after her without a thought."

Every muscle in Sunset's body went stiff. "They didn't mean to!" she shouted, jumping back to her feet to glare at the two. "I know they didn't! So don't you dare say those things about them!"

Applejack and Rainbow were taken aback by the outburst, and their previous anger shriveled up in the presence of Sunset's like a flower in the noon day sun. "You're right," admitted the farmer, looking down at her shoes guiltily. "I shouldn't a' jumped the gun. I'm sorry sugarcube. I didn't mean to offend you none."

Rainbow shuffled one of her sneakers against the floor. "Yeah, me too."
Sunset blinked, her temper cooling, before allowing herself to sit back down. "I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to snap like that." Her cheeks flushed a little, and she tugged at the sleeve of her jacket. "My parents tended to get really distracted. They'd get so caught up in what they were doing they wouldn't realize anything else was happening unless it poked them."

A memory sprang forth of her father being so preoccupied reading something work related that he failed to hear her when she asked for him ten times in a row. "That's just the way they were. So I'm not really surprised they didn't hear me." Her face fell. "Not that they're around anymore to defend themselves."

"What do you mean by that, darling?" began Rarity, before realization dawned on her. "Oh no."

Sunset nodded her head. "Yeah. Celestia found me a little while after I got separated. She searched all over for my parents. But when she tracked them down, they were gone."

Twilight's eyes widened behind her glasses. "How?"

"Some kind of accident," Sunset answered solemnly. "She didn't say, and I didn't ask. Never really wanted to, I guess. But she said that they'd been looking all over for me."

Rarity put a hand on Sunset's shoulder. "Darling, I'm so sorry... Pinkie dear, what are you doing?"

Pinkie Pie, who had been listening intently, stood there, her whole body trembling. At Rarity's question, she jumped upwards, like a spring released from a mechanism. In a blur of pink, Sunset found herself pulled from her seat and wrapped in a hug by a bawling Pinkie Pie. "THAT'S SO SAD!" she wailed.

"Pinkie... vision going... dark... I need air..."

"Oopsie," said Pinkie quickly as she released the other girl.

Sunset stumbled as she filled her lungs, savoring the precious oxygen. Her ribcage was burning. "It's okay, girls. It's ancient history." She gave them a reassuring smile in spite of feeling like her heart was being embraced by a cactus, reopening wounds she thought had healed.

"This calls for another hug!" declared Pinkie. She bolted forward, moving in for another strike against Sunset's poor, already abused ribs. This time however, Sunset managed to twist out of the way. The pink-skinned girl kept her forward momentum, running right into a pile of boxes. With a resounding crash, she and the pile fell over.

A pink hand gave a thumbs up. "I'm okay!"

Applejack proceeded to help her up, and Rarity fussed over the boxes Pinkie had trampled. Sunset, for her part, just laughed at her friend's silly antics. A pure, warm laugh. And somehow, the throbbing in her heart went away.

"Come on girls, let's get this done. We have a movie to get to, remember?"

From there the conversation turned back to more mundane things. The former unicorn picked up a marker to scribble on one of her boxes, while Twilight had started going on about the book-turned-movie.

"I'm so excited to see it. I saw the trailer and the lead actress they picked looked exactly the way the character was described on page three! And they showed her sister and they even made sure to include that dark colored birthmark on her forearm from page twelve. That attention to detail has me
Abacus Cinch marched through the doors of Crystal Prep Academy the next day. Her footsteps smashed down on the polished tiled floors in a way that was more of a stomp, but Cinch refused to admit that she was stomping. It was a dignified march, and that was that.

Behind her glasses, her pink eyes turned upwards to look at a clock on the wall. It read 10:39 AM. She sneered at it, willing the mechanism to turn backwards.

She despised being late, and she wouldn't have been most days. But her car had developed a flat tire and she'd had to take a taxi of all things to get to work. A taxi whose back seat was covered in blackened gum marks.

As she made her way through the foyer, her eyes turned to the many trophy cases. Each one was almost bursting with medals and awards in every form of school event conceivable, and each was carefully cleaned once a month for maximum sparkle under the lights.

Cinch moved past these to the actual halls. Students turned to the principal in surprise, parting before her. She passed the student lockers, frowning at the image of a thunderbolt drawn on one. Her frown deepened when two lockers down, she saw a little flower sticker on another. Did those students not read the Crystal Prep code of conduct? She'd have to deal with them later.

A group of girls stood in the hall, still engaged in animated conversation. She recognized most of them as regulars at the after school study sessions held in the library.

Now they were talking about going to the mall after class, something that sent a wave of nausea rolling through her.

Cinch glared at the girls as she passed. But rather than being rendered mute, the girls met her eyes, and kept on talking as if they hadn't even noticed her, or perhaps because they had.

By the time she reached the door to her office, the principal was grabbing the handle in a death grip. Twisting the knob, she walked into her personal space.

She'd liked to keep the room relatively dark. The main light source was the one on the ceiling, an adjustable light that she always kept low, and the only other light was a little lamp on the back desk she never even bothered to plug in.

The darkness helped to emphasize the sense of quiet she appreciated. And of course, that same darkness helped to put visitors to her office on edge, making it easier to emphasize her complete dominance of the academy.

It was a place where Abacus could go to get away from whatever nonsense had assailed her that day. It was a place of her complete control.

Or at least it should have been.

Her eyes squeezed shut in reflex upon opening the door. Someone had turned the light all the way up. Someone was in her office. Blinking a few times to adjust to the unexpected glare, Abacus searched for the intruder, feeling not unlike the classic trio of bears who discovered a little blonde trespasser.

And like the story, this trespasser was still here. She was leaning back in Cinch's high-backed swivel chair, face buried in the contents of a folder. Cinch had bought the chair for the lush cushions and the
fact that it resembled a throne. Soft pink and gold curls spilled over the surface of her polished oak desk, another item she’d spared no expense for when decorating the seat of her power.

The invader in the chair looked up. "Oh, Principal Cinch, you're here."

The principal ground her teeth. "Dean Cadance," she replied slowly, managing a curt nod. She tried her best to ignore how comfortable the pretty young dean had made herself behind Cinch’s desk, like she belonged there. "What are you doing in my office? I simply told you I would be late. I did not give you permission to enter."

"I'm sorry, Principal Cinch," she replied politely, getting up from the seat and smoothing out her skirt. "But there were a few students I needed to deal with and their files were still in your office." She held out the folder she’d been reading. "I wanted to start going over them before I spoke to the students themselves."

"Hmmph," was all Cinch could say. "Well, since I'm here now, you may return to your own office."

"Yes ma'am," replied Cadance with a nod as she headed for the door. The smile on her face never wavered.

"And Dean Cadance," called back the principal. "On my way over here, I noticed a few lockers had stickers and other markings. Seeing as such things are against the school code, I want those students to be punished immediately."

"That won't be necessary, ma'am," said Cadance, a little twinkle in her purple eyes.

The principal raised an eyebrow. "And why not?"

"I relaxed the rules regarding the lockers," said the dean simply. "As long as the students don't use anything permanent and offer to remove any stickers when they relinquish the lockers, I saw no problem in allowing them a little creativity."

"You allowed them to deface the lockers?!” screamed the principal.

If the volume bothered Cadance, she didn't show it. "It's not defacing. It's a form of personalization for a private space. It was suggested by a member of the student body and had quite a bit of support from the other students, so I allowed it."

The principal's eyes narrowed at the dean. "Very well. Just make sure they abide to these new rules of yours. Any infractions will reflect back on you, Dean Cadance."

The pink woman's smile grew, showing off her perfect, pearl white teeth. "I'm sure it won't be a problem, Principal Cinch."

With that, the dean left, and once again Abacus Cinch was alone in her office. Quickly turning the lights back down, she sank into her chair, willing away an oncoming headache.

Her eyes wandered to her inbox, full of the day’s business. Perhaps it would help her to relax. Taking up the first new document, she discovered it to be a request for a new school club, a… a glee club.

"A glee club," she hissed, almost crushing the paper. Similar, non-academic, proposals followed as she continued to sift through the documents. Her jaw clenched, the pain almost unbearable. She crumpled every single document before throwing them into the trash with such force, the little can almost toppled over.
Relaxed rules. Non-academic clubs. Students spending time at malls instead of after-school studying. Crystal Prep, her academy, was falling apart.

And Dean Cadance. Dean Cadance was just waiting to take over. Cinch had no delusions about that. The young dean had always been popular, a pretty face much closer to the age of the students. But she'd been gaining even more popularity and pull ever since...

Ever since the Friendship Games.

Cinch let out a curse at the thought of those games. It should have been an easy win for her academy. It always was. Her students were the best of the best, pushed to the very limit. A simple public high school like Canterlot High should have always lost to them in the most satisfyingly humiliating way possible.

But this year, they'd won. It was a blot on their reputation. On her reputation.

And then there was Twilight Sparkle. Their top academic asset had transferred to CHS. For a student such as her to transfer from their hallowed halls to a common institution like that was unheard of, and Cinch had already had to deal with several embarrassing questions from teachers regarding the move.

Oh, but Canterlot High School wasn't just any little high school anymore. No, they had magic. It was insane, but how else could Cinch describe what she'd witnessed?

The "magic of friendship," they'd called it. That same magic had turned Twilight into a monster, and it was still causing her no end of trouble. It had infected her precious academy. It had infected her students, turned them against her, against everything she'd drilled into them.

This school was hers. Her empire of education. She'd come in when it had been in decline. She'd brought it back up to glory. She, Abacus Cinch, was responsible for its prestige. She'd pushed her students to excellence in every field, made it once again a stepping stone to the greatest universities in the country.

But because of that disgusting magic, her power and authority were slipping, bit by bit, day by day. If things kept sliding the way they were now, Cinch would be replaced by Dean Cadance.

The image of the dean behind her desk popped back into her mind. That soft-hearted brat, sitting in her seat, doing her job. Such a thing was unacceptable.

Getting up to pace around her office, the principal's anger continued to boil. Out of reflex, her fingers played with a little charm on her right wrist, normally hidden under her sleeves.

It was a gold chain, and hanging from it was a golden abacus. An old family gift. It always reminded Abacus of the mathematics competitions she'd won, of the relaxation she'd felt when working with numbers.

The world was built on numbers, her world too. Students accepted to universities, career opportunities opened, alumni created, awards won. Each one the moving of a bead on the ancient instrument. But now there were losses. Empty spaces in the foundation, an instability she had yet to correct.

If it hadn't been for those brats at CHS, her world wouldn't be crumbling. She couldn't report them without being placed in a mental ward, even if the image of them being taken in by the higher authorities for study brought a smirk to her lips.

There had to be a way to get back at those six little witch girls. This magic of theirs had to be
stamped out, and the best way to start was the source of it.

As she paced, her mind turned the problem over, like a child trying to find the trick to a puzzle box. Finally, an old adage of military strategy floated to the surface: To defeat the enemy, first take out the leader.

"The leader," she muttered. Her thoughts turned back to the miscreants that had caused all this. Even among a group of teenagers, leaders emerged. Gangs had leaders, and what were those brats but a small, magical gang?

She remembered the disaster with Midnight Sparkle. The girl with the red and yellow hair had confronted her, been the one to stop her. Thinking back to the other, few times she'd seen her, Cinch realized that she definitely seemed to be the leader of that little group. But what was her name?

Cinch returned to her desk, the clack of keys filling the room. Very soon, she'd found the name she'd wanted.

"Sunset Shimmer, hmm?" The wheels in Cinch's brain turned. All she had now was a name to go with a face. She needed more information on this girl, much more.

A cold smile formed on her features. Fortunately, Cinch knew just how she could get it.
Chapter 3: The Calm Before…

It was Thursday afternoon, and Sugarcube Corner was already filling with CHS students seeking refreshment and conversation after completing another long, hard day at school, including Sunset and her friends.

As per usual, they took the table next to the sofa close to the register. Sunset got there first, sitting herself precariously on the sofa arm while Twilight sat on the cushion proper between Pinkie and Rarity, while Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy were around the table.

"We totally aced band practice," declared Rainbow Dash, stretching her arms and legs.

"We know, Rainbow, you only said that five time already," replied AJ flatly.

"Darling, please try not to kick me," said Rarity, moving her legs to avoid Rainbow sneakers. The rainbow-haired girl gave her an apologetic smile in return.

"Hello, girls," said Mrs. Cake cheerily as she walked up to them. "You're a little later than usual."

"We went a little long with band practice, Mrs. Cake," explained Sunset.

The older woman nodded. "Oh yes, time can just slip by you sometimes, can't it? It's a good thing you're here now, though." Going back to the counter, she returned holding a tray laden with an assortment of different drinks. "Sodas for Rainbow Dash and Applejack," she said, placing each item before its recipient. "One milkshake for Pinkie Pie, smoothies for Twilight and Sunset, and tea for Fluttershy and Rarity."

Sunset reached into her pocket for her wallet, and the others did likewise, but Mrs. Cake just held up a hand.

"That won't be necessary today, girls. These are all on the house. It's the least I can do for you, what with how you helped us when Carrot Cake caught the flu. Between him being so sick and the twins being so young, I don't know what I would have done without you."

Sunset's hand, still in her jeans pocket, let go of her wallet. Last week, Mr. Cake had come down with a nasty strain of flu. They'd come in that Monday afternoon to find poor Mrs. Cake practically tearing her hair out from overwork. So as a group, they'd volunteered themselves to help her.

"It was no sweat, Mrs. Cake," said Rainbow Dash, leaning back in her chair. "This is like one of our favorite hangouts. No way was I going to leave you hanging."

"How is Mr. Cake doing?" asked Fluttershy.
"He's doing wonderfully, dearie," replied Mrs. Cake. "Take a look for yourself." She gestured back to the counter, where the redheaded man could be seen handling customers. "The herbal remedies you and Twilight put together really did the trick."

"It was mostly Fluttershy," said Twilight, her cheeks turning the slightest bit pink. "The data I found just managed to supplement what she already knew."

Now it was Fluttershy's turn to blush, hiding behind her long locks. "Miss Zecora really deserves the credit. S-She's the one that taught me everything."

Mrs. Cake gave Fluttershy a smile as sweet as the confections she sold. "Well, you can tell Zecora she's welcome here anytime. And if you girls need anything else today, just let me know."

More students were starting to pour in now. Pinkie Pie looked around at the building crowds. "Hey Mrs. Cake, do you want me to help you at the counter?"

"No thank you, dearie," she replied kindly. "I want you to just relax with your friends." She turned her head back to the counter at the sound of her husband's voice. The line had begun to get long. "Coming, honey!"

After she walked away, Sunset raised an eyebrow at Fluttershy. "Who's Zecora?"

"She's a very nice lady who lives down the block from me," answered Fluttershy quietly. "She grows all kinds of plants in the woods by her house, and makes all kinds of herbal remedies."

"Isn't she the one who speaks in rhyme?" asked Dash.

"She says it's part of her native culture and language."

Sunset took a sip of the smoothie, letting the gears in her head turn. Rhyme? Working with herbs and plants? If this were Equestria, she'd have thought this Zecora person was a zebra. Or maybe she was a zebra on the other side. She'd met zebras before, mostly ambassadors, when she'd lived with Celestia. While most of the castle staff found their rhyming language strange, Sunset had loved it as a filly.

Even when she'd grown arrogant, she'd always held a respect for zebras. The things the ambassadors had taught her about potion making had been invaluable when she'd started learning alchemy.

Sunset was pulled from her thoughts when Rainbow Dash spoke up. "Man, I'm so glad to be out of science class. That documentary teach had us watch was so boring!"

"I thought it was fascinating," whispered Fluttershy. Across from her, Twilight nodded in agreement.

"I have to agree with Rainbow Dash for once," said Rarity, taking a dainty sip from her cup. "I found the subject most disgusting."

"What? You mean the spiders?" asked Pinkie, wiggling her fingers in front of Rarity. The purple-haired girl blanched.

"Please Pinkie, don't remind me."

"I don't see the problem," said AJ. "They're just little things."

Right beside Rarity, Sunset shuddered, and she wrapped her arms around her chest in a gesture of human instinct. She'd been trying to get her mind off that documentary so far. Band practice had
managed to get rid of it, but now the film was coming back in full force.

"Are you alright, darling?" asked Rarity in concern, not missing Sunset's change in body language.

"I'm fine," said Sunset, forcing her arms back to her sides.

"Ooh! I know!" declared Pinkie, bouncing on the sofa cushion. "Sunset Shimmer is afraid of spiders!"

Applejack let out a humming sound, rubbing her chin in thought. "You did look a might pale in class while we were watchin' the movie, now that I think about it."

"I'm not afraid of spiders," Sunset insisted.

"There's no need to be embarrassed, you know," said Twilight. "Arachnophobia is quite common."

"I'm not afraid of spiders," Sunset repeated, her voice firm. "Not all of them. Just black widows. Black widows really freak me out."

Rainbow looked at her incredulously. "You're afraid of a little black widow?" She smirked. "Too bad we didn't think of that before. Your bully career would have been over before it even started."

"Yeah, too bad," muttered Sunset. "Let's just say I had a really bad experience with one once and leave it at that." And that's probably another nightmare I have to look forward to. Wonderful.

She noticed Twilight was still staring at her, curiosity burning in her purple eyes. And sitting on her lap was a particular hardback journal equipped with a lock. The title read Private Research.

Sunset recognized the book right away. Not long after Twilight transferred to CHS, she'd asked questions about Equestria. The others had asked similar questions after the Fall Formal, once they were comfortable enough to broach the subject. Since Princess Twilight hadn't had the luxury of time during her first and most recent visits, answering those questions had fallen on Sunset's shoulders.

Right from the start, Twilight wanted to take notes, something Sunset had highly disapproved of. The existence of Equestria was something that couldn't get out. The fact that all the things that had happened so far were still urban myths was a miracle.

But Twilight had looked at her with such sad, pleading eyes. Had she learned to do that by watching Spike?

No matter where she learned it, it had certainly worked. Sunset relented, on the condition that Twilight keep it to herself. After that, Twilight had gotten that book and added the lock herself.

"What's up, Twi?"

"I, uh..." she stammered. Opening up her book, she flipped through the pages. "Well, I was going over some of the things you mentioned before, and I was wondering, what, uh," her eyes scanned the page, "tribe, is Princess Twilight?"

Sunset looked around. Sugarcube Corner was noisy enough to mask their conversation. "Alicorn."

"Alicorn," Twilight repeated. She picked up a number two pencil and began to write, only for her hand to freeze. Her eyes shot back up to look at Sunset in confusion. "Alicorn? She's... the horn of a unicorn? You're saying she's an inanimate object brought to life?"

"I thought Princess Twilight said she was a pony," said Applejack, looking just as confused.
"Um, actually," spoke Fluttershy, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's also a name for a winged unicorn. The other names are pegacorn, unisus, unipeg, hornisus, and hornipeg." When everyone else at the table gave the girl blank looks, she hid behind her hair. "When I was little, I liked to read about fantastical animals. I always thought alicorn was the prettiest of the names."

"I think I'm inclined to agree," said Rarity after another brief pause. "The others sound rather mangled."

"Anyway," said Sunset, moving the conversation back on topic. "To say Princess Twilight is a winged unicorn isn't entirely accurate. By our definition, an alicorn is a combination of all three tribes, possessing a unicorn's horn and spell casting power, the wings of a pegasus, and the strength and stamina of an earth pony.

"Actually," she continued, rubbing her chin in thought. "If I remember right, way back in the very early days we used to call a unicorn's horn alicorn too, but that definition got phased out after it became really confusing."

Sunset took another sip of her smoothie, savoring the taste of mixed fruits. "Princess Twilight started off as a unicorn from what I understand, but managed to ascend to alicorn status for... something. I'm not sure. And because she's an alicorn, she was crowned a princess alongside Princess Celestia."

"Principal Celestia is a princess?!" asked Twilight with wide eyes. The page on her notes now had a jagged line she was hurrying to erase.

"Trust us, darling, it was just as much a surprise to us when we heard it."

"You mentioned Celestia on Monday. Is she the same as Principal Celestia?" asked Twilight.

"Yeah, is she? Is she?" said Pinkie, now fully invested in what she'd consider story time. "You know, you've never really talked about her much and whenever you do you get sort of frowny."

Twilight raised an eyebrow at that, and Sunset gave Pinkie a glare before she continued. "She's similar, really patient and calm." Images of Princess Celestia's angry gaze flashed through her mind, and Sunset forced them back down. Twilight looked at her expectantly, clearly not satisfied by so little information.

Sunset put her hand behind her head nervously. "I was Princess Celestia's personal student for years, so it was a little awkward being around Principal Celestia." And it still was, especially with her streak of nightmares. The fire-haired girl prayed that was enough to dissuade Twilight from further questions.

Twilight tapped her eraser against the notebook. "I see." Her face scrunched up in thought. "What about Vice Principal Luna?"

"Well I'll be doggone," said Applejack slowly. "I hadn't even thought about that."

"Ooh! Is there a Princess Luna too?" asked Pinkie.

"There is, but I've never met her," Sunset replied.

"You haven't met her?" asked Twilight. "If you were Princess Celestia's student for years, how could you not have met her sister?"

Rarity took another dainty sip of her tea. "Yes darling, that is a little hard to believe."
Sunset shrugged. "It's true, though. In fact I didn't even know Princess Celestia had a sister. Seeing Luna here was a complete surprise."

When Sunset first arrived in this world, she'd quickly created a list of priorities. At the top had been securing food and shelter. After that had been learning about human culture and their very advanced technology.

But after a few weeks, she'd added another item to the list: investigate the vice principal of CHS. Her entire presence had been a wild card that drove Sunset nuts.

And even once she secured herself as the social ruler of the school, the vice principal was still someone to be wary of. She was sharp, and always seemed more suspicious of Sunset than Principal Celestia was. It had taken years of careful work to gain some level of confidence with her.

"I don't get it," said Rainbow. "How does that even work? Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna have been working together at CHS since... forever."

"Agreed," said Rarity. "Mother and father told me that Vice Principal Luna came in only a few years after Principal Celestia. How could you know one on your side but not even know the other existed?"

"Yeah," added Applejack. "Do they not get along or somethin' over there?"

"Actually, I came up with a theory on that," admitted Sunset. "Managed to confirm it when I went to get Princess Twilight's crown. You know that old myth of the Man in the Moon?"

"You mean how the dark maria of the Moon's surface form shapes that resemble a man? Yes," said Twilight with a nod. "In fact, cultures around the world all see shapes in the moon. They report different things, though certain images are predominant. Most of Europe sees a man, with a few scattered tales of a woman. Native Americans predominantly see a frog, while those in East Asia most often see a rabbit."

That last part made Fluttershy's ears perk up. "A rabbit?" she asked giddily. "Like Angel?"

Twilight nodded. "Yes. Most of their stories anyway. Man, woman, rabbit, frog, it's all pareidolia."

"Para-what?" asked Rainbow.

"Pareidolia," Twilight repeated. "Seeing patterns in things where there are none."

Pinkie's eyes lit up. "Ooh! You mean like when I look at a cloud and see an alligator playing a tuba?"

"Yes, exactly!" replied Twilight excitedly. She blinked a few times as her brain processed the rest of that sentence. "Wait, what?" Shaking her head, she chose not to go down that particular road. Though her time with Pinkie Pie was relatively brief, she was quickly learning not to bother. That way lay madness.

She looked back at Sunset. "What does this have to do with Princess Luna?"

"Well..." Sunset took out her pen and a piece of paper from her backpack. She did a quick sketch. "This is what Equestria's moon looked like."

She set the paper down, allowing the group to see the dark shape inside the circle. "We called her the Mare in the Moon. According to the old pony tales, a thousand years ago Princess Celestia fought
against a black-coated alicorn called Nightmare Moon. She threatened to kill Celestia and plunge Equestria into eternal night."

Fluttershy's eyes widened. "But everything would freeze!" she cried. "The plants and animals would die without the sun."

"Whoa," muttered Rainbow Dash. "That's nasty. Even the Dazzlings didn't go that far."

Sunset nodded. "Celestia ended up banishing Nightmare Moon into the moon forever, so her image remained burned onto the surface." She pointed at the face. "And Nightmare Moon was Princess Luna."

She'd connected the dots slowly over the months. Nightmare Moon had been little more than a filly's story, but a vivid one that Sunset remembered. And even she knew myths had some basis in fact.

It was while she was observing the vice principal that she noticed the crescent moon pin on her jacket, similar to the principal's sun which matched Celestia's cutie mark. That pin and Luna's coloring had reminded Sunset of something she'd never given much thought to before: The Equestrian flag.

The design was of two alicorns, one white and one blue, circling each other with the sun and moon respectively. The standard interpretation was that they were living representations of the two heavenly bodies under Princess Celestia's care.

But the fact remained that Sunset was in an alternate universe with human counterparts. She'd confirmed that not just with Principal Celestia, but by recognizing names and faces in old yearbooks, like Equestria's founders and various ponies from Canterlot's history.

As far as she'd known, Princess Celestia didn't have a sister. And yet Luna's existence in this world, along with everything else, told Sunset that perhaps the blue alicorn on the flag wasn't just symbolic.

The Nightmare Moon connection was one of her theories for explaining a lost lunar alicorn. Ultimately her Luna theories had pushed Sunset's desire for power even further, knowing that she might have another alicorn to beat.

"She banished her own sister?" asked Fluttershy, mouth hanging open.

Sunset nodded. "The last time I went through the portal, I found out that Princess Luna had been freed and returned to normal, after a thousand years."

What she didn't tell them was how she'd learned that. She didn't dare tell them how she'd used a powerful mind control spell on a guard to get him to tell her everything that was going on, and then used another spell to erase his memory of the encounter. Like she'd done every other time she'd snuck back to Equestria over the years, right before she raided the place for whatever small number of bits or gems she could find.

Both spells were dark magic, dangerous and forbidden, that she'd picked up when she'd broken into the dark magic section the night she'd left.

She'd only gotten brief looks at them. But like the prodigy she was, she had a handle on them almost immediately, even when she was still adjusting to being a unicorn again.

Just remembering her use of those spells filled Sunset with shame, and once again, Celestia's angry, disappointed face played before her eyes.
"I can't believe she did that to her own sister," whispered Twilight. "A thousand years?"

"Nightmare Moon threatened to destroy Equestria. It's what Princess Celestia does to threats," muttered Sunset solemnly. "It's what she'll do to you if you ever go back," whispered a little voice in the back of her mind tauntingly, one that sounded suspiciously like the raging she-demon.

Rarity frowned. "I can't imagine doing something like that. No matter how much trouble Sweetie Belle can cause, I couldn't bear the idea of being separated from her."

Applejack adjusted her hat, tilting it over her eyes. "Same with Apple Bloom. That must have been rough."

"I... I remember hearing once that Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna had some sort of falling out," said Fluttershy quietly. "I didn't want to pry. But I wonder if it ended as badly as that."

Pinkie Pie smacked her hands on the table, leaning in. "Hey, you know what?" she said excitedly. "We should totally do something nice for both of them."

"It might be a little weird doing something for them just because we feel sorry for their counterparts," said Sunset. Pinkie's excitement seemed to dim. "But," offered Sunset, a smile forming on her face, "They have been pretty accepting with all the chaos that's happened, and I guess we never really thanked them for it."

"Yeah!" exclaimed Pinkie, jumping up to her feet. "We can throw them a thank-you party!"

Pinkie's enthusiasm was infectious, and as she babbled excitedly about her different ideas, all of them found themselves swept up in it. The gloom from earlier had been completely dispelled. Perhaps that had been the point, Sunset mused.

"If Principal Celestia is anything like Princess Celestia," said Sunset as the others were offering ideas of their own, "then she'll love cake."

Pinkie stopped babbling, her face frozen in thought before her smile somehow tripled in size. "Ooh, I know! Maybe we can have them try the MMMM."

"What's the MMMM?" asked Rainbow.

"It's this super delicious cake the Cakes have been working on for this big dessert competition next month. It's the Marzipan Mascarpone Meringue Madness, but that's as much of a mouthful as the cake, so I call it the MMMM. We can have Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna be taste testers."

As Pinkie went on describing the work-in-progress dessert, Sunset's mouth watered. It sounded absolutely irresistible. Principal Celestia would probably love it. Sunset knew Princess Celestia would have. She could just imagine the alicorn's serene mask slipping at the sight of the dessert.

She'd seen it before, so many years ago, when she'd been with the princess on a trip to Prance and the chef there had created the most delectable pastries Sunset had ever seen. Celestia's eyes had been wide as the dinner plates and a single drop of drool had escaped her muzzle.

It was utterly priceless. Celestia had bribed her with a double serving of ice cream for three days to keep her from telling anypony about it.

"—unset. Yo, Sunset!"
Sunset snapped out of her memories when a blue hand waved in front of her face. "You still there?" asked Rainbow.

"Yeah, sorry. Got distracted."

"Pinkie was saying how we should have a sleepover at her place," said Rainbow.

"Yeah," added Pinkie. "That way we can plan the thank-you party!"

"Sleepover?" Dread welled up in her chest. This would be the first sleepover since her nightmares had started.

With every moonrise, she'd feared another nightmare, another mental torture to remind her of her crimes, of why she could never see Equestria ever again.

Monday night’s dream had had her cutie mark erased, leaving her magicless and unable to do anything. Tuesday night had been a brief, dreamless respite, only for last night to have her banished to the empty wastes of the frozen north to starve.

That was, she realized, the worst part about it all: The randomness. She never knew what nights would be peaceful, and which ones would be yet another dive into the darkness of her imagination. And perhaps that uncertainty and anxiety only fueled the cycle.

What if it happened again? She didn't want her friends worrying about her, and she didn't want them trying to press the issue like she knew Princess Twilight would. What if they tried to contact Princess Twilight for her?

All she needed were a few days straight without nightmares and she’d be fine. A few days to build confidence that they wouldn't return. She still clung to the hope that the dreams would run their natural course, clung to it like a floatation ring in the middle of a raging sea.

"I think it sounds lovely, Pinkie Pie," said Rarity. "Shall we all meet at the usual time?"

There was a round of agreements. Sunset reached for any kind of excuse not to be there, to avoid the risk of her troubles being discovered. But her mind couldn't find anything of substance.

When it came her turn to voice her opinion, she had little choice but to agree. Refusing without a good reason would only draw more attention.

With plans made, Sunset slipped off the sofa arm. "I'm going to head off now. I've got homework to do. I'll meet you guys tonight," she said with a wave of her hand. She smiled at them as she collected her backpack, and kept smiling as they gave their goodbyes.

The smile only faltered when she was out of sight, and Sunset Shimmer gave a silent prayer for this to be another one of those nights where her nightmares took a break.

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While the seven girls conversed inside the shop, another sat alone at the table outside the front door. She'd been there since the time the group had entered.

The girl let out a sigh, thankful for the umbrella attached to the little table. The snow from days ago had gone away, and now the sky was a clear blue, allowing the sun's rays to fully batter down on the world below. She looked at her forearm, still its natural pink. Were it not for the shadow of the umbrella, her easily burned skin would be an angry red.
She glanced back at the group through her tinted glasses, before taking a sip of the chocolate ice cream soda in front of her, already half finished. Sitting on the table were two identical glasses, both empty.

Brown eyes glared at them over the top of her glasses, and she grumbled inwardly about her figure before taking a large, angry sip of the sweet beverage. She needed to seem normal.

She almost choked on the ice cream when she spotted Sunset Shimmer heading for the door. Swallowing quickly, she dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. Her sudden movements caused a long, deep purple lock of hair to slip free of her stylish hat, and the girl hastily tucked it back in.

Sunset seemed distracted, her gaze unfocused. That was good. It meant she hadn't been paying attention to her, wouldn't pay attention to her.

As Sunset passed her on the sidewalk, the girl looked at her watch, or seemed to, before getting up and walking away. Whenever Sunset stopped, so too, did she, and whenever she walked again, so too did the girl, always at a discrete distance.

Her quarry, meanwhile, never looked back.

The sleepover was underway. Rarity sat on Pinkie's bed, putting Fluttershy's hair into a half ponytail. Pinkie Pie was typing away on her laptop, surfing the internet. Rainbow and Applejack meanwhile, were engaged in a fighting game on Pinkie's console, while Sunset was content to watch them virtually duke it out.

"One of these days I'm going to beat you at this, AJ," growled Rainbow.

"Only in your dreams," replied the farm girl smugly.

"I would if I had more time to practice," she shot back, hitting the buttons at a rapid pace. "Ugh, why can't my parents spring for one of these?"

There was a knock at the door, and in walked Twilight, already dressed in her pajamas. "Sorry I'm late, girls. I had to take Spike to the vet."

Fluttershy’s torso shot forward. "What? Is he okay?!" she asked frantically. Behind her, Rarity frowned at the sudden movements, and the damage they'd done to her work, before giving Twilight her full attention.

"He's fine," said Twilight. "Just tired. He got some sort of stomach bug. Apparently Shiny accidentally gave him some hot dogs Spike wasn't supposed to have."

"Oh dear," replied Fluttershy. "I'll come by and bring him something soothing tomorrow."

"Yes, I'm glad to hear it's nothing too serious," said Rarity, taking hold of Fluttershy's hair again and coaxing the girl back into position. "Although stomach flus are still a horrible experience."

Sunset nodded. "Yeah, caught one more than once. Even for ponies, it's never fun."

"HA!" cried Rainbow, drawing their attention. The athlete had somehow managed to gain the upper hand in the fighting game, pressing buttons like wild and pummeling Applejack's character. "Revenge!"

The blonde's eyes narrowed with determination as her own button pressing increased in an effort to
"You ever play that game?" asked Sunset.

Twilight shook her head. "I was never all that interested in console games. But my brother used to let me play computer games like the *Quest for Fame* series and the *Ultimate* series."

Sunset just raised an eyebrow, prompting Twilight to continue. "They're really old, the beginning of personal computer technology. *Ultimate* is a lot like my brother's O&O games, which was intentional. The *Quest for Fame* series also had RPG elements to it, but it was more of a traditional adventure game in a fantasy setting, and it was more humor oriented, very self-referential in a time where staples of the genre were still new.

"I remember them being really fun. You know I heard somewhere that there are companies that manage to make old, unplayable games like those able to run on modern hardware through digital download. I've been so busy with class that I never checked into it."

Sunset chuckled. "Maybe we can check it out together. I never really got a look at computer games here." Though that had mostly been because she'd been too busy planning her revenge for the longest time. And since her laptop was rather out of date, it wasn't like there were many games she could play.

"I WIN!" declared Rainbow, pumping her fist in the air. "I beat you! I finally beat you!"

Applejack laughed. "Alright, alright, so you beat me." She gave Rainbow a smirk. "But that's one against how many, now?"

It was that this point that the pizza arrived. Or rather, pizzas, plural. It took a lot to feed seven girls, especially ones with big appetites like Applejack, Rainbow, and especially Pinkie Pie.

As such, there were three cheese pizzas just for Pinkie, one pepperoni pizza each for Applejack and Rainbow, another cheese pizza for Rarity and Twilight, and a vegetarian one for Sunset and Fluttershy. Pinkie had sprung for bread sticks this time.

Any arguments had stopped as soon as the group began to eat. Instead, they began talking about their thank you party for Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna. Pinkie said the Cakes were planning to work on the MMMM in a couple weeks, so that ended up being the best time.

Pinkie had decorations taken care of, and she was sure the Cakes wouldn't mind the use of Sugarcube Corner for the event, especially if it meant they'd have a whole group of taste-testers for their competitive pastry. Applejack volunteered to provide the drinks.

They all discussed making sure the two administrators weren't occupied with some school meeting on whatever day they picked, and various methods for getting them to the shop. Every now and then, Pinkie would say something else about the MMMM. Talking about it seemed to make all of them hungrier, and soon, there weren't any scraps for leftovers.

"Well," said Applejack as she stretched her arms. "I think that about does it as far as plannin'. I don't know about y'all, but I," she let own a yawn, "I'm hitting the hay. I still have chores to help Big Mac with tomorrow."

"Yes, I do believe it's time for me to get my beauty rest," said Rarity, putting on her sleeping mask.

"I should probably get back early to check on Spike," said Twilight, taking off her glasses.
As the others voiced their agreement, Sunset felt a churning sensation in her stomach. It was the moment she'd been dreading. She didn't want to sleep, not yet. But in the face of overwhelming agreement, Sunset found herself forced to go along with the others. Attempting to stay up would only draw attention.

So instead she just lay back in her sleeping bag, hands behind her head, trying to fall asleep. *Trying* being the operative word. Her brain refused to shut down. Synapses still fired wildly, thoughts still swirling around. *You're going to have another nightmare, Sunset,* whispered the voice of the she-demon tauntingly. *You're going to scream in a room full of people.*

Sunset turned on her side, trying to shut the thoughts out. But once they'd taken hold, it was hard to push them back. She tried to think of something, *anything* to keep her mind from going back to her worries. Her stomach churned again. Perhaps she shouldn't have had all of that pizza.

*When your friends find out,* continued the taunting thoughts, *they'll be so worried. Then they'll go over your head and tell the princess. You'll be back in Equestria where you'll be imprisoned for eternity like the criminal you are.*

Sunset let out a grunt, giving another mental push. Her friends wouldn't do that, would they? As much as she hated to admit it, she could imagine them doing that if they got worried enough. And that one little admission only made her anxiety grow.

She lay there for a good thirty minutes, but nothing helped. Every attempt to try and rationalize it all ended up making her feel worse, and all her subsequent attempts at distraction didn't help either, unable to gain traction on the slippery slope of fearful thoughts she'd found herself on.

The fire-haired girl kicked her legs in frustration, forgetting for a moment that she was sleeping in close quarters. Next to her, Rarity let out a cry of pain, and Sunset held back a particularly foul Equestrian curse.

"Huh?" muttered Rainbow, sitting up from her place on one side of Pinkie's bed. "What happened?"

"What's wrong, Rare?" asked AJ, rubbing her eyes.

Twilight, who had also been woken up, flicked on the lights. "What's going on?" she asked sleepily.

Rarity took off her mask to glare at the former unicorn. "Sunset, darling, why did you kick me?" She rubbed her leg, frowning. "Oh, please don't tell me that left a bruise."

"Sorry, Rarity," Sunset apologized. Her heart was starting to race. She hadn't had a nightmare and she'd *still* woken them all up. Was this part of some karmic payback for everything she'd done? "I didn't mean to."

"I'm surprised you're still wide awake," remarked Applejack. "Did somethin' wake you?"

"Was it Gummy?" asked Pinkie, going from sleepy to fully awake in the span of three seconds.

"Uh, Pinkie," said Rainbow, "Gummy is a stuffed toy."

"Oh, right." She giggled, grabbing the plush gator and hugging it close to her chest. "You know, Dashie, I bet the me on the other side of the mirror has a real live Gummy."

"Why would she have a live alliga... you know what? I don't want to know."
"What's wrong, darling?"

"N-Nothing," replied Sunset. The teenager was desperately trying to get her heart under control in the face of her friends' stares. "I'm just having a little trouble sleeping. Brain just won't shut down."

"Um," said Fluttershy, her face half hidden by her hair, "is that why your breath smelled like black coffee the last week?"

Scarlet and gold hair whipped through the air as Sunset's head turned. "You noticed?"

The timid girl squeaked, ducking further behind her pink curtain. "One of the volunteers at the animal shelter has a night shift job and he drinks black coffee a lot to stay awake. I, um... didn't want to bother you about it."

"Wait, wait, wait," said Rainbow, "You've had insomnia for a week?"

Sunset desperately tried to form an excuse, reaching into her mind for anything that would work to quell her friends' worried expressions. Finally, she just slumped. "Y-Yeah. On and off."

"Have you seen a doctor?" asked Twilight.

Sunset shook her head. "I thought it would pass." The words seemed so weak now, saying them out loud.

Rarity put a hand on her shoulder. "Darling, if you were having problems, you should have told us."

"I didn't want to worry you," she replied, a sense of shame creeping over her.

"You sure your problem ain't nightmares?" said Applejack, crossing her arms over her chest. "Cause right now you're soundin' like Apple Bloom when she was scared to start CHS."

Sunset flinched. "I-I..." Her eyes fell to the floor, all but confirming the blonde's suspicions.

Fluttershy was next to her now, placing a delicate hand on her unoccupied shoulder. "If there's something bothering you, we're here to listen."

"I..." Sunset began. She tried to form the words, but her tongue just didn't seem to want to work. Fluttershy's warm eyes still lingered on her, and with one more mental push, she managed to speak. "It's nothing. I'm sure they'll pass soon."

Applejack's face fell, and she gave a sigh. "Alright, sugarcube."

Sunset looked at the blonde in surprise. "You're not going to press me?"

"Oh, I want to, no doubt about that," replied the farmer. "But you look like you don't want to talk about it. Am I right?" She got a slow nod from Sunset. "I don't reckon there's a point in pushin' you right now. And maybe you're right, and it'll go away on its own. But remember, sugarcube, we're here when you need us."

"Yeah," voiced Rainbow in agreement. "We're not going to leave you hanging."

Relief flooded her body. "Thank you."

Suddenly, Pinkie's face lit up, and she hopped out of bed. "I know just what will help you sleep, Sunny!" She dashed out of the room, leaving her six friends staring at the doorway in confusion.
When she returned, she held a drinking glass in one hand, and a small, unmarked plastic bottle in another. Slowly, she poured some of the bottle into the glass and offered it to Sunset. "Here."

Sunset eyed the gold-colored liquid warily. "Um, Pinkie, what is this?"

"This," Pinkie said proudly, "is the Pie family's home remedy for insomnia. My great aunt Petra made it. We always keep the ingredients around because Marble has really bad insomnia every once in a while."

"Really, a homemade sleep aid?" asked Twilight, peering closer at the liquid. "What's in it?"

Pinkie shook her head, her pink curls dancing wildly. "Can't tell you that. Great Aunt Petra wanted to keep the recipe a super top secret so she made mom and dad promise not to share, and they made me promise too. I never break one of my special promises."

Twilight frowned in disappointment. "Would I be able to ask your great aunt in person then?"

"I don't think so," said Pinkie. "Aunty Petra is like, super old, but she goes around traveling the world. She's on one of her trips now." Pinkie's face scrunched in concentration. "I think she said something about going somewhere with someone named Jordan." She looked back at Twilight. "But I'll let her know you asked when she comes back."

Sunset took the glass from Pinkie, letting the liquid swirl around in it. She gave it a sniff. "It smells like peppermint."

Pinkie laughed. "Yup-a-roonie. Aunty Petra loves peppermint. Favorite thing in the whole world. You wouldn't believe how many candy canes she goes through every Christmas."

"And it really works?"

Pinkie nodded vigorously. She pulled out a small photo of a rose-colored woman with graying sandy hair styled in such a way that made her look like a much older Maud, and held it in front of her face. "This stuff will knock you into a sleep so deep, even the nightmares will give up trying to bother you." The entire line was spoken in an imitation of an old woman's voice.

"Oh my," said Fluttershy, "That sounds awfully deep."

"Uh-huh. I took a sip of it once and I slept till ten."

"You?" asked Rainbow incredulously. "Miss 'I get up every day at six with a ton of energy' slept until ten in the morning?" Now Rainbow looked worried. "Sunset, you sure you want to drink that?"

Sunset Shimmer looked back at the glass. The rational part of her brain cautioned against trying a homemade sleep aid with that much purported power. With that kind of description, the formula seemed just as likely to put her into a medically induced coma as put her to sleep.

And yet, Sunset also knew that she wanted to sleep without another nightmare, and she didn't really want to leave things up to the chance this would be one of those lucky nights.

And so, gathering her courage, Sunset risked potential hospitalization and let the liquid pass over her tongue and down her throat. It tasted like peppermint as well, a very strong taste too. Pinkie hadn't been kidding about her aunt.

She handed the glass to Pinkie, offering her a thank you, and lay down in her sleeping bag. "Goodnight, girls." Precisely fifteen seconds later, she was fast asleep.
Pinkie set the glass down on her nightstand. "Huh. Lasted a teeny bit longer than Marble's average."
She smiled again. "Works every time."

The following Monday morning found Principal Cinch in her office. She stared coldly at the girl across from her desk. "Is this everything you could gather?"

"Yes, ma'am," the pink-skinned girl said meekly.

Cinch flipped through the dossier in her hands, eyes darting back and forth behind her glasses. She paused as she reached the bottom of the page. Her gaze moved back up. "And I assume you vetted all this information?"

"Of course I did," came the girl's sharp reply. Cinch raised an eyebrow at her tone, and the girl quickly backpedaled. "S-Sorry, Principal Cinch. I checked everything in there, m'kay? And I pointed out everything I wasn't sure about, just like you asked."

"Good," said Cinch with a nod. "Consider your grade for that chemistry test taken care of."

The girl breathed a sigh of relief at avoiding Cinch's anger. She stood there a moment, watching as her principal continued reading. Cinch looked up again. "Yes, Miss Polomare?"

Suri Polomare's shoes shuffled against the floor. "Um, Principal Cinch, what about my..."

"Hmm?" It took a second before realization hit her. "Oh, yes, I almost forgot. You can consider your application to the Manhattan School of Design accepted."

The girl's face split into a smile, and she seemed ready to burst from pure glee. "Thank you, ma'am, I —"

"However," added Cinch, cutting her off. "If this information turns out to be inaccurate and that you have failed the task I gave you, I will ensure your application is denied by every design school in the state. The same will happen if you breathe a word about this. Do I make myself clear, Miss Polomare?"

Suri's enthusiasm was snuffed out instantly, and her face turned dead white. She nodded her head furiously. "Yes, ma'am. I won't tell anyone, m'kay? No one!"

"I should hope not, Miss Polomare. Now leave my office. You have classes to attend and I have work to do."

The girl rushed out of the office, leaving Cinch alone. The woman regarded the dossier again. It was a small stack of papers, and paper-clipped to the front was a picture of a smirking Sunset Shimmer.

The documents were a mix of vital statistics, and transcribed testimonies from students. At the end of the file was a small flash drive, carefully attached. Cinch preferred having both print and digital copies. Every piece of data was neatly labeled, in accordance with her instructions.

Suri wasn't her top choice for this. But she'd been easy to recruit, and had only been in the first round of the Friendship Games before slipping into the background, so she was less likely to be remembered.

As far as being a student at the academy, she was rather poor outside of home economics. But despite her weaknesses in academics, when it came to scandal and gossip, Suri Polomare had an incredible memory. While the human mind caused rumors to exaggerate with each telling, Suri could
repeat every story and detail she heard almost perfectly.

If such skills lent themselves to legitimate work, Cinch would have directed the girl to that instead of letting her go on her chosen path of dressmaking.

Abacus had discovered her talents in her freshman year, and had used her more than once to help deal with trouble. It had taken some work to train her to organize her findings, to sort out what information was more certain and less certain, and to label it as such. But train her she had.

She flipped through the contents front to back again. The vital statistics came first. They were limited, but she certainly couldn't risk her informant breaking into the principal's office to get at the school records. After that came various headings. Spring Fling, Bullying, Fall Formal, CHS Music Festival, Anon-a-Miss Incident, Friendship Games.

There was little by way of real background, and everything that was here only pertained to the last few years. But sometimes a lack of information was information in and of itself.

An idea formed in her head. Picking up her cellphone, she dialed a familiar number. "Hello? It's me." She paused, listening to a grumbled reply. "Yes, I know it's early. I need to meet with you this afternoon. Yes, it's important."

The principal leaned back in her chair, her eyes falling to the file still sitting in her lap. "I have a problem and I believe the solution is right up your alley. Four o'clock is fine. The usual place."

Ending the call, Cinch got up and walked over to a portable CD player. Pressing a few buttons, she let the soft notes of classical music fill the room before returning to her desk.

Setting the file aside to move onto other work, she hummed along to the music before sparing the smirking photo one last look. The principal gave it a smirk of her own, one that quickly grew into a grin.

The girl ought to enjoy herself now, because when she was through with that brat, she would wish she'd never gone to Canterlot High.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. Chapter four will take a while longer to put together since I don’t really have any scenes drafted for that one, just ideas in my head. But I’ll try to get it done as soon as possible.

I’d also like to mention that the idea for the symbolic interpretation of the Equestrian flag was an idea I borrowed with permission from the author Skywriter, author of such wonderful stories such as “How to Remove a Unicorn Tooth”.

It was a rather brilliant idea on how Equestria could have a flag like that and yet still consider Luna/Nightmare Moon a fairy tale, and I consider it part of my own personal headcanon. I also highly suggest checking out Skywriter’s work. He’s a very talented writer with far more experience than me.

And finally, for those reading along, there were three name puns/references in this chapter. Points to anybody that can list them. Go ahead and try.
Chapter 4: The Storm

It was Wednesday afternoon and Sunset Shimmer was in her last class of the day. As she scribbled away at her notes, she let out a contented sigh. Pinkie's insomnia cure had been good to its word, and the former unicorn had slept soundly through the night.

She'd used it for the rest of the weekend before attempting to sleep on her own. Much to her delight, she'd found her original hopes had come true. After a long enough break, the nightmares had stopped coming.

Or perhaps, she mused, it had been telling her friends, even half-way. Sunset knew she'd have to tell them the rest eventually. That conversation would probably be difficult. But that wasn't in the very near future, so she'd worry about it later.

No matter the reason for her lack of nightmares, Sunset was just happy to be free of it all. She'd felt more rested than she'd had in a while, her hastily bought coffee can now collecting dust.

The day too, it seemed, shared in her happiness. The sun shone brightly in a cloudless sky, but the air was still comfortably chilly with a light breeze. It was the sort of day people relished in. And it was the sort of day that made Sunset just want to keep smiling. With her nightmares finally gone, things were definitely looking up.

Unless some new magical threat reared its ugly head, everything was back to normal at CHS. And if something did appear, Sunset was confident she and the others could handle it. As Rainbow Dash had put it in a new song she'd been working on, they were the Rainbooms, and nothing could break them.

"Will Sunset Shimmer please report to Principal Celestia's office right away?" came the voice over the PA system.

Sunset Shimmer blinked, taking a few seconds to process the message. Mr. Doodle had stopped in his lecture, turning his head back towards the class so that both he and the other students were staring at her.

A few rows over, Trixie was smirking. "Ooh, in trouble again, Shimmer?"

Shooting the amateur magician a dirty look, Sunset nonetheless felt discomforted by the sudden attention. Quietly, she gathered up her things and headed out of the classroom.

The halls were still covered in red and pink heart decorations. Valentine's Day had passed only yesterday. As expected, Rarity's locker had been overflowing with cards and gifts, while Sunset's had been empty.
Not that she minded. She didn't really want to be the center of *that* sort of attention. She was still understanding what it meant to have friends. Love, real, romantic love, was something else entirely.

Besides, Rarity had shared her ample supply of gifted chocolates with the rest of them, so it wasn't all bad.

As she walked down the hall, she wondered what this was about. Most times a call to Principal Celestia's office was a sign of trouble. But Sunset had pretty much stayed out of trouble since the Fall Formal. Some kind of academic award maybe? She was still at the top of her classes, so that wasn't exactly a stretch.

She passed by the secretary on the way to the door. Her expression was strangely tense. Sunset knew the woman was pretty busy, but most times the stress she was under never made it to her face.

When she finally opened the door to the office, she saw Principal Celestia sitting behind her desk, and, surprisingly, Vice Principal Luna standing behind her.

Both women wore uneasy expressions, and the hairs on the back of Sunset's neck stood on end. "Hello, Principal Celestia," she began uncertainly. "Why did you call me?"

Celestia cleared her throat. "It's because—"

"That would be because of me, Miss Shimmer."

Sunset jumped before whirling around. The door to the office shut, and there, practically hiding behind the door, was someone new.

She was tall, about as tall as Principal Celestia or Vice Principal Luna, and a moderate build. She appeared to be in her early forties, with sapphire blue skin.

Her eyes, hard and piercing, were a deep purple, set inside a face of rather angular features with a large, prominent nose. This was complemented by a head of indigo-colored hair arranged in a pixie cut, similar to Mrs. Harshwhinny, but even shorter.

Her clothing denoted professionalism, a black suit jacket and business skirt, a white blouse, and a set of heels. Her jewelry was minimal, consisting of only a pair of white star-shaped earrings and a gold necklace ending in the symbol for Scorpio, most likely her birth sign.

"Who are you?" asked Sunset.

"I am Mrs. Circinus," she replied, in an accent that sounded distinctly upper class. The woman sat down in one of the chairs in front of Celestia's desk, turning it to face Sunset. "Please sit, Miss Shimmer."

Sunset slowly took the opposite seat. She looked to the two administrators in the room. Both of them still radiated discomfort, which was in and of itself discomfiting. Sunset couldn't recall the last time anyone or anything had gotten to them like this. Just what in Tartarus was going on?

The woman's eyes followed Sunset as she took the seat, and there was something in them that made Sunset feel like an animal being watched by a hungry predator.

"I represent Child Protective Services, Miss Shimmer. We've received reports that you are a minor currently living alone without parental supervision."

Sunset's heart slammed into her ribcage. If she hadn't been sitting, she might have lost her balance.
As it was, she didn't feel all that stable right now anyway.

Child Protective Services. She'd been dodging them since she'd gotten here to avoid being stuck with a human family. But more importantly, there was the threat of investigation. The threat of them digging too deep and discovering her non-existence and extra-dimensional nature.

She did not want to end up on a dissection table, thank you very much.

Sunset placed a nervous hand behind her head. "W-What makes you think that?"

"Please, Miss Shimmer, there's no point in denying it," replied the woman flatly. "I was talking to your principal earlier," she spared a glance at Celestia, "and she told me how your parents have never attended any scheduled interviews with teachers or any conferences. In fact, they have never been seen or heard, period. This only substantiates the reports I've received regarding you."

Principal Celestia gave Sunset a guilty expression. Not that she could blame her. Sunset knew the principal probably had little choice. "Who exactly told you all this?"

"I am afraid I am not at liberty to say, Miss Shimmer," replied the woman. "That information was given to CPS by a concerned party and then passed along to me."

Sunset suppressed a groan of annoyance. Great, so I don't even get to know who's responsible for this.

"The fact remains that you are a sixteen-year-old girl living alone. This arrangement is not one that can be tolerated," continued Circinus. "Thankfully for you, I know of a family more than happy to take you in immediately."

"Really?"

The woman's face broke into a friendly smile, the first truly pleasant expression during this whole meeting. "Really. They are acquaintances of mine, and recently told me they were interested in adopting a girl." She gave a small chuckle. "I understand that you might have been expecting a great deal of hassle with this process. It's a perfectly reasonable assumption. But I assure you, I can make this go quite easily."

Principal Celestia raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that against standard procedure?"

Mrs. Circinus waved a hand. “I suppose so, yes. But I think Miss Shimmer would be an excellent fit for this family, and vice versa, so it seems a waste to not take advantage of it. There would of course be some additional legal proceedings to follow up on in coming months as part of the adoption process, but that will be of little concern to Miss Shimmer, and I’m confident we can smooth out all the potential wrinkles.”

Her deep purple eyes focused back on the teen. “I’m sure I can speak for both of us when I say it would be best to resolve this situation with as much expediency as possible. In addition, if you take this option, your life wouldn’t face the constant disruption of moving from place to place through the foster care system, as can be the case for many children such as yourself. So what do you say?"

Sunset allowed her body to relax. Being stuck with a random family was weird, and there was the chance that she'd have to tell them about her magic. A good, solid chance. But she'd prefer doing that with regular people over letting a CPS agent dig too deep into her background.

Still, she couldn't help but find the entire thing... anticlimactic. Sunset supposed that she was just used to things going straight to Tartarus. Then again, she'd had reason to think that, what with the
Dazzlings, the Friendship Games, and in a way, the Fall Formal.

"I'll take your silence as a form of agreement," said Mrs. Circinus. She gave a nod, more to herself than anyone else. "Excellent. Now your foster family doesn't normally live in Canterlot, but that's for the best, and you should be able to meet them soon."

"Hold it," interjected Sunset, raising her hands. "Back up. What do you mean they don't normally live in Canterlot?!

The indigo-haired woman raised an eyebrow at the teenager. "I don't think there's much room for confusion with that statement, Miss Shimmer. Your foster family normally lives in another part of the state."

"But what about me going to Canterlot High?"

From the expression on Mrs. Circinus's face, Sunset might as well have asked why a square peg wouldn't go in a round hole. "Well Miss Shimmer, switching schools is a common occurrence when one moves."

"I'm not leaving CHS," responded Sunset firmly. "No way."

"I assure you, Miss Shimmer, it is in your best interest to leave," insisted the woman.

Though silent through the exchange thus far, Vice Principal Luna now cleared her throat. "Pardon me, Mrs. Circinus, but why exactly do you think it's in Miss Shimmer's best interest to leave our school?"

Circinus turned to address Luna. "A multitude of reasons." She reached down and picked up a leather satchel, pulling out a tablet. Booting it up, her eyes and fingers skimmed across the screen. "The reports to CPS were quite extensive. I was made to understand that Miss Shimmer's behavior since enrolling in your institution has been something akin to delinquency."

Sunset cringed. Her bully career was coming back to bite her in the plot. Again. Not for the first time did Sunset wish she had a time machine, if only to go back and beat some sense into her old self.

"And I'm going to say that, based on Miss Shimmer's response just now, those allegations have merit."

_Horseapples_. Not only did this woman have information on her, but she was sharp, too. Her eyes had only seemed to take the barest glimpse up from her tablet, and she'd still picked up Sunset's body language.

"I find it curious," she said, giving the vice principal her full attention, "that the conduct records I saw before she arrived here said nothing of the sort. Were you blind to these issues, Vice Principal Luna? Or did you perhaps turn a blind eye?"

Luna's face darkened, and she looked ready to snap at the woman. Celestia took her sister's hand, rubbing a thumb against her palm. "My sister is quite capable of doing her job, Mrs. Circinus," said the principal. "We are not omniscient, and if there were issues with Sunset's behavior, I'm sure they were exaggerated."

"Yes," added Luna, managing to reign in her temper. "And I can tell you right now that Sunset Shimmer has been an exemplary student. We are proud to have her at Canterlot High." Beside her, Celestia nodded in agreement.
Sunset gave the two administrators a grateful smile. Even if they were stretching the truth and defending themselves as well, Sunset could hear the sincerity in their tone. A comfortable warmth made itself known on her face. Suddenly, Pinkie Pie's thank you party seemed all the more necessary.

"I have friends at CHS," Sunset stated firmly, taking the chance to speak. "My only friends. I'm not leaving them."

"That's true," added Principal Celestia. "Mrs. Circinus, while I understand that it would be much simpler to place Sunset with a family that is ready to adopt, I highly doubt you would wish to separate her from her only friends. I can tell you that they have been a wonderful influence on her. It would be better to nurture that influence."

The principal's genuine smile reminded Sunset of Princess Celestia whenever Sunset would pass one of her tests. That thought made her feel even warmer, but also caused a prickling of shame at remembering her current standing with her mentor.

She shook off that feeling. She needed to be focused on the more immediate problem right now.

Circinus returned Celestia's smile with a condescending one. "A wonderful influence, you say?" She looked back down at her tablet. "Are you sure you don't have a second Sunset Shimmer among your students, Principal Celestia, because I'm afraid that is not what I was told."

Her fingers danced across the screen even more. Sunset wished she could see what the CPS agent was looking at. What other information was she holding?

Judging from the looks on the two administrators' faces, they wanted to know just as badly. But Mrs. Circinus kept the tablet close, angled away from prying eyes like a poker player protecting his hand.

"The concerned party that contacted us mentioned something about an," the woman paused, double checking something on her screen, "Anon-a-Miss incident that occurred here this past December."

Sunset let out another mental curse, practically biting her tongue to keep it from being a verbal one. At this rate it would be a miracle if she doesn't find out about Equestria.

"As I understand," said Circinus, "there was a vicious instance of cyber-bullying at this school under an anonymous MyStable account, and the culprit was believed to be Miss Shimmer."

"She was found to be innocent of that," replied Celestia, her expression pained.

Circinus nodded. "Yes, I'm aware. But according to my information, the group of girls Miss Shimmer calls her friends supposedly joined those who believed her guilt. I was told that Miss Shimmer broke down into tears in the hallway. And it seems the concerned party didn't think we'd believe it, so they included this."

She tapped a few buttons on her tablet before presenting it to the administrators. Sunset leaned closer to see. Her heart dropped at the image on the screen.

It was her, crying on her knees in the hallway, her friends walking away.

"Where did you get that?!" she cried.

Circinus glanced back at Sunset. "It seems a student took that picture in the halls and posted it online. There was also another picture," she paused, pressing another button. The screen once again showed Sunset in the halls, down on the floor clutching her knees, surrounded by angry students.
Someone must have been taking pictures then, too. She certainly didn't remember anyone doing that, but Sunset had been so overwhelmed in that awful moment that the click of the cameras might not have registered.

"Principal Celestia," said Circinus as she pulled back her tablet. "Pardon me for saying this, but these girls that Miss Shimmer calls her friends don't sound like the sort that are a good influence if they do such things to her. I was also informed that the perpetrators of the account were three eighth grade girls, two of which were siblings of this group of friends. Is this true?"

Celestia hesitated, unsure how to phrase an answer that somehow wouldn't make things worse.

"Principal Celestia," repeated the woman. "Answer me." Her eyes narrowed. "Or would you prefer I confirm it on my own?"

"... Yes, it's true," admitted the principal at last.

"I see," said Mrs. Circinus, her face changing to an expressionless mask. "I'm surprised the two of you let the situation get as out of control as it did, if I understand the events correctly."

"You think we weren't trying?!" hissed Luna. "We were! We had no idea it existed until it was targeting the whole school. Fighting an anonymous gossip account was like trying to slay the Lernaean Hydra. Every time I tried to track down the source of a post, two more would come up demanding my attention!"

"Please sister, calm down," soothed Celestia.

Sunset had no idea Vice Principal Luna had been having so much trouble. Given the vein now bulging on her forehead, perhaps the six months of detention that Apple Bloom and the others got had actually been reduced by Principal Celestia.

Mrs. Circinus seemed completely undaunted by Luna's outburst. Her eyes went back to her tablet. "There was one other thing I wanted to discuss, a music festival that was held here. I was told that Miss Shimmer's friends formed a band, the... Rainbooms," she said, stumbling a little over the word. She turned to look at Sunset. "Is that correct, Miss Shimmer?"

"Yes."

"And at the time of the festival, you were not a member of this musical group?"

"No." Sunset wasn't sure where the woman was going with this, but it made her uneasy, like she was walking into a pair of giant claws. What was she forgetting?

"And yet, you possess musical talent and are now a member."

"I play the guitar," she answered hesitantly. "What's your point?"

Circinus looked back at her notes. "According to a witness, during the semi-finals, you tackled the lead singer, one Rainbow Dash, completely disrupting their performance in a fit of jealous rage."

"But it wasn't..." Sunset began to protest, only to realize that she didn't know how to defend her actions that day. She'd only tackled Rainbow because her magic was beginning to appear, but that answer would just exchange the CPS agent for someone from a mental ward.

Mrs. Circinus leaned back in the chair. "Why did you tackle her, Miss Shimmer? Was it because your friends wouldn't let you join their group despite your musical aptitude? Were you angry enough
to try and sabotage them in the semi-finals?"

The indigo-haired woman's face took on a more sympathetic expression. "While I cannot approve of what you did, it was still a very human reaction under the circumstances."

"But that wasn't what happened," insisted Sunset. "I... I thought the spotlight over Rainbow was going to fall, and it was the only thing I could think of." An improvised lie, but the best she could come up with on short notice.

Circinus raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And did the spotlight fall?"

She'd wasted no time going for the obvious weak point in the explanation. "Well, no," admitted Sunset. "I was wrong about that. But I really thought it was going to fall at the time."

Vice Principal Luna cleared her throat. "We checked after the semi-finals, and one of the spotlights was actually a bit loose."

Sunset gave a mental cheer at Luna's support. It wasn't worth much in the face of everything else, but at least they were making some headway against the woman's arguments.

"Was it? You were lucky then that no students were hurt. And in a sense, Miss Shimmer's actions were quite heroic," replied Circinus, her last sentence filled with approval.

She went back to her tablet. "Yet, despite the heroic measures Miss Shimmer took, the audience repaid her by going into an uproar. I believe a student, one Flash Sentry, said something along the lines of 'Now that's the bad girl we love to hate.' Are those words accurate Miss Shimmer, or should I have Mister Sentry called to verify?"

Sunset bit back yet another curse. Even when they'd tried to take out some of her sting, she'd managed to turn it right back around against them. "I, uh, he might... I mean..."

"I'll take that as confirmation." Mrs. Circinus shut off her tablet, slipping it back into her satchel. She stood up, looking back to the two administrators. Luna's expression was once again one of anger, and if Celestia felt the same, she hid it well, her face merely a pained frown.

"Principal, Vice Principal, instances such as these have not painted a very flattering picture of your institution, especially where Sunset Shimmer is concerned. As an employee of Child Protective Services, it is my job to ensure the wellbeing of any child brought to my attention."

"I understand that," said Celestia, "But—"

Circinus cut her off. "And what I see is not an environment suited to her emotional development and wellbeing. The fact that she didn't resort to self-harm during that Anon-a-Miss fiasco is a miracle."

She looked back at Sunset now. "Miss Shimmer, as for these friends of yours, I know you may think they're your friends, but as an unbiased party, I don't think they are. I question their loyalty and sincerity when they make you suffer in such a manner, or when they clearly excluded you from performing with them."

But they hadn't excluded her. Sunset had never let them know she could play, and she'd never shown an interest in playing. She'd still been fearful of messing things up, admittedly more so after the Anon-a-Miss disaster. She hesitated in arguing that, however, for fear of it somehow backfiring and making this even worse than it was.

The woman straightened out her skirt before slinging her satchel strap over her shoulder. "I will be
taking Miss Shimmer to her foster family now, if there are no further objections."

The entire situation was spiraling out of control. Her mind raced for something to say, or she'd be separated from her friends and the portal by Celestia only knew how many miles and who knew how long and with people she didn't even know.

"I'll find another family to stay with," she said finally, words rushing out of her mouth.

The three adults in the room turned to her in surprise. Mrs. Circinus spoke first. "Pardon me?"

"Just what I said," repeated Sunset, her voice stronger. "I'll find a family to stay with. I am not leaving CHS, or Canterlot City."

Circinus gave Sunset a hard stare. "And do you have any idea who exactly you would stay with?"

"Not yet," she admitted, right before glaring back at the woman. "But I know I'll find someone."

"That is a fine sentiment, Miss Shimmer, but it doesn't fix your living situation in the eyes of CPS."

Principal Celestia got up from her desk. "Please, Mrs. Circinus, I'd like you to give Sunset some time to find someone. You can clearly see she doesn't want to leave this school."

The woman looked uncertain, ready to flat-out reject their plea. Sunset needed to convince her somehow. But how? There had to be something she could do to get her to go along.

An idea came to mind. It was a high-stakes gamble, but right now she had little choice. "If I can't find anyone else to take me in, I'll go to the foster family you have in mind without argument."

Circinus raised an eyebrow. "Without argument?"

Sunset nodded her head, even though she really didn't want to. "Just give me some time."

The older woman stood there pondering for a moment before she answered. "I'll give you a week to find another legal guardian, Miss Shimmer." She pointed a stern finger at the teenager. "Bear in mind that if you do find someone, they will have to be vetted by me. If I don't find them fit to care for you, I will take you to the other family. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal clear," muttered Sunset.

Mrs. Circinus nodded. "Good. I will be on my way then. Good day Principal, Vice Principal, Miss Shimmer."

Once she'd walked out the door, Sunset's shoulders slumped. That had been far more draining than she expected.

"Sunset, are you alright?" asked Principal Celestia, placing a hand on the girl's shoulder.

Sunset sighed before shaking her head. "Can't really say I am. This is a real mess, isn't it?"

"Well, it certainly could have gone better," answered Celestia with a self-deprecating chuckle.

"That is an understatement, sister," grumbled Vice Principal Luna. She massaged her temples in an attempt to stop a headache. "I think I should go back to my office and rest. I feel like I just wrestled a bear... and lost."

Watching her sister leave, Celestia’s face turned sour. “I don’t like that woman,” she half-whispered,
more to herself than Sunset. “There’s something about her and her attitude that’s just not right.”

“I’m just glad she’s not looking too closely at me,” said the teen. As much as she didn’t like the woman’s attitude either, or the gamble she’d been forced into taking, at least it would get her out from under government scrutiny.

Celestia looked up at the clock on her wall. "Considering how close it is to the final bell, why don't you just go wait at the front of the school for your friends?"

"Yeah, that's probably best," she muttered. Feet feeling like lead, Sunset gathered her backpack and headed out the office door. She had work to do now. Lots of it.

Sunset breathed in the cool air as she exited the front doors of CHS, walking silently along the grass before sitting down on one of the few benches in front of the school, near the edge of the campus.

This was bad, and that was putting it lightly. Child Protective Services had been put on her trail, and now she had a week to find someone to stay with. She'd need to ask her friends as soon as the school bell rang. Her cyan eyes looked back at the front doors, wishing students would pour out now instead of later.

Nervous energy still surging through her, Sunset withdrew her journal. Princess Twilight's support would help. Opening up the book to a blank page, she took a pen and began to write, hand trailing over the paper.

She'd been in the middle of yet another sentence when the book was suddenly ripped from her hands.

"Ooh, what's this, your diary?"

Sunset's eyes shot up to the girl holding her journal. "Give that back!" she demanded, jumping to her feet.

Unfortunately for her, the girl had the advantage of both height and long arms, holding the journal well out of Sunset's reach. The irony was not lost on the former bully that she was now a victim of a game of keep away.

"Like, don't have a cow. I'm not going to read it. Reading a girl's diary is, like, wrong," she said, clearly offended. "You're Sunset Shimmer, right?"

"Yes I am," growled Sunset, making a leap for her book, only for the girl to move it out of the way. "Now give that back to me!"

The girl peered at the cover, still holding it well out of reach, even going so far as to waltz around Sunset's attempts to get it back. "This thing looks so drab! And it's old-looking, too. This is, like, a boy's journal, not a girl's diary. You need a new one. Something pink, or at least brightly colored."

With that, the girl dumped the book into a nearby trashcan. Sunset raced for the can, only to come to a grinding halt when she felt a sharp tug at her arm. She found herself pulled backwards, coming face to face with the girl.

Sunset took a moment to really look at this new pest. She looked old enough to be in college, so definitely not a student. She had pale white skin like Rarity, and wore a pearl pink wool jacket and a pair of light blue jeans. The gold heels on her feet looked expensive, probably designer.
Gold bracelets dangled from her wrist, and a diamond sat in each ear. Her hair was the color of gold, hanging to her mid-back in beach waves, topped by a pearl pink beret. Joining the beret was a hair clip in the shape of a pearl surrounded by light rays, also pearl pink.

The girl's dark blue eyes looked at Sunset critically before she gave a deep frown. "Eww, were you going for the biker chick look? No, no, no, we can't have this."

She grabbed the sleeves of Sunset's jacket, yanking it off with a surprising amount of strength for her seemingly slim build. Sunset yelped as she was turned around, her jacket pulled free. "This needs to go too," said the girl, right before she deposited it in the same trashcan.

"What are you—" Sunset began, only to be cut off when the girl pulled her close again.

The two locked eyes as the girl's fingers reached out for Sunset's face, moving across her cheeks and chin. The former unicorn suddenly felt like a piece of fruit under inspection from a buyer.

"You've got a pretty face. That's good. We can totally work with that." Her hands grabbed a few of Sunset's red and gold tresses, twisting them in her fingers. "Ooh, and you've got really nice hair, too."

Her mouth suddenly opened, her tongue pushing out slightly. "Ugh, it looks like bacon. I hate bacon. It's so greasy!" She paused in thought before her eyes lit up. "We so need to get these awful yellow streaks dyed. Ooh! What about green? Then your hair will be all Christmasy! And who doesn't love Christmas, am I right?"

At this point, Sunset had had just about enough. The crack at her hair had been the last straw. Her hair was, in truth, a point of vanity for Sunset. As many had told her since she was a filly, it was her most striking feature, and Sunset was extremely hesitant to let others mess with it.

She pulled herself free from the girl's grip, backing up several steps to re-establish some sense of personal space. "Just who are you?!

"Like, no need to scream, Shimmy," replied the girl. "I'm Gleaming Pearl Luxury. But everyone just calls me Pearl." Despite her heels, she somehow managed to bounce on the balls of her feet, right before wrapping Sunset in a tight hug. "I'm your new sister!"

What?!

"I heard that you're not so popular around here. But don't worry, baby sis. I'm going to make you popular. I love that song, by the way. It totally speaks to me."

"Yo, Sunset!"

Sunset turned her head toward the school entrance, never more thankful to see Rainbow and the others walking towards her. She squirmed once again out of Pearl's grip, backing away from her like she was a king cobra.

"We heard you got called out of class," said Rainbow as she ran up ahead of the others. "What happened—Hey, who's she?"

"I'm Pearl Luxury," repeated the girl. "Like, who are you, and how do you know my new little sister?"

"Little sister?" Rainbow repeated, mouth agape as she looked back at Sunset. The teenager offered her a grimace and a look that said it's a long story.
"Wow! I didn't know you had a big sister!" exclaimed Pinkie, bouncing up to them. "You should have told me. We could have totally invited her to one of our sleepovers."

"She's not my sister," spat Sunset.

"Don't be modest, Shimmy. You're, like, part of the family now!" exclaimed Pearl. "But, like, who are they?"

"I'm Rainbow Dash," said Rainbow, "all around awesome captain of every sports team."

"I'm Pinkie Pie!"

"I'm Fluttershy."

"Twilight Sparkle."

"Applejack at your service."

"And I am Rarity," said the fashionista, coming up last in the group. "I—Sunset, darling, what happened to your jacket?"

"Oh, that thing? I like, threw it in the garbage, duh," said Pearl.

"Why would you do that to such a beautiful article of clothing?!" Rarity screamed.

Pearl just scowled. "Like, it was ugly. Way too biker. I'm going to give her a whole new wardrobe, one that's not so," she looked back at Sunset, "drab. Like, no offense Shimmy but it's so true."

Sunset groaned. Please stop calling me Shimmy.

Rarity's blue eyes narrowed. "Drab? I helped pick out that outfit, thank you very much!"

Pearl wrinkled her nose. "Well it shows. You totally don't seem to know a thing about clothes if you picked that out."

Rarity let out a huff of annoyance. "I'll have you know I design my own outfits."

Pearl grimaced. "You make them yourself? Yuck, that's so tacky. Real clothes come from factories or top designers, duh. What are you, like, some tacky designer wannabe?"

"TACKY DESIGNER WANNABE?!" Rarity screamed, at a pitch that threatened to break every piece of glass within a fifty foot radius. Her face had turned completely crimson. "I'll show you a designer wannabe, you little hussy!"

Pinkie Pie slipped her arms under Rarity's armpits, holding her back. "Whoa there, Rarity. Whoa!" Her feet started sliding. "Girls, I could use a little help here."

"Hold it Rare," said Applejack, getting between Pearl and the fashionista. "There's no need to blow your top."

Pearl struggled to suppress her laughter. "Are you, like, for real?"

Applejack flicked her green eyes back to Pearl. "Beggin' your pardon?"

"That outfit and stupid accent. Is it, like, 'Dress Like a Cowboy Day' around here?" Pearl frowned. "Aww, why didn't someone tell me? I have a really cute pink hat and matching boots I could have
worn. Like, yee-haw, ride em' cowgirl and all that stuff."

Applejack just stared at her, slack-jawed.

Pearl blinked. "Wait, you're, like, totally serious?" She let out a gasp, hands covering her mouth. "Oh wow! A real live country bumpkin!"

Before Applejack could say anything in response, Pearl wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close before holding out her camera phone. "Photo-op!" cried the girl, snapping the photo before letting go of the farmer and typing away on the device.

"OMG, I, like, can't believe it! I thought you, like, didn't exist anymore. It's like meeting a dinosaur! I am so putting this on MyStable. And Chirper too. Diamond Facet is going to flip when I show her this. She said you people, like, died out in the last century."

"On second thought, Pinkie," said Applejack, her green eyes as flat as her tone, "let Rarity go."

At that moment, Angel Bunny popped his head out of Fluttershy's backpack, curious as to all the commotion. He hopped his way right into Fluttershy's arms.

When Pearl looked up from her screen, she let out a squee of delight before racing over to the shy girl. She bent down, smile threatening to break off her face as she took the little rabbit from Fluttershy. "What a cute little bunny!" she gushed.

"Is he, like, your pet? You know I, like, had this tank of twelve pet goldfish once. But they were, like, defective, because for goldfish they weren't very gold. I, like, wanted them to match my hair. So I just gave them to Momma's cat for dinner."

Fluttershy stared at Pearl in white-faced horror. "You murdered twelve innocent goldfish?" She quickly snatched Angel back from Pearl, dropping him back into her bag as if Pearl were about to skin him alive. "How could you do that?! You-You monster!"

Pearl just stared in confusion as Fluttershy broke into tears. "Like, they were just goldfish. They were so replaceable, and kind of boring."

As Rarity and Pinkie turned their attention to soothing Fluttershy. Twilight's eyes widened in realization. "Luxury? Are you related to the import/export tycoons?"

Pearl nodded her head enthusiastically. "Yeah. That was Daddy's company. But he's not around anymore. He died when I was really little when some jellyfish stung him." She paused, putting a manicured finger to her chin. "Why do they call them jellyfish if they aren't made of jelly?"

Shaking her head, she typed away at her phone. "It's Momma's company now. See, Shimmy, this is her, Excessive Opulence Luxury. She's the best mom ever and now she'll be your best mom ever!"

She shoved her phone in Sunset's face, and the former unicorn saw a picture of an older woman with the same dark blue eyes, gold colored skin, and platinum hair wearing an evening dress decorated with the image of a pile of precious stones. It looked like a red carpet event.

"And she's interested in adopting?" asked Sunset. "Weren't you enough?"

"Well it was actually, like, my idea," replied Pearl, twirling a lock of her hair around a finger. "Like, I had my twenty-first birthday last month, which was totally awesome by the way. Anyway, Momma gave me all these great presents, but then I, like, realized there was one thing I'd never had that I'd really like."
"A brain?" grumbled Sunset under her breath.

Pearl didn’t seem to catch the jab. "A baby sister! Baby sisters are so cute and I never had one! So I asked Momma to get me one. And now I have you, Shimmy! We are going to have such a totally awesome time in Paris."

Sunset, in mid-swallow, broke in a string of violent coughs as she almost choked on her saliva. "P-Paris?"

Pearl beamed. "Yeah! We're, like, going to Paris in a week. That's why I have this." She pointed at the beret perched on her head. "We have this, like, totally amazing château there." She giggled. "Isn't château a funny word? Like, French has a lot of those."

A week. The same amount of time Mrs. Circinus had given her to find another foster family. Sunset realized now that the woman hadn't been generous in making that deal. She'd just given her an already existing time limit.

If Sunset couldn't find someone else to take her in, she'd be immediately shipped off not just to another city, but across the ocean.

"Actually, we'd, like, better get going now. Come on, little sis!" Pearl grabbed Sunset's arm, hauling her away from campus and towards a white limousine parked in the distance.

Sunset dug in her heels. "I'm not going anywhere," she growled.

Pearl jerked to a halt, the beret almost falling from her head. "Hey, like, what gives, Shimmy?"

"Don't call me Shimmy," snapped Sunset. She yanked her hand free. "I said I'm not going with you."

"But you, like, have to," argued Pearl. "You're my baby sister. That means you have to do absolutely everything I tell you to do because I'm older and always know better. Momma said that's how it works."

Sunset resisted the urge to smack her forehead. She was an only child, but she was pretty sure that wasn't exactly how it worked. "I didn't say yes to the adoption."

Pearl tilted her head. "Like, why?"

"I don't want to leave CHS, or my friends." She gestured back to the girls behind her. "I have a week to find someone else to take me in. So until then, I'm not your sister, and I'm not going anywhere with you. You got that?"

Pearl looked back at the six girls again. "Oh, are these, like, those really rotten friends you're supposed to have?"

"Rotten?" hissed Rainbow.

"They're not rotten," shot back Sunset, giving the heiress a glare. "They're my best friends. I'm not leaving them or this school. So you might as well just go away."

Pearl scrunched up her face in apparent thought. "I, like, don't get why you'd want to stay in high school. I had tutors all the time. You could use them too. They were, like, the best. Everything was so easy. I mean who needs algebra or geometry or Piegore’s thorm or whatever it is anyway?"
"Pythagorean theorem?" guessed Twilight, utterly aghast. "One of the most fundamental parts of geometry?"

"Whatever," dismissed Pearl with a wave of her hand.

_Somehow, I think my brain would atrophy with your tutors._ School here wasn't especially hard, not for a prodigy like herself who was older than she appeared. History was the most challenging, naturally her academic Achilles' heel given her origins.

But Sunset would have far preferred triple the work at CHS compared to whatever, most likely edited, lesson plans Pearl's tutors would provide. She'd probably go crazy with intellectual boredom within a week, minimum.

"Yeah... no thanks, Pearl, I like it here better," she told the blonde.

"Yeah," said Rainbow, walking up next to Sunset to stand in a defensive position. "We're not going to let her go anywhere with you. So why don't you just take a hike?"

"Or you'll do what?" said Pearl with a huff. "Try anything and Momma's lawyers will sue you for everything you have. And by the way, what's with the hair? Could you, like, not decide what color to dye it or something and just used all of them? Rainbows are pretty but rainbow hair is just ugly and stupid, duh."

Rainbow's eyes were dangerously narrow. "Why you little..."

Sunset stepped between them, giving Pearl another glare. "Look Pearl, just accept the fact that I'm not your sister, and leave me and my friends alone, okay?"

Pearl frowned, her body seeming to sag. "Fine, take your stupid week," she said with a pout. Suddenly, she perked up. "Actually, yeah, go ahead, take the week, it's so much better that way!"

"And why is that?" Sunset asked cautiously. There was no telling what, if anything, went on in that head.

"Because little sis, when the week's over and you still haven't found anyone, that means we can go straight to Paris and totally have our sister bonding time there!" She bounced on her feet while clapping her hands excitedly.

"That means I can take you shopping in Paris for your new wardrobe. No, like, _a full makeover!_ Head to toe! Ooh, idea! Forget what I said about green. We should dye those streaks another shade of red. Then they'd totally look like highlights!"

She paused for a moment, lost in apparent thought. "You know, like, Sunset Luxury sounds totally weird. Hmm..."

Her face lit up like a spotlight. "That's it! How about we change your name too? New wardrobe, new look, new life, new name. If we dye your hair totally red... hey, what about Dazzling Ruby?? Dazzling Ruby Luxury. Ooh, that's totally going to be your name now. I'll call you Ruby, no, Little Ruby because you're my little sister!"

"Of course, like, Momma said that you'd need to act like a Luxury if you want to be one of us. But, like, don't worry, Little Ruby, I'm going to teach you everything I know. You'll walk like one of us, talk like one of us, think like one of us. Ooh! You'll be, like, a second me! Isn't that great? I mean I am, like, such a popular person, who wouldn't want to be like me?"
She grinned maniacally at Sunset. "I know it seems like a lot, and I know you're being all grumpy now, but trust me, Ruby, I'll help make you into the best little sister Luxury ever. You'll totally learn to love it for sure. We'll have so much fun making you over."

While Pearl spoke, Sunset just stood there in stunned silence. It wasn't just the words. There was something in the heiress's gaze that unsettled her. Pearl was looking at Sunset not in the way one would look at a person.

Rather, it was more like the way Rarity would look at a new dress, or the way Pinkie Pie looked at a tray of fresh cupcakes. Like she was an object or a doll.

An image floated up in her mind of herself altered by Pearl, dressing, walking, and talking like her. A crawling sensation made itself known across her skin in response.

*I think I'd rather fall into a river again, and drown.*

If Pearl got her hands on her, Sunset had to wonder if there would even be anything left of herself to recognize in the mirror.

It was then that she realized, much to her increasing horror and disgust, that since she was only sixteen here, she'd be stuck with her foster family until she was an adult. That meant she would be saddled with Pearl for two years. Her skin crawled again, more violently than before.

Pearl gave a loud gasp. "We should totally take a camera along to film it all. You're my first little sister so we should save it all for, like, posterity. We can, like, even edit into a makeover montage and watch it in the home theater. I love those! Maybe I could use the footage to get myself a reality TV show! Wouldn't that be totally great?

"Yeah, yeah it would totally work. After all, it'll be such a totally big change." She held her hand out in front of her, as if framing a sign. "Sunset Shimmer, unpopular orphan girl transformed into Dazzling Ruby Luxury on the streets of beautiful Paris."

Pearl let out a high-pitched squeal that would have caused any dog in the area to whimper. "You'll be infamous, and I'll be on TV! You're going to be the best little sister ever, Ruby."

"Don't count on it," growled Sunset, not even bothering to correct her on her use of infamous. Sunset didn't really want to know whether she'd meant to say famous or not, because there was no way in Tartarus this was happening. "I'm going to find someone else," she repeated.

Pearl laughed. "As if. There's, like, no way you could find somebody better to stay with than Momma and me. But hey, I'll, like, let you try."

She paused, seemingly in thought. "You know, like, when I asked for a baby sister, I totally didn't expect one as old as you. But now, I've, like, realized something."

Sunset crossed her arms over her chest. "And what's that?"

Pearl took a few steps forward, looming over Sunset as she bent down so the two were eye level, a pleasant smile plastered onto her face. "Like, I don't just want a little sister to play with anymore."

One of her manicured fingernails reached out to touch Sunset's nose playfully. "I want you."

She gave a little giggle as her smile became something more akin to a hungry great white shark. "And here's the thing you, like, really need to learn, Little Ruby. Momma always gets me what I want. Always. So like, you can try. But I know you're going to be Little Ruby no matter what."
She straightened up, glancing back at Sunset's friends, all of them now wearing identical, angry expressions. "Hey, like, I'll pay all of you like three hundred bucks each if you keep Little Ruby in, like, one piece for me. Like, I don't want her getting hurt because people are all jealous of her new big sister. I'll even throw in another, like, two hundred if you convince her to come home early."

"Keep your money, you airhead!" screamed Rainbow.

"You think you can just pay us to make our friend do something she clearly doesn't want to do?" asked Twilight in complete disbelief.

"Like, duh, Four-Eyes," replied Pearl. "I'll even throw in a pair of contacts for you to replace those seriously lame glasses."

Twilight pushed her glasses back up her nose. "Forget it!"

"Whatever," shot back Pearl. She looked back at Sunset, giving her a giant smile. "I guess I'll see you in a week." Turning, she walked off, only to turn around and offer one final wave. "See you at the château, Little Ruby!"

After Pearl left, Applejack stepped up beside Sunset. "Sugarcube, now I know we got some of what that was about, but would you mind tellin' us—"

"What was that?!" screamed Rainbow.

"Yes, darling, I do believe we deserve an explanation," said Rarity, taking a few deep breaths to calm herself.

Sunset sighed, walking over to the trashcan to retrieve her jacket and journal. Thankfully neither seemed stained or damaged, the jacket out of luck, and the journal because of light protection spells Celestia had placed on it when she'd first given it to Sunset.

Slipping the jacket back on, she sat down on the same bench as before, her friends following behind. "That," Sunset said, letting out a groan, "was part of why I was called to Principal Celestia's office. When I got there..."

"...And that's when you showed up."

"So," began Applejack. "What you're sayin' is if you don't find someone else in a week..."

"That meanie mean pants Mrs. Circinus will stick you with that ultra meanie mean pants Pearl?" finished Pinkie.

Sunset nodded. Now that she knew about Pearl, her agreement with Mrs. Circinus seemed increasingly like a deal with Discord.

*I know you're going to be Little Ruby no matter what.*

Sunset shuddered. Being stuck with Pearl was like several of her nightmares put together. But this one was real, very real and very much looming over her immediate future.

"I still don't get why this Mrs. Circinus was convinced you had terrible friends," said Twilight.

"She brought up when I tackled Rainbow at the music festival, for one. Thought I did that because I was angry at not being a member," muttered Sunset. "But mostly she brought up Anon-a-Miss. She even found pictures."
All of the others save for Twilight cringed. Rainbow's face darkened as she looked down at her shoes, and a silence descended over all of them. Even the normally talkative Pinkie was mute, her hair seeming deflated.

Finally, Twilight spoke up. "What's Anon-a-Miss?"

"It was when we screwed up," muttered Rainbow, the others nodding along with her.

"Twilight, I know it's hard to believe whenever I say this," said Sunset, looking over at her friend, "but I was a really horrible person. Then Princess Twilight left me with them to learn about friendship. But in December, this anonymous MyStable account came up, spilling all sorts of secrets. It got to the whole school, and everyone thought I was responsible."

"And," Rarity admitted with complete shame, "We all believed Sunset was responsible as well."

"You did?" asked Twilight in shock.

"I hurt them really badly, Twi," said Sunset flatly. "I hurt them all for years. Some of those hurts hadn't really been resolved, I guess."

"Still doesn't make it right," snapped Rainbow, more angry at herself than Sunset. "We were supposed to be your friends."

Twilight watched the six other girls, the misery, regret, and hurt radiating off of them so strong it was practically tangible. "So who was responsible?"

"My sister and her friends," said Applejack, irritation creeping into her voice. "They were jealous of us spendin' time with Sunset. Eventually they all broke down and confessed. That's why they've been servin' six months of detention."

"Once they told us," added Fluttershy, "we all went to find Sunset to apologize."

They'd found Sunset in the library, huddled on a bed of books. The fire-haired girl had gone there for the night. She'd known Princess Twilight had spent the night there, and in her misery, Sunset had just wanted to feel closer to the princess that offered her a helping hand, and not return to her lonely apartment.

Apologies were said all around, forgiveness begged for, an ironic twist from the way Sunset herself had asked to be forgiven. Sunset had broken down into tears again during their talk, somehow finding tears to shed after crying she didn't even know how many times that day, or the days prior.

She'd spent Christmas with them, shared Hearth’s Warming songs and stories while they in turn shared Christmas traditions with her.

But there had been scars. The entire incident only pushed her further into the shyness she'd had before the music festival. And though she'd been innocent, the entire mess hadn't helped her reputation at school either, some still thinking she'd really been behind it all.

And, clearly, it had left scars on her friends too.

"We're not letting you down again," said Rainbow, hands tightened into fists. "No way are we letting that Circinus lady stick you with Pearl. No way."

"I wouldn't be able to live with myself if you got stuck with that... that goldfish murderer," said Fluttershy, a rare fire in her eyes.
"If you need a family to stay with, you don't need to look further than us, sugarcube," said Applejack, a smile on her face.

"We can each ask our parents if they'd be able to take you in," voiced Rarity in agreement. "I certainly can't let that awful woman ruin your sense of style."

"Yeah!" cried Pinkie, bouncing on her feet. "I already have three sisters, and I'd love to have another. I'll ask Mom and Dad right away!"

Sunset gave her friends a warm smile. "Thanks, girls. I knew I could count on you."

Twilight too, seemed swept up in their enthusiasm. "That Mrs. Circinus made it clear she has to approve of whoever takes you in." She pushed her glasses back again, doing some mental calculations.

"She really seemed to think you have terrible friends, and she was dead set on the Luxuries, so we should expect some resistance from her. Given how things went before, I suggest that once we all check with our families we hold a strategy meeting to try and anticipate her complaints before she comes back."

"Yeah!" said Rainbow enthusiastically, already worked up like she was about to compete. "She only got to you today because she took you by surprise. This time we'll come up with a game plan, and between all of us, and you and Twi's brainpower, we'll beat her next week for sure." She emphasized her point by thrusting a fist into her palm.

Applejack rubbed her chin in thought. "What I can't figure out is who gave that Mrs. Circinus all that stuff about you anyway."

"It could have been a lot of people," answered Sunset. Based on the data she'd had, there were several possibilities. It could have been a student at CHS. There were still those that hated her, and not just Trixie, and those pictures had definitely come from students.

There were also some teachers, ones she thankfully didn't have anymore, that also still disliked her, though none had ever tried anything for fear of Celestia and Luna. And of course, there were even parents that hated her for the things she'd done.

Any person or persons from those groups, or even a mix of the groups themselves, could have gathered that information.

She shook her head. "It doesn't really matter right now who sent that information to CPS. What matters is getting them off my back."

There was a loud growl, and the group turned to look at Pinkie. The energetic girl chuckled, clutching her stomach. "Heh, heh, I guess all this pep talk is making me hungry."

Sunset laughed. "Why don't you girls start heading for Sugarcube Corner? I don't know about you, but I think we should relax first before we do anything."

Rarity nodded her head. "Good idea, darling, this whole thing has been a bit, shall we say, taxing. A bite to eat sounds perfect right now."

"Aren't you coming too?" asked Fluttershy.

"I want to finish writing to Princess Twilight first. I got interrupted by Pearl. Don't worry, I'll be right behind."
As the others left, Sunset opened her journal and found the page she'd been on. There was still a jagged line at the end of her entry from Pearl's interruption. She wrote out the rest of her message, offering an extra apology.

Hopefully Princess Twilight hadn't been reading it already and gone berserk at the sudden stop. Then again, if she had, she'd probably be here by now.

"Hey, Sunset."

As the former unicorn closed her journal, she looked up to see Flash Sentry standing there. "Hi, Flash."

The musician looked off toward the edge of the campus. "Was that Gleaming Pearl Luxury I saw earlier?"

Sunset raised an eyebrow. "You know her personally or something? I thought your type would have more brainpower."

The musician's cheeks flushed. "I don't actually know her. But my brother's girlfriend reads the tabloids. Out loud. And Pearl is on the cover a lot." He sat down on the bench next to her. "So how did you get involved with the Airhead Heiress?"

Sunset snorted with laughter. "Airhead Heiress? That's a good one." Her laughter died down as she once again remembered why Pearl had been there. "A CPS agent found out I live alone, and if I can't find a legal guardian in a week, she's going to send me to the Luxuries where I'll be Pearl's plaything in Paris."

"Man, that's nasty," said Flash, putting a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "You know, if it were up to me, I'd let you stay with us. But... well, you know my mom still hates your guts."

Sunset nodded. Mrs. Sentry had never liked Sunset from the day she'd started dating Flash. She'd been justified in her dislike, of course, what with all the stupid, petty things Sunset put Flash through just for fun.

Even after the Fall Formal, his mother had still detested her, despite Flash insisting the former unicorn had changed. The last time Sunset had been over to Flash's house had been after the music festival. She'd offered to help him with some homework he'd been struggling with.

When Mrs. Sentry had spotted her, Sunset had been pelted with cold, leftover lasagna, and had been forced to make a hasty, and messy, retreat. Flash had apologized for it afterwards. Personally, she was just glad it hadn't been something meat-based. If it had, she might have vomited.

She suddenly came to the horrible realization that she had no idea of Pearl's opinion on vegetarianism. "H-Hey Flash, those tabloids ever say what Pearl's favorite food is?"

Flash blinked. "Um, steak, I think."

Oh great. That means she'll probably make me eat it too. She shuddered again. "Thanks for offering anyway, Flash. You're a good guy."

Flash smiled. "No problem, Sunset. I hope you figure this out."

"Me too." She got up off the bench. "I'd better join the girls now before they send a search party. See you later."
"Later."

As Sunset walked away from CHS, her legs felt tired. No, her whole body felt tired. It wasn't fair. She'd felt rested and full of energy not long before. Now she was so exhausted. It was like her nightmares hadn't stopped, all the stress coming right back and bearing down on her worse than before.

Even the bright and cheerful day had somehow been lost, a thick covering of grayish clouds blowing in, blocking out the warm solar rays and dropping the air temperature.

It was as if Mrs. Circinus or Pearl had somehow willed the weather to increase the sense of gloom rising up inside her, and make the trudge, because that's what it felt like now, to Sugarcube Corner seem harder.

Sunset shook her head. She couldn't allow herself to get depressed. Her friends were all going to help her. She'd escape from Circinus and from Pearl. They'd faced bigger and more powerful threats than those two. Hay, she'd faced bigger things while she was still in Equestria. There was no way they'd be beaten like this.

Momma always gets me what I want. Always.

The reminder of Pearl's threat stuck in her memory, hanging over her head like a metaphorical axe, big, heavy, and already glistening with blood. Her mind conjured an image of Pearl holding the horrible weapon aloft, grinning the whole time as she swung it down.

And then another thought occurred to her. What if Pearl found out about her magic, or Equestria? Finding out her foster sister was from a land of magical ponies would probably make Pearl's grip even tighter, not to mention all the other ramifications.

Sunset shivered as a strong, cold breeze passed through, punctuating the terrible thought. She pulled the two sides of her jacket closer in an attempt to fight the chill.

Letting out a sigh, she realized that she really did need to get her mind off of all this. Perhaps she'd feel better with more sugar in her blood stream. She'd need the energy anyway, and she was not going to open up that coffee can again.

As she continued her walk to the shop, the feeling of heaviness stayed, hanging down on her with every single step.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: I hope you all enjoyed that chapter. As you might have been able to tell, I made use of the contents of the IDW 2014 holiday special here. I love the MLP comics they put out, and this story, if you hadn’t noticed already, will be peppered with things from the comics.

If you haven’t read them, don’t worry. You won’t need to have read them to follow along or anything. If something needs explaining, I’ll do that.

And yes, I know I changed the placement of the holiday special from after RR to before RR. I forget if I mentioned this before somewhere, but I follow a rule of cautious
judgement when it comes to canon alteration. I try to mix and match canon across mediums where they work, and I only flat out change things when I have very good reasons that benefit the story.

In this case, I did have story-based reasons, and timeline-based reasons. The same essential resolution happened as you can see, but Princess Twilight’s involvement was removed. Please bear with me for that.
Chapter 5: Of Promises Once Made

The lobby of the Castle of Friendship was quiet that Saturday. Not a soul was to be found waiting, not a single friend or even a citizen there to visit Equestria's newest princess. The early afternoon sun filtered in through the windows, creating a pleasant glimmering effect on the walls and floor of the sparsely furnished room.

A single point of golden light came into existence, floating a foot off the floor. It grew quickly into a giant golden bubble before popping, the sound echoing into the connecting hallways.

In place of the flash of magic, there was now a single pony, Princess Celestia, princess of the sun and co-ruler of Equestria. She shook her head a little as the traces of her spell faded away.

"I really must practice teleporting more often," muttered the princess as she got her bearings. "That was a far bumpier trip than it should have been."

Looking around the lobby and finding nopony, Celestia smiled for a moment. Perhaps she would be able to sneak up on Twilight. The surprise on her former student's face would be absolutely priceless. Would Twilight jump all the way to the top of her library?

Her amused thoughts were interrupted when she spotted a small letter propped up on a wooden tripod. At the very top of the letter was written Wednesday's date. Celestia's eyes scanned the message, the words written in what could only have been Twilight's hornwriting.

To all visitors

*I, Princess Twilight Sparkle, will be absent for the next several days. I, along with my friends (the Elements of Harmony to anypony who doesn't know, although it would be rather hard not to know), my assistant Spike, and my student Starlight Glimmer, will be heading to Horseshoe Bay for a brief vacation, and to observe the migration of a rare breed of tropical fish. For those wanting access to the public library, please sign your names in the ledger provided, as well as any checked-out books. And if anypony tries to take a book without logging it, be aware that all of them have a tracking spell, and I will verify the ledger when I return. We will be returning on the morning train from Baltimare next weekend. Please hold all your questions or concerns until then. Below the letter had been added an extra sentence, this one she recognized as having been written by Spike.

And this time we'll try not to get roped into being pirates.*
Celestia cocked an eyebrow at that. "Pirates?"

The princess's face fell at her plans for amusement being foiled. She was further disappointed at Starlight being absent. Twilight taking on a student of her own filled Celestia with pride, and she'd been curious to meet her, and to see her magical skill with her own eyes.

Celestia had asked about meeting her a few times, but none of those requests ever worked out. She suspected the young unicorn was afraid of the confrontation. All things considered, she was probably within her rights to feel that way, were it the case.

Trotting down a hallway, Celestia turned her attention to her original reason for visiting. Her economic advisor, Supply Curve, was working on a budget proposal for the coming months. The older pegasus stallion had wanted to examine the master work of one of the greatest economists of the last few centuries, one Bull Market, in order to draw ideas.

She remembered Bull Market quite well, a short but very wide earth pony stallion with an incredibly astute mind for bits. Though generally level-headed, he became quite volatile if anypony made a crack at his color blindness, something for which he'd been mocked as a colt.

That flare of temper and his musculature made for a bad combination. Several vases and other such items had needed replacing when he was around. But despite the collateral damage, she'd rather liked the old stallion.

Unfortunately, the book in question couldn't be located in the Canterlot Archive. Its misplacement was being looked into, but the only other known copy of the work was among the books Celestia had given Twilight. Celestia only knew that because Twilight had sent a detailed list of various titles lost with the destruction of the Golden Oak Library.

Poor Twilight. The mare had been so distraught at the destruction of her old home. The way the list had been heavily cross-indexed by every conceivable bit of data indicated Twilight's stress level at the time. Helping her reconstruct her library was the least Celestia could do.

The trip involved a number of false turns. There was hardly anything in the castle hallways to act as a landmark. Celestia would have to see about helping Twilight with navigation.

At one point, Celestia stumbled onto the public library, brand new ledger clearly displayed right inside the doors on top of the oak desk.

Twilight had been adamantly against leaving Ponyville without a public library, even if it rarely saw use. As such, she'd dedicated part of her new home to fill that purpose, and perhaps to give herself back a sense of normalcy.

Finally, Celestia managed to find the right place, Twilight's private library. It was as massive a collection as the public one or perhaps larger, but just as well laid out.

It didn't take Celestia long to find the book she needed, not with Twilight's obsessive level of organization. Book held tightly in her magic, Celestia was about to write a note to inform Twilight of her visit when her eyes fell onto something else.

Placed off to the side was a large mirror set inside an upside down horseshoe frame. A mirror she knew all too well. It was an enchanted mirror crafted by Starswirl the Bearded himself, the same one that used to be in her throne room, and in the Crystal Empire. The one Sunset Shimmer had run through.

Various forms of machines surrounded it now. Celestia had heard Twilight speak of her device, but
she'd never seen it with her own eyes.

That Twilight had managed to bypass Starswirl's system of dimensional travel was nothing short of astounding, and by only using such a simple item. Speaking of which...

There it was, on a stand to the left of the mirror. A simple journal with her cutie mark on it.

Celestia had given it to Sunset when she was thirteen, a way to keep in touch on long trips. Sunset's arrogance was still in its infancy at that point, so their conversations still retained some of the pleasantness they lacked in later years.

Just looking at it made Celestia's chest ache. The journal, too, had been among the bequeathed books, but not by choice. It had been near the donation pile and the workponies had taken the journal along by mistake.

Normally, Celestia would have asked for the return of her personal property right away. But then the Sirens happened, and Sunset needed help. After that, after hearing the entire story, it seemed too awkward, too wrong, to ask for the journal back.

The ache in her chest was even worse now.

Suddenly, the book began to glow and shake. Celestia's eyes widened. A message was incoming. A message from Sunset.

The book flashed with magic, but it was a slow, lethargic pulse, rather than the usual energetic reactions.

The way the enchantment was designed, when a new message had been transcribed, the book was able to detect when it was opened to the newly filled pages. In the event that messages arrived and the book hadn't been opened, in other words, the messages were unread, it would flash slowly like that for a minute before stopping, and repeating the process at intervals throughout the day.

The message was undoubtedly for Twilight. Celestia had no right to read whatever had been written on those pages.

And yet, curiosity gnawed at her, burying its fangs into her heart like a pack of rabid timber wolves.

Twilight had told her Sunset was being looked after, as well as many other things about the current state of the human world beyond the mirror. It all sounded so strange and yet fascinating in ways, reminding her of her own adventures with Starswirl across the vast multiverse.

But there were times when Celestia couldn't help but worry about her former student, whether she was truly well, truly safe. Sunset was, after all, a unicorn living far from the comforts of her home.

Perhaps the message contained within would soothe her?

Giving in to her curiosity, Celestia nodded her head in silent agreement and picked up the journal. The last time she'd held this book was right after Sunset stole Twilight's crown.

The message was most likely some happy little life update, not unlike Twilight's friendship reports. Celestia smiled a little. She hadn't read something like that from Sunset in so many years.

The very thought of reading Sunset's words again, untainted by arrogance or ambition, was like a tiny miracle.
Part of her acknowledged that it was horribly rude to read the correspondence of others. But Twilight didn't need to know. *I can just mention in my note that Sunset left a message and reset the spell.*

Using her magic, she commanded the journal to open to the unread message, and began to read.

*Dear Twilight*

*I wish I could tell you I have some happy news, but I don't. I ran into some real trouble today. I got called to Principal Celestia's office, and waiting for me was somebody from Child Protective Services. It's their version of Foal Protective Services.*

*Her name was Mrs. Circinus. Twi, she knew I was living alone. She'd gotten reports from a "concerned party", whatever that means. And we're not talking a few little things either.*

*She wants to stick me with a family that lives in another part of the state. She said it was better for me to leave CHS completely. She knew about me being a bully. And she said my friends were a "bad influence." She even knew about Anon-a-Miss.*

*You know I forgave the girls for that mess. But this woman, she used it as ammunition. She used it against them. She even knew about how I tackled Rainbow at the music festival. Of course I couldn't tell her I did that to keep Rainbow's magic a secret, and I tried to lie my way out of it.*

*She's sharp. I tried, and so did Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna. But Mrs. Circinus just turned everything back on us. The only way I had to stop her from taking me away right there was to make a deal.*

*I have about a week to find a foster family, and if I can't find one she approves of, I'll have to go to her choice without argument. I'm going to ask the girls when they get out of cla—*

*Sorry about the interruption there, Twilight. I... things just got worse. The reason I got cut off is that I had a surprise run-in with my prospective foster sister. Her name is Gleaming Pearl Luxury. And Twi, she's an airhead. I know you're probably thinking that that's a horrible thing to call a person, but I mean it.*

*She grabbed my journal and threw it in the garbage because it didn't look like a girl's diary. And then she tossed my jacket in there too. Both of them are fine. But Twilight, there is no way in Tartarus I'm going to be stuck with her for a sister.*

*Pearl's family is incredibly wealthy, and the reason her mom is looking for a girl is because Pearl asked for a baby sister as a late birthday present. And you know how you said your Rarity has those inspiration kicks too?*

*Well, Pearl was like that. Except with her, she didn't seem to have much interest in the actual person. She thought I should change my name to Dazzling Ruby, and wanted to make me over completely, starting with dyeing my hair totally red and Celestia knows what else.*

*I think she wanted less of a sister and more of a life-sized doll to play with, or that she doesn't really understand the difference. She also has no concept of personal space.*

*And before you think her mother will be of any help, she told Pearl that since I'm her little sister, I have to do whatever Pearl tells me to because she's older and always knows better.*

*And don't even get me started on her offer of giving me her old tutors so I can finish school. If they give me what they gave her, I might as well not be in school. Worst of all, the Luxuries are going to Paris in a week. As far as comparative geography, that's the same as Maris, Prance, across the*
ocean.

The girls are going to talk to each of their families about taking me in, and we're going to try to do some planning. I don't need you to rush over here, I just wanted to let you know, and I wanted another friendly ear.

Sunset Shimmer

The pages beyond glowed with magic. These too, carried more unread messages. A turn of the page revealed them to be dated this very day.

Dear Twilight

Things haven't been going the best over here. The girls spoke to their families first thing. Rainbow's parents are a no. They can't afford to take in someone else, let alone another teenage girl.

Pinkie's out too. Her sister Limestone called before Pinkie got to talk to her parents. She's moving back in with them, so there's no way they can take me.

More bad news came in today, first from Fluttershy. If I moved in with her, I'd have to deal with Zephyr. But honestly I'd take him over Pearl. But Fluttershy is out. There was some kind of problem at the factory where her dad works today. His job is looking at risk right now, and so it's not a great idea for them to take someone in.

She and her parents feel horrible about it. But I know it's for the best. Her dad's job problems wouldn't help win the fight with Mrs. Circinus.

A few hours ago I got a call from Rarity. They had a massive flood at their house. It's an old place, and a hot water pipe burst somewhere deep in the walls of the bathroom attached to their guest room.

They think it got jarred by something Sweetie Belle and her friends did. Rarity might have said something about a science project, I'm not sure. She was kind of frantic on the phone. But whatever they did, the thing had been leaking for days before it finally broke through the wall tonight.

They're looking at major cleanup and repairs, and both the guest room and bathroom are shot. Which means I can't move in with them anymore either, not in time, anyway.

I swear, Twi, it's almost like the universe is conspiring against me. Applejack's family is still open, and so is Twilight's, the human you I mean. But Granny Smith is out visiting her cousin Apple Rose. She won't be back until the deadline, and we all agreed that whoever takes me in has to physically be here come Wednesday.

Twilight's parents are out of town too. Her mom got invited to some sort of big writer's conference at the last minute, and her dad went with her. Twilight contacted them, and they're coming back as soon as possible, but it probably won't be until the deadline too. They're going to be back in the morning though, so that helps, I guess.

The girls tell me things will be fine, and it's not like I don't trust them. I just...

I'm scared, Twilight. I'm really scared. A part of me can't help but worry. Before we all went home, I had six possible options, then I had four. And today those options just got cut in half again. And even the options I do have will be cutting it close.

I can't help but think about what happens if something else goes wrong, or if we fail. The only real
good thing about all this is that Mrs. Circinus hasn't dug too much into my background, so at least my being from Equestria is safe.

I don't want to go, Twilight. I don't want to be taken away from CHS, my only friends, and the portal. I've finally managed to get my life back on track and now there's a chance I'll lose everything I've had these last few months.

Mrs. Circinus isn't going to be easy to convince. I know that. She had so much information on me in the first place, and she twisted everything around. And even without being a CPS agent, there's something about her that just sets me on edge.

It's not just me, either. Celestia and Luna agreed. There's something about that woman that just makes you squirm when she looks at you.

I don't want to go with the Luxuries, but if I can't change her mind, I'll have to. If I get stuck with Pearl for a sister, I'll be miserable. I might not even recognize myself after Pearl's done with me. She said she'd teach me how to be a Luxury, that I'd be like a second her. She said "I'll help make you into the best little sister Luxury ever."

Just thinking about that and the way she said it freaks me out.

If I were just two years older over here I wouldn't have this problem. But then, if I were two years older, I wouldn't have met the others.

I know it's past midnight. Maybe you're up late. But the truth is, I can't sleep. The deadline isn't for days, and my friends are ready to help, and I love them so much for that. But I just can't sleep. I guess Rarity's call shook me a little. So here I am, just sitting on my bed, writing to you.

I know you're probably busy lately. Maybe it's important royal business, or maybe not. You've got a student to help now, after all. Right now you might even be asleep. I can't exactly expect you to be tied to this thing.

But get back to me soon, okay, Twilight? I just... I need help here. I need help getting through this.

If something goes wrong, okay, I don't know what I'd do.

Sunset Shimmer

Celestia stood there, frozen in place as her eyes moved over the last few lines. Her jaw fell open. The book she'd held in her magic fell to the floor with a crash, the sound echoing off the room's high ceiling.

A coldness swept over the sun princess, along with a feeling of disorientation. Her mind was racing, emotions lashing out wildly inside her skull, and the logical part of her brain was desperately trying to reign them in.

Her original task utterly forgotten, Celestia did the best thing she could think of. She teleported back to Canterlot.

When Celestia popped back into Canterlot Castle, she felt as heavy as lead. She was half-convinced that had she attempted to fly back, she wouldn't have been able to get off the ground, let alone climb to Canterlot's altitude.

There was a rattling of metal from the guards at her sudden entrance. Only their rigorous training
prevented them from jumping in surprise.

A gray-haired unicorn stallion wearing a red coat trotted up to her. "You're back from your trip, Your Highness," said Kibitz. "I trust you found the book in question?"

Celestia glanced in his direction, pausing before she remembered why she'd left the castle, and realizing the book was no longer in her grip. "Um, no. I didn't."

Kibitz raised a gray eyebrow. "You didn't? That's odd. With Miss Sparkle's sense of organization, I thought it would have been easy to find."

"Your Highness?" A mare was walking up to her now, Raven Inkwell, her secretary. She'd been an invaluable addition to her staff that had been taken on while Twilight was still a student.

Raven could have applied for the position, or a multitude of others, simply on the fact that she was Professor Inkwell's grandniece, what with the sun princess's fondness for the old mare. But she'd applied for the position on her own skills, and more than proven her trustworthiness and capability.

Her notepad floated in front of her, and the unicorn pulled out the pencil that was perpetually behind her right ear. "Your meeting with the mayor of Neigh Orleans is in an hour, but the mayor has already arrived. Do you want to see her now?"

Kibitz's eyes widened. "Getting ahead by an hour? That would be a very rare jump. Why, we might even be able to get to some of those postponed meetings if we—"

"Actually, Kibitz," interrupted Celestia. "Keep the schedule as it is."

The stallion turned to her in surprise. "But Your Highness..."

"Raven, I will meet with the mayor at the scheduled time," she told the mare, her voice devoid of emotion.

Raven was about to make a note, but the princess's tone seemed to catch her attention. The white unicorn looked up at her with concern. "Your Highness, is something the matter?"

Kibitz too, shared that sudden look of concern. "Did something happen, Your Highness?"

Celestia mentally cursed the two unicorns for knowing her so well. Her face took on the usual mask of complete serenity, though the storm of emotions still raging inside her made it harder to maintain. "I'm fine. I just wish to be alone for a while. I will be in my private quarters. Raven," she moved her magenta eyes over to the mare, "Make sure I'm not disturbed."

The two unicorns looked at each other before turning back to Celestia. "Yes, Your Highness," replied Raven. Either Celestia's mask had worked, or they both decided not to press her. Or perhaps they'd mention something to Luna.

The last of those options didn't thrill her as she trotted slowly off to her rooms. She didn't need Luna prying right now. All Celestia needed was time to sort everything out. As she walked the halls on the short trip, she maintained her mask, smiling and nodding to every servant or guard she passed.

Once the door to her private rooms closed, her mask crumbled into dust. Her wings drooped. Holding it up had taken more out of her than she'd thought it would.

Philomena gave a squawk, taking off from her usual perch and landing on her back. Her warm beak nuzzled itself against Celestia's mane. "Hello, Philomena," she greeted, returning the gesture.
Sitting down on a lush sofa, the princess heaved a sigh. “I wish I could say things were fine, but they aren’t. Sunset Shimmer is in trouble.”

Philomena gave another, more irritated squawk, her body heat spiking.

"Now, now," scolded Celestia. "I know she wasn't very kind to you before she left, but you shouldn’t be like that."

The phoenix made another angry noise in retort.

"Alright, she wasn't very nice to anypony," conceded the princess. "But she wasn't always like that, remember?"

Looking over at her bookshelves, one caught her eye. She grabbed it in her magic and pulled it over to the couch. Philomena peered over her shoulder. It was a sky blue album, the edges covered in gold leaf. On the cover was the image of a red and gold sun outlined in gold thread.

"No," Celestia whispered. "She wasn't always like that."

Opening it up, she found herself faced with memories. So many memories, all of them featuring a pony with a red and yellow mane. On the first few pages were pictures of Sunset's first days in the castle, ironically the newest additions to this collection.

In the years following Sunset's departure, Celestia realized to her dismay that there weren’t many pictures from those early, happier days. So she’d used her magic to imprint her own memories onto photographic paper as a sort of substitute, to fill the glaring void in the album.

They were fine substitutes, as clear as or clearer than the real photographs. But it meant that Sunset was always alone in them, even at times when she hadn't been. It simply highlighted both their artificiality, and Sunset's social isolation.

Celestia put a hoof over one of those early photos. It was the day Sunset demonstrated her abilities to the faculty of Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. The little filly had managed to lift a grand piano half a foot off the floor with her magic, as well as an orchestra's worth of instruments that she'd made orbit the piano like a little musical solar system.

It was a startling feat normally unseen outside of the strange surges of foals, even if it had given Sunset a powerful headache afterwards.

The solar princess smiled as she saw the face of Professor Nox Arcana in the background. The usually stuffy stallion had his jaw hanging open, his eyes practically popping out of their sockets. That expression alone had been priceless. So too, was the beaming smile on Sunset's little face.

She'd displayed so much skill and power at such a young age. As a filly, Twilight's normal magical power had never managed to match that initial surge. And though Twilight eventually matched and surpassed Sunset in that capacity, it had taken her many years to do so.

Turning the page again, she stopped, and gave her feathered companion a nudge.

It showed a young but worried Sunset peering into Philomena's cage, its floor littered with dozens of feathers. "Remember how worried she was when she first saw you burning out?" she asked. "Even when I told her what was going on, she didn't stop worrying."

The phoenix looked down at the floor. She squawked again, but this time, it was far more reserved.
"And remember," Celestia continued, "when she first saw you? She said you were the," the princess cleared her throat, trying to approximate Sunset's young voice, "the prettiest bird I've ever seen, with the prettiest feathers ever."

Now, Philomena blushed.

"And now," said the princess, her voice heavy, "she's in serious trouble."

I'm scared, Twilight. I'm really scared.

Sunset's words echoed in her ears. They sounded so very foreign to Celestia, so wrong. The Sunset Shimmer she remembered was a confident young mare.

Yes, a confidence that slid into monumental arrogance like a boulder going downhill, she reminded herself.

Well, no matter how much it got out of control, it had never been baseless. The Sunset she'd taught had been skilled and capable, and in her later years faced many a challenge, similar to Twilight, though on a lesser scale only for lack of opportunity. Sunset hadn't truly been scared of anything since she was a little filly.

And yet, the fear in her student's words had been as tangible as the album before her now.

Celestia shook her head, trying to get her thoughts in order. "I should just tell Twilight," she muttered, running a hoof through her mane. "The portal is her responsibility now, and Sunset asked for her help."

For a moment, a burning sensation made itself known in the pit of her stomach, like acid reflux. Celestia couldn't think of anything in her diet today that could have caused it, but she pushed it down. It was probably the sudden shock of all this.

"Yes," she said again. "I should just tell Twilight. She probably won't be happy about her trip being cut sho—"

Celestia paused, brow furrowing as her magic turned the album to a new page. Her eyes were locked on a new picture. One she hadn't seen before. Sunset was lying in a hospital bed, eyes closed, bandages wrapped around her head. Her forelegs were covered in cuts and bruises.

Celestia certainly remembered this day, this was one of the memory photos. But she didn't recall making it into one. She'd created all of them at once. Perhaps this one had been created without her conscious knowledge?

As she stared longer at the image, she could practically hear the rhythmic breathing of the little filly on the bed, and the steady beep of the heart monitor.

Yes, she remembered this day all too well.

Where is she?

Celestia scanned the ground from her position high above, giving her wings another flap as she flew over Trottingham. How in the world an eight-year-old filly could get so far away, Celestia didn't know.

It had started off so well. Sunset had been at the castle for around a year now. The little filly was
doing fantastically as Celestia’s personal student, passing every test with flying colors. It made Celestia wonder if the child was the destined Element of Magic she’d been hoping for all these centuries.

When her trip to Trottingham had come up, Sunset had begged to come along. She’d never been outside of Canterlot before, and a trip across the sea to the Griffish Isles in the east had utterly captured her foalish imagination. She’d allowed it, but only if Sunset was on her best behavior while Celestia was working.

The actual trip had been... less smooth, in the literal and metaphorical sense. Sunset's eyes had lit up as they'd taken off in the royal chariot. But after they'd gained enough altitude, she'd displayed the tell-tale symptoms of air sickness, which only got worse in the face of turbulence.

One guard helmet had been sacrificed into becoming an impromptu bucket. It would have been even worse had one of her other guards not offered up nausea medication fit for children. It worked like a charm, and for the rest of the ride, Sunset slept curled up on her back.

Celestia had never been more thankful, or more embarrassed, that one of her guards had thought ahead of her. She'd made a mental note to give that particular guard a raise, and to pack nausea medication of her own next time.

She'd met with the mayor of Trottingham right away, despite her student's wishes to sightsee. Monsters had been acting up at the edge of town, and that took priority. So she'd left Sunset outside the room to wait.

But when she'd come out a little more than an hour later, Sunset was nowhere to be seen.

Just where had she gone to? Celestia had tried several tourist spots nearest town hall, but they'd yielded nothing. She'd left her guards to conduct the rest of the searches on the ground while she took to the air.

Still finding neither hide nor hair of the filly, Celestia cast both the Eagle Eye spell and the Bat Ears spell to increase her sensory range. She paused for a moment to absorb the sudden increase in information rushing into her brain.

Taking a deep breath, she glided out towards the forest at the edge of Trottingham. It was less likely that Sunset had gotten that far, but she couldn't overlook it. As she flew closer, she picked up a scrap of sound.

"...Help.... Princess Celestia, help."

It was faint, but for Celestia, it might as well have been a thunderclap.

It was Sunset's voice.

Celestia shot forward, tracing the sound to the forest. Her heart stopped as she spotted her student. She was lying there in a clearing, barely moving and all four of her legs wrapped in thick webbing. There was a gash on her forehead above her horn, blood trickling down to stain the soil crimson. Sunset's mouth kept moving, uttering faint pleas for help, but her eyes were closed.

Closing in on her was a gigantic spider, pitch black, glossy, a large, blood red hourglass on its abdomen, the points plainly visible from the side. A black widow. One large enough that it surpassed an Ursa Minor in both height and weight.

In the aftermath, Celestia would come to wonder how such a creature came about. Giant spiders
certainly existed. They started as an accident. A hundred and fifty years prior a professor of entomology, Arachne Webb, had come upon the idea of enlarging spiders so as to make studying them easier.

Celestia had questioned Professor Webb's coworkers after the fact, and they'd told her that *sensibility* was not one of Arachne's strongest suits.

And despite being a unicorn, neither, they'd said, was spell work.

In one act of complete stupidity and a spell misfire, she'd enlarged her entire collection to ridiculous proportions *at once*. Royal guards discovered her lab in shambles and the professor... well, what was *left* of her at any rate.

The size of her creations was sadly found to be irreversible, and over the years they'd formed a breeding population. Reports had reached the princess of an encounter between her guards and a cluster led by an enormous tarantula near the Appaloosan Mountains. They'd driven them into the abandoned Diamond Dog mines, and the earth ponies of the unit reported that they'd taken out two of the leader's eyes with javelins.

And yet, there had been no poisonous breeds among Professor Webb's collection. And certainly no black widows of any sort existed on these isles naturally.

Ultimately, Celestia decided some foalish unicorn must have done something similar to Professor Webb and cast a growth spell on one that had wandered in with travelers, though no such unicorn ever came forward during inquiries.

But at the time, such wonders didn't cross the princess's mind. She didn't have a strategy, nor did she even think. At that moment, Celestia just saw *red*.

She crashed into the ground, landing between her student and the monstrous arachnid. The ground shook under her hooves. Had a regular pegasus attempted a descent of that speed and from that height, it would have utterly shattered all four of their legs. Celestia didn't even feel it.

The beast growled at her, bearing its fangs, flowing freely with deadly latrotoxin. Any one of those drops could have sent a Zebrican elephant into fatal death spasms.

The sun princess glared at the monster. "Get. Away. From her. *Now.*"

The widow lunged.

A wall of flame twenty-five feet high sprang up, encircling the two ponies. The spider howled as its two front legs were caught in the roaring flames, pulling them back to reveal second degree burns.

The wall parted, allowing Celestia to once again see the creature, her magenta eyes still fixed in a glare.

Snarling, the arachnid fired several shots of its webbing. The volume of each shot alone would have been enough to cover a dozen average ponies, more than enough to ensnare the alicorn. The widow smirked, intending to make this new pony the main course of its meal after the filly appetizer.

The widow's face fell when Celestia gave a single flap of her wings, and a wave of heat lashed out, not unlike the opening of a blast furnace door. The webbing was incinerated before it even got within a foot of the enraged alicorn.

Celestia narrowed her eyes, now aglow with magic. The beast stood there, trembling in fear as it
retreated a few steps.

Charging her horn, she let out a blast of golden magic that hit the creature's chitin covered body dead on, lifting it off the ground. A second shot struck the creature at the point between its cephalothorax and abdomen, sending it flying backwards into the forest a hundred feet, splintering trees in its wake.

With Eagle Eye still active, she could see the unconscious form of the beast in the distance. She then turned all of her attention on the filly behind her. Bending her head down, she saw that her student was still breathing, much to her relief.

Sunset's face wasn't flushed, so she didn't seem to be poisoned. Those fangs would have torn a hole through her if they'd made contact, and if she'd swallowed a drop she would've already been dead.

Her magic cut through the webbing with ease, and she cast the silk strands aside. The filly's legs were battered, and one of her ankles looked particularly injured. That gash of her head looked worse up close.

"Princess!"

Celestia raise her head to see the captain of her guard force landing before her. "We saw the fire in the distance, Your Majesty. What happened?"

"Fire?" It was then that Celestia truly noticed her surroundings. The trees around the clearing were ablaze, a true raging forest fire that was spreading by the second. Radiant heat rippled in the air, and the acrid scent of smoke assaulted her nose. Even the earth under her hooves had been utterly scorched.

Eyes widening at her unintentional destruction, the princess of the sun used her magic to push the air away, choking out the flames.

"Princess?" Steel Wing's voice was soft, uncertain. Hovering in the air were the other pegasi in his unit. Eagle Eye allowed her to see the looks on their faces clearly. All of them were mixed with fear and awe.

Celestia glanced back at Sunset, then at Steel Wing. "I'm sorry, captain. I was protecting Sunset. Off in that direction," she gestured with a hoof, "there is a giant black widow. It is unconscious for now. Take your stallions and see if you can secure it, but if it wakes, do not engage."

The pegasus nodded, saluting with a wing. "Understood." He looked around at the blackened woods, then back at her. "Princess, I... I've never seen you..."

"I don't have time, Steel Wing," said Celestia firmly. "Sunset needs to be treated immediately." She hoisted the filly onto her back. "I'm heading to Trottingham General. Meet me there." Celestia took off without another word.

It was hours before Sunset regained consciousness. The filly had sustained multiple cuts and bruises to her legs, a twisted ankle on her right hind leg, and a concussion. Celestia stayed by her bedside the entire time. Steel Wing came in once to report they'd managed to tie down the giant widow without injury.

When Sunset finally woke, it was to the worried face of her teacher. The filly sobbed and told Celestia the whole story, how she'd decided to wander off in search of the monsters. She'd been determined to show how skilled she was to Celestia by slaying one of them, and had found the black widow.
She'd shot at it with her magic, but that hadn't even stunned it, so Sunset had fled. When the beast had webbed her legs, she'd tumbled and taken the blow to the head.

"You're very lucky Sunset," Celestia had told her when she'd finished recounting the tale. "You could have gotten hurt far worse had I not arrived. Despite your talents, you're too young and still too unskilled to be fighting monsters."

"I'm sorry," muttered the filly. "I won't run off again, I promise."

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"And I won't fight monsters until you say so," added Sunset remorsefully. As soon as she finished saying that, the little filly gave a mighty yawn.

"You should sleep, my student," soothed Celestia. "You need your rest."

Sunset shivered. "What if... what if the monsters show up while I'm sleeping? What if that nasty spider comes back? W-what if it tries to take me away?"

Celestia laughed. "If they do come back, I'll protect you." Reaching out with her magic, she pulled up the blankets on the hospital bed, tucking them tight over Sunset.

"Do you promise?" asked Sunset with half-lidded eyes, her muzzle buried into the pillows.

Celestia nuzzled her cheek. "I promise, Sunset. I promise on the sun and moon and every star in the sky, I'll always protect you from the monsters."

It had been such a long day. After joining her guards and those in the Trottingham barracks to drive off the monsters personally, Celestia treated Sunset to a round of sightseeing. The little filly spent the rest of the visit practically strapped to her back, and a few more days in Canterlot Castle stuck in bed, fawned over by servants at Celestia's request.

Celestia looked up from the album. That had been so long ago. Years of isolation and silence stood between the two of them. Sunset turned to Twilight now.

Knowing that Sunset was in trouble once again, Celestia couldn't help but feel guilty, her last confrontation with her former student playing over in her mind, and the weeks of events that preceded it.

If she'd done better, if she'd paid more attention to Sunset's behavior, realized the danger of the mirror obsession...

*If I'd actually learned a thing from what happened to Luna.*

If Celestia had managed to keep Sunset in Equestria, she wouldn't be in this mess. She might have made her own friends. Twilight said the counterparts to the element bearers had already been friends before Sunset arrived, so they still would've had a happy future.

Sunset would have been safe and happy in this Canterlot, if only Celestia hadn't been blind and stupid. Again.

Her former student's descriptions of her looming foster sister made the sun princess uneasy. Not every family a foal was born into was a good one, and neither was every foster family. Celestia knew that better than most with the families she'd seen come and go.
Even last month, she'd read about a trial involving a case of a young stallion subjected to "lantern-lighting" as the term was known, a form of hideous psychological abuse that made a pony question their own perception of reality. By the time the authorities had found the stallion, he was in such poor condition he had to be hospitalized.

While Sunset's descriptions weren't quite on that level, they nonetheless made Celestia just as worried.

The life Sunset was describing, it seemed little more than a prison. Forcibly separated from her friends, from the city and all those she'd come to know and any comforts they provided. If she was truly taken across the sea, then even running away back to Canterlot would be filled with difficulties.

*I'm scared, Twilight.*

Twilight had mentioned that humans had the ability to communicate over vast distances, but would Sunset even be able to speak to her friends? Though Celestia didn't quite understand how, they'd clearly been painted as harmful. And in that case, it was more likely she'd be kept away from them for her own perceived good.

*I'm really scared.*

And the journal. Pearl had thrown it in the trash almost instantly. Without it, Sunset wouldn't even have any form of emotional support from Equestria. Its magic made it more durable, yes, but it was far from indestructible.

And if the journal was destroyed, its magic would dissipate, and the way to manually open the portal would be lost.

*If something goes wrong, I don't know what I'd do.*

Even if Sunset could escape the Luxuries and reach the portal again to evade capture, there would be no way to open it in time with her arrival. She'd be trapped until the cycle of the moon came around again. What if she got caught and taken back before that?

And then, Celestia had to wonder, even if Sunset reached the age of majority in two years, would she be free? Or would her foster family find new reasons and ways to keep Sunset close to them, to keep her under their influence? Though legally difficult, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

Two years was nothing for a being like herself, but still not an insignificant amount of time, not for mortals.

Sunset was a strong mare, strong and stubborn. But would she even survive being stuck there for that long all alone, trapped in circumstances seemingly tailored to make her as miserable as possible? Or would she break?

*I just... I need help here.*

Those words echoed in her ears. The voice that spoke them, however, was that tiny filly, hurt and trapped before a beast intent on devouring her whole.

"....Help.... Princess Celestia, help."

Celestia got up from the couch, shoulders squared; the album floating in her magic. She walked into her private study, lighting the candles with barely a thought as golden magic whirled around her.
Philomena flew behind Celestia, embers trailing with every flap of her wings. She landed on top of a bookcase to get out of the way, watching her princess intently.

Worktables for alchemical experiments were set to order, stacks of books put back in place, while cleaning spells removed layers of gathering dust throughout the space. It had been far too long since she'd worked in here, far too long since she'd found purpose or time.

A piece of parchment flew out to a work desk. Sitting before it, Celestia took a quill and an inkwell and began writing, planning, ideas and thoughts poured onto paper.

"W-What if it tries to take me away?"

"I promise, Sunset. I promise on the sun and moon and every star in the sky, I'll always protect you from the monsters."

The album was placed next to her desk, still opened to the picture of the hospitalized filly. Celestia took one last glance at it.

"I promise," she whispered, reaching out a gold-clad hoof to the photo. Celestia pressed it against Sunset's image gently, as if to soothe the miniature filly within. "I promise on the sun and moon and every star in the sky."

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: I hope you all enjoyed that. To be honest, when this idea first started forming in my head, and I was playing around with various scenes and ideas, this was one of the first.

The idea for Twilight’s castle serving as the public library was something I took with permission from Orpheon and his story Perspective. It’s a good story and if you haven’t checked it out, I recommend it.
Chapter 6: The Scorpion’s Trap

Sunset walked through the halls of CHS that Tuesday afternoon, intent on reaching her last class of the day. She winced at a throb of pain from her left forearm.

Yesterday morning Flash Sentry had collided with her as they'd entered school, guitar case in hand, apparently late for an early meeting. She'd been knocked to the ground, her left arm having protected the rest of her. Nothing had been broken, but it was definitely sore, and she’d have bruises soon.

Princess Twilight still hadn't answered any of her messages, which was disheartening. She was probably busy, but that didn't mean Sunset didn't want to hear from her alicorn friend any less, especially now.

She took a cleansing breath. She had to stay calm. Her friends were sure they'd be able to drive off Mrs. Circinus. Twilight's parents had called last night to tell their daughter they were definitely arriving back in Canterlot tomorrow morning, and Granny Smith had confirmed the same with Applejack.

They were facts that had already been presumed, but hearing them confirmed was comforting, even if their arrivals were going to be close. But if Mrs. Circinus did happen to arrive in the morning, she'd be forced to wait.

As she passed by the library, she heard a grunt. Turning her head toward the open doors, she spotted the school librarian, Ms. Cheerilee Blossom. The magenta woman's arms were piled high with books and papers.

"Hey, Ms. Cheerilee," greeted Sunset. "Do you need help?"

"Yes, please," groaned Cheerilee, her legs beginning to buckle. "These need to go on the table over there."

Taking the top portion of the stack, Sunset put it down on a nearby table, ignoring the ache in her arm. Ms. Cheerilee followed after her, legs still wobbling.

Her arms free, the librarian wiped a drop of sweat from her forehead. "Sometimes I really wish I had Cherry's muscles," she muttered under her breath. Turning to Sunset, she gave the teenager a smile. "Thank you so much."

"No problem," Sunset replied, waving a hand. "Why were you holding that much, anyway?"
"A bunch of students dumped it in my arms," Cheerilee grumbled. "Honestly, they were in such a rush they didn't even bother cleaning up."

Letting out a sigh, she looked over the assorted items. "And I still need to sort these out." Her green eyes looked up at the clock on the wall. "And there's still... actually, Sunset, could you do me a favor?"

The woman went to the nearby library desk and picked up her bag, marked as it was by a patch shaped like a daisy with a smiling face. Pulling out a folder, she handed it to Sunset. "Could you go to Principal Celestia's office and give these to her?"

Sunset eyed the plain manilla folder. "What is it?"

"Permission slips for a field trip to the Canterlot City Museum of Science. Do you remember Mr. Berzelius Beaker?"

Sunset nodded her head. She remembered him well. He taught eighth grade science, though Sunset hadn't seen him in a while. Many of the eighth grade and under classes were grouped together on one side of the school, including his, with very few high school-level classes, so Sunset rarely went that way.

She remembered him as a tall and thin man with peach skin, large eyes, a tuft of orange hair, and a large, bulbous nose, wearing a lab coat and tie, with a voice that was rather high-pitched for a full-grown man.

He'd also been accident-prone, more than once tripping his way through the classroom door. Somehow, thankfully, this never translated into any major disasters with the lab equipment, like all his good luck was diverted solely to his teaching time. Though Sunset remembered one time an experiment had caused a big, if harmless mess that forced them to temporarily switch rooms.

But despite that, and his somewhat silly appearance, he'd been a solid teacher who was rather liked by all his students.

"Mr. Beaker had to leave for some sort of family emergency, so he asked me to give these to Principal Celestia," continued Cheerilee. "But I'm so busy cleaning this up. Would you be able to drop them off for me?"

Sunset looked up at the clock. The last period would be starting soon, and if she detoured to Principal Celestia's office, she'd definitely be late. But then again, if she did go to Principal Celestia, her lateness could be excused. "Sure, Ms. Cheerilee."

"Thank you so much."

The walk to the principal's office wasn't very long from the library, and soon enough, Sunset found herself in front of that same crescent moon-marked door. Knocking first, she turned the handle. Principal Celestia was seated behind her desk as usual. And once again, she'd been joined by Vice Principal Luna.

"Principal Celestia, I ran into Ms. Cheerilee and she wanted me to give this to you," said Sunset, holding out the item.

"Ah, Miss Shimmer, how fortunate of you to arrive. I was just about to have Principal Celestia call for you."

Sunset froze. It couldn't be. It was too early. Her eyes darted to the seat in front of the principal's
desk, praying she was just hearing things.

But it was not to be. Sitting in the chair was none other than Mrs. Circinus.

The woman locked her deep purple eyes on the stunned teenager. "Come in, Miss Shimmer, and do close the door." Her mouth twisted into a smirk. "We have things to discuss."

Sunset stood there like a deer in the headlights. When she didn't move for several seconds, Mrs. Circinus got up, closed the office door, then took Sunset's left arm in her hands, directing her to the same seat as last time. The contact made Sunset wince, the pain shaking her from her daze.

A whirlwind of thoughts passed through her head. What was she even doing here? The deadline wasn't until tomorrow. Sunset looked over at the two administrators. Neither of them looked happy about this visit. Vice Principal Luna in particular looked like she'd swallowed an entire lemon. No, two lemons would have been more accurate.

"You're early," Sunset said finally, sitting down in the chair.

"I am aware of that, Miss Shimmer," said Mrs. Circinus. "I still remember our arrangement. I am merely here to see how you're doing. I was concerned that you were a, shall we say, flight risk."

In other words, the woman had wanted to catch her off guard. Sunset narrowed her eyes at Circinus. "Well as you can see, I'm still here, and I'm doing just fine," she answered, defiance creeping into her voice. "So you can go now."

"Now, now, Miss Shimmer, there's no need to be hostile," said Circinus. "As it happens, I don't have any pressing appointments at the moment, and I thought that since I was here, we could talk about your progress."

"You gave me a whole week, not six days," retorted Sunset.

Mrs. Circinus nodded her head. "That is true, but I see no reason not to expedite matters since we have the opportunity. Doing so would be of benefit to both of us, don't you think?"

Though she had a pleasant smile on her face, the CPS agent's eyes were brimming with something more malign. Those eyes seemed like they were looking through Sunset, trying to spot some weakness.

Again she was struck with the sense that there was something distinctly dangerous about this woman beyond her occupation. Sunset's encounter with Pearl had made her realize all the more that this woman was definitely someone to be wary of.

Right now, this entire situation screamed of a trap. It screamed so loudly that Sunset was almost positive it could be heard all the way in Equestria.

Well, she knew one thing. She wasn't going to fall for it. "I... I have class I need to get to. I'm going to be late."

Mrs. Circinus waved a hand. "Oh I'm sure the principal and vice principal will help with that." She turned to the two other women in the room. "I would think missing a class would be well worth the sacrifice, Principal Celestia. After all, we are talking about the welfare and future of one of your students, and such a thing takes priority above all else. Or do you not agree?"

Celestia hesitated, and something inside Sunset tensed in anger. It was a loaded question. If she
answered yes, Sunset would be drawn into another verbal sparring match. If she answered no, it would be admitting that the welfare of her students wasn't her top concern.

"Fine," interrupted Sunset, sparing the principal the anguish. "Let's talk." **So much for avoiding the trap...**

Mrs. Circinus smiled. "I thought you'd agree, Miss Shimmer."

Behind her sister, Luna scowled. "If you're going to have this discussion, then I insist my sister and I stay here to observe." Suspicion ran wild in her eyes. Mrs. Circinus had shown her claws once, and Luna was bracing herself for another attack.

Circinus just nodded her head. "Of course, Vice Principal Luna, I would expect nothing less." She turned her attention back to the teenager across from her. "Now, Miss Shimmer, how has the search for a guardian been going for you?"

"Fine," she half-lied. Her options had been decreasing from the start. But Sunset didn't need to tell Mrs. Circinus that. "There are two families willing and able to adopt me."

"Two?" repeated Circinus. "My, what an **impressive** number. Considering your conviction last time, I rather expected more."

Sunset scowled at her. **Oh, shut up.**

"In any case, I suppose we should discuss them one at a time," continued Circinus. "Who would you like to talk about first?"


Mrs. Circinus reached into her satchel, pulling out her tablet. She powered up the machine, setting it down on her lap. Her fingers glided across the screen. "Apples?" she said, not losing any speed. "I see in my notes that one of your friends at CHS is named Applejack Apple. I presume this would be her family?"

The former unicorn gave a nod.

The CPS agent's finger paused, lost in a memory. "Are they related to the large farm in the southwestern part of the city?"

"That's Sweet Apple Acres, and they own it," answered Sunset.

"Ah. And I suppose this farm is financially stable? Agriculture can be a rather uncertain business. One drought or blight can be quite disastrous, and I certainly remember reading about those in the Canterlot City Times."

Sunset snorted, pointing her nose in the air like a Canterlot snob. "The farm's been in their family for generations and it hasn't gone belly-up yet," she said, quoting AJ from when they were discussing strategy. Sweet Apple Acres's finances were a clear weak point. "In fact, the only loan they have is one for a new tractor, and it's almost paid off."

Mrs. Circinus hummed in thought, the corners of her mouth falling a fraction. "And Miss Apple's parents agreed to take full responsibility for you?"

"Granny Smith, actually. AJ's parents passed away."
The woman's face fell further in a look of disapproval. "So your only form of adult supervision is an elderly grandmother who already has multiple grandchildren to look after?"

"AJ's brother Big Macintosh turns eighteen in August," shot back Sunset. "And the Apple family's large. They work their own farms, but AJ says they like to visit, too."

"That's certainly true," added Principal Celestia. "I recall Miss Apple telling me about the size of her family. How many members did she name again, Luna?"

The vice principal did the math in her head. "Twenty-one as I recall, though I believe she said that wasn't her entire family."

Mrs. Circinus seemed taken aback for a second by the statistic before managing to school her features. Turning back to her tablet, her eyes sailed across the screen.

"Speaking of family, I am made to understand one of Miss Apple's relatives works in the school cafeteria. Out of curiosity, who is that?"

"That's Granny Smith," answered Sunset.

Circinus raised an eyebrow. "She works in a high school cafeteria?" She paused in thought. "Is she perhaps the woman I saw when I came in last week? She looked like cafeteria staff. Elderly, green skin, heavy-set, and in need of hip replacement surgery, judging from her walk?"

"Yes, that would be her," answered Luna.

The CPS agent's eyes continued to skim through her notes, not bothering to look up at the vice principal. "Isn't Miss Apple one of the girls whose sisters created the Anon-a-Miss profile?"

Sunset winced. "Yes, she is. But Apple Bloom apologized for that. They all did. And they're serving their punishment."

"What was their punishment? Vice Principal Luna, would you mind, if purely for my own curiosity?"

Luna's scowl deepened. "They had to delete the profile and serve six months of detention."

Circinus gave Luna a quick glance. "Really? Only six months? Personally, I would have thought expulsion would have been more appropriate considering the chaos they caused. But I suppose it is your school, and your choice to show leniency to budding delinquents."

Luna's face darkened, and even Celestia's eyes grew angry at the offhand remark.

"Ah, there we are," announced Circinus, hands pausing on her tablet screen. "I thought I'd forgotten something." She looked up, giving Sunset a piercing stare. "Miss Shimmer, are you certain you want the Apples to take you in?"

"Positive. Why?" Sunset's whole body tensed. Mrs. Circinus had something up her sleeve. What was it now? Hadn't she exhausted all her weaponry the last time?

Circinus's eyes didn't waver from Sunset, the corners of her mouth twitching for only a moment. "I'm simply surprised you would be willing to stay with a family whose youngest not only participated in Anon-a-Miss, but started it as well."

_Ponyfeathers._ The fact that Apple Bloom had started it off was something none of them thought Mrs.
Circinus was aware of. As far as they knew, Apple Bloom hadn't told anyone the exact sequence of events behind the profile's creation. Clearly, it had gotten out somehow.

Sunset ground her teeth in frustration. "How do you figure she's the one that started it?"

"Simple deduction," replied the woman plainly. "My understanding of the events is that those three girls created the profile to smear you, before it grew to attack the entire student body. The concerned party made it clear that the profile began by attacking your friends, starting with Miss Applejack.

"Targeting your friends meant they wanted to drive them from you, and with the original target in mind, it's not hard to imagine it might have been Miss Apple Bloom's idea to begin with." She smirked, leaning back in the chair. "And I do believe I'm correct. So I ask again, why would you want to move in with them?"

"W-Well," Sunset stammered. She cleared her throat, trying to steady her words. "I know Apple Bloom messed up, but she's sorry for what she did, and I forgave her for it."

The CPS agent's nose wrinkled. "Well, that may be true for you, Miss Shimmer. However, there is the old saying, 'once bitten, twice shy'. And while you might be willing to trust that someone like Miss Apple Bloom won't do that again, I am the one that must decide, since your case is in my hands. And I, for one, will not trust your wellbeing in the hands of a family whose members caused you so much emotional trauma."

"But Apple Bloom won't! You can even talk to her and the others. Principal Celestia can call them here and—"

"That is enough, Miss Shimmer," was Circinus's harsh reply, cutting through the air like a falling icicle. "I will not have them pulled from class, because I am certain they will be unable to change my mind. I will not approve of your adoption by the Apples, period."

Actually, if Mrs. Circinus had shown up tomorrow instead of today, Apple Bloom would have already been in the room. When she and her friends found out about the trouble Sunset was in and how their mistake helped to cause it, they'd volunteered, no, practically demanded, to plead in front of Mrs. Circinus and express just how sorry they were, and promise they'd never do it again.

Whether or not their words would've had an effect, Sunset didn't know. But now they were rendered meaningless. Mrs. Circinus had shown up a day early, and the three of them were still in class, unaware of what was going on in here. They'd been shut down before they even had a chance.

In fact, if things had gone the way they were supposed to, all her friends were going to be here, by her side and supporting her, willing to argue and prove their worth. They, too, didn't even know what was happening, and Sunset highly doubted they could get Circinus to talk to them now.

"Now then," said Mrs. Circinus, her tone shifting back to something far more conversational, "Who was the other family you had in mind, Miss Shimmer?"

Looking the woman right in those same piercing purple eyes, Sunset spared a glance down to the necklace around the woman's throat. It was in that moment that Sunset realized that Circinus's demeanor reminded her of a scorpion.

An aggressive predator that hid underground, waiting for prey to brush by its pincers before leaping up and delivering the killing blow. Yes, that described this woman, alright. Sunset would need to be even more careful, or she'd end up stung.

She took a deep breath before speaking again. "The Sparkles."
"Sparkles?" questioned Circinus, before her memory seemed to kick in. "Ah yes, I believe I heard something about Twilight Sparkle being at this school. She's among your group of friends now, is she?"

"You know Twilight Sparkle?" asked Principal Celestia.

Circinus turned, giving the magenta-eyed woman a pleasant smile. "I know of her. Her name has appeared in the paper for the competitions she's won. And I do speak with parents at Crystal Prep in my work, though I cannot say who for confidentiality, you understand. Some have mentioned in passing how she transferred here."

"Well, Twilight Velvet and Night Light offered to take me in as well," said Sunset with a bright smile.

Twilight was their ace in the hole in this situation. Unlike the others, she hadn't been part of the Anon-a-Miss mess, so that eliminated Mrs. Circinus's main source of firepower. And as far as they could find, there wasn't a thing she could strike at to disqualify her family.

"Twilight's dad works at an observatory, and her mother is a best-selling mystery author," continued Sunset confidently.

"Ah yes," replied Circinus. "Twilight Velvet. She won a Nagatha Award two years ago, if I'm not mistaken."

Oh yes she had. Sunset had seen the black teapot-shaped award at Twilight's house, proclaiming Velvet the winner of Best Novel 2015. Twilight Velvet kept it on full display, clearly ecstatic to have won it at all.

Sunset had never gotten around to reading Nagatha Christie's work in either universe. By the time she was old enough, her attention had been more consumed with magic textbooks and experiments. Sweet Celestia, she really had missed out on a lot because of her obsessions, hadn't she?

When she'd said as much to Twilight's family during one visit, it had been, surprisingly not Twilight Sparkle, but Twilight Velvet who had reacted. She'd immediately loaned the teen a few novels from her personal collection, and wouldn't take no for an answer.

Said collection was a complete set of everything the author had ever written. Twilight's love of literature had suddenly made quite a bit more sense to her.

"They have more than enough space and money to take care of me," stated Sunset, trying not to grin too widely at the CPS agent. "Plus, Twilight's brother is an adult, and he's training to be a cop, and his girlfriend is the dean at Crystal Prep."

"Is that who Cadance is dating?" asked Principal Celestia in surprise, right before her mouth twisted into a sly grin. "I was wondering."

Oops. It looked like Cadance hadn't mentioned that detail to her two pseudo-aunts. Sunset hadn't interacted with the pink woman too much. Another, lesser point of awkwardness. Hopefully she'd forgive the little slip.

The former unicorn directed her attention back to Mrs. Circinus. She sat there, still reading something on her tablet.

Why hadn't she reacted? Sunset had presented a family that had space, was financially secure, and had multiple sources of adult supervision and discipline. It seemed solid to her. That should have
warranted some kind of reaction, shouldn't it?

"I will admit your case is quite solid, Miss Shimmer," said Mrs. Circinus, eyes still fixed on her screen. "And normally I'd approve of your choice. But unfortunately, you seem woefully unaware of recent events."

Sunset's confidence started to wither, her suppressed grin slowly morphing into a frown. "What are you talking about?"

"A piece of news that got published this morning." She tabbed a few buttons on her tablet before looking up at Sunset. She held out the machine. "Take a look at the headline."

Sunset's eyes shot to the top of the article on the screen. It was a web-based news article, and a reputable source. There in large letters, was the line *Mystery Writer Twilight Velvet Accused of Plagiarism at Writer's Conference!*

Sunset's stomach dropped out from under her. "P-Plagiarism?"

"Yes," said Circinus slowly. "The Sparkles are at a convention right now. Today was the last day. Early this morning, during the closing ceremonies, a group of people approached Mrs. Sparkle and declared that she'd stolen their stories. They were loud enough to draw a great deal of attention, including the press, and this article found its way online within hours."

Sunset eyed the accompanying photo. It showed a shocked and horrified Velvet, next to an equally shocked and angry Night Light.

The person to the right was probably one of the accusers. The woman in question had on a faded trench coat that was frayed at the seams, and definitely wet from the rain. The rest of her clothing seemed somewhat disheveled.

The camera caught her face in mid-scream as she waved a stack of papers in her right hand. There were others behind her, and from what little Sunset could see, they seemed a bit better dressed than their leader.

Mr. and Mrs. Sparkle had only called last night. Twilight usually kept her phone off during school, so she probably had no idea this had happened.

"They could just be a bunch of nut jobs trying to squeeze money out of her!" argued Sunset.

"Hmm, that is possible," agreed Circinus with a nod, taking her tablet back. "But then there is also a remote chance that the allegations are true. Either way, it will be up to Mrs. Sparkle on whether she wishes to let a court decide, or if she wants to settle, as most do in civil matters."

"Twilight Velvet didn't steal from anyone," Sunset shot back. "And there's no way she'd settle out of court. That would be admitting they're right." She hadn't known the woman all that long, but she knew Twilight Velvet had too much dignity and self-respect to plagiarize another, or allow herself to be extorted.

"Well, be that as it may, I cannot in good conscience allow you to be adopted by a family that is facing this sort of scandal and possibly a long court battle. So, Miss Shimmer, I must unfortunately deny your adoption by the Sparkles."

Sunset let out a string of mental Equestrian curses that would have put a sailor to shame. Once again it was like the universe was conspiring against her. Why, just why couldn't she just have some good luck?
"Since that eliminates both of your options, Miss Shimmer, I do believe it's time we head to your new foster family."

"You gave her the whole week, Mrs. Circinus," interjected Principal Celestia. "It hardly seems fair to go back on that now."

The indigo-haired woman glanced at the principal. "I didn't forget. However, she has less than twenty-four hours to find another legal guardian, and it is highly improbable that she'll find one in that time frame. Tell me, Miss Shimmer, did you have anyone else in mind?"

"N-No," she replied, barely above a whisper. They'd been so focused on their own families. Seeking out any random family among the student body had serious problems, since for one, students had to volunteer, and just because most of the students liked her didn't necessarily mean their parents would be willing to take her in.

And for two, they would be open to attack from Circinus, and whatever she'd be able to dig up or twist. They'd decided it was better to focus on what they had more control over. And of course, that was back when Sunset had had four options instead of two.

Mrs. Circinus got up from her seat. "Well then, I see no point in delaying the inevitable."

The woman's deep purple eyes looked down at Sunset, still lost in her own thoughts. "Come, Miss Shimmer... it's time to go to your new family."

Sunset stared up at those eyes. Those eyes that seemed so self-assured of her victory. Eyes that practically demanded that she get up and obey.

No. Sunset's hands tightened into fists. Her face contorted in response to the strong, aching complaint from her injured arm. But her hands stayed clenched, anger overriding the pain.

It wasn't going to be that easy. She wasn't going to be caught by this overgrown scorpion. If going on the defensive didn't work, then it was time to try the offensive. Let's see how she likes being under attack.

Sunset glared at the woman. "I'm not leaving with you just yet."

"Oh?" Mrs. Circinus was already busy slipping her tablet back into her satchel. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you promised that if you couldn't find a suitable guardian, you would go with me without argument."

"You're already bending the rules here," countered Sunset. "And besides, things changed after you left."

The tablet had almost fallen back into its compartment when the woman's hand froze. She looked down at Sunset with curiosity before slowly resuming her seat. "How so?"

"I met Pearl," was Sunset's flat reply.

Mrs. Circinus's right eye twitched. "Ah, yes," she said, her voice strained. "I... heard about your meeting."

Now that was an interesting reaction. This was the first time they'd really gotten under her skin to any degree. Had Pearl's introduction not been planned?
"Who is this *Pearl*?" asked Luna, also not missing the woman's response.

"And how did you even know I met her?" added Sunset. "I didn't see you around."

"Pearl is Gleaming Pearl Luxury," answered Circinus, managing to get herself back under control. "Her family will be adopting Miss Shimmer."

Sunset scowled. *Not if I can help it.*

Celestia's eyes widened. "As in Luxury Imports and Exports?"

"Yes," replied Circinus. "I happen to be an acquaintance of Excessive Opulence. That's how I know she's interested in adopting a second daughter."

She cleared her throat. "And as for how I know you met Pearl, Miss Shimmer, they told me. I had to speak to them after our conversation last week to inform them of our agreement. They naturally thought they'd be meeting you that day, so they deserved the courtesy."

"Okay, fine," conceded Sunset. "But that doesn't change that I met Pearl. And she had some interesting things to tell me. Like the fact that her family is going to Paris tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" questioned Principal Celestia, looking right at the now clearly irritated Mrs. Circinus. "They're leaving the country at the same time as they would be adopting Sunset?" Her normally passive face darkened, just a bit. "That doesn't seem entirely legal."

"Is that why you gave her a week?" asked Vice Principal Luna, leaning forward on her sister's desk, giving the woman an accusatory glare. "Did you know about this?"

Sunset's face broke into a smile. *Ha! Talk your way out of that one. Sorry Pearl, but the Sunset Shimmer Dress-up Doll just got discontinued.*

Circinus didn't bother to return the glare. Instead, she simply chuckled, and Sunset felt her confidence waver.

"I don't see what you could possibly find funny about this," said Principal Celestia angrily.

"Forgive me," replied Circinus, "but it appears that there has been some sort of mistake." Clearing her throat again, her eyes scanned the faces of everyone in the room. "I assure you, the week I gave Miss Shimmer was purely because I thought it a reasonable time frame."

"What about the Luxuries going to Paris?" asked Sunset pointedly. "I'm not moving from Canterlot and I'm sure not moving to a different country."

Circinus turned her sharp eyes to Sunset. "Pearl mixed up the dates."

The fire-haired girl did a double take. "...What?"

"She mixed up the dates," repeated the woman. "She was already back home by the time I got there, and she told me about your discussion. It is true that Excessive was planning a trip to Paris, a four day or week-long trip by the way, not a move, but that is set for three weeks from yesterday."

"How do you make that kind of mistake?!" asked Sunset, completely flabbergasted.

"With this." Circinus once again showed Sunset her tablet. On the screen was a picture of a book. It looked like a day planner. On the 22nd of February, there was written the word *Paris.* "This is Excessive's day planner. Pearl got a glance at this page."
"I don't see how this is a mistake," said Sunset.

"That's because it refers to this." The woman pressed a button and the image changed to show a painting of a man in ancient clothing standing before three very different women in robes. "This painting is of Paris of Troy. Excessive just bought it, and it was scheduled for delivery tomorrow afternoon.

"And if you'll look here..." Again she changed the image. It showed the day planner again, but this time, it was for March. Under the heading for March 13th was written Paris trip departure.

"As you can see, Pearl made a simple mistake. Surely you can't say you haven't made a mistake like that before?"

The teenager scowled deeply, her brow furrowing in thought. To be honest, she could believe Pearl could do that, and the pictures certainly lined up.

"And if you don't believe that, Pearl recorded a message, in case you were angry about the mistake."

She pressed another button, and a video of Pearl came up on the screen. The girl was sitting on a rather large ornate bed, while the room itself was bathed in light pink. Obviously her bedroom.

She was still dressed in the same outfit as last time, save for the beret which now sat in her lap. "Like, uh, hi, baby sis," she began nervously, her cheeks flushed. "So I, like, messed up. We're, like, not going to Paris just yet."

Pearl let out a weak round of laughter, tinged with nervousness. "Looks like the sister bonding time plans I told you aren't going to work the way I thought. Oopsie."

Her blush intensified, as she twiddled with a lock of her hair. "I'm like, so totally sorry and embarrassed, baby sis. I mean I, like, gave you all these totally awesome plans and ideas and now they're a whole lot later than I thought! I don't know if, like, you're looking forward to it by the time you see this, but if you were, I'll totally make it up to you, I promise."

Her face brightened a little. "Ooh, maybe we can totally decorate your room? Wouldn't that be fun? You can tell me all your favorite colors, and you can have a bed like mine and we'll put your initials in it too."

She moved, allowing the camera to see the large cursive GPL carved into the polished white wood, before giving the camera another shot of her still blushing face. "Hope you'll, like, forgive me. Bye bye."

With the end of the video, Circinus took back her tablet. The message sounded sincere enough, even if Pearl seemed quite nervous. Then again, that could have just been from being around Mrs. Circinus.

Circinus chuckled again. "Did you honestly think I was planning on sending you abroad? As I said before, they live in another part of the state normally, though they have houses in multiple countries. Their main residence is about a few hours upstate from here by car."

Whether it was across an ocean or just hundreds of miles, Sunset didn't care. It was still too far away. And she wasn't quite done by a long shot. "Speaking of her sister bonding time, Pearl said she wanted to change my name to Dazzling Ruby."

"Hmm... a new name for a brand new life," remarked Circinus with some level of genuine surprise. "A rather poetic suggestion for Pearl, I must admit."
Poetic my cutie mark. "I don't think it was a suggestion," Sunset retaliated. "Neither was her plans for making me over. I'm not going to be a rich girl's toy."

"Of course you won't," said Circinus with yet another chuckle. "You'll be her sister." She turned to Principal Celestia. "Honestly, teenage girls and their melodrama. How do you manage to run an entire high school?"

"I'm not being melodramatic!" cried Sunset angrily. "She threw my journal and jacket in the garbage!"

Circinus's eyes darted back to Sunset. "Well, I must admit, I'm not all that fond of that jacket of yours either, Miss Shimmer. It makes you look like a delinquent."

Sunset's scowl returned. I didn't ask for your wardrobe advice, lady. "Well I don't like the impression I got from Pearl. She said she'd make me like a second her, that her mother said I had to act like one of them. I don't know about you, but I don't want to go into a home where I'll have no free will."

Mrs. Circinus broke out laughing. "My, my, Pearl really didn't leave a good first impression on you, did she?"

It took a few moments, but the woman managed to get her laughter under control. "Pearl is not some monster, Miss Shimmer, and neither is her mother. Pearl is simply an exuberant young woman who wishes nothing more than to shower her new sister with love and attention and share with her the many blessings life has granted her."

Another chuckle escaped her throat. "Honestly, next you'll probably tell me Pearl wants to use your blood in some arcane ritual to raise a mad moon goddess from the dead or some such nonsense." She punctuated the sentence with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Furthermore, as far as 'acting like one of them', I happen to know that Excessive was merely concerned about teaching you some form of higher etiquette. The Luxuries are in a much higher social class, and there are different standards of behavior at social events. They merely don't want you making a fool of yourself."

She let out a small snort of laughter. "And while I know the thought of learning upper class etiquette might seem like torture to a teenager, it's really not that bad."

Sunset's face turned red with indignation. Maybe that would have worked on others, but she already knew all about upper class gatherings, thank you very much. She'd grown up in a royal palace surrounded by nobles and dignitaries.

She'd suffered through the Grand Galloping Gala three times, which was just as soul-crushingly boring for a filly as it was for a mare.

Sunset needed a new angle. Her talk with Flash came to mind. "Pearl is also on the cover of a lot of tabloids," she argued. "You really want her to be my sister?"

"She's a very wealthy young woman and a minor celebrity," countered Circinus. "Of course she's in the tabloids. Many such people are. Just because someone is made into a tabloid target doesn't mean there is something decidedly wrong with them."

She gave a contemptuous sniff. "I hope you aren't in the habit of reading that trash, Miss Shimmer. The only thing they could ever report on that's true would be that the sky is blue. Though personally it wouldn't surprise me if one day they reported the sky was plaid."
Sunset ground her teeth. She wasn't making any real headway. This woman was just so infuriating, shrugging off every one of her attacks like they were nothing.

But she still had one other angle of attack. "Pearl told me about her tutors, too. From what she said, they seemed to have skipped several things."

The irritated twitch in the corner of Circinus's eye returned. "Did they now?"

Sunset allowed a smirk to form on her lips. "Yes, they did. Things like algebra and geometry and who knows what else. She offered me those same tutors. Do you really want me to go with a family where I probably won't even qualify for a high school diploma?"

Circinus paused, closing her eyes in thought. A few seconds later, those deep purple eyes snapped open, staring down at Sunset from across the room. "If what you say is true, that is indeed a problem, for Pearl at least. I will have to discuss that with Excessive. It's certainly unfortunate if that occurred, though since Pearl is twenty-one, she's beyond my purview."

She chuckled once again, leaning back in her seat, fingers folded in front of her face. "But that certainly doesn't mean you would be given the same tutors as Pearl. Or perhaps you could do something different. You would need to speak to Excessive. Perhaps a boarding school? Personally I recommend private education."

She cast a glance at the two administrators, giving them a condescending smile. "My apologies, but I've always favored private to public, and the public system hasn't been kind to Miss Shimmer thus far."

Sunset let out a mental curse. The woman had a point. She needed to find a way to disqualify the Luxuries, and now.

Maybe she could scrounge for more information. "Why do you even want to put me with them? How are they supposed to be a good influence on me?"

"Actually, in some regards it's the other way around."

At Sunset's confused expression, Circinus continued. "You are a very bright child, Miss Shimmer, exceedingly so. Pearl, by contrast, is not exactly the most... intellectually inclined young woman."

Sunset suppressed the desire to snort. That's putting it lightly.

"When I spoke to Excessive, she expressed to me the possibility that by being her sister, your genius might rub off on Pearl. She is, after all, the sole heir to a large company."

"So that's it, then? You're just putting me with the Luxuries for their sake instead of mine, so I'll be a glorified tutor?"

"Hardly," was Circinus's flat reply. "It's for your sake as well. She leaned back further in the chair, hands once again folded in front of her face as her expression turned even more serious. "I'll say it again, you are a bright child. You have such potential in you."

Her gaze moved momentarily to the window outside. "There are many in this world with potential to be something great, but lack the resources and opportunities. Like a dwarfed tree, they're stunted because they live in nutrient-poor soil."

"Such a thing is a travesty. These individuals are wasted. They are lost, and my job, my purpose, is to find cases like these and guide them to new homes, to places where they belong, and where they
can grow to be the people they should be."

She stared directly into Sunset's eyes, her own deep purple ones practically burning a hole through the girl. "The Luxuries can offer you those opportunities. The world would be your oyster, Miss Shimmer. You could travel the globe, do whatever you want. And you could do a great deal of good with the resources at your fingertips.

"Most of all," she continued. "You'd have a sister who wants nothing more than to dote on you. She wants to give you every gift she can, that much is clear. The same is true of Excessive. They want you because you're a bright girl without a home."

The last part was definitely twisting the truth into a pretzel knot. But at the same time, Sunset could feel the sincerity of Circinus's words as she spoke about wasted potential.

And for some teenagers, the offer might have been tempting. But Sunset had friends here, and she'd seen how Pearl acted, how she'd really acted.

There had to be some new avenue of attack here. But what was it?

As Sunset pondered her question, Circinus just continued to stare, before directing her attention to her wristwatch, then to the wall clock. She frowned. "Pardon me, Miss Shimmer, but could you tell me what time it is? I'm afraid my own watch has been losing time recently."

Sunset froze for a moment, the random question jarring her from her thoughts. "Uh... sure." She raised her right arm, beginning to roll back her jacket sleeve. "It's—"

"How very odd," said Circinus, cutting her off. "Why did you raise your arm, Miss Shimmer?"

"Yes," said Circinus, her stare more piercing than ever, like she was homing in on something. "But why did you raise your right arm? I noticed you're right-handed. Most times a person will wear a wristwatch on their non-dominant arm. And yet, yours is on your right."

She got up from her seat, grabbing Sunset's left arm. Sunset began to protest, but the woman just pulled down her jacket sleeve, revealing a long series of bruises.

"I thought as much," said Circinus. "I saw you wince before and I started to wonder if you were hurt." She inspected Sunset's arm carefully. "This is quite a lot of bruising, Miss Shimmer. How did you get this?"

Vice Principal Luna spoke up. "It was nothing serious. She just got knocked down on the front steps."

The indigo-haired woman's eyes narrowed. "So a student assaulted her? Pearl told me she was worried that some student might hurt Miss Shimmer out of jealousy. Perhaps she was right to think that."

"Flash would never—" Sunset blurted out, right before clamping her mouth shut with her free hand. *Curse it all to Tartarus!*

Circinus turned back to Sunset, her face equal parts eager and curious. The scorpion had sensed passing prey. "Flash? As in Flash Sentry? The boy who incited the crowd at the music festival and your ex-boyfriend?"
Sunset shot up in her seat, pulling her arm free. "How do you even know he's my ex? What, are you prying into my love life?!

"I am not in the habit of prying into teenage girls' love lives," was her offended reply. "But the concerned party provided context regarding Mister Sentry's actions. Very important context, it seems. I take it he's the one who knocked you down?"

"It was an accident. He ran into me because he was late."

"Are you so sure?" asked Circinus. "Willful acts have been claimed as accidents before."

"Mrs. Circinus, I don't like you slandering one of my students," interrupted Celestia, rising from her seat to glare at the woman. "Especially when he's not present."

Mrs. Circinus ignored her. She bent down, her eyes meeting Sunset's. "Miss Shimmer," she said, her tone softening so much that if Sunset actually trusted her, she might have believed it. "I think I finally understand what's going on here, and I have to say, you have my sympathies."

"What do you mean?" The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. The scorpion edged closer, pincers raised and opened wide, ready to crush her.

The woman straightened her posture, smoothing out her dark skirt. "It's quite obvious what's going on here. As I understand, Miss Shimmer, you were Fall Formal Princess three years in a row, as well as last year's Spring Fling Princess. That's quite an achievement." She nodded her head in approval. "You must have been quite popular to do all that."

She walked over to the wall where Sunset's old Fall Formal pictures once hung, replaced by photos from last year's, eyes moving over each one. Sunset thanked her lucky stars that there were none of Princess Twilight among them.

"And yet," she continued, "you didn't win this past year, even though you ran. In fact, all of your social problems here seemed to stem from around that time."

She turned back to the other women in the room. "And as I understand, you and Mister Sentry were together quite some time. But then he broke up with you not long before the Fall Formal. The concerned party said he left you on bad terms. This is particularly interesting since it was he who incited the crowd against you at the music festival, he who called you a 'bad girl'."

The CPS agent stepped closer to Principal Celestia's desk. "Do you know what I find odd about the Anon-a-Miss mess, Principal Celestia?"

Celestia met the woman's eyes, still glaring. "I'm sure you'll tell me."

"It wasn't just how easily Miss Shimmer's friends believed her to be responsible, but how easily the rest of the student body believed it. After all, you assured me that the reports of Sunset's behavioral issues were exaggerated. And on top of that, she seems to have been the most popular girl in this school."

"So why," Circinus pondered, "would the entire student body seem to so easily turn against a single student who had once been so very popular? It's an interesting question, isn't it? And I think I know why. I'm fairly certain that Miss Shimmer has been the victim of a much larger slander campaign, separate from Anon-a-Miss, one that may have been started by Mister Sentry."

Luna mirrored her sister's glare. "That's a rather bold thing to say, Mrs. Circinus. I know Mister Sentry and he wouldn't do such a thing."
Circinus returned the glare full force. "Then tell me why they turned on her so easily. It speaks to the possibility they'd already hated her." The woman's mouth twitched in an attempted smile before it was forced back down. "Were you lying to me about her conduct records before? If you were, that would be very bad for you."

The sisters both hesitated, and this time Circinus allowed herself to smirk. "I thought so. Although even if you had, I can hardly imagine something a single teenage girl could do that would earn her the scorn of the whole school."

No. It was happening again. This was just like last time, but worse. None of them could admit what Sunset had done at the Fall Formal without having her committed, and now their efforts to fight the bullying charges had been used against them.

Sunset was caught in the scorpion's claws, the deadly stinger hovering and ready to strike. She had to get herself out. "Flash wouldn't have done that. He's a good guy!" she screamed.

Circinus ignored her, keeping her gaze on the two administrators. "Ladies, what I'm seeing is a victim of slander, someone who has only suffered more from those so-called friends of hers."

"They are my friends," protested Sunset. "They're more my friends than Pearl will ever be in a hundred years."

Again, Circinus ignored her. "Now you can clearly see why I want her gone from this place. It's toxic. She's desperate to stay here, and all I can see is a teenager unable to tell the difference between what's healthy and what's not."

The woman turned back to Sunset now, going back to her and bending down again so they met eye to eye, her expression somber. "Miss Shimmer, I know this is hard to accept, but these friends of yours, they're not your friends. From what I've gathered, they probably only want to use you for your mind and your musical talents."

She placed a hand on her shoulder, the grip less than comforting. "I don't think you can see it, but they're the ones that don't care for you. The Luxuries will. Pearl will give you all the love and attention you deserve, and so will Excessive. And I'll also see to it they find you a good therapist, one that can undo the damage this awful place has done to you."

Sunset's heart beat so wildly, it threatened to break free of her chest. Circinus was attacking her sanity. This... this was all backwards, distorted like a funhouse mirror. "I'm not crazy!" she protested.

Circinus just shook her head. "I'm not saying you're crazy. But I think you have problems that require professional help."

"I'm telling you I don't need therapy," she insisted.

"That's what many people say, and yet, they still need it. But as they say, acceptance is the first step."

There was compassion on the woman's face, but it never truly met her eyes. Just a mask. She knew what she was doing. She had Sunset firmly clutched in her pincers now, caught in an ambush.

And here... here was the sting. By asserting Sunset wasn't thinking straight, her protests against the Luxuries were called into question, as well as her counterarguments to defend her friends.

Mrs. Circinus straightened up, looking once again to the two administrators. "Since it's clear to me that Miss Shimmer has been injured and abused by this place, and since she has no legal guardian, I am going to go ahead and take her to her foster family."
Her hand grabbed Sunset's right arm. "Come along, Miss Shimmer."

"Wait!" cried Principal Celestia. "My sister and I will take her in."

Hope sprang on Sunset's face. "Yes!" she cried. "I'll stay with them. I want to stay with them!"

Circinus just smirked. "I'm afraid I can't allow that, Principal Celestia."

"Why not?" said Luna, taking an angry step forward. "We're both adults and financially stable enough to provide for her."

"Because," countered Circinus, "I don't think you'd be good for her. I've already seen what kind of environment this school is. Do you really think I'd let you put her back in it?"

"We could send her somewhere else," said Celestia, giving Sunset a quick apologetic expression. "CHS is the largest public school in Canterlot, but it's not the only one."

"Fair enough," conceded Circinus. "But I also can't trust you." Her smirk bloomed into a smile. "Going back to the last Fall Formal, I heard there was an accident. A massive hole was made in the front of the school, and an equally large crater in front of that."

She looked slyly at the two. "What caused it?"

"A gas line," said Luna firmly, clearly a practiced lie.

Circinus nodded. "Quite the disaster. You're lucky no one got hurt. And then there's your Wondercolt statue. I couldn't help but notice it's gone. I heard that it was destroyed during the last Friendship Games."

Her smile grew even more, turning into a grin as her sharp eyes fixed themselves on the two women. "And speaking of those, there's also the rumors about Twilight Sparkle. Parents at CPA can't help but comment on how odd it is that she transferred here out of the blue. She was Crystal Prep's top academic asset, and now she's yours. Some of them even think there was cheating and blackmail involved."

"You can't seriously be suggesting that we cheated," said Celestia, "or that we coerced Twilight into transferring?"

"I am only repeating what many are thinking, but I cannot help but wonder, especially in light of Miss Shimmer's problems. And I am understandably loathe to place her with the two women responsible for the school that hurt her."

She let go of Sunset, taking a single step forward. "My report will already be scathing for CHS. If you wish to pursue custody of Miss Shimmer, then I'll be forced to investigate these incidents more thoroughly to satisfy myself that everything was above board."

She reached down, picking up her almost forgotten satchel, adjusting the strap on her shoulder. "Naturally," she said in an offhand manner, "the school board would need to be contacted, and I'd also have to speak to them about Miss Shimmer's problems, as it would be quite relevant."

"You're blackmailing us," hissed Luna.

"I am stating facts," corrected Circinus. "You would need to be vetted. Things like these cannot be overlooked, especially in the case of an already abused child like Sunset Shimmer, which happened under both your noses."
The CPS agent's attention moved to the degrees that dotted the office walls. "Tell me, Celestia; you've been a principal here for, what, twelve years? And this was your first job as principal as, well. That's quite a distinguished career you have. Your sister as well. And you're both so well liked, from what I hear."

Circinus turned back to look at the two angry women. "If I were to bring up these incidents with the board, your careers could go down in flames. You'd be lucky if either of you could get jobs in education again. And if parents find out, enrollment here could sink like a stone."

The menace in her eyes was almost tangible, lashing out at everyone in her line of sight. "It might even drop enough to close down the whole school. As you said, CHS isn't the only public school in Canterlot. A string of scandals like this could very well make that happen."

She narrowed the gap between herself and the two women, getting dangerously close to Celestia. "Right now I am willing to let the both of you move on with your lives and pick up the pieces. Perhaps you just want Miss Shimmer for her test scores. I don't really care. But you can't have her anymore."

A sapphire blue finger pointed itself at Celestia. "I'm giving you one chance. Either back down, let her go to the Luxuries and end this ridiculous game, or take the very real risk that your careers and this toxic waste dump of a school will come crashing down around your heads."

She leaned in, her nose touching the principal's. "So what will it be, Principal Celestia? This one student who has been abused in your institution under your watch, or your career, your sister's career, and maybe your entire school?"

The agony on Celestia's face was clear as day. So too, was Luna's. Sunset felt like her heart was going to burst. Circinus had stung them too. She'd trapped and stung both of them, stunning them with her poison.

When they didn't answer, Circinus stepped back, her face one of smug satisfaction. "This conversation is over." She took hold of Sunset's right arm again. "Come along, Miss Shimmer. Your new life is waiting for you. We should be at the Luxuries' mansion by early evening."

Sunset pulled back. "No!" she screamed. "I don't want to leave Canterlot, or Canterlot High!" The heels of her boots dug into the floor, trying their best to find purchase against the forces acting against her.

Circinus looked back at her with annoyance. "Young lady, please cooperate and stop acting like a child."

Sunset's cyan eyes shot back at the two sisters, pleading for them to say anything, to do anything. "Principal Celestia, Vice Principal Luna, you can't let her do this! I don't want to go!"

The principal lowered her gaze, sinking back into her chair. Her head was buried in her hands. Luna too, failed to meet Sunset's eyes.

"I-I'm sorry Sunset," whispered Celestia. "I... I can't risk the school."

Sunset's head whipped around, and she let out a growl. "There's no way I'm going with you. Let go of me!"

Mrs. Circinus sighed. "So much for no argument," she said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "But then you're not well, so I suppose I can't blame you. Please try not to make a scene."
The inside of Sunset's skull was a lightning storm, every neuron bursting with manic energy. She only had one option left, escape through the portal.

It was a last resort, possibly trading the gilded prison of the Luxuries for one in Equestria. But she'd rather be imprisoned as Sunset Shimmer than Dazzling Ruby Luxury.

Would Twilight respond in time and open the portal? Sunset prayed that whatever business had kept the alicorn away from the book was over now.

Right, all she needed now was an excuse to write in her journal. She could claim a need to go to the bathroom and take her bag and... No.

No no no! Sunset's mind broke into a panicked string of curses. Her journal wasn't in her bag. She had to leave it in her locker earlier today to make room for a book for literature class. Without the journal she couldn't message Twilight to open the portal. She needed to get to her locker, now!

"Mrs. Circinus," she cried, still pulling against the woman as the two headed for the door. "I need to get my stuff from my locker."

"You can have your things shipped to you later," said the woman as she gave another tug. "It's a long drive to your new home and we need to start right away. Now please stop struggling."

She'd dragged Sunset to the door despite all of her best efforts. The woman reached out a hand to turn the knob, Sunset still resisting the entire time, when the door swung open on its own.

Standing in their path was a woman. She was on the tall side, around Principal Celestia's height and with skin that was the same white pinkish tone.

She was thin, but not skinny. Her soft purple eyes looked at the scene in front of her with surprise. Her face was a rounded shape, topped by soft, light pink hair that felt to around her shoulder blades. Judging only by the face, she was young, perhaps early thirties at a stretch.

She wore a light blue blouse and a festive red winter coat lined with fur at the edges along with a pair of jeans and flat, practical shoes. A gold necklace hung around her neck ending in a polished amethyst.

"Pardon me, I was hoping the principal could help with..." she started, only to stop when her eyes clapped onto Sunset. "... Sunset?"

They widened in curiosity and recognition. "Sunset, there you are!"

In an instant, the woman was inside the office, wrapping the teenager in a tight hug. She felt especially warm, like an electric blanket in winter, and the scent of lilies hit Sunset's nose.

Sunset managed to find her voice. "Who—"

The woman laughed. "Now Sunset, that's not very nice. I know you haven't seen me in a while but I'd like to think you would still recognize your own mother."

Sunset practically choked on her tongue. "M-Mother?!"
Author’s Note: So here's chapter 6. I hope you all liked it. And yes, another Agatha Christie reference. The Agatha Awards are a real thing, and they really are black teapots, though I've seen some white ones too. Look them up.

I've recently come to realize how incredible an author she was. Just look at the first couple paragraphs on her Wiki page and you'll see why.

Well, that and the fact that she was able to write a mystery where the first person POV narrator was the murderer (a giant no no) and pulled it off. Seriously, only she had the skill and experience to do that.

Getting back on track, there was originally supposed to be more to this chapter. I had several other scenes in sequence I thought of doing. But upon realizing how long this was getting, I decided to split them, as I'm not in favor of writing giant chapters. Also had to split that conversation as you can see because of how long it was.

I also did some light editing to chapter 5 before I published this. Just fixing some typos and the like.

See you all next time for chapter 7.
Chapter 7: Reunion

The entire room was frozen in place. Even the air seemed still, hanging heavily within the confines of the office walls. An outside observer, if they'd tried, might have been able to hear the sound of five heartbeats beneath the veil of deathly silence.

Finally, Sunset spoke. "Mother... I..." she began, only to stop when her tongue couldn't find the words, her brain still trying to comprehend just what was going on.

"What is the meaning of this?" hissed Circinus, her grip on Sunset's arm tightening to a painful degree.

The woman turned her head in Circinus's direction, finally noticing her presence. Her face went through several expressions, confusion, curiosity, and when she noticed the sapphire blue fingers wrapped around Sunset's arm, anger. "Pardon me, but who are you and why are you holding my daughter's arm?"

Circinus released her grip. "I'm Mrs. Circinus," she said with a scowl. "I represent Child Protective Services, and I was under the distinct impression Miss Shimmer didn't have parents."

The pink-haired woman chuckled. "Of course she does. Everyone has a mother and father." Her chuckles evolved into full musical laughter. "I would think someone your age would know how that works."

The indigo-haired woman's cheeks flushed. "Of course I know that!" she half-screched. Realizing her momentary loss of control, she took a moment to brush her now ruffled indigo bangs back in place. "But I—"

"Oh, Sunset, look how much you've grown," cooed the woman, completely ignoring the CPS agent, much to her consternation. "Let me get a good look at you." She put her hands on the former unicorn's shoulders, turning her left and right.

Sunset didn't resist. Her mind was in complete chaos, earlier thoughts of escape plans thrown to the wind in favor of a barrage of questions. Who was this woman, and what was going on?

She certainly wasn't her mother's human counterpart. Star Shimmer had been a petite mare with a white coat, distinctive blue eyes, and a curly blonde mane and tail.

Had her friends recruited this woman to pretend to be her mother? Some sort of emergency plan? If they did, they hadn't told her. Had they wanted Sunset's surprised reaction to be genuine? They'd certainly succeeded.

Ultimately, Sunset decided that the best thing to do was to just go along with it. If she didn't take
advantage of... whatever this was, she'd be in a car and shipped upstate within minutes.

"You're so beautiful, sweetheart," whispered the woman, her voice overflowing with emotion. "I swear you get more and more beautiful with every passing day." Her magenta eyes moved over to Sunset's still exposed left arm before going wide. "You're hurt." The fingers on Sunset's shoulders pressed tighter. "Who did this to you?"

"N-No one," Sunset stammered. "I had an accident yesterday morning. It's just a bruise."

The fingers relaxed, the woman seeming to accept the answer. A glint of mischief sparkled in her eyes. "My poor little baby. Here." She laid a gentle kiss against the offending skin. "Better?" she asked with a smile.

"I, um... yeah," answered Sunset, her cheeks warm. **Well, she's definitely embarrassing.**

"I beg your pardon."

The woman turned back to Mrs. Circinus with confusion, as if trying to understand what she was still doing there. "Did you need something, Mrs. Circinus?"

"Who precisely are you?" asked Circinus with no shortage of suppressed anger.

"I told you," replied the woman, as if explaining it to a child, "I'm Sunset Shimmer's mother."

"Your name. Now."

"There's no need to be rude ma'am," she replied, getting to her feet. "I'm Sunny Skies."

Up to that point the two administrators had still been lost in their own depression, and then left in a state of shock at the woman's arrival along with everyone else. But at the mention of the name, their faces changed to a shared look of confusion and even greater surprise.

Sunset wasn't sure what was up with that. Admittedly the name sounded vaguely familiar, like something buried in the deepest recesses of her mind, but she couldn't place it. Then again, it could have just sounded similar to some other name she'd heard somewhere.

"Well then Mrs. Skies—"

"Miss, actually," corrected Sunny.

"Miss Skies, then," continued Circinus. "As I was saying, I received reports that Miss Shimmer was living alone and unsupervised. So you'll forgive me if I have a few questions for you and your... daughter."

"Of course," said Sunny with a nod.

Principal Celestia had to ask Raven the secretary to bring in another chair, but soon enough everyone had returned to their previous places. Sunny had her chair set right next to Sunset, her hand intertwined with the teenager's. It was a gentler grip than Mrs. Circinus, but there was a strength to it that told Sunset not to resist.

Mrs. Circinus leaned back in her seat. "I have to say, I find your arrival quite convenient for Miss Shimmer."

"I guess I'm just lucky," said Sunny with a laugh. "I was already on my way here looking for Sunset." She turned to Celestia. "How's she doing in school by the way?"
Celestia blinked at the unexpected attention. "Very well, actually. Academically she's one of our top students."

Sunny beamed. "That's what a mother loves to hear. Of course I always knew my little sun was bright, even from day one. You wouldn't believe how quickly she learned how to walk and talk. Of course once she did she was always following me around and babbling my ears off," she added with a laugh.

She pulled Sunset closer in a pseudo-hug between their seats. "She's so bright in fact that I thought maybe I should have named her Sunrise instead."

Sunset groaned internally at the horrible pun. *Yup, definitely going for the embarrassing parent angle.*

Circinus just frowned at the attempted humor. "I have to say," she said, her voice as flat at her expression, "you two don't look much alike."

Sunny looked over at the teenager beside her. "I suppose we don't. Sunset takes more after her father's looks. He had the most amazing green eyes. Although my own mother had red hair and blue eyes, so she takes after her a bit too."

Celestia's eyes widened, and she glanced at her sister, who shared her expression. Sunset resisted the urge to raise an eyebrow at that. If she made it through this, she was definitely going to have to ask what was up with them.

"And where *is* Miss Shimmer's father, *Miss Skies,*" said Circinus. She leaned in, peering closer at the pink-haired woman's free left hand. "I don't see a wedding ring, or even a ring mark for that matter."

Sunny glanced down at her hand in confusion before meeting Circinus's eyes. "Oh, well, he's actually not around anymore."

"I see," replied Circinus flatly.

"No, I don't think you do," corrected Sunny. "He passed away a long time ago. He was a military sta—" she paused, almost biting her tongue, "man, you see. Or at least he wanted to be," she said, adding the last line quickly. "We were going to wait to be married, but then he... he died."

Sunny let out a pained sigh, her previous happy expression crumbling. "I never found another like him. But he did leave me a few things to remember him by." She looked over at Sunset, a warm smile tugging at her lips, "Sunset included."

She gave Sunset's hand a gentle squeeze. "Do you remember the stories I told you about Daddy when you were little, sweetie?"

Sunset nodded her head in silent agreement. It was a good cover story, she supposed. This way, they didn't need to drag somebody else into the cover. And then of course, there was the sympathy angle. Not that they were likely to *get* any real sympathy from Mrs. Circinus. If anything, they'd be crocodile tears.

Still, Sunset couldn't help but ponder over the woman's earlier flub. To Sunset's ears, it almost sounded like she was going to say "military stallion". But that was ridiculous. There was no way Sunny was from Equestria. Sunset certainly couldn't think of anypony that looked like her, let alone somepony that would come in and do this sort of thing for her.

Circinus's face remained neutral through the entire story, though there was a trace of irritation in her
"My... condolences on the loss of your fiancé, Miss Skies," she said stiffly.

"Thank you," replied Sunny. "But I don't understand why you're not happier. After all, this must be
the easiest case you've ever had, you coming here to investigate a child living alone only for her
mother to arrive."

"That would be because she was here last week," said Principal Celestia with no amount of
sympathy.

"In fact," added Luna, ignoring the acidic glare she was getting from Mrs. Circinus. "Right before
you got here, she was about to drag Sunset off to a foster family that lives far away from Canterlot."

Sunny's face fell as she moved her narrowed magenta eyes from the sisters back to the CPS agent.
"Really?" Then, just as quickly, her expression transformed back into a pleasant smile. "I suppose I
saved you the trip then."

"Yes, I think you did," added Principal Celestia slowly, hope and realization spreading over her
features. "I seem to recall that Child Protective Services can't separate a child from their family
without a warrant."

Next to her, Luna smiled. "I do believe you're right sister." Her smile grew into a full grin that she
directed right at the CPS agent. "And you don't have one, do you? You wouldn't have even needed
one before this."

The glare doubled in strength. "That... would be correct," said Circinus, looking every bit like she'd
just embraced a cholla cactus.

Sunset fought back the desire to grin herself.

Yes, yes, yes! Thank you, girls! When this was over, she
was going to treat them all to ice cream at Sugarcube Corner for coming up with this plan.

It would probably deplete her wallet, what with how much Pinkie could pack away. But at that
moment, Sunset didn't really care, her joy crushing any practical concerns her logical brain brought
up.

Circinus turned back to Sunny, her face transformed into an icy mask. "Which is why you'll forgive
me, Miss Skies, if I ask you a few more questions. Your arrival has me concerned about your
authenticity." Her mouth twitched. "For instance, I can't help but notice how young you are. You
seem to still be in your twenties."

The twitch blossomed into a smirk. "So how is it then that you have a sixteen-year-old daughter?"

Sunset's heart skipped another beat. Ponyfeathers, that's a good point. She can't be more than thirty
or thirty-one, and that's being generous. Girls, why'd you pick someone so young?!

Sunny laughed. "Oh, thank you. But I'm afraid I'm just blessed with one of those baby faces. I'm
actually going to be thirty-six in July."

"T-Thirty-six?" sputtered Vice Principal Luna. "You're two years older than me?"

Sunny gave the woman an apologetic smile. "I'm afraid so."

Luna grumbled something about the unfairness of nature while her sister gave her a comforting pat
on the arm, her own expression indicating that she wasn't exactly happy either.

For her part, Sunset Shimmer just gawked. Almost thirty-six, really? Her eyes and ears struggled
against each other. Her eyes wanted to disagree. But Sunny sounded so sincere to her that another part of Sunset wanted to believe her. If she was serious, though, Sunset imagined Rarity had turned green with envy upon learning of that particular factoid.

Mrs. Circinus seemed equally taken aback by the admission. "Nineteen, then," she muttered, more to herself than anyone in the room.

Refocusing her attention back on Sunny, she narrowed her eyes. "What exactly do you do, Miss Skies, and why have you never been seen or heard from before this?"

Sunny's eyes widened a fraction. "Oh, well I'm, um..." she paused, seemingly searching for an answer. "An archaeologist! Yes," she added with more confidence. "I was out of the country on a dig for a long time and then I had some trouble getting back home. I actually only arrived in Canterlot City this morning."

She looked over at Celestia and Luna. "I'm sorry we've never gotten to meet before. But for what it's worth, you seem to have a wonderful school here. You must be so proud."

"Thank you. We certainly are," was Celestia's pleased reply. "My sister and I have worked hard to make CHS the place that it is."

"The quality of that work," snapped Circinus, "is debatable." She leveled her gaze at Sunny. "So you can confirm that Sunset was alone during your absence?"

Sunny nodded. "Unfortunately, yes."

Sunset was screaming inside her skull. What the hay are you doing?! Don't admit something like that!

Mrs. Circinus gave a look of disapproval. "So you left your daughter alone for a long period of time?" Her voice dripped with smug satisfaction. "That's not a very wise decision for a single parent."

"I agree," replied Sunny. "But I didn't leave her alone."

Circinus's brow furrowed. "What?"

"I left Sunset with our neighbors," explained Sunny plainly. "They'd been next to us for quite a long time, and I'd been invited over on several occasions. I thought they were trustworthy, so I left my daughter in their care and gave them some money to help out."

She sighed. "But when I got back I found out that they'd left Canterlot, without my daughter. Naturally I came here to try and find Sunset."

Sunny turned to the teen in question. "Did you run away from them, sweetheart?" she asked softly. "I know we had an argument before I left, but were you really that mad at me?"

The former unicorn saw where this was going, and quickly formulated an answer. "Y-Yeah," she said, trying to make herself sound as unhappy as possible. "They ignored me... Mom. They had all these loud parties that kept me up even when I had school the next day, and they wasted all the money you gave them. I couldn't take it anymore, so I just... ran away."

Sunny's hand squeezed tighter. "Oh, my little sun, I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I suppose sometimes you just don't know who you can trust." She turned back to Circinus. "As you can see, this was all a misunderstanding that was completely out of our control."
The irritation on Mrs. Circinus's face was as clear as day. "I find it a bit odd that Miss Shimmer never once mentioned any of this to me during our discussions."

"You never actually asked," answered the teen flatly.

The CPS agent's face contorted. "Well I—"

"And really," added Sunny, "if Sunset had told you her mother was an archaeologist on a dig out of the country, would you have believed her?"

"I suppose not," was the begrudging reply.

Sunset allowed herself a smile. Finally, they were making ground. Now it was Circinus who was off guard and struggling to regain her footing, and she definitely wasn't happy about it.

"I'm still not entirely convinced this is for real," continued Circinus. "Tell me, what is Miss Shimmer's date of birth?"

"September 22, 2000," answered Sunny confidently. She cast her eyes to the ceiling, seemingly lost in memory. "It was an especially memorable day, since a certain little someone absolutely refused to come out and let her mommy see her pretty little face."

She smiled playfully at the now-crimson teenager. "But then, it was still dark outside, and you've never been happy being woken before sunrise, so I can't blame you for being fussy, sweetheart. I just wish you'd made it a little bit easier for me to bring you into the world."

Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna politely hid twin smiles behind their hands, which just made the teenager blush harder as she slid down in her seat, her descent only stopped by Sunny's hand pulling back.

Looking at the CPS agent again, Sunny saw the woman's sharp eyes were still full of suspicion, completely unamused by the anecdote. Sunny frowned. "I suppose that's not convincing enough. Alright then..."

She turned to Sunset. "Is that a black widow over there?"

The former unicorn shrieked, jumping from her chair before darting to the other side of Sunny and using her as a human shield. "WHERE?! Where is it?! Keep it away from me! Keep it away!"

Looking around frantically at the three confused faces in the room, and noticing the distinct lack of spiders, black widow or otherwise, she gave her "mother" a glare powerful enough to melt steel. "What was that for?!"

"Yes, what was that for?" asked Circinus dryly.

Sunny gave her daughter an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Sunset. But I thought it was necessary. As you can see," she said, addressing Circinus, "my daughter is absolutely terrified of black widow spiders."

"She is?" asked Principal Celestia, eyebrows shooting up to her hairline. "I had no idea."

"Why black widows?" questioned Luna. "Granted, their venom is especially dangerous, but with how little is delivered in their bite, the chance of fatality for a healthy adult is abysmally low."

"Childhood trauma," answered Sunny. "She got a terrible scare from a gigantic one when she was
very young."

*That's an understatement.* Sunset gave a mental grumble as she sat back down. One of her friends must have told Sunny about her fears, and Sunset could take a guess at who. Sunny clearly took her own stab at the reason.

It was so close to the mark, but ultimately nothing more than a coincidence. After all, she couldn't possibly know about Sunset's near death experience.

Still, Sunset made a mental note to throttle Rainbow Dash after this was all over.

"And I take it," said Circinus, "that Miss Shimmer's fears are not widely known?"

"Of course not," Sunset snapped, still angry over being tricked. "You think I want people knowing that? I haven't told anyone!" she lied, her angry embarrassment providing it with conviction.

"But you know," concluded Circinus, looking at Sunny, "because you're her mother, is that right?"

Sunny beamed. "Right."

The indigo-haired woman closed her eyes, deep in concentration. When she opened them again, she smirked. "Fine then. Show me your ID."

Sunny's smile faltered. "I-ID? You need to see that?"

"Yes," said Circinus, still smirking. Her eyes grew eager, catching Sunny's sudden nervousness. "If you're really who you say you are, then you shouldn't have a problem showing me your identification. Unless, of course, you're a fake concocted by Miss Shimmer or her so-called friends to keep her in this waste of an institution."

She leaned in closer to Sunny's face. "And let me make one thing perfectly clear, Miss Skies. If your ID doesn't match the name you've given me, or if it's fake, and I assure you I will be taking a close look to make sure it isn't, you will be in serious trouble. So if in fact you are a fake, I'd back out now before I decide to charge you with a crime."

Sunset felt a stab of panic. That was a good point. No matter who this woman was, she probably hadn't used her real name, not if she was really smart. Or if she had, it was hardly fair for her to prove that and get her trapped in this mess with them. If she got exposed some other way, she'd be facing consequences along with Sunset.

Sunny's eyes, too, betrayed a sense of panic, but only for a moment. Just as quickly, her face returned to a happy smile. "Alright, then. Just let me find it."

She set the little handbag that had previously been slung over her shoulder onto her lap. It was pure white, decorated with a simple sun surrounded by small clouds. She peered into it. "Now where did I put it?"

Her necklace dangled down into the open handbag, and Sunny pulled it out of the way. As she did, there was a bright flash of light.

Mrs. Circinus groaned. "Can't see," she muttered, before reaching up to cover her eyes.

As the woman raised her arms, Sunset noticed a glimmer of gold from under her right sleeve. It was another small piece of jewelry. A gold chain around her wrist, connected to a gold disk. The disk seemed covered in some kind of circular designs, though what exactly they meant, Sunset wasn't
sure. But before she could get a better look, it disappeared from sight again.

Sunny looked up from her bag, concern written all over her face. "Oh dear. Are you alright? I'm sorry, my necklace does that to people sometimes when it catches the light."

"Why do you even wear that thing if it's such a hazard?" complained the woman, still trying to clear the spots from her eyes.

"It was a gift from my fiancé." She ran her fingers along the jewel. "He didn't have the money for a ring at the time, so he gave me this instead. He said it was his grandmother's favorite piece of jewelry. I've worn it every day since."

Moving her attention back to her bag, she smiled. "Ah, here it is. I believe this is what you wanted to see."

Sunset watched Sunny reach out her hand to show... nothing. Her palm was completely empty. Was she insane? Across from them, the two administrators also wore expressions of silent confusion.

Circinus blinked a few times, peering closely at the empty space. Her eyebrows knitted together, like she couldn't comprehend what she was seeing.

And why should she? She was staring at nothing. Wonderful, the girls found a crazy woman to stand in for my mother. I'm so doomed. I might as well just change my initials to DRL right now.

Sunny gave another smile. "As you can see, it's authentic."

The woman nodded stiffly, as if she really didn't want to. "Yes, I can... see that."

Sunset did a double take. Circinus was staring at nothing. Literal nothing. But she was acting like there had been an actual ID card in Sunny's hand. If Sunset had still been in Equestria, she would have sworn it was some sort of... illusion spell.

In that moment, the dots connected in her head. The woman's appearance, the little flub in her speech, her knowing about Sunset's phobia of black widows, her sleeping habits... That flash hadn't been sunlight, it had been Equestrian magic.

The woman sitting next to her wasn't somebody recruited by her friends. It was Princess Celestia. How could she have forgotten that Sunny Skies was one of her teacher's favorite pseudonyms?

An icy dread settled over the former unicorn as the blood drained from her face. Princess Celestia was here. Sunset didn't know how she found out. Maybe Twilight told her about what was going on. But she was here, here and posing as Sunset's mother.

The fact that Princess Celestia had personally come here told the fire-haired girl one thing: The alicorn was furious.

Why else would she have shown up here to save her miserable flank, other than being angry at her getting caught by CPS and risking Equestria's discovery? Celestia didn't just cross dimensions to help a disgraced student and traitor when she had a nation to rule. She stepped in when her kingdom was under threat.

Shame welled up in Sunset's chest. She supposed after her attempted invasion, the Sirens, and the portals created at the Friendship Games, Celestia refused to risk the possibility that humans or some other invader would come to Equestria.
She glanced up at Sunny. To everyone else, the woman’s expression was pure pleasantness. But right then, all Sunset could see was Princess Celestia’s angry face.

"Mrs. Circinus," continued Sunny. "I understand that you're concerned about my daughter, and I appreciate you trying to do your job. But I am Sunset's mother. I'm here now, and my daughter won't be alone. So as far as I can see, your job here is finished."

She stood up, taking Sunset's hand again and pulling the still shell-shocked teen to her feet. "Now if you'll pardon me, I'm going to take my daughter home."

Home. Sunset's blood froze in her veins as she read between the lines. Celestia was going to take her back to Equestria. She'd come not only to fix this, but to personally collect her failure of a student.

It seemed that, no matter what happened today, Sunset was still going to be leaving this place for good. She would have laughed at the horrible irony if she could, but her vocal chords just refused to work.

Mrs. Circinus stood up, her face twisted in frustration. "But I—"

"Goodbye, Mrs. Circinus," said Sunny finally. She turned to the two administrators. "I hope you don't mind me leaving with Sunset now. We have a great deal of catching up to do."

Yes, they certainly did. And Sunset knew that was probably going to be between a set of iron bars, at minimum. She glanced at the sisters. Could they see the fear on her face? Mostly they just seemed confused as to what had just happened.

"Of course, Miss Skies," said Principal Celestia uncertainly, glancing between the woman and the still-angry CPS agent.

With a nod, Sunny walked toward the office door, taking Sunset with her. "Come along, sweetheart, it's time to go home."

The pair walked through the halls of CHS. The final bell had rung not too long ago, and students were still filling the halls, making way for the two as they went.

Neither of them said anything as they walked, passing posters for various events scattered between rows of green lockers, some of which were dented and scraped. Not that they might have been able to have a conversation amidst the noise of the hallway, the opening and closing of lockers and the chatter of escaping students.

Sunset allowed herself to be pulled along, her hand still entwined with the older woman's, though the grip was far less comforting than it had been only a little while before.

As they exited the front doors, Sunset spied the base of the Wondercolts statue. This was it. She was being taken back to Equestria. No doubt the portal was already open and waiting for their return, along with a squadron of royal guards on the other side.

Actually, as Sunset thought about it, she realized that last part probably wasn't true. Since Celestia had gone to the trouble of doing this herself, she probably didn't bother with the formality of guards for prisoner transport.

Would Princess Twilight be there on the other side? Would she plead for leniency? Would Spike?

Princess Celestia looked around, as if trying to get her bearings. "Sunset?"
It was so strange hearing Sunny's voice, knowing it was Princess Celestia. Sunny sounded so different from the princess, so much younger. It made part of her desperately want to believe that this wasn't Princess Celestia in front of her. But she knew that was just a delusion.

"Princess," she croaked in reply.

Celestia's eyes widened a fraction. "I see you recognized me." She looked around again. "Where do you live, Sunset?"

The former unicorn, still buried in her own thoughts, did a double take at the question. "I-I have an apartment. Why?"

"I'd like to go there. Would you be able to take me?"

"S-Sure," she answered with a nod, once again reading between the lines to see her mentor's intent.

Celestia wanted to stop by her apartment to let Sunset gather her things. They were going to ensure there weren't any traces of her life here in the human world. Sunset Shimmer would disappear in much the same way she'd appeared in this dimension. All the better to prevent Equestria's discovery.

"SUNSET SHIMMER!" came a voice in the distance.

Turning her head, Sunset saw her friends racing towards her. Spike was with them, frantically following behind Twilight.

Pinkie Pie, the one who'd called out to her, reached her first. She barreled into her, nearly knocking her off her feet. "I'm so glad you're still here!" she cried. Her hair looked less curly than it normally was, falling limp around her head, while her whole image was... *dimmer* somehow.

"We heard you got called out of class again," said Applejack, trying her best to pry Pinkie off of her. "We got worried that snake in the grass pulled somethin'."

Twilight spoke next, hands on her knees as she tried to catch her breath. "Spike," she huffed, "Spike was jumping outside the classroom window. He told me what happened with Mom and Dad."

"Hey," interrupted Rainbow Dash, looking suspiciously at Sunny. "Who are you?" Her pink eyes narrowed. "Are you Mrs. Circinus? And why are you holding Sunset's hand?"

The rainbow-haired girl growled, taking a single step forward. "If you're even *working* with that jerk Circinus then you better get away from her right now."

"I'm not working for Mrs. Circinus," said Sunny calmly, taking in the sight of the six girls and dog with no shortage of curiosity. Gesturing for the girls to follow her, she proceeded down the steps of the school out onto the open campus.

"I'm Sunny Skies. I'm Sunset's mother," she said with a smile.

The seven girls shared glances. "That's a load of manure right there," said Applejack, crossing her muscled arms over her chest. "*We know* you're not her momma. So start talkin'."

Sunny chuckled. "Well, it was worth a try." She cleared her throat. "I'm Princess Celestia. I'm not sure if Sunset has told you about me."

Twilight's glasses almost fell off her nose. "P-Princess Celestia?!"

Rainbow narrowed her eyes. "You don't look like our principal."
"Or, um," added Fluttershy quietly, "sound like our principal."

"Or smell like her," added Spike, walking up to her legs.

"I altered my appearance when I came to this world so I didn't look or sound like my human counterpart. I didn't want to cause confusion," answered the princess calmly.

Rainbow looked over at Sunset, and the girl nodded. "She's Celestia."

Rarity's eyes widened. "I'm in the presence of royalty..." she whispered. She whipped out a pocket mirror in a fit of panic. "Is my hair alright?"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Your hair's fine, Rarity." She looked back at Celestia and smiled. "I gotta say, it's a surprise to see someone like you here, Your Highness. What are you doin' at CHS?"

Pinkie Pie bounced up to the woman, her hair having suddenly returned to its normal, curly state. "You heard about Sunset's problem and you decided to come here and pretend to be her mom so Sunset wouldn't get taken away by that big meanie mean pants!"

The sun princess blinked, taking a moment to absorb the sentence, before laughing heartily. "That's exactly right, Pinkie. I'm only sorry I didn't get here sooner. I might have been able to save you some grief."

"Well, we're certainly glad you're here now, Your Majesty," said Rarity, having calmed down. She curtsied. "And it is most certainly an honor to be in your presence."

"Oh please, call me Miss Skies, or even Sunny. After all, I'm not a princess here."

"So what happened to Mrs. Circinus?" asked Spike, taking another cursory sniff at the woman's shoes. "What? They smell good," he defended, seeing the look Twilight was giving him.

If Celestia minded, she didn't show it. "She did indeed show up today, and from the sound of it, she almost succeeded in taking Sunset away from here before I arrived." She paused, observing the now-paling faces of the group. "But since I arrived, she shouldn't be able to do anything."

"Oh thank goodness," said Fluttershy, taking a hand away from her chest.

"This calls for a party!" declared Pinkie.

Princess Celestia laughed. "As wonderful as that sounds, I wanted Sunset to take me to her apartment. We have things to talk about and I wanted to do it in private."

Sunset stiffened. This was just like her nightmare from a little more than two weeks ago, pushing away her only lifeline so she could be punished without protest. Only this time, Sunset knew what was coming.

But what point was there in fighting? Fear, shame, and helplessness wrapped themselves around her and held her down like invisible iron chains, and whatever resistance she might have been able to muster was gone.

Without Princess Celestia, she was subject to Mrs. Circinus. And besides that, Celestia clearly had her magic here. They had magic, sure, but they were still just beginning to learn how to use it, and Celestia was an expert. There was no way they'd win.

Celestia turned to Sunset. "You said you could show me the way?"
Sunset nodded slowly. "There's a bus stop down the block that way," she said, pointing to a sign in
the distance. Her bike had a flat tire, and Sunset wasn't even sure it would've fit the both of them.
"You can go wait there. I'll be right behind you."

Sunset watched as Princess Celestia walked away, before turning to her friends.

Her friends. The girls that had shown her what it meant to care for others, reminded her what it
meant to be cared for, to laugh and share her joys and sorrows with someone else. They'd filled a
hole in her life she didn't even realize she'd had.

She'd only known them, only really known them, for a few months. But now she found it almost
impossible to imagine life without them.

You won't have to imagine for much longer, taunted the voice of the raging she-demon in her head.
This is why you should have stuck with me.

"I... I shouldn't keep her waiting too long." She gave them a weak smile, even that being a
monumental effort on her part. "Goodbye, girls. Thank you for being my friends."

Sunset turned around, walking off to join Princess Celestia before they could respond. She wouldn't
give them that chance, couldn't give them that chance. If she had, if she'd stayed any longer to let
them answer back, she might have broken down into tears.

By the time Sunset caught up with Princess Celestia the bus was already pulling up, and the two
Equestrians boarded it in another round of silence.

She edged herself away from Celestia on the seat. Her emotions were growing more and more
turbulent as time went on, and it was taking all of her willpower to keep herself together. Looking
around at the other passengers as a means of temporary distraction, she studied their faces. Some
were lost in thought, others looked tired, while still others looked bored. For them, it was just another
ordinary bus trip through Canterlot City.

For her, it might as well have been a march to the gallows.

Celestia seemed to busy herself between looking at Sunset and gazing out at the buildings they
passed. She was undoubtedly interested in this world, and Sunset couldn’t blame her. It was such a
surreal experience seeing it all for the first time. She'd been the same way when she'd arrived here.

Sunset couldn’t really enjoy the same view. Looking out that window would mean looking at
Celestia, the mentor she’d failed, the princess she’d betrayed. The pony who would be doling out her
punishment in the very near future.

It hurt like a knife to the heart. So she had to settle for the view from the window across the aisle,
farther away, harder to reach.

Soon it'll be completely out of reach. It was a sobering thought. She’d probably only have one last
look at this world on the way back to the portal. Then she’d be back in Equestria, chains on her legs
and a magic-blocking restraint on her horn.

Her horn. She’d have her horn back, and she probably wouldn’t have more than ten minutes to use
it.

The bus finally stopped, and Sunset led Celestia over to her apartment building. In her opinion, it
would have been more fitting for Celestia to lead her, what with Sunset being the prisoner. But
Sunset was the navigator here, so she had to take the lead. It was a sort of freedom the girl chose to cherish for what little time she still had it.

Quietly, the two made their way to her door. She pulled out her keys and twisted them in the lock with a click. “Here it is.”

Her apartment wasn’t much. It was a small, dull space that was made of one main room with a kitchenette, one small bedroom with an east-facing window that was permanently shut by way of defect, and a bathroom. Sunset flicked on the lights. Or rather, light, singular, because the main room only had the one, uncovered light bulb on the ceiling.

She didn’t even turn to face Celestia. “You can wait here,” she said, not allowing any of the myriad of emotions surging in her heart to enter into her voice.

Sunset immediately made her way to her room, picking up the two large old duffel bags she’d managed to procure in her time here. They were all she needed to pack away everything she owned in this world, every precious thing and piece of detritus she accumulated over the years.

She’d pack her clothes in one. Her closet had been near empty for most of her time here. But since she and Rarity became friends, the tiny space had been finding itself with more and more occupants.

They’d probably be useless in Equestria. Who knew if or how well they’d change to fit pony anatomy? It was probably best, Sunset realized, to give them all to Rarity before she left. The rest of her meager possessions would fit well enough between the other duffel and her backpack.

In fact, now that she thought about it, most of her possessions would be useless on the other side of the portal. Which ones could she take and which would she have to leave behind?

Her laptop and phone would definitely be worthless. She could probably give them to Twilight. The bespectacled girl certainly wouldn’t object to the extra electronics. She didn’t have Crystal Prep’s resources anymore after all. At the very least she could use the parts for whatever inventions she happened to come up with.

Her guitar? Sunset had, to her surprise, fallen in love with the instrument once she’d learned how to use human fingers enough to manipulate the chords. She’d even put in the effort to engrave her initials in its polished surface. Now Sunset probably wouldn’t get a chance to play it again.

Her bike? At the very least she could rule out Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie for that one. The former wouldn’t like the noise or speed, and the latter... the idea of Pinkie on a motorcycle was a scary enough thought. She was as likely to cause some sort of collateral damage as she was to grievously injure herself. Applejack wouldn’t need it since it couldn’t be used to transport anything large, not like her brother's truck. Rarity definitely wouldn’t want it. Rainbow might like the speed.

Sunset had loved the speed too, so much. Racing down the road made Sunset feel like she was flying, which had been a particular plus in those dark days before Princess Twilight. It was like a simulation for the wings she’d been sure she’d get.

As she gathered her things, her eyes fell onto two items on the nightstand by the bed. A couple of pictures in simple frames. One was of her and her friends at Christmas, after Anon-a-Miss had been settled. The other was more recent, taken after the Friendship Games, where Twilight and Spike stood with them before the front steps of CHS.
She picked them both up, returning the smiles that graced the photos. She slipped them into her backpack carefully, padding them with softer items to prevent damage. Would Celestia let her come back here after her sentence? That was, of course, presuming she didn’t get life in prison. Or execution. Or got banished to the sun.

Which one of her past nightmares would become reality? Which one of those horrible possibilities would Celestia choose? Or would Sunset have the novelty of something entirely different and unexpected? Even if prison was all that it was, she’d want, no, she’d need these photos.

That’s what her friends would be soon. Nothing but images on photographic paper and memories lodged in her head, separated by a literal universe of distance.

And that’s what she’d be to them, too. Reduced to memories of days gone by, a few meager items, scattered records and pictures at CHS, and an empty, worn-down apartment they’d never seen, without the smallest trace of her ever living there, like she hadn't even existed.

Suddenly, the little goodbye she'd given them seemed so inadequate to express the misery raging inside her. How could she leave them with something so pathetic? She wanted to do it again, to speak to them one more time and tell them just how much she was going to miss them and how sorry she was that it had to end this way.

Would she even get the chance to say goodbye one last time? Would she—

“Sunset?”

The voice broke her from her thoughts. Sunset whirled around to see Celestia standing in the doorway, concern written on her face.

Sunset couldn’t hold it in anymore. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so...” Tears blurred her vision as she fought to find the words.

A hand was on her shoulder, guiding her to sit on the bed. Sunset pressed herself against Celestia’s side. “I’m so sorry. I... I was so horrible. I did so many awful things. I j-just... I wish I could take it all back.”

The tears were joined by fresh mucus from her nose as she continued to mutter apologies. She hadn’t cried like this in years, but she just couldn’t stop herself.

The guilt, the shame, the fear and stress from the past weeks, it wouldn’t be held back, a swollen river breaching a dam, sweeping away everything in its path. Her arms wrapped themselves around the woman’s torso, seeking any form of comfort from the torrent of pain she was lost in.

A handkerchief found its way in front of her face. A part of her mind wondered if Celestia had it on her to start with or if it was made by the portal. But the rest of her just didn’t care. She took the piece of cloth and blew her nose loudly.

“... Princess Celestia?” she asked after another sniffle.

“Yes, Sunset?”

“Can I... Please, can I get to say goodbye to my friends? Just one more time.”

Celestia’s magenta eyes filled with confusion. “Why on Terra would you need to say goodbye to them Sunset?”
“Because you’re taking me back to Equestria. I know I’m going to face trial. Whatever verdict I’m
given, I’ll take it without complaint. But I just want to say goodbye in case I never see them again. I
owe them that much.”

Celestia frowned at the former unicorn. “Sunset, I’m not here to take you back to Equestria, and I’m
certainly not taking you back to stand trial.”

“But I committed crimes!” cried the girl, hands balling into fists. “I knocked out those guards. I stole
Twilight’s crown. I tried to invade all of Equestria. I was going to overthrow you. That’s treason!
Why would you be here if you aren’t taking me back?”

Celestia just chuckled. “As I told Pinkie Pie, I heard about your situation and came to help you,
Sunset. That is all. And as for your crimes, if you’re so concerned about it, well, there are advantages
to being a ruling diarch.”

She cleared her throat. “I, Princess Celestia, Sol Invictus,” she intoned, “co-ruler of all Equestria, do
pardon the unicorn Sunset Shimmer for all crimes committed against the crown or any ponies prior to
this day in time.”

She grinned toothily. “It’s not exactly on paper and notarized, but that can be easily amended.”

“But…” Sunset stammered, "But why? How can you forgive me just like that? Those awful things
I said to you... and you don’t even know everything I’ve done since I got here, before Twilight. I—”

“I forgave you for those things a long time ago Sunset,” soothed Celestia. She rubbed the girl's back
slowly. “And for what it’s worth. I’m sorry too. I’m the one that failed you.”

Sunset looked at Celestia like she’d just said the sky was lime green. “I don’t understand.”

“I was your teacher, Sunset. I should have done more to help you through your problems, done
something more to break the arrogance that consumed you. And perhaps if I had simply explained
the mirror to you instead of denying you answers, you may not have run away as you did.”

Fresh tears started to prick at Sunset’s eyes, but Celestia wiped them away. “There is something I
want you to understand, Sunset,” continued the princess, her tone especially gentle. “I have never
stopped caring about you.

“I moved the mirror to the throne room after you left to remind myself of my mistakes, and in the
hopes that you would return. And when Twilight came back from this world, the very first thing I
did was ask if you were alright.”

She nuzzled the teenager's cheek. "You are both my subject, and my student, Sunset Shimmer. And
what sort of ruler or teacher would I be if I didn’t come to your aid when you most needed it?”

Sunset just hugged her mentor tighter, fear and pain transforming into gratitude and relief. Her chest

Celestia’s arms went around Sunset’s torso, pulling her closer. “You’re welcome, my student.”

They sat there on the bed for a few more minutes, wrapped in that shared hug, before Sunset spoke
again. “What happens now? Do you need me to help you back to the portal?”

Celestia shook her head. “I’m not going back, Sunset.”

Sunset pulled away to stare wide-eyed at her teacher. “But what about Equestria? They need you to
"I'm not going back to Equestria," said Celestia as a sly smile crossed her lips, "because I never left."

Sunset's brain tried to make sense of that statement before throwing its metaphorical hooves in the air. "What are you talking about? Of course you left. You're right here."

Celestia shook her head again, letting out a laugh. "No, actually I'm not. This isn't really me, not entirely."

Sunset's blank expression prompted the solar princess to continue. "What you're looking at is a magical construct or clone. It's not only made from my magic, but is also magically connected to me as well, able to transmit thought back and forth, not unlike the spell on our journals."

"This is how I was able to easily alter my appearance. I simply created the clone in the shape of Sunny Skies before it crossed over."

The woman grinned. "So while we're here talking, I'm still in Equestria." She closed her eyes. "Currently I'm handling a delegation from Los Pegasus." Her face fell. "The leader is a rather long-winded stallion... with some kind of nasal problem from the sound of his voice."

Sunset sat there completely stunned. A construct that allowed the transmission of consciousness? It was the sort of magic that drove the academic part of her brain wild. Struggling for a proper response, she finally settled on the simplest thing she could think of. "I didn't know you could do that."

"Well, it's not exactly something most ponies know how to do, let alone something they're able to perform, but it's certainly possible for an alicorn like myself."

"And it's not too difficult?" asked Sunset worriedly. She didn't like the idea that she would be placing a tremendous burden on Celestia's shoulders.

"It's perfectly fine," assured the princess. "I managed to rule an entire nation by myself for a millennium, so I think I can handle something like this." She placed a gentle hand on Sunset's cheek. "The ultimate point is that I'm going to be here with you for a while, Sunset, until I know you're safe."

The pair were interrupted by a pounding against Sunset's door.

"Were you expecting company?" asked the startled princess.

Sunset shook her head. "Not that I know of. It's not like a lot of people know where I live."

Walking to the door, Celestia right behind her, Sunset turned the knob. Before she could greet whoever was practically beating her door down, she found herself flung forward.

The next thing Sunset saw was her friends' backs. The six girls had barged into the apartment, forming a human wall between her and Celestia, Spike standing in front of Twilight, legs fixed in a defensive posture.

"Girls?! What are you doing?"

"Just stay behind us, sugarcube," said Applejack, her green eyes never leaving Celestia.

"We're not letting you take her away!" barked Rainbow.
Celestia blinked rapidly. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out, words unable to find her tongue.

"Please, Your Majesty," said Rarity, "we know Sunset has committed several crimes, but don't punish her."

"Please," pleaded Fluttershy, trying her best not to hide behind her hair. "S-She's not bad anymore."

"Darn right," added Applejack. "I wouldn't have believed it if you told me last year, but Sunset's turned over a whole new leaf since the Fall Formal. She's our friend and we're not gonna let her get dragged off without a say."

"Yeah!" cried Pinkie with an angry bounce. "It's totally not fair, too. She almost got taken away by that super duper meanie, so you can't just stop that from happening just to do it yourself. That's extra super duper mean. It's like offering somebody chocolate chip cookies but then giving them raisin cookies instead." She stuck her tongue out in disgust to illustrate her point.

"We, uh..." began Twilight nervously, "we demand to speak as character witnesses." The bespectacled girl took a deep breath before meeting Celestia's still staring eyes. "Sunset stopped me from tearing this dimension apart," she added, her cheeks flushing with shame. "She pulled me back when magic drove me crazy. She doesn't deserve to be punished."

"And if you still try to take her away," threatened Rainbow, "we'll fight you for her." She raised her fists to emphasize her point. The other girls looked at her uncertainly, but they too nodded their heads.

"That includes me too," said Spike. He lowered his head and shifted his paws, almost like he was ready to jump up and bite, for however far his puppy legs would take him anyway.

"Girls," whispered Sunset. "It's okay. She's not going to—"

Whatever she had to say was interrupted when Celestia burst out laughing. It wasn't the mocking sort of laughter as one might expect from an alicorn threatened by teenagers, but a happy one, and the pink-haired woman clutched her sides in an effort to control herself.

When she finally looked at the still pensive group, she shook her head and smiled warmly. "You truly remind me of your counterparts, though they've never felt the need to actually threaten me."

She let out another chuckle. "You can all relax. I'm not punishing Sunset or taking her back to Equestria. As far as I'm concerned, her crimes have been pardoned."

"But why did she look so sad?" asked Fluttershy.

"Because I thought she was going to punish me too," answered Sunset as she squeezed out from behind the human barricade. "Turns out I was wrong."

"I'm only here to help Sunset, girls, though I appreciate your dedication. It makes me happy to know she's found such wonderful friends here." She turned her attention to Sunset. "I think we've spoken enough for now, my student. Why don't you go spend time with your friends?" She grinned. "I believe Pinkie said something about a party."

"YES!" cried Pinkie with another bounce. "A victory party at Sugarcube Corner!"

Sunset smiled at Pinkie before glancing at Celestia. "What about you?"

"I think I'll pass. This is something you should celebrate with them." She put a reassuring hand on
Sunset's shoulder. "Don't worry, Sunset, I'll be right here when you get back."

Turning the girl around, she gave her a little push. "Now go on, all of you. A victory party isn't going to start itself."

Sunset smiled at her old teacher before letting herself get swept away by her friends, both figuratively, and in the case of Pinkie, somewhat literally. The mood of the celebration had reached them all even before the actual celebration had begun.

Making their way down to the ground floor, Sunset's feet were as light as a feather. As the group emerged onto the busy streets of Canterlot City and continued onwards to the bus stop, Sunset couldn't help but feel like the sun was smiling back at her, just like the one in her apartment.

It was afternoon at Crystal Prep Academy, and the final bell had already rung. A portion of the students had gone home, while others still lingered in after school study sessions or other such programs.

Even some of the faculty, including the resident dean, had gone home for the day, and the building was filled with a sense of quiet that came from major depopulation.

Principal Abacus Cinch, meanwhile, was in her office, bathed as it was in shadow. She was sitting behind her desk, taking care of the minutia of paperwork that came with her job, her chair turned away from the door.

The pen in her hand shook when her door swung open with a crash, the light from the hallways spilling in. Her pink eyes glanced irritably in the direction of this sudden intrusion. "Knock before entering my office," she said sternly.

"It's me."

Abacus turned her chair slightly to see Mrs. Circinus standing before her. She raised an eyebrow.

"So it is."

Mrs. Circinus didn't say another word as she shut the door, locking it for total privacy. Her hand reached out for the nearby switch, twisting the knob so the lights were turned all the way up.

Cinch squeezed her eyes shut in response to the sudden brightness. Once her vision had adjusted, she looked down at her watch. "What are you even doing here, Astrolabe? I thought you'd be transporting Sunset Shimmer to the Luxuries' estate. Did you get someone else to deliver her?"

"No," was the strained reply.

Cinch's eyebrow shot up higher. "What do you mean no? I thought you were going to return today and take care of it."

"I did," replied Circinus, her gaze never leaving Cinch's face. "There was a problem."

"What happened now?" asked Cinch, setting down her papers to turn her chair fully in Circinus's direction. "Did she exploit some loophole to give herself even more time? I told you that wasn't wise in the first place—"

"Oh, shut up, Abacus!" screamed Circinus. "Just shut up!"

Cinch's eyes widened at the outburst. The other woman's face was one of pure rage, her eyes
burning with a frightening intensity. It was the sort of expression that would have made grown men taller and twice her weight back away in fear. A vein of emotional magma breaking through to the surface, threatening to raze everything in its path.

The principal looked into her eyes and didn't even flinch. Instead, she gave the woman a flat stare. "Don't take that tone with me... little sister."

Astrolabe Circinus growled, baring her teeth like an oversized wolf. "And don't you dare talk down to me."

Abacus glanced away. "Perhaps I wouldn't need to if you got yourself under control again. Remember how much father hated your emotional outbursts?"

The other woman's cheeks flushed with humiliation. "I am in perfect control, thank you," she said, taking a few deep breaths. She straightened her dark jacket as her face settled back into a calmer, if still irritated expression, the intense feelings the younger Cinch had always been prone to sinking back into the subterranean depths.

Principal Cinch leaned forward, propping her elbows on the desk as she looked at her sister over the top of her folded hands. "Tell me what went wrong."

The plan they'd developed together had been simple. Armed with Abacus's information, her sister would stick Sunset Shimmer with the Luxuries. Astrolabe knew them far better, having met Excessive when her husband was still alive. Abacus, by contrast, had only met them a handful of times.

In both their opinions, and many others' opinions undoubtedly, just being around that insufferable brat Pearl at a social gathering was punishment enough. But to be shanghaied into being her recently desired baby sister?

Either being around the heiress constantly would drive Sunset Shimmer mad, or, as Astrolabe suggested, perhaps Excessive Opulence could mold her into something useful to society, like an heir for her company that wouldn't kill it in a calendar month. Though Excessive, according to Astrolabe, had held the vain hope that Sunset's intellect really might rub off on Pearl.

No matter the outcome, it seemed an appropriate recompense for what she and her friends had done to Abacus and her academy, not to mention the first step towards crushing their so called "magic of friendship".

Really, it was such an insipid name for something that had caused her so much grief.

"Sunset Shimmer's mother showed up," was Astrolabe's terse reply.

Cinch's brow furrowed. "That's impossible. The information pointed toward her being an orphan. At the very least we know she's living alone."

"And I agreed with you. My initial talks with her gave me the same impression. But then this woman showed up."

The younger Cinch ground her teeth. "I had her! I had her right where I wanted her. I could have even broken CHS if I wanted to. But this woman... she..." Astrolabe let out a growl, her control slipping again as her fist smashed down on Abacus's desk. A stack of neatly organized papers toppled over in response.

"Do you know what happened on the way over here?" continued Astrolabe. "Excessive called. She
wanted to know how things were going. And of course I had to tell her. She's not happy, to say the least. And *Pearl*! I had to listen to her wail on the phone. Do you know what that's like? I wanted to pierce my own eardrums from listening to that *waste*!

Her nostrils flared. "Honestly, Excessive may be a shrewd and influential businesswoman, but she's completely failed with her daughter. And as Miss Shimmer found out, it seems Pearl's stupidity is thanks in part to her tutors editing her lessons."

Cinch's nose wrinkled. "I suppose that would explain some things, even from what little I've seen of her."

"If I thought it plausible, I'd encourage Excessive to adopt a daughter in exchange for throwing that waste into the dirtiest, most disease-ridden slum she could find."

Her eyes became dangerously narrow. "Not that I don't want to do that anyway, for all the extra grief she caused me. Her visit and natural stupidity put that Shimmer brat on edge. And then that Sunny Skies woman."

Her fist smashed into the desk again. The same stack of papers, just recently restored, was sent toppling over again. "*She has* to be a fake. It was just too lucky."

"You should have just taken her last week," admonished Cinch as she righted the papers for the second time. "You could have taken her to the Luxuries right then without her even knowing what she was in for. She would have been gone and no one but you would have known exactly where she went or who you took her to."

Abacus locked eyes with her sister and gave her a disapproving frown. "But *no*, little sister, you had to give her that extra time. It seems to me that this is your own fault, not mine."

"I had everything under control," Astrolabe retorted. "It was a chance to get complete cooperation, and I was confident that I could break those friends of hers. After all, who else would someone turn to?"

She folded her arms in front of her chest, turning away from her sister, before glancing back. "How *did* you manage that stunt with the Sparkles? You said you'd handle them, but you never explained it."

"Those individuals regularly file frivolous lawsuits to receive quick out-of-court settlements. Most of them use false names when they file. It didn't take much encouragement to get them to go after Twilight Velvet," explained Cinch with a wave of her hand.

"And they can't be traced to you?"

"They were contacted through a mutual acquaintance." While her status as the principal of Crystal Prep and her own family name offered Abacus a number of powerful contacts, there were some that were less than prestigious, people who could be asked to contact other such individuals anonymously, as in this case.

But such contacts, while unsavory, were necessary. One needed to be ready to deal with trouble, ready and prepared with the tools to cripple it however possible. Father understood that, and grandmother understood it, and so did Abacus and her sister. The world was harsh and cruel, and one had to adapt to not just survive, but *thrive.*

Cinch leaned back in her chair. "This doesn't change the fact that you failed, Astrolabe," she said, directing the conversation back on track.
The indigo-haired woman bristled, giving her sister another glare. "You were the one that came to me for help, Abacus, so don't talk to me like that."

"You were the one who agreed to help," countered Abacus. "You could have said no if you wanted, if you weren't willing to accept the consequences."

"It would have benefited us both," she retorted sharply. "The Luxuries would have been indebted to me, and their influence could have been directed here." Astrolabe gave a derisive sniff. "Besides, you're the one whose career was somehow endangered by a bunch of teenage girls."

Principal Cinch's face darkened. When her sister smirked back, her expression grew darker still.

"And of course I had to help you. We can't have the family name stained like that, or lose Crystal Prep. We were one of the founding families, after all."

Abacus nodded her head in silent agreement. No, they certainly couldn't. "At this point, perhaps it's best for me to try a different angle of attack."

Astrolabe cocked an eyebrow. "What does that mean?"

"It means, little sister, that you don't seem to be necessary anymore," replied Cinch idly, already deep in her own thoughts as she turned her chair away from the other woman. "Please turn the lights back down before you leave."

"No."

Cinch's head snapped in the direction of her sister. "... What?"

"I said no," repeated Astrolabe, her voice low. "I'm not done yet." Her hands tightened into violently shaking fists. "I will not be bested by a sixteen-year-old girl. This is our problem now, and I for one am not going to just walk away simply because you tell me to."

"It seems to me that you're at a disadvantage at this point, Astrolabe," argued Cinch. As much as she would have liked her sister to deal with the problem at hand, she was loath to waste time on failed strategies.

"Don't you have any confidence in me?" asked Astrolabe, planting her hands firmly on the oak desk. "I presumed you did, since you bothered to ask for my help." She gave her sister a pointed stare. "I took care of those other troublemakers for you, didn't I?"

Abacus had to concede there. More than once Astrolabe had helped to deal with thorns in her sister's side at CPA. That was why Abacus had called her in the first place.

The indigo-haired woman smirked, taking her sister's thoughtful expression as a form of agreement. "You can add Sunset Shimmer to that tally, Abacus."

She stood up straight, and purple eyes met pink ones, the former burning with determination and barely contained rage. "I don't care what other plans you come up with, as long as you keep me informed. But I'm telling you now, I'm not done, not by a long shot."

Astrolabe whirled around, leaving without so much as a goodbye, and to Abacus's annoyance, without turning the lights back down. After restoring her office to the state before her sister's arrival, the principal sat back in her chair, hands folded in front of her face as she pondered the turn of events.
Her little sister always took pride in her profession, about as much as Abacus did in hers. Both of them helped to shape the generations that would follow, and therefore benefited society as a whole. It was rare for anyone to provoke Astrolabe enough to make her lose control of her emotions like that. The only other one she knew of was Astrolabe's ex-husband.

It had been a marriage of convenience on her part, since not only had True North been enthralled with her, but he’d been well-connected. But after only a year, he’d become disenchanted with his wife, and became romantically involved with another woman.

Astrolabe's reaction had been... volatile seemed like too weak a word to describe the utter fury that resulted when he'd asked for a divorce. She'd certainly given it to him, but not before she made it so he and his newfound love were sent crawling away with meager possessions to some small town that had several states between it and Canterlot City.

Astrolabe was never a slouch at her job, but now... now she was angry, and once she got that under control, it would turn into even greater motivation. A deadly combination indeed when it came to her little sister.

Principal Cinch picked up the papers she'd been working on. Alternate attack strategies could wait. She still had her job to do, and at this point, it was best to just get out of Astrolabe's way while she regrouped and prepared her own assault.

As Cinch returned to sorting through documents, she allowed herself a smirk. "I wonder if they realize this is just round one."

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: And so ends chapter 7. I hope you enjoyed it. I also did some light editing to earlier chapters, one typo in chapter 1 and some light corrections to chapter 6.

The name "Sunny Skies", and her general description were taken with permission from the author PhantomFox and his wonderful story Sunny Skies All Day Long. If you haven't read it yet, well, what can I say other than you SHOULD. Seriously, it's a classic, both in terms of age and quality of content.

It's also at this point that I'm going to say that the next chapter will take a while longer to put out. It's at this point that I need to take a step back and do more planning. I have lots of ideas for things to happen further in the story, but some of them need further refining, and I need to bridge the ideas together so I know what happens when, etc.

There are also other fanfics of mine in other fandoms that have been waiting long enough for updates. For those that read my other works, you’ll be happy to know that The Lost Boy is up next for a new chapter.

But don’t worry, I will return to this one. Until then, if you liked the story, please leave feedback and let me know. Or if you think there’s something I need to improve, feel free to tell me that too.
Chapter 8: Survival

The apartment door closed, and Sunny Skies released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Walking over to the old sofa in the main room, she sank into the seat, leaning her head back against the cushions. Behind her eyelids, the events of the day passed by.

Many ponies in Equestria viewed her as a master planner who was always several steps ahead. There was, of course, truth to that. Immortality had made her intimately familiar with both patience and long term planning, both of which paid off handsomely in ruling Equestria, allowing her to tackle and overcome many a problem.

But when it came to her success on this day in time, there was one unassailable fact: Celestia had been lucky. Very, very lucky.

Her plan had been simple. Once she'd finished the construct, she'd sent it across the portal so she could meet Sunset before the deadline. The two of them needed time, both to at least begin to reconcile their differences, and to work out a coherent story they could both agree on.

She'd created many parts of that story already. But since Sunset knew more about the current state of this world, Celestia wanted her to help fill any holes she might have missed. To that end, she'd legitimately gone to the principal's office to locate the wayward unicorn.

The absolute last thing she expected was to run into that Circinus woman. Sunset's descriptions, though brief, hadn't really done justice to the uncomfortable and unpleasant impression she gave off. Right away, she knew something had gone horribly awry prior to her arrival, and she'd had a fairly certain idea what it was. Even still, getting verbal confirmation later had just driven it home.

If she'd been even a few minutes late... one distraction at the castle, one delay of any kind, then Sunny Skies might have walked into that office to find nothing but bad news and a school with one less student. Just a few minutes, and Princess Celestia, despite all her efforts and experience, would have failed.

Just thinking about it made something inside her tremble. It was a humbling realization, and she whispered a string of silent thank-yous to her mother, wherever in the vast universe she was, for letting her be there just in time.

Yes, she reminded herself, close call or not, she had succeeded. She, or rather, Sunny Skies, had succeeded in so many things. She'd driven back that Circinus woman, and she'd met Sunset, something that Celestia had more than once considered to be impossible.

But she'd done it. She'd seen her, looked into her eyes, heard her voice. She'd held Sunset Shimmer, real and tangible and not the one that had sometimes sprung forth in her dreams alongside Luna.
The shock of her earlier thoughts was replaced by a warmth in her chest, and Sunny allowed a few happy tears to prick the corners of her eyes, having held them back only because her student had needed to cry more.

A knock at the apartment door shook Sunny from her reverie. Had Sunset forgotten something? Wiping the corners of her eyes, she walked over to the door and opened it, finding Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna standing in the hall, seeming just as surprised as she was.

"Excuse me," said Celestia slowly, her words fighting to cut through the sudden wall of awkwardness that formed between them. "Is... Sunset here?" She angled her head, trying to see past Sunny.

"She went out with her friends," replied Sunny with a small but welcoming smile. "Did you need to talk to her?"

"Yes, we did," answered Luna, clearing her throat. She turned her head toward her sister, and the two seemed to partake in some unspoken communication before Luna once again addressed Sunny. "But we'd also like to talk to you as well. You'll understand if we're a little concerned after everything that happened."

Ah, so they wanted the full truth, it seemed. "Of course. Come in," said Sunny, moving aside. "I'm sure Sunset won't mind."

The two administrators entered slowly, Luna taking the lead. Her cyan eyes glanced around at every corner of the room, taking it all in. "So this is where she lives," she muttered, and Sunny didn't miss the downward turn of the woman's lips as she spoke.

She allowed the two women to take the sofa, while she sat on the only other piece of furniture in the room, a worn-down armchair. "So," she began, smiling pleasantly at them, "what did you want to talk about?"

Not that she couldn't guess what their first question would be. But there was no reason to throw away civil conversation, especially now. The two had relaxed for the most part during their first encounter at the office, except for perhaps near the end. But Sunny could feel a tension present in these two women, a tension that was fully directed at her.

Luna took the initiative again, her elder sibling still seeming more interested in their surroundings. "You're from the same place as Sunset Shimmer, aren't you, that other world of hers?"

Sunny nodded her head, both in answer and to herself for predicting the opening to the conversation. She knew the two of them would figure that out, especially after her illusion spell. "I'm from Equestria, yes."

"I thought as much," said Luna with satisfaction of her own.

Finally, Principal Celestia spoke up, straightening her back against the sofa cushion. "What are your plans for Sunset Shimmer, exactly?" She leveled her narrowed gaze at Sunny, looking every bit as authoritative as you'd imagine a high school principal to be. "I couldn't help but notice Sunset looked quite distressed when you left."

"That was... a misunderstanding," admitted Sunny, more than a little ashamed of not realizing until they'd arrived at the apartment how much anguish the former unicorn had been feeling. "Sunset and I did not exactly part on good terms when we last saw each other, so when she realized who I was, she thought she was in a great deal of trouble."
She looked between the two sisters. The tension was still there, neither woman having truly relaxed since they got here. And there was worry written on their faces, worry for their student, undoubtedly. Their dedication would have made Sunny smile, if she didn't have a pair of suspicious faces directed at her.

"I can assure you, though," she told them, "I mean her no harm."

"I see," replied the principal thoughtfully. Beside her, Luna seemed to relax a little. "And would I be right in guessing," continued Celestia, "that the rest of your story was false as well?"

Sunny nodded. "Sunset is, or was, my personal student. She ran away from Equestria years ago when her ambition and arrogance got the better of her, and escaped through a magic mirror to this world. For what it's worth, I'm sorry for the trouble she caused you. I had no control over where the portal connecting our worlds ended up."

"I'd certainly like to have a word with the one responsible for that portal," muttered Luna darkly.

"As would I." Melancholy crept into Sunny's voice. "But unfortunately that pony is long gone."

Celestia leaned back against the sofa, studying Sunny for a moment. "You're me, aren't you? A version of me from your universe."

Sunny's mouth fell open. While she'd predicted being spotted as an Equestrian, she hadn't counted on being personally recognized so quickly. "What gave it away, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Sunny Skies," replied the principal. "She was a character I invented, a world traveler who faced adventure with a bright smile on her face. I spent a great deal of time pretending I was her when I was a little girl."

The pink-haired woman let out a chuckle. "I can't say I did the same, but it is a favorite name of mine whenever I need to travel incognito."

"Sister, that reminds me," interjected Luna, sporting a grin that stretched ear to ear. "Didn't you have pink hair once upon a time? I recall you experimenting with hair dye in the tenth grade."

"I thought I told you never to mention that," groaned Celestia, her cheeks reddening.

"You were just lucky it washed out," chided Luna. "As I recall, you hadn't actually paid attention to that particular detail on the box, and had a panic attack when you thought it was permanent."

"I did not have a panic attack," her sister snapped back.

"No, I'm fairly sure your reaction qualified. You kept screaming until mother finally managed to find the box buried in the trash and proved it was temporary. Now that I think about it, that might have been why she took it all so well. Perhaps she thought you'd suffered enough."

Sunny laughed. "Actually, I had pink hair a long time ago as well, when I was young. Though in my case it was a natural color."

"Really?" said Luna, her grin somehow growing wider. "That would have been interesting to see on Tia."

"Quiet, Lulu."

"In any case," continued Sunny, cutting off the argument before it could gather any more
momentum, "I suppose I should properly introduce myself. My name is Princess Celestia, immortal co-ruler of all Equestria along with my sister, Princess Luna."

Both sisters sat stiff, as if each had been struck by a bolt of lightning. "Princess?" squeaked Celestia.

"Immortal?"

"Yes, and yes," answered Sunny. "And before you ask, I'm 1,648 years old."

"I'm an immortal equine princess in another universe," muttered Celestia.

"We're immortal equine princesses in another universe," corrected Luna, her voice just as much of a whisper.

"Really," added Sunny, "I envy the fact that you only have a high school to manage. Ruling Equestria has been quite trying at times, particularly the nobles."

"I don't know about that. The school board definitely gives us our share of trouble," said the vice principal, clearing her throat as she regained some of her composure. "What I don't understand is, if you are a co-ruler, why are you only a princess?"

Sunny's mirth diminished. "It was a decision my sister and I came to. Mother had left Equestria to pursue important matters, and my sister and I didn't feel it appropriate to be queens since she wasn't dead." She paused, her mind sinking into the ancient depths of her memory. "Is mother still around in your universe?"

"Yes she is," replied Celestia with a sympathetic smile. "She's not in Canterlot City these days, but she's still working. She draws and writes every day."

"And pesters us about our love lives," added Luna under her breath with no small amount of annoyance.

"So, what now?" asked Celestia, putting the conversation back on track. "You do know that Mrs. Circinus won't be finished with Sunset."

Sunny nodded gravely. "I thought that likely, yes."

"More certain than likely," said Luna. "You didn't see the expression on her face after you left. I don't think I've ever seen someone look so absolutely livid." She put her finger to her chin in thought. "That was a very good trick you pulled with the identification card. Magic, I presume?"

"Illusion spell," explained Sunny. "I used that particular spell because I had no idea what identification here looked like. It made her see what I wanted her to, and she provided the details. But it only really works on one subject at a time."

The vice principal's eyes sparkled with fascination. "So it's something like the power of suggestion, then. But why does it only work on one person?"

"Because any more than that and problems can arise from differences in what everypony actually sees."

"Everypony?" muttered Luna, before simply shaking her head. "Yes, I can see where that would be an issue. But what if she decides to bring in someone else?"

Sunny's mouth set itself in a hard line. She hadn't entertained that possibility. "You think that likely?"
"I'd say it's best not to discount it," answered the vice principal. "That woman caught us by surprise in multiple ways already, and I wouldn't let her do it again if it can be helped."

Beside her, Principal Celestia nodded. "She's dangerous when she's well-armed, and sharp, as you no doubt noticed. She's very good at spotting weaknesses." Her whole body suddenly slumped, and her next words carried an unusual quietness to them. "Not to mention cruel."

Sunny pursed her lips, considering her options. "I suppose I'll have to forge physical identification, then, just to be safe. It should be possible, if I knew what it looked like."

"We can help with that," declared Celestia, the swiftness and sharpness of her response causing Sunny to jump in her seat. But if the principal had noticed, she gave no indication. She simply continued to address her counterpart. "If all you need is something to go off of, my sister and I can collect some things you can borrow."

Luna followed her sister's lead. "Yes, we'd be able to gather everything you'd need from home."

Sunny met the eyes of her doppelganger and those of her sister, both familiar, and yet, unfamiliar at the same time. These two didn't carry the weight of the centuries or that long, solitary millennium, but Sunny could still see herself and her own sister in them in so many ways, even from these few interactions.

Right now, she saw two pairs of eyes blazing with determination, and an unspoken but equally loud demand: please let us help you, let us do this. It was something they didn't just want to do, but needed to do, as if it was key to their continued survival.

In the face of those eyes and the emotions they carried, Sunny couldn't refuse them. Even if she'd wanted to, she couldn't have refused them. So instead, she just nodded her head, offering a heartfelt and soft "Thank you."

The answer seemed to satisfy the two women, their expressions softening. They stood back up, brushing off nonexistent dust from their pants. "We need to get back to CHS," explained Celestia, looking down at her wristwatch. She held out a hand to the other woman. "It was good to meet you, Sunny."

Tentatively, Sunny returned the gesture, still not completely used to these strange human limbs. "It was good to meet you too, Principal, Vice Principal," she said, nodding to each in turn.

"We'll be in touch," said Luna as the two headed for the door. "Expect a package from us soon, if we can't hand it to you in person."

Sunny gave them a bright smile befitting her name. "I will."

"... But when Twilight here figured that stealin' Princess Twilight's crown was a felony, we all realized you were in a heap of trouble, so we chased down your address," explained AJ.

"Yeah! We wanted to find you before you got locked up in a jail cell!" declared Pinkie. "We couldn't let that happen. And besides, you didn't have a tin cup to rattle against the bars, and who can be in a jail cell without a tin cup?"

Sunset laughed. For the last fifteen minutes, the seven of them had been sipping drinks, celebratory chocolate milkshakes to be precise, while her six friends filled her in on what had happened after she'd left them at school. "Never thought of it that way, Pinkie."
"I'm so glad we didn't have to fight," whispered Fluttershy as she took another sip. Somehow, Fluttershy always managed to be as quiet drinking beverages as she was all other times, even when reaching the bottom of the glass.

Rainbow, sitting right next to Fluttershy, took a loud sip of her own milkshake. "We so would have won anyway," she said, giving a cocky grin.

While Sunset found the sentiment extremely flattering, she still wasn't sure they would have come out on top. But she decided not to comment on the probabilities, and instead just gulped down another portion of chocolate ice cream. It was funny. Even across two universes dominated by species with very different diets, chocolate and ice cream remained the same.

"I have to say, darling," said Rarity, taking a dainty sip of her own beverage, "it was," she gave a small cough, "interesting, seeing your apartment."

Sunset blushed. "Yeah, there was a reason I never invited you girls over."

"Well, I never imagined your living space to be so..." Rarity hesitated, struggling to find the right word.

"Crumby?" volunteered Pinkie Pie.

"Thank you, Pinkie." Rarity turned her attention back to Sunset. "I admit I didn't see much of it, but the decor was rather, shall we say, run down."

"You're not hurtin' for money, are you, sugarcube?" asked AJ with some level of concern.

"I'm fine, AJ, don't worry about it." Admittedly her budget was pretty tight at the moment, but with minimal spending she still had enough money for a couple more months' worth of rent. After that was a different story, but there was no sense getting her friends worried now. They'd all had enough worries over the last week.

Applejack gave her a flat stare. "You sure?"

Sunset held her hands up defensively. "I'm sure. And look, if I start having problems, I'll tell you." She turned her attention back to the others. "But now you know why I never volunteered to host sleepovers."

Sunset glanced over at the last members of their group. Twilight and Spike had been decently talkative during the beginning of their explanations, but now both had fallen strangely silent. The bespectacled girl was still staring at her phone, with Spike joining her from his position in her lap.

"You okay, Twi?"

"Huh?" said Twilight as she pulled herself away from the screen to see her new friends staring intently at her. "Oh, um, yeah. I'm just still worried about my mom." She set her phone down on the table, and Sunset could see the same article declaring Twilight Velvet a plagiarist.

Twilight's fingers wrapped themselves tightly around the hem of her tartan skirt. "It's just impossible. I know my mom and she'd never do that. And there are so many of them. What if she's disqualified for her awards? She will, won't she? They'll come by and empty mom's entire shelf."

A strand of Twilight's hair popped out of place as her breathing became more ragged. "Then they'll take the Nagatha Award. Mom will be devastated. Of course she'll be devastated, she idolizes Nagatha Christie. Then her publisher will drop her. And Mom will probably be too much of a wreck.
to work, not to mention the low probability of another publisher taking her after that."

Her eyes widened. "Have Mom and Dad paid off the house? I... I can't remember. What if we have
to sell it? What if we have to move?!"

"Twilight, it'll be okay," reassured Spike, nuzzling his cheek against her arm. "And if anybody tries
to take your mom's awards, I'll bite them."

"You shouldn't make a habit of biting people," reprimanded Twilight reflexively. Her eyes softened,
and her arms pulled her canine friend into a gentle hug. "But thank you, Spike."

"I may not know much about writin' and plagiarism," said AJ as she adjusted her Stetson, "but
personally, I smell a rat." She flicked her green eyes over to Fluttershy. "No offense."

"Oh, none taken," assured the shy girl. "Many rats, particularly ones in cities, have an odor problem
from rummaging in garbage. Well, all the ones I've met other than Pete at the shelter. He's a very
clean rat. And really quite cute."

"I already tried calling my parents while you girls were ordering," said Twilight. "But all I got was
their voice mail."

"They could just be swamped between the press and trying to contact an attorney," said Sunset.

Twilight nodded her head in agreement. "I'm going to call Shining. He probably hasn't seen the
news. If he had, he would have called me already."

Spike hopped down from her lap right before she got up from her seat, walking off to a more private
place to call her brother.

"Um, Sunset?"

The fire-haired teenager turned to look over at Fluttershy. "Yeah?"

"Um, I was wondering... is Princess Celestia going to be around long? I mean, um, she said you
would talk later but doesn't she need to get back to Equestria?" Around the table, the other girls
looked on with curiosity, Rainbow even stopping her stream of texts with Thunderlane about their
upcoming games.

"Not really. She said she used a spell to duplicate herself, sort of." Sunset shrugged. "I'd try to
explain it to you if I could, but I've never heard of that spell myself."

"That's so awesome," said Rainbow. "I wish I could do that. Think of how many different positions I
could play at once. I could be a whole team."

"You gotta leave room for other players, Rainbow," teased Applejack. "That does sound mighty
useful, though. We do fine on the farm as is, but a few extra hands sure wouldn't hurt none."

"I certainly wouldn't mind," said Rarity. "I would be able to sew dresses so much faster."

"Ooh! And think of all the things I could do with multiple mes!" exclaimed Pinkie.

"No offense, Pinkie," said Rainbow Dash, "but I think there's only room for one of you in each
universe."

"Princess Celestia said she'd be sticking around with me until she's sure everything's okay,"
continued Sunset, smirking in amusement when Pinkie stuck her tongue out at Rainbow, and
Rainbow proceeded to copy her.

Although, now that Sunset thought about it, she realized that she hadn't allowed the words to truly sink in until now. Princess Celestia was going to be staying with her. The two of them would be living together again, just like they had before she'd run away to this world.

And yet, in every way the situation also seemed the exact reverse of before. Back in Equestria, they'd lived in the palace, and Sunset had been a guest in Celestia's home. Now it was Celestia who was the guest. Princess Celestia, staying in her run-down, third-rate apartment, nestled tightly inside a third-rate building.

She was still there now, waiting for Sunset to come back. Shame and embarrassment welled up inside her as she remembered the mess she'd left in her room, not entirely fixed by her attempt at packing. And then there was the messy state of the kitchenette, counters she hadn't thoroughly cleaned in a while, crumbs still scattered, the dirty dishes, what few she actually had, still in the little sink.

As Sunset continued to contemplate the cleanliness of her living space, Twilight and Spike returned, having, it seemed, succeeded in contacting her brother.

Nearby, Mr. Cake popped his head out from the door to the kitchen. "Honey, I've been checking the deliveries, and the supplier sent us way too much marzipan."

At their table, Pinkie let out a loud and horrified gasp. "THE PARTY!"

"Aww, dagnabbit, I completely forgot that was supposed to be this week," said Applejack.

"I know!" cried Pinkie. "That big meanie mean pants Mrs. Circinus made me forget all about it!" Her face grew uncharacteristically dark. "Now she's a real meanie. She nearly ruined a party!"

Pinkie rushed the counter, planting her hands firmly on the wood surface. "Mrs. Cake, when were you going to make the MMMM?"

The woman leaned away in discomfort at the sudden closeness. "W-well, we were thinking of tomorrow, dearie. Is there something wrong?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Pinkie with a hop. "We totally wanted to throw a thank you party for Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna for being so awesome this year and have them be the taste testers for the MMMM, and I was going to tell you about it but then this really awful lady Mrs. Circinus showed up and threatened to take Sunset away and make her super duper miserable and I forgot and would you mind if we threw a party?"

The baker stood there in stunned silence for a moment, trying to soak in the deluge of words. "Um, of course, Pinkie Pie. Carrot Cake and I would love to have taste testers."

"Great!" Pinkie dashed back to the table, looking Applejack right in the eye. "AJ, do you think you can get everything here tomorrow?"

"Shouldn't be too much of a problem, sugarcube," replied AJ with a nod of her head.

"And I can get the decorations," added Pinkie, a smile breaking out on her face.

"But how are you going to get Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna here?" asked Fluttershy.

"Don't worry," reassured Pinkie, "I have these." She pulled out a pair of envelopes. "Anonymous
invitations. These will get them here no problem." She dashed back to Mrs. Cake. "I'll come by after school to put up some decorations. And—Sunny!

Sunset, who had been watching the exchange in between thinking of anything else that needed cleaning in her little apartment, blinked. "Me?"

"No, silly," corrected Pinkie Pie with a giggle. "Your mom. We should totally invite your mom to taste test the MMMM too."

Sunset almost said no. After all, Princess Celestia was still busy, and it was a little weird to invite her for a party meant for her human counterpart. But the look in Pinkie's eyes made her reconsider. "I'll ask her. But I'm not entirely sure she'll say yes."

The answer seemed to satisfy Pinkie, and she dove back into an animated conversation with Rainbow Dash about... Sunset wasn't sure. Pinkie was talking far too quickly to keep up, though Rainbow didn't seem to be having too much trouble.

"That was your mom? I was wondering who you were with today."

Sunset turned to see Trixie standing nearby, hands planted confidently at her hips. "So what if she was?" asked Sunset, resisting the urge to grimace at the sudden source of annoyance.

"Personally," answered Trixie, "I expected your mom to have cloven hooves, horns, and bat wings. And maybe carrying a pitchfork."

Sunset rolled her eyes. "Demon jokes. Real original, Trixie." At least she hadn't called her "Sunset Satan." That had been one of the most popular nicknames she'd earned after the Fall Formal. "What do you want?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Oh, nothing," she replied airily, before giving Sunset a smirk. "Don't you think you're a little old to be holding hands? Or was she afraid you'd get lost?"

Sunset gritted her teeth. Trixie could hold a grudge like nobody's business, even if Sunset couldn't exactly remember what she'd done to her. It was hard to keep track of every awful thing she'd done to everybody by this point, even with her excellent memory. It was even harder if you added her behavior when she was at CSGU.

And besides that, Trixie just seemed to have an incredible knack for getting under your skin, to the point that Sunset wondered if it was possible to have that for a special talent. "My mom just missed me. She's been out of the country for a while," she defended.

What I wouldn't give to be able to use the old Hot Hoof spell right now.

"Where was she, native Transylvania?" Trixie mocked.

"Actually, Transylvania isn't a country," chirped Twilight. "While it is a region, with borders defined in part by the Carpathian Mountains, it's actually just part of Romania now. In fact, it hasn't been its own country for almost a hundred years, not since officially declaring its union with the rest of Romania on December 1, 1918."

Trixie scowled, turning an irritated eye to Twilight. "Oh go write a history book, Sparkle."

"And why don't you go do somethin' useful," countered Applejack, "like pull a rabbit out of a hat."

"I would, but unfortunately I left my hat at home," shot back Trixie snidely. "Unless you'd like to
volunteer yours?"

"Not a chance, Trixie," said Applejack.

"Trixie," called out Mrs. Cake. "Your peanut butter cookies are done, dearie."

Trixie let out a huff, turning her back to the group, walking over to claim her snack. "Whatever. I have better things to do than waste my time with you anyway."

Applejack glared at the magician's retreating form. "I'll never understand what that girl's problem is."

"Eh, she's just jealous," said Rainbow, leaning back in her seat. "I mean we are pretty awesome. And she did lose to us in the Battle of the Bands."

Sunset could have pointed out how that victory was only because the Dazzlings convinced Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna to let them pass to the finals, but kept her mouth shut. It probably wouldn't do any good, not against Rainbow's ego.

"She was kind of right about one thing, though," said Fluttershy.

Sunset raised a skeptical eyebrow. "What's that?"

"Well, um, Princess Celestia does have hooves, a horn, and wings, doesn't she?" she replied, letting her hair fall over her eyes. "Not that I agree with her being mean like that."

For a minute, they were all silent. Finally, Sunset broke out laughing, with everyone else following suit. "So close, and yet so far," said Sunset in between laughter.

"I think you just cracked a joke, Shy," grinned Rainbow.

"I did? I wasn't trying to be funny..."

"You did!" declared Pinkie. "Maybe not a big one or the best joke ever, and I know some really good jokes, but it wasn't bad."

"Oh," said Fluttershy with a blush. "I don't think I'm that funny, though."

"That's okay too." Pinkie pulled the girl into a hug. "You can just leave the comedy to Aunt Pinkie."

"But we're the same age," argued Fluttershy. "And my birthday is before yours."

"Hey," said Pinkie, turning back to the group, "do you think I could make balloon cakes? You know, like balloon animals, but cake-shaped. That would be so great! I wonder how many balloons it would take. And what about colors? Rarity, what colors do you think would be best for balloon cakes? Red? White? Chocolate brown? Cosmopolitan? And how big should they be?"

Sunset laughed as, one by one, they were all pulled into a discussion on the design aesthetics of balloon cakes.

Sunset Shimmer turned her key in the lock, entering her apartment. Time had whittled away while she was out, and it was now 4:45 PM. She set her backpack beside the sofa, and had just sat down to remove her boots when a voice called out.

"Sunset? Is that you?" Sunset turned to see Sunny's head poking out from her bedroom doorway. "I was wondering when you were going to be back."
"What were you doing in my room?" she asked automatically, before mentally reprimanding herself when she realized the accusatory edge her voice had carried with it. "Sorry, that came out harsh. I—"

Sunny laughed. "It's alright Sunset, I understand. I probably should have asked first. I was simply interested in the view outside and your room has the only window. I didn't violate your privacy, I promise." She took a few steps, walking back into the main room. "Though I was disappointed that your window wouldn't open."

"It's stuck," replied the girl. "I've never been able to open it. Makes it pretty stuffy in here during the summer." She watched as the woman frowned, but otherwise let the explanation pass without comment.

That one little mouth movement, however, was enough. The embarrassment she’d felt earlier at Sugarcube Corner reasserted itself. "I'm sorry this place is in such poor shape," she continued lamely, her eyes dropping contact with Sunny's. "I know you wanted to stick around, but I feel bad about you being here."

"Well, the cracks in the walls and sections of peeling wallpaper did give me the impression that this wasn't *typically* what human apartments are like," quipped Sunny.

*That's an understatement.*

"But you shouldn't feel embarrassed. As of right now, I'm only Sunny Skies, not a princess. I know you wouldn't be staying in this place if you had any real choice. However, there were a few questions I wanted to ask you."

Sunny moved across the room before placing herself next to the teenager on the sofa. "Sunset, how have you managed to survive all these years?"

Sunset kept her gaze aimed at her boots. "You won't like it."

Sunny reached out with a hand and lifted the girl's chin. "Tell me," she said softly.

"After I knocked out the guards, I knew there was a possibility I'd need things to survive on. I didn't really have many bits on me at the time, and I couldn't go back to my room. Even if I teleported, I didn't know how much time I had before I was discovered by you or some of the other guards."

The rush of her thought process that night came back to her. Sunset could almost smell the adrenaline that poured off her that night, hear the pounding of her heart as she'd formed a plan.

"The servants' quarters were nearby, so I, uh..." Sunset reached up, placing a nervous hand behind her head, "sort of broke into them and looted whatever bits or gemstones I could find."

"Hmm," said Sunny, now deep in thought. "I recall those robberies being reported the next day, but I never thought to attribute them to you. I always wondered who the culprit was. You know Tea Tray was extremely upset when she lost that necklace. It was supposed to be a birthday gift for her sister."

A lump formed itself in Sunset's throat, one that felt less like something made of saliva and more like a tiny thorn bush. "I.... uh, I know."

She'd known very well why Tea Tray, the head maid, had gotten that necklace, a thin gold chain ending in a hoofful of small sapphires. Sunset just hadn't cared in the slightest.

If anything, she'd been happy to steal it. She'd grown annoyed by the middle-aged mare, constantly interrupting her studies to fuss over her, whether it was missing meals, lack of sleep, straining her
eyes, or the damage she'd done to her bedsheets during some of her experiments.

"Practically speaking," added Sunset, forcing down the horrible lump of guilt, "it ended up being a good idea. Humans don't even use gold for money anymore, but since gold and gemstones are less common here than on Terra, they're more valuable. I was able to pawn off everything I stole for human currency."

"I see." Sunny leaned back into the cushion. "And that lasted for all this time?"

"Well... not exactly." The first person she'd found to fence some of the bits she'd stolen had cheated her on their real value.

It was something she'd discovered afterwards with a little more research. Her buyer had only given her a sliver of what they'd been worth, figuring that she wouldn't know the difference since she'd only been, physically, an eleven-year-old girl.

Sunset had been absolutely infuriated. The next time she interacted with him, she'd made certain he understood just who he was dealing with. She'd demanded better prices, and emphasized her point with some choice pictures she’d taken while following him around with her newly stolen camera.

His first response was to try and grab her, but Sunset had simply fled onto the street. Thanks to a healthy set of lungs, she drew the attention of a small crowd of adults, making sure it included several maternal-looking women and some very burly men. With some decent acting, she convinced them that her fence was trying to kidnap her, and slipped away in the chaos that followed.

When she'd found him later, his face looked like a giant bruise. Staring down at him from atop a stack of old boxes like a small queen on a throne, she told the battered crook that her pictures were hidden in a place he'd never find, and that if he ever tried anything again, they'd go right to the authorities.

He'd been far more cooperative after that, and to this day, his nose was still crooked.

"For the rest," continued Sunset, "I got by however I could. Once I learned how to use these," she flexed her fingers, "I... um..." Her tongue tied itself in a knot. Why was it so hard to say? She'd already admitted to Princess Celestia that she'd robbed the castle servants.

Thankfully, Sunny spared her from any continued agony. "You went back to pickpocketing?"

Sunset just nodded, cheeks pink. Of course she remembered that particular, if brief, chapter of Sunset's life. How could Sunset expect her to forget it? Not that it made it any less embarrassing. If anything, the feeling only grew stronger by the fact that Celestia did remember.

"Once I developed some coordination in my hands, I started reading books on sleight of hand, for magic tricks, not thievery," she said, amending the last part quickly. "But I got good at it." She allowed herself a chuckle. "No more screw-ups anyway."

The corners of Sunny's mouth curled, right before being forced back into an expression of seriousness. "And what about shelter? Have you always been here?"

"No. At first, I stayed at CHS. Besides being really big, it's old too, built in 1951," said Sunset, reciting the facts she'd learned so long ago. "It's had lots of reconstruction over the years, and there are actually some spaces between the walls to sneak around in if you know where to look, and if you can fit. There are also some places that just don't get visited too often."

She'd basically haunted CHS for a long time, spying on the students and faculty, stealing food from
the cafeteria, and reading every book in the library she could in order to understand the strange world she'd found herself in, and her equally strange body.

Eventually though, slipping around her secret passages had lost some of its charm, and she'd yearned for a proper place of her own where she wouldn't have to worry about being discovered. "I got this apartment because it was the cheapest place I could find that was close to the school and the portal."

Sunny raised a pink eyebrow. "And the landlord let you stay here without parents?"

"He's kind of a dirt bag, so he doesn't really care all that much," admitted Sunset. "That, and I blackmailed him into it."

The stern look in Sunny's eyes said continue or else.

"He hosts gambling events semi-regularly in one of his extra rooms. It's all illegal, of course. I threatened to expose him if he didn't stay quiet about my living alone and give me a discount on my rent."

Feeling Sunny's continuing stare, Sunset's tongue moved with a will of its own. "I participated a few times, and cheated my way to a few good wins, sleight of hand and mathematical probability. B-But," she stammered, watching as Sunny's face grew darker and more disapproving. "I stopped coming because even with the blackmail, I figured I didn't want to press my luck."

Sunny's face softened, and she let out a loud sigh. "Well I'm glad to hear you haven't added gambling to your list of vices, Sunset."

"Not like I could afford to lose much," muttered the girl.

"You were also wise to stop. Blackmail is a dangerous business, Sunset. The victims frequently attack their blackmailers, especially if they're actually guilty."

"Really?" True, her first fence had lashed out, but Rusty Nail? Sure, her landlord was tall and wide, but the latter was due to his pot belly, not muscle. Personally, he always seemed too lazy to ever get truly violent with anyone, even her. Kick her out, sure. Attack her, not so much.

"Really. And while I can't approve of the things you did, I know you were just trying to survive." Sunny pulled the girl closer. "I think the important thing is that you know it's wrong."

Sunset gave her mentor a little smile. "Thank you." Taking a glance at her watch, she realized how much more time had slipped by. "Shoot, I need to get to my homework."

The older woman seemed surprised. "Is the work at CHS really that hard?"

"Not especially, at least not for me," admitted Sunset with a shrug as she finally slipped off her boots and stretched her toes. "But essays don't write themselves."

Sunny chuckled. "That's very true. Well, don't let me get in your way."

Sunset gave a nod as she went into her room. Sitting down at the little desk, she opened her laptop. The red-painted machine let out a little whine as it booted to life.

She reciprocated with a groan. "Yeah, yeah, I know you're not happy. Just boot already." Her laptop was old, and it was typically a little slow to start. But with her finances the way they were, she couldn't afford to buy something better.
Not that she'd paid for this one in the first place. Like her trusty little red blackmail camera, this piece of electronics had been stolen.

Finally, the machine turned on. Sunset opened up her English class essay and began to type. She was about a third of the way done with it, and it was due by Friday. Normally she'd have gotten much further along, but like Pinkie's party, it had been set on the back burner amidst her battle with Child Protective Services.

Sunset had been typing away into a second paragraph when Sunny's voice interrupted her. "Sunset? I'm sorry, but I was wondering what the noise was." Sunset glanced back to see Sunny hanging back in her doorway, a perplexed expression written all over her face. "What is that?" asked the woman, pointing at the desk.

"It's my laptop," answered Sunset.

Sunny's eyes just clouded over in complete non-comprehension.

"A computer," she clarified.

The woman's face lit up in recognition. "Ah... yes... Twilight mentioned these... computers," she said, stumbling over the word like a foal just learning to speak. "Honestly, much of what she said about human technology was hard to believe."

She walked into the room until she stood beside Sunset. "Twilight told me these machines were used for all sorts of things."

"They are," said Sunset, "though mine is a little less capable, since it's older. They started as adding machines big enough to fill the throne room at the castle. But as time went on, humans managed to make the parts smaller and smaller, until they made things like these that regular people can buy."

"Fascinating," said Sunny, eyes pouring over the machine with clear interest. Moving up to the screen, she pointed a finger at the text. "Is that your essay?"

The teenager nodded. Looking back at the document, she knew she needed to keep working away at it. But then another idea popped into her head. "I could give you a crash course in them if you want."

Sunny stared at her in surprise. "But don't you have school work you need to finish?"

"Yeah, but if you're going to be staying for a while, I might as well take some time and help you get familiar with these things, since you'll be seeing them a lot." She grinned widely. "And besides, when else am I going to get the chance to teach you?"

Sunny laughed. "Ah, so the student has become the teacher, I see." Sunny picked up the single extra chair in the room and planted it next to Sunset. "Alright then," she said as she sat down, "teach away Sunset. You have your pupil's full attention."

Sunset turned her eyes back to her screen, the plastic reflecting back the grin that had only seemed to grow wider. The idea of her teaching Princess Celestia anything was just too funny, and her chest ached just from trying to contain her laughter. Maybe this was why Pinkie laughed so much.

Still, even with how funny it was, there was a practical point to this thing. Celestia expected Sunset to be able to teach her something about these things. She expected Sunset to succeed. And Sunset Shimmer was going to ace this like she aced all her tests.

Well... almost all her tests. The only reason she was here was because she failed a test of character.
But Sunset was choosing to ignore that for the moment. This was academic, and her track record there was still one of the best.

Taking a deep breath to relax, she placed her fingers back on the wireless mouse, moving the cursor across the screen. "Okay, so this right here is the mouse."

Sunny tilted her head. "A... mouse?"

"The general shape of the machine resembles a mouse's body, so that's what they decided to name it," Sunset explained. "Anyway, you use it to move this around, which is called the cursor, and here's the desktop..."

Sunset Shimmer yawned as the light of the rising sun stirred her from sleep. Rubbing her eyes, the teenager slipped out of her bed and moved straight out to the kichenette in the main room. She hunted through the cabinets for a box of cereal, letting out another enormous yawn as she finally found it.

Her body moved on autopilot as she picked out a clean bowl, then combined the contents of the box with a healthy portion of milk from the one, half-full carton in her fridge. Sunset had just placed a spoon into her meal when she felt the need to stretch her still-stiff arms and legs.

Raising her head upwards from the counter, her sleepy brain finally registered the other person laying on her sofa, and she remembered her new roommate.

The lesson on computers had amounted to little more than an introduction, as Sunset had still needed to get back to her essay among other, lesser assignments. They’d gotten decently into the topic, considering the numerous questions or points of confusion Sunset had had to deal with.

Why was it called a window when the entire screen was like a window? Why was it a monitor if it didn't watch anything?

What powered these machines other than magic? Why was it the internet if it wasn't used to capture something like a net? Were computers sentient, since they were "intelligent" and had their own language? How did the letters get from the buttons to the screen?

Using YourVids as an example of the internet in use raised more questions. How did they fit movies inside the screen? Was Sunset sure there was no magic here, because those things in that "video" seemed impossible otherwise. How was there a dragon here? Why was it destroying that city? Were the people capturing these images even safe? What about the poor people below, and the struggling army? When had this happened? Were there monsters in Canterlot City too?

In hindsight, showing her a clip of an old Japanese monster movie hadn't been the best choice for an example video. Sunset had just gone with the stuff on the homepage, and that one was a recent watch thanks to the latest movie marathon. But eventually she'd calmed Sunny down by explaining the nature of modern special effects, or semi-modern in this case.

Still, thinking back on Sunny, on Princess Celestia, looking so confused and alarmed by the world of computers and the internet as a whole made the corners of Sunset's lips curl in amusement. It had taken every ounce of her willpower not to laugh while she tried to untangle it all for her.

I should have taken pictures. Then again, she probably wouldn't have let me.

Bringing her thoughts back to the present, she regarded the woman on the sofa again. Was she really still asleep? Princess Celestia had always been an early riser by necessity, so how could she be
sleeping away when it was already morning? "Princess, are you awake?"

Getting no response whatsoever, Sunset walked over to the sofa to get a closer look. Sunny Skies was flat on her back, eyes firmly closed with her arms stuck at her sides. She definitely seemed asleep. "Princess?" she asked again. "Princess, it's six-thirty in the morning."

Again, Sunny didn't even move. Tentatively, Sunset poked at Sunny's arm. Nothing. She pressed harder, but still nothing. Sunset knitted her brow, her brain now shedding the last vestiges of sleep. This time, she gave a tug at the older woman's arm. "Princess, shouldn't you be up by now?"

Sunny didn't make a sound, even when the teenager gave another, sharper tug that should have woken anyone with a functioning pain response. Even Rainbow would've woken up from that, and she slept like a rock.

Unsure of what else to do, Sunset gave one last powerful tug. It was enough to pull the pink-haired woman off the sofa. Her body rolled, landing with a thud on the room's thinly carpeted floor, completely limp.

Sleep had already given way to wakefulness, and now wakefulness was giving way to a pervasive sense of panic, which only increased when Sunset realized how little the woman was breathing.

"No no no no no." Like lighting, Sunset turned Sunny onto her back before pressing her ear against the woman's chest. She was greeted only by a faint beating. Far too faint.

Sunset shook Sunny violently, shouting right in her ear. "Princess Celestia! Princess, say something! Wake up!"

What was this? A coma? Do coma patients usually have low vital signs? Sunset wasn't sure. Could an alicorn even go into a coma?

Sunset's mind raced at the possibilities, trying to recall anything and everything she'd read or learned about alicorns in the years prior. The end result didn't amount to much, and none of it shed any light on whatever was going on.

An image flashed in her mind of the princess back in Equestria, a giant vegetable on a bed, surrounded by frantic guards and servants, the sun still missing from the sky.

Sunset's heart hammered in her chest. What if it was something else, like a disease? Or maybe some new villain had done something to Celestia. What if they went after Luna, or Cadance, or Princess Twilight? This was bad. This was very bad.

Sunset raced to her room, grabbing her phone and her watch. Taking hold of Sunny's wrist, her fingers scrambled to find a pulse, before finally detecting the faint beat under the skin. Her eyes fixed themselves on her watch face and the ever-moving numbers of the second counter.

It probably wasn't the most assuring thing in the world that she'd only seen this done on television, but she didn't have much of a choice, and didn't really care. The first plan was to call Twilight, both Twilights. Both of them would probably know more about medical science for their respective species than she did, especially if it was a disease.

But they'd both want data. Not just "a weak pulse and heart" but specifics. Sunset could at least count the beats per minute, get an idea of just how weak a pulse they were dealing with.

That, and counting the beats might keep her from teetering off the edge into hysterics. Maybe. Hopefully.
"... Sunset, what are you doing?"

Cyan eyes shot upwards to look at Sunny's face, wide awake and staring at her in utter confusion. "Why does my right arm hurt?" asked the woman. "And..." she looked around at her position. "How did I end up on the floor?"

Sunset dropped Sunny's arm like a hot coal and wrapped her own around the woman's neck. "YOU'RE ALIVE!"

"Yes, Sunset," replied Sunny slowly. "I've been alive for quite some time. Now would you mind telling me what's going on?"

"I thought you were in a coma or something," answered Sunset, resisting Sunny's every attempt to wrench her off. "You wouldn't wake up, you were barely breathing, and your heartbeat was so low. I thought something had happened to you!"

"... Oh."

"Oh?" repeated Sunset incredulously, pulling away to look at her mentor with narrowed eyes. Irritation gushed upwards, boiling into full anger. "I started to panic and that's all you have to say? Oh? What the hay just happened?!

"I'm sorry that I scared you, Sunset," apologized Sunny, looking more than a little sheepish. "It's just the spell." Sunset crossed her arms over her chest. "How?"

"This body doesn't sleep, not in the traditional sense," explained Sunny. "Instead I simply relaxed the connection between it and myself. Here, I'll show you." In an instant, Sunny fainted, eyes slamming shut as she went as limp as a deflated balloon.

Sunset examined the woman's body. Her breathing was once again reduced to almost nothing, and a quick touch of the wrist confirmed the same weak pulse.

About fifteen seconds later, Sunny's eyes snapped open, completely alert. The artery under Sunset's fingers roared back to life, beating so steadily that it was impossible to think that just a few seconds ago, it had been all but gone.

"See?" asked Sunny as she sat up once more.

"That's just... just... freaky," Sunset said, finally finding a word to express the bizarre sight before her. Breathing a sigh of relief, she ran a hand through her still messy hair. "But I guess it'll just take some getting used to. Sorry for pulling you off the sofa."

"It's alright, Sunset," said Sunny as she placed herself back on the seat. "Don't let me keep you from getting to school."

"Right." Walking back over to the counter, Sunset sat back before her breakfast. She raised her spoon, only for her hand to freeze in mid-air. "Hey, princess, do you want any breakfast?"

She glanced at her cabinets, despite knowing they were practically hollow. She frowned at them in disappointment, as if it were their fault she had little to offer her guest and not because she seriously needed to go grocery shopping.

Sunny shook her head. "This body also doesn't need to eat."
Sunset supposed that made sense. In fact, now that she thought about it, Sunny hadn't asked about food when Sunset had gotten her own meager dinner last night. She'd been too wrapped up in homework to even think of asking. But at least it would make things easier on groceries in the near future.

Sunset did discover a downside to that revelation, however. Namely, it was sort of awkward having someone sitting there, just watching you eat. In response, she took slower, self-conscious bites of her now extra soggy cereal. After a few minutes, Sunny seemed to pick up on the problem and directed her attention elsewhere.

No longer having an audience, Sunset dug into her breakfast and went through the rest of her morning routine, retreating to the bathroom. When she emerged later, dragging a brush through her hair a few more times, she found Sunny still on the sofa, eyes closed, as if meditating.

Finally, Sunset's memory kicked in. "Oh, right, I forgot. The girls and I are throwing a party for Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna at Sugarcube Corner today. It's a thank you for being so easygoing with everything that's happened."

Sunny opened her eyes, smiling warmly. "That sounds like a wonderful idea."

Sunset nodded her head. "Pinkie said they could be taste testers for some new dessert the Cakes are making for a competition. She calls it the MMMM. Trust me, the full name is a mouthful, no pun intended," she added with a chuckle.

She brushed out a few knots at the ends of her hair. "But she also wanted you to come too. If you want to, that is. I mean I know you're busy and if you can't eat you can't actually taste the food, so I can just tell the girls—"

"I'd be delighted to go, Sunset," answered Sunny. "It will be nice to get to try the MMMM properly for once."

Sunset tilted her head, forgetting about her brush. "What do you mean?"

"I've met the Cakes in Equestria. They entered that dessert for a nation-wide dessert competition in Canterlot a while ago."

"So you got to try it?"

"No," replied Sunny. "I was going to, but I never got the chance." Her brow furrowed. "Something about a mishap in transit. By the time the contestants arrived, all the desserts were combined into one, and even then Pinkie Pie ate most of it," she said, her tone full of disappointment and a touch of irritation. "I only got a tiny slice before it was all gone."

Sunset gave her teacher a sympathetic look. For a pony with her sweet tooth, that had to stink. "But wait," she asked in confusion. "You said you can't eat."

"This body doesn't need to eat, but I'm certain that it still can," corrected Sunny. "What time is the party?"

"Three-thirty," answered Sunset. "I can come back here after school to drop off my stuff and we could head out."

Sunny nodded in agreement. "Three-thirty it is, then. I'll be ready to leave when you get back."

Putting her hairbrush back in the bathroom, Sunset grabbed her backpack and keys and walked to
the front door. Opening it a couple inches, she turned around. "You going to be okay while I'm gone?"

Sunny gave the teenager a look of reassurance. "Don't worry about me. I'll find something to keep myself occupied. Go on and get to school. You don't want to be late."

Sunset's legs stalled for a second, unwilling to start walking and leave the woman alone, but she forced herself to relax. Stepping out into the hallway, she gave a little wave. "I'll see you later, prince —uh," she looked around, searching for anyone that could have overheard. "Mom."

She shut the door behind her and headed down the hallway. As she stopped at the top of the staircase, she paused. "Mom?" Shaking her head, she started the walk down the steps.

This was definitely going to take some getting used to.

In a room of Canterlot Castle, Princess Celestia popped into existence, golden light piercing through the darkness of the windowless chamber. Looking around to confirm her location, she turned to face a set of large oaken doors, and quickly cast a powerful sound dampening spell.

The room she found herself in was the "Royal Gift Room". Perhaps not the best name, but an apt one nonetheless.

In their centuries of life, Celestia and Luna had accumulated many gifts, either personal or gifts to the crown, given by regular ponies, ambassadors, heads of state, and many other such individuals.

Some of them were on display throughout Canterlot Castle. Others of a more personal and intimate nature, the sisters had kept stored in their private spaces. But the number of objects had grown so numerous, that a separate space had been required to place them all. Hence, the allotment of this room.

It was chosen by the strong suggestion of her captain of the guard many centuries ago, Argus. He believed the personal gifts and treasures of the princesses deserved the highest protection, which was why the room had only the one, perpetually locked entrance, flanked day and night by a pair of armed guards.

Argus had been an excellent soldier, but, oh, how he'd grated on her nerves at times. He'd been high strung, and his zeal for both his work and the code of the guard had bordered on neurotic. Under his command, the castle guard had been quadruple what it was now and ran triple the number of drills.

Celestia sneezed as she took a breath. Everything in here was coated in dust. Par for the course with how infrequently she visited. But she didn't have time for cleaning. Celestia had a task to accomplish. She was in between Day Court and a meeting to mitigate between ponies from San Franciscolt and Los Pegasus. Once again, the two were fighting over water distribution.

Her meeting yesterday hadn't borne the fruit she'd hoped. Los Pegasus was still clamoring for extra rainstorms, particularly from their northern neighbor, in spite of Cloudsdale's weather schedule for the region having been set, and previous discussions on the balance of climate. Now she needed to mitigate between the two parties before things escalated and somepony did something rash and stupid, as had happened in years past.

Honestly, the two of them reminded her of a pair of toddlers fighting over a toy. Had she and Luna been this bad when they'd bickered as foals? If they had, Celestia owed their mother an apology. Or maybe two.
The sun princess estimated she had a total of five minutes at most to return to her quarters before her escort arrived, and she needed to make the time count.

Casting her eyes over the room, she found her first object of interest, a solid gold goblet of simple design. It had been a gift from a griffon ambassador, a thank you for helping his son when he'd been stricken with fever. Considering the hoarding nature of griffons, and the fact that it had belonged to the ambassador's father, the gesture had spoken volumes.

A sad smile crossed the sun princess's lips. *I hope you understand, Geoff, wherever you are. It's for a good cause.*

Taking up the goblet, she slipped it into the saddlebags placed over her back. Looking around, she spotted a little gem statue, crudely shaped like a dog, before grabbing that as well. Another diplomatic memento, but far less pleasant.

Walking along, hooves disturbing the layer of dust on the carpeted floor, Celestia moved to a section holding some of her old accessories. In a glass case sat a headband of gold, decorated with a variety of gemstones. Celestia gingerly lifted the glass before taking up the object in her magic.

She'd never particularly liked the thing. It always irritated her forehead horribly. And yet, it had been a gift from an influential noble, so she'd been expected to wear it. Celestia was sure there were still tiny marks on her skin from where the metallic edges had incessantly poked her, even after all these years.

Holding it in front of her, she dislodged the gems from their settings before adding them to her bag. She had three minutes left before she needed to leave.

Kicking up the dust with another step, Celestia coughed, and mentally reduced her window. She'd need time to thoroughly clean herself off. Aside from his other nasal problems, the Los Pegasus delegate was highly allergic to dust. If there was even a speck of it on her during the meeting, he'd be sneezing as much as yelling.

She gave the contents of her bag one last look, assessing the items she'd grabbed along with the small hoofful of bits that had already been present. It would have to do for now.

As she prepared to teleport back, her mind turned over Sunset's story again. She'd been robbing ponies under Celestia's nose all this time. Sunset didn't admit to it, but Celestia knew she was most likely responsible for all the other, similar waves of petty theft that occurred at the castle over the years. All, she now realized, coinciding with the portal opening. How had she been so dense not to make the connection?

Celestia thought of all the ponies that had been stolen from, bits and gems and little personal possessions. She thought of how many people Sunset must have stolen from, all the things she'd taken, all the acts she'd committed, just to survive in that foreign universe.

Celestia understood it, she truly did. And she'd forgiven Sunset for all of it. And yet, thinking about it made her mouth turn horribly sour, choking out the lingering taste of the sweet, syrup-coated pancakes she'd eaten for breakfast, like a weed wrapping around a plant.

Celestia charged her horn for the teleportation spell. Sunset Shimmer wasn't going to need to steal ever again.

Of that, Celestia would make absolutely sure.
Author’s Note: At long last, a new chapter! I am so sorry it took me so long to update this. But in my defense, one of the reasons it took so long is that I have a surprise for my readers. I took the time to get not one, but two chapters ready to go. Normally I only do that for the beginning of a new story, but I thought “why not?”

Turns out the reason “why not” is that it’s a whole lot of work and really exhausting having to edit that much at once. @___@ Never doing that again outside of starting a fic.

Chapter 9 will be released either tomorrow or the day after that, I haven’t decided.

This and the chapter 9 you see were originally going to be chapter 8, and I was going to go even further into the story. But as the length got apparent, I split the chapter in two. That seems to keep happening with me…

I also did some editing on ch 1-7, fixing typos, combining splitting a paragraph or two, fixing a minor continuity error, stuff like that. A big thanks to people at fimfiction for helping me proofread my story.
Chapter 9: Days in the Life

The party had just begun at Sugarcube Corner. The principal and vice principal had walked in completely unawares, and Pinkie let out a cry of "SURPRISE!" so loud that, if they'd been near a cemetery, Sunset was sure the residents would've shambled over to file noise complaints.

The decorations for the little party were minimal, but effective. Several of the tables had been pushed together into a triangle formation, overlaid with nice white tablecloths Rarity had helped to pick out. All around the room were balloons knotted into the shape of cakes and cupcakes.

Unable to decide on a single "flavor", Pinkie had instead gone for an assortment, so the sides of the room were adorned with browns, whites, reds, pinks, yellows, blues and greens. Filling up the other tables were various desserts and drinks, either from the Cakes themselves, or ones Applejack had gladly donated.

Once they'd recovered their sense of hearing, the two sisters were ushered to a table while the Cakes prepared to bring out the MMMM.

"You really shouldn't have done this," muttered Principal Celestia as she took her seat.

"We wanted to," replied Applejack with a smile. "You and Vice Principal Luna have been great to us."

"Yeah Principal C," added Rainbow. "Remember when the soccer team had that big game against Northwest High? We thought they were totally going to cream us like everybody else. Even the coach thought so. Even I thought so. But you and Vice Principal Luna came in and gave us that pep talk." Rainbow grinned. "We blew Northwest High away, all thanks to you."

"And with how cool you've been about everything that's happened since last year," said Sunset, "we thought we should thank you."

Celestia looked over at Sunset, offering a small smile before her eyes drifted downwards towards the table. Sunset tilted her head. Principal Celestia had been like that today at school too, when she'd passed by Sunset in the halls, never seeming to maintain eye contact.

In fact, now that she thought about it, Luna had been doing that today as well. Not as bad as Principal Celestia, but it was still there. Or when the two had been walking the halls together, she'd look away and then redirect her gaze to her sister.

Sunset was just about to ask what was wrong when Mr. and Mrs. Cake brought out their prize dessert. It was far bigger than Sunset expected, towering multiple levels with an equally wide base. The two bakers struggled to get it to the designated table, each layer wobbling dangerously, and Pinkie leapt up to help them.
"Thank you dearie," said Mrs. Cake as she wiped her brow. Looking over at their guests, she took out a cake cutter and made a slice into the dessert, before setting it on the plate in front of Celestia, then repeating the process for Luna.

"This is the Marzipan Mascarpone Meringue Madness," she told them.

"I call it the MMMM!" cried Pinkie happily.

Mrs. Cake shot her guests an embarrassed smile. "We're planning on entering it in an upcoming dessert competition."

"We'd really appreciate it if you could tell us what you think," added Mr. Cake.

Celestia looked down at the piece of cake, her nostrils breathing in the sugary aroma. Her tongue slid across her lips, right before pulling back in. She looked at the teenagers and adults around her. "I really don't think we deserve-"

"Go on," insisted Sunny, who for the most part had stayed quiet. "I may not have had a part in the planning, but I'm fairly certain they don't intend to let you leave until you try it."

Celestia still seemed hesitant, but Luna just placed a fork in her hand. "Come on Tia, let's try it. They're asking for our help after all."

Celestia gave her sister a little smile, and both women proceeded to bite into the cake. As they did, Sunset noticed the nervous smile on both bakers' faces, punctuated by the beads of sweat dripping down their foreheads. Clearly, the pressure of the competition was getting to them.

But as it turned out, the two had nothing to worry about. Both women's eyes widened in surprise, and they let out sounds of complete delight. "This cake is fantastic," muttered the principal. Her sister's only answer was to shove another bite into her mouth.

With the ice broken, the party started in earnest. Everyone else received pieces of the MMMM, smaller than those of the guests of honor of course. Soon, everyone was digging in, and joining the sisters in their praise.

"This is heaven," sighed Sunny as she took another bite. "Pure heaven."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Cake as she took a sip of tea. "Carrot Cake and I have been working so hard on this."

"Really?" asked Fluttershy, taking a bite of her own cake before handing a treat to Spike, who had migrated from Twilight's lap to hers.

"Oh yeah," interjected Pinkie Pie, crumbs pouring haphazardly from her mouth. "I've been helping them the whole time. They've been working super duper hard on the recipe. They've put blood, sweat, and tears into the MMMM." Her face twisted into a grimace. "You know that's a really yucky metaphor to use for food."

"The competition is across the whole tri-state area," said Mr. Cake, cutting off a potentially endless stream of babble. "We've seen some of the other competitors, and they're pretty tough."

"Pardon me for asking," interrupted Rarity as she took a dainty nibble of her own piece. From the look on her face, it seemed like stopping at such small bites was taking a generous amount of willpower. "But why are you entering? You've never struck me as the competitive types."
"There's a cash prize for the top three spots," answered the redhead. "We thought we could use it to start a college fund for the twins."

"I could help you with those calculations if you want," offered Twilight. "I could make an estimate for all the colleges within a given radius of Canterlot City."

"Why thank you dearie," said Mrs. Cake with a warm smile. "I know it may be silly to worry about it since they're still babies. But it's gotten so expensive lately that we thought we should start now."

"Well I'm sure y'all will win that competition no problem," said Applejack as she polished off her slice. "I'm no slouch at bakin' and I think you're gonna win by a country mile."

"Definitely one of the best I've had," agreed Sunset as she swallowed another bite. She cast a glance at Sunny, the corners of her mouth curling upwards. "And I've had a lot of experience with desserts."

Across the table, Luna chuckled. "So your mother has a sweet tooth too, hmm? Tia has one as well, or she did." The vice principal shot her sister a look. "Before she went on a health food kick that is."

"There's nothing wrong with being conscious of my weight and what I eat," retorted the principal. She pointed a fork at Luna accusingly. "Your diet could use some improvement if you ask me."

"I'm fine. But you need to indulge yourself more. A few sweets aren't going to kill you."

After a few more minutes of verbal prodding, and threats of physical prodding with forks, Luna got her sister to eat another slice. Pinkie, meanwhile, had gobbled up the remains of her own pieces, and proceeded to get up and put on an improvised standup comedy routine.

By the end of it, everyone had broken down in laughter. Sunset had narrowly avoided choking on her water a grand total of four times before she finally gave up drinking anything. The second time it happened, Sunny tried to soothe her with a pat on the back. Though from the way she'd been shaking, it was clear she was having just as hard a time keeping her composure.

Every now and then, Pinkie would take a pause to allow them to catch their breath, never seeming to run out of air herself, before jumping right back into it and starting everything over.

After an hour and a half, the party was wrapped up, and everyone went on their way. Each of them got a piece of the cake to take home, though they insisted that Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna take back the lion's share of the remainder. Celestia had hesitated, but Luna plopped the plastic container into their car before Celestia could raise any more objections.

"I'll say it again Pinkie," said AJ, standing outside the shop as Big Mac's truck pulled up in front. "You should be a professional comedian."

"I could, couldn't I? That would be great. But so would owning a party store. Or baking, I like baking too. Maybe I could open a bakery and party store in one?"

Sunset chuckled, looking back inside the shop. Sunny was still inside, engaged in conversation with the principal and vice principal. Sunset saw Vice Principal Luna take a medium sized plastic bag from her purse, which Sunny quickly slipped into her own handbag.

After her friends all departed for their respective homes, Sunset walked alongside her mentor toward the bus stop. "That was a wonderful party," said Sunny.

Sunset nodded her head, readjusting her grip on the take home container with their pieces of the
"What was that thing Vice Principal Luna gave you?"

"Some examples of identification. I'm going to use them to make forgeries for myself," she replied. "And you too I suppose, if you haven't done so already."

Sunset arched an eyebrow. "Why? You already fooled Mrs. Ciricus once." She paused in thought. "How do you even have your magic anyway?"

Sunny simply held up the amethyst dangling around her neck.

The fire-haired girl nodded to herself. "Thought so."

"I got the idea from Twilight's story about the Dazzlings," explained Sunny quietly, making sure they weren't overheard as they walked along the still populated sidewalk. "I simply-"

"Infused the crystal matrix with magical energy as a form of storage so it could pass through the portal intact," guessed Sunset, catching onto the other woman's line of logic.

Sunny beamed. "Correct. The quantity of magic is limited, but this crystal is connected to another I have in Equestria, the same way our journals are connected. All I have to do is charge that crystal and the magic will flow into this.

"And as to your first question, I'm doing it for insurance. The principal and vice principal came by yesterday after you left, and we talked quite a bit. They made me realize that illusion spell might not always work, not if someone else gets involved. So I'm forging identification."

The pair came to a halt at the bus stop, sitting down on the bench and getting back into the shade. It was warmer today, and the heat still radiated from the surrounding buildings. Sunset stretched her legs, looking at the bag that Sunny had placed in her lap, before doing a double take. "Hey, that's not the purse you had before."

It looked almost identical to the little bag Sunny had arrived with, but where the one before had a sun and clouds imprinted on it, this one had a tiny shimmering piece of purple glass cut into a circle, surrounded by a gold band.

"It's not," said Sunny. "It's a special bag I sent over yesterday. And speaking of which, after we head back to deposit these slices, I'd actually like to go out again, if you don't mind."

"Sure. But where did you want to go?"

"Somewhere to sell these," said Sunny, opening up the bag to let the teenager see the contents.

Sunset peered inside, before her eyes went as wide as dinner plates. Her hands shot out, pulling the zipper back across. "Where did you get those?!" she hissed, looking around frantically to make sure no one else had spied the treasures within.

"They're mine," answered Sunny calmly. "I thought they could be used to give you some money."

The pink-haired woman quirked an eyebrow. "I got the impression you needed it. And this is certainly better than your usual methods."

Sunset wanted to argue, but found her tongue completely uncooperative. Her brain turned back to the conversation with AJ. Yeah, her budget was tight, but her income had also decreased not insignificantly over the last few months. Hanging out with her new friends left her with less time to go out and pick pockets for cash, or steal the occasional item.
Not to mention her heart felt a little heavier doing it these days. She'd never worked up the courage to tell her friends that she was a thief. But then, she'd done so much worse, and after they'd accepted her for everything else, including trying to kill them as a giant raging she-demon, bringing up her occupational larceny seemed... trivial.

And it wasn't as if they'd ever asked how she got by. It was just one of those things they took for granted, being teenagers that had parents and allowances.

Her newfound social life had also had an impact on her spending as much as her income. With her circle of friends and places to visit, she'd been driving more, and filling her bike's gas tank wasn't cheap.

The only saving grace was that thanks to the age of Canterlot City, the public transit system was well developed, even out here, making it easy to travel by other means when she needed to.

She peaked into the bag again, looking at the bits and gems and gold goblet. Her eyes stopped on the frankly ugly looking statue. "Is that a Diamond Dog?"

"A gift from their leader at the time," replied Sunny. "It signified the peace agreement between them and ponykind."

Sunset blinked, momentarily distracted. "We were at peace with the Diamond Dogs?" She didn't remember that in any of her history books.

Sunny waved a hand. "It was a few centuries ago. About two weeks after they gave me this, they raided a town and kidnapped half the populace to help work their mine."

Sunset rolled her eyes. That explains that then. She looked back at the bag. The idea of selling some of Celestia's possessions made her more than a little uncomfortable, and that feeling buzzed around in her head like a gnat. "I'm not sure about-"

"I'm not taking no for an answer," was Sunny's stern reply.

Well, if that's the way she was going to be. "I... could take you to some places." A good percentage of her fences only did their "business" at night, but she knew several that would welcome her now, especially if she brought things like these.

"Good," replied Sunny, taking on the commanding air of the princess she really was. She pulled the purse back onto her lap. "Just show me the way and I'll do the bargaining."

"What?" Sunset's hands tugged the bag back in her direction. "No. No way! You let me do the talking."

"I think I'd be able to handle a negotiation Sunset," replied Sunny with a huff of annoyance. "I hardly need to remind you how many I've made over the last thousand plus years."

"I'm not forgetting," said Sunset, giving the woman a glare. "But trust me, it's better if I do it. I know these guys, and I have a better sense for what these things are worth. What you think is a good amount in bits isn't the same as dollars. You'll be cheated for sure."

Sunny's resolve visibly weakened. "Well... perhaps... you could help me then, offer me advice?"

"They'd be suspicious of you too," continued the teenager. "The guys I go to wouldn't suspect me of being a plant. But if you come in out of the blue with me and take over, they'll be smelling a trap in under a minute."
And besides that, Sunset found the idea of Princess Celestia dealing with some of her contacts extremely unappealing, even more than selling her property.

One man in particular, Grease Ball, aptly named considering the state of his skin, had a penchant for hitting on women. Sunset often walked in on him trying to win over one or multiple women that had come bearing loot. It wasn't a pretty sight to put it lightly. She'd always been too young to be on his radar, but he'd be all over Sunny in seconds.

An image flashed in her head of the two of them in the same room, and nausea rolled around in her stomach. For the princess's sake, and hers, she was going to keep Sunny as far away from Grease Ball and anyone like him as possible.

They stared at each other in silence like that for a while, like a contest of wills. Sunny broke down first. "Alright Sunset," she sighed. "I'll let you handle it."

Sunset exhaled in relief, the sound of her breath mingling with the whistle of the bus as it finally pulled up to the stop. The pair walked up the metal steps, moving to a free seat in the back.

As Sunset slid into the leather seat, she readjusted the box of cake on her lap. "Princess," she whispered, leaning in closer. "Are you really sure you want to get rid of those?"

Sunny's fingers just tightened themselves around the purse strap. "Positive."

With a silent nod, Sunset turned her attention to the window, and began to plan out their route in her head, choosing which of her contacts to visit and the most efficient route going by bus or on foot.

It was going to be a busy afternoon.

The very next afternoon found Sunset Shimmer and her new mother Sunny Skies walking the streets of Canterlot City. It was an early release day, so the afternoon sun was around its zenith as the pair strolled down the sidewalk. After converting some of Sunny's Equestrian loot into currency, the first order of business had been to refill Sunset's food supplies.

Sunny had opted to join her, if just to see more of the city. The pink-haired woman turned her head this way and that at the buildings they passed along the suburban street, wincing at the occasional honk of a car horn.

"Are these... cars always so loud?" she asked, massaging an ear with her fingers.

Sunset nodded. "Yeah, but at least the traffic congestion isn't so bad out here like it is further into the city. Air's nicer too." She paused at the crosswalk, gesturing for the woman to stop with her. "Personally, I prefer my bike."

"Bike?"

Sunset mentally slapped her forehead as the two continued across the street. "Motorcycle or motorbike. It's like a bicycle," she said. When Sunny still looked at her in confusion, she tried again. "That's like a unicycle, but with two wheels. A motorcycle has a car engine attached to it. I would've taken it here but I don't think you'd fit with me, not to mention the groceries."

Sunny hummed at the details, observing the buildings again as they continued their walk. "It's so strange," she said absently.

"I know. You wouldn't believe how much the cars freaked me out when I first got here."
"I wasn't talking about that," said Sunny. "It's strange seeing Canterlot, any version of Canterlot, that's... flat."

"Flat?" Sunset quirked an eyebrow, looking at her surroundings. Canterlot City had plenty of rolling hills, even out around CHS. Nobody would ever call it flat, not by a long shot. But on the other hoof, it was nowhere near the capital built high in the mountains. "I guess it comes off that way, doesn't it?"

Sunny nodded her head. "I always did enjoy the view from that elevation."

A warmth tingled in Sunset's chest as memories floated to the surface. Memories of rooftops and balconies, of watching the sun rise and set over the distant horizon with Celestia, sunlight dancing at the command of her horn like an orchestra to a conductor. "Me too."

Finally the grocery store came into sight, a moderately sized concrete structure painted tan with light green trimming. The sign above proudly proclaimed it as "Appleville Grocers".

The two quickly headed inside, Sunset continuing to take the lead. She grabbed a cart and made a beeline for one side of the store, knowing her usual route through the aisles by heart. Sunny kept pace beside her.

"Sunset, I was wondering," asked the woman as they passed a shelf filled with cereal boxes. "What do they mean by 'Appleville'? I noticed that on a few of the other buildings we passed on the way here."

Sunset was scanning the shelves, moving her way through her list with precision, when she looked back at Sunny. "Oh, that? That's just an old name for the neighborhood. This entire suburb used to be its own town called Appleville. It got annexed to Canterlot City in like the late 1800s I think."

Sunset hadn't really cared for the local history, but a few weeks after the Fall Formal, she'd been invited to Applejack's house with the others, and Granny Smith had been in a mood for stories.

"Our farm was the first in these parts," she'd told Sunset and the girls. "Rough goin' at first, but we Apples stuck it out. That was until the blight came."

Her face had turned serious, lit up by the fire in the nearby hearth to ward off an autumn chill. "It nearly wiped everyone out," she continued. "We Apples were the only ones hangin' on, even if it weren’t by much. All the other farmers around were plum ruined. But my great, great granddaddy, he was a seed collector. My daddy too. They both loved plants and collectin' seeds from all over. Not a wonder we ended up farmin'.

"Great, great granddaddy saw how all the farms were hurtin' and people were starvin' and he gave up all his seeds to the other farmers to rebuild their crops, and shared our crop with everybody for nothin'. He kept them alive. After it was all over, when they built a proper town, they named it Appleville." She'd let out a laugh. "Even made great, great granddaddy the mayor. He'd wanted to say no but they insisted."

"Really?" hummed Sunny. "How fascinating."

Sunset left the woman to her thoughts as she turned around the back of one aisle to go into another, only to notice that Sunny's footsteps had stopped following her. She turned around to see the pink-haired woman staring at the deli at the back of the store, her face having lost some of its color.

"Uh, Pri-Mom? You okay?"
"I... forgot humans were meat eaters," she replied quietly.

The teenager grimaced, her tongue reflexively running itself over the points of the large canines in her upper and lower jaws, mixed in with the more familiar and comfortable flat grinding teeth. "Yeah, they are," she said, shrugging off the discomforting train of thought. "Thankfully for me, vegetarianism's pretty popular."

The two continued their trek through the store, Sunny frequently asking questions about some of the products on the shelves. Sunset did her best to answer, even if she couldn't explain why a juice product would so boldly advertise only having 30% juice content, or what the rest of it was.

Seeing a large crowd of people ahead, Sunset detoured through the currently empty aisle nearby. The shelves were stocked with an array of pet supplies, transitioning into books and magazines at the far end.

As she walked along, one of the books caught her eye. It appeared to be a fantasy romance of sorts, its brightly colored cover displaying a purple-skinned girl in a medieval style dress, embraced by a broad-shouldered knight in gleaming armor.

She stopped, looking back at Sunny. "What happened to Twilight?"

The woman, who had been so casually casting her magenta eyes over the magazine rack, stiffened, just for a second. "What?"

"I still haven't heard from Twilight," clarified Sunset. "Is she okay? I was really hoping to talk to her."

It had been just over a week now since she'd written Twilight about her problems, and her journal had stayed silent. With Sunny's arrival, Sunset had been sure Twilight would write back to ask how things were going, or show up in the flesh.

"Oh. Oh, yes," replied Sunny quickly, clearing her throat. "She's perfectly fine Sunset. She's just been... busy."

Sunset quirked an eyebrow. "You're sure? Even when she's busy she's still answered within a few days at most. I should have heard back from her by now."

A bolt of worry shot through the teenager. What if some monster had appeared? Goodness knew that Equestria had enough dangerous creatures and mythical monsters to fill an encyclopedia or three, and if Nightmare Moon was real, who knew what else was?

"Don't worry Sunset," reassured Sunny, reading Sunset's expression. "It's just the everyday sort of things, and having a student is taking much more of her attention."

"Things aren't going badly, are they?" Twilight had mentioned her new student when she'd visited after the Friendship Games, and in a few of their messages, but she hadn't gone into any real detail as far as how the whole teaching thing was working out.

"I wouldn't say that. Right now Twilight is helping Starlight adjust to her new living situation, so she hasn't started teaching her yet. She's probably still adjusting to the idea herself. You should expect some greater delays once Twilight actually begins teaching her, especially once she starts."

Sunny's eyes grew distant, lost in her memories. "Students as capable as Starlight, if Twilight's description is accurate, and I know it is, will often be a challenge for any teacher. While I have faith in Twilight as a mentor, that doesn't mean it's going to go smoothly for her. In fact, it's almost
guaranteed not to."

"Oh," Sunset replied, her voice carrying a hint of disappointment. She knew that Twilight had her duties and her new student, but a little part of her was still hurt at the thought that their correspondence would slow down. Princess Twilight Sparkle was the first pony that had offered her friendship, and she considered their connection a special one.

Then, another thought crossed her mind. "Was I that much trouble for you?"

"Oh you certainly kept me on my hooves," chuckled Sunny. "But you weren't a bother. Unlike Twilight, I had much more experience when you came along." She looked over Sunset's shoulder at the grocery list sitting in the seat of the cart, eyes scanning over the still unchecked items. "We should hurry along Sunset. Didn't you say earlier that you had a meeting this afternoon?"

The teen slapped her forehead. "Ugh, I totally forgot." They'd all made plans this morning to meet at Twilight's and study together for a math test tomorrow.

Sunset looked down at her watch, eyes widening. It was already 1:33 PM. Their meeting was for 2:30 PM. She had a little less than an hour to finish here, get everything back, and head out to Twilight's. "How did it get so late?"

"All the more reason to finish up here," said Sunny. The woman took another glance at the list, and then craned her head to look at the signs hanging from the ceiling, trying to figure out where to go next.

"Hey Princess," Sunset whispered, "I know she's busy, but could you tell Twilight to write me soon? I really miss talking to her."

Sunny glanced back, giving the teen a half-smile. "Of course Sunset. She'll contact you as soon as she can."

"Thanks." Was it her imagination, or did that smile not reach Sunny's eyes?

"I think the next item on your list is in the aisle next door." Sunny pointed at the sign overhead. "Come along sweetheart," she added, slipping into character as they passed a small crowd of people.

Sunset followed along into the next aisle. It was probably just my imagination. As Sunny pulled further ahead, Sunset picked up her pace. She needed to get her mind off Princess Twilight.

Besides, if she was late, this world's Twilight would throw a fit.

It was late Friday morning in Ponyville, and the doors to the Castle of Friendship swung open to admit Princess Twilight Sparkle, the newest ruler of all Equestria. "It's good to be back," she declared cheerily.

The young princess had a spring in her step as she entered her crystal home. "I can't wait to write up my findings." Her whole body was charged with visible excitement, wings twitching involuntarily, making her levitate an inch off the floor. "Best. Research Vacation. Ever!"

Her original goal during the trip had been to observe the rare golden sun fish as it migrated through Horseshoe Bay. But her discovery, well, not entirely hers she supposed, had made the trip go far beyond her expectations.

The golden sun fish was a small creature, bright yellow in color with a multitude of orange spines. Its
ball-shaped body was covered with highly reflective scales that acted like a mirror for the sunlight when it swam close to the water's surface starting at dawn, but which disappeared into the depths at sunset. Schools of golden sun fish were normally an amazing sight. To passing pegasi, they often looked like a miniature underwater sun.

The first evening there, Twilight spent time out on the beach trying to find the best places to observe the migration. While looking out at the water, she'd found a school of crescent moon fish. Like the sun fish, they too had highly reflective scales, though theirs were a much paler color, matching the moon hanging high overhead.

As the name suggested, these fish were something of a crescent shape, with long, thin bodies and sharp curved fins. In contrast to the sun fish, these creatures basked in the moonlight before disappearing with the day.

The purple alicorn hadn't thought much of them. If anything, she'd expected them. Golden sun fish and crescent moon fish were almost always seen in the same habitats. Many ponies theorized that the two were related, and that they lived in the same places simply because they had similar preferences as far as water temperature, salinity, and diet.

Their association with each other was an altogether ancient thing. According to several written accounts, it stretched back all the way to the time the royal sisters took on rulership of Equestria.

Twilight had once read that in the early days of the diarchy, their combined appearance was seen as a good omen, reminding the sailors of their princesses and the protection they offered, though that status was lost for the latter species after Nightmare Moon, and Princess Luna, faded into myth.

But thanks to Fluttershy casually striking up a conversation with a sun fish, Twilight's understanding of both species had grown tremendously. It wasn't simply a matter of relation, shared preferences, or even coincidence that the two were so often seen in the same places.

They lived together, side by side. When the sun fish dove beneath the waves to sleep, the crescent moon fish rose up and watched for predators. And when the day came around, the sun fish switched places and roles.

In fact, as Endy, the male sun fish Fluttershy spoke to, had put it, the relationship between the two fish was so close that they formed partnerships, one sun fish for one moon fish. It was a bond formed not long after hatching, a bond that lasted a lifetime.

And as if to illustrate the point, the very minute that Fluttershy relayed that information to Twilight, a female crescent moon fish broke the water's surface, looking at sun fish, alicorn, and pegasus alike with curiosity, filtered through a state of half-sleep. This fish, once brought up to speed, promptly introduced herself as Endy's partner Lene.

The single migration Twilight had wanted to study had transformed itself into two, since in accordance with their relationship, both fish migrated together, one on the surface and the other totally hidden under the ocean.

It was a fascinating case of mutualistic symbiosis. And the fact that nopony before her had ever documented it made her giddy all over again.

"Maybe not the best," came a groan from behind. "I can think of a negative, or eight."

Twilight pivoted her head to look back at her new student, thoughts of her upcoming contribution to ichthyology set aside. The pink unicorn's back twitched as she walked, the skin under her coat dotted
with red spots.

Twilight winced. "I'm still sorry about that Starlight. When Pinkie offered to introduce you to her crab friends, I didn't think they'd be so... *enthusiastic.*"

"I can still feel their claws pinching me," groaned Starlight.

Twilight laughed weakly. "I really shouldn't have pushed you," she told her, repeating the apologies she'd offered on the ride back. "But in my defense, with how Pinkie let them hang off of her so much, I thought they had a gentler grip."

Of course she should have realized Pinkie probably had a higher pain tolerance, either from being an earth pony, or just being, well, *herself.*

"I don't get it. A couple of them pinched me and I didn't feel a thing," said Spike, bringing up the rear as he pushed a small cart with their belongings, including Starlight's saddlebags, her own back still too sore for them.

"Spike," replied Starlight, "you have scales."

"Oh, right."

"And hey," said Twilight, trying to lighten the mood. "It wasn't all bad. Your kite flying was pretty impressive. I think you might have put some of my brother's tricks to shame."

Starlight blushed, the change in topic seeming to distract her from the ache in her skin. "Thanks. But I think I was just lucky. All those tropical currents made it easy."

"I think you're being modest," countered Twilight.

"Don't forget the concert too," said Spike, pulling out a rolled up poster from the luggage cart. The little dragon unrolled it, holding it out in his claws. At the top was written, in flowing script, "Mistress of the Waves." Water spiraled in the background in torrents and jets, obscuring the shape of some sea monster.

Standing in the middle of the poster's foreground was a young unicorn mare with a light peach coat and a long, dark brown mane. She was dressed in pirate attire, though the costume didn't hide her cutie mark, a violin and a set of four silver spurred boots in mid-step. She too was in a dancing pose, balanced on her hind legs while a violin and bow floated above her in her magic.

"Lindsey Spurling was awesome!" declared the dragon.

Twilight smiled. "Yes, she certainly was." The concert in Baltimare hadn't been planned, but Rarity talked them into it once she saw the poster. She was as interested in the musician's costumes as she was in her music. Afterwards, they'd all ended up with her autograph on various items, including Spike's poster.

"I don't think I've ever seen anypony play the violin and dance ballet at the same time," admitted Starlight. "Even for a unicorn, I can't imagine that's easy." Her gaze redirected itself at her hooves. "I would have taken all that away."

Twilight reached out a forehoof in comfort. "Starlight, you can't keep focusing on that. You'll never get anywhere if you do."

"It still gets to me," she muttered.
"I know. But you need to get your mind off of it. Why don't you start unpacking? That might help."

"Actually," said Starlight, a sliver of strength returning to her voice. "I think I'm going to soak in the bath first. The warm water will help my back feel better."

Twilight gave a little smile. "Alright. Spike," She turned to her assistant. "Could you take Starlight's things to her room, and then set down mine? I'll unpack in a few minutes. I want to check the library first."

"Sure thing Twilight."

As the three went their separate ways, Twilight held in a sigh. Logically, she knew Starlight's bouts of guilt were perfectly normal. It had been around a month since the unicorn's attempted revenge, an attempt that had temporarily splintered the timeline and threatened to destroy all of Equestria.

She'd been making strides of course, not huge ones, but she was trying. She wanted to be that better pony. And Twilight was more than willing to help her.

But Twilight would be lying if she said it didn't hurt when Starlight was haunted by the shadow of her actions, making her shrink back into herself. It made Twilight feel like she wasn't doing well enough as a teacher.

Not that Twilight had started teaching in any real capacity yet. Most of the time had been spent helping Starlight move in, along with all the other day to day things. Well, one thing was for certain, Twilight was going to change that very soon. But right now, she'd check the library.

Taking down the sign they'd left in the lobby, she continued on her way, reaching the doors of the newly established Ponyville Library. Mayor Mare had wanted it to be the Ponyville Royal Library, but Twilight preferred it this way.

She surveyed the room, the many crystal shelves, already built into the walls, filled with books, or in the process of being filled. From the fantasy section to the non-fiction section, to the reference section stocked with thickly bound dictionaries, encyclopedia sets, and other such materials, it was all there, and still being built.

As much as she'd treasured the Golden Oak Library as her home, she had to admit the library floor had always been a bit small compared to the ones she'd practically grown up in. When she'd decided to recreate the public library, she'd taken advantage of the room size, adding reading nooks and study areas for ponies to use, a properly sized children's section, and several large wooden tables and chairs.

Going over to the main desk, she picked up the ledger. Opening it to the first page, the princess of friendship frowned in annoyance at the short list of ponies who had checked out books.

Actually, to call it a list was unfair, as it consisted only of Cheerilee, which was no surprise to Twilight at all, as Cheerilee had always been a regular at the Golden Oak Library. Though Twilight knew that was more for her job than actual pleasure, based on the titles she'd checked out.

Come to think of it, the number of ponies she'd have called truly regular customers at the library could be counted on four hooves, with some to spare.

Her librarian's pride once again stung, Twilight sighed, allowing this one to escape over her frowning lips. She closed the book, carrying it along to her private library. She'd set it there for now and search for any unregistered checks out later.
Opening the new set of doors, she set the ledger down on one of the sturdy oak tables, taking a look around at her personal space. The sight of so many more books returned the smile to her face.

Her purple eyes stopped at an unfamiliar piece of paper sitting on another table. Levitating it up, she instantly recognized it as Celestia’s writing.

_Dear Twilight_

_I hope you don't mind, but I had to borrow your copy of An Extensive Examination of Equestrian Economics by Bull Market. Supply Curve needed to see it, but for some reason the copy in the Canterlot Archive has been misplaced. I will return your copy as soon as possible._

_Princess Celestia._

Well, at least her library had been of use to _somepony_, even if it wasn't the public one.

Flying up to the shelves, she quickly found the place where the volume was supposed to be and confirmed that it was still missing, before slipping the note into her saddlebags as a reminder.

Thinking of Celestia, Twilight remembered that the sun princess had been trying to meet Starlight for some time without success, mostly due to things at Starlight's end. Twilight wasn't a fool. She knew Starlight was just trying to avoid the meeting. But she also wasn't sure if or how hard she should push her.

Still, it needed to be fixed. Perhaps Princess Celestia would have ideas.

"Twilight! Are you coming?" called Spike from the hall.

Twilight turned her head, seeing the little dragon standing in the doorway. "Sorry Spike, I got distracted."

Bringing herself to the ground, she and Spike walked along the halls to their rooms, his rapid steps falling in sync with her longer strides. "Spike," she told him as she turned a corner. "I need to start working on Starlight's studies. Tomorrow, could you get another order of paper and ink? I'm going to make a list of all the lessons we could go over, A to Z. Oh, and quills too."

"All of them?" asked Spike in surprise, his large green eyes becoming even larger as he considered the idea. "Better make it a triple order," he muttered to himself.

Walking into her bedroom, conveniently located next door to Spike's, the pair made short work of unpacking their bags.

Ever organized, Twilight not only made each of them a two part checklist for long-term travel, checking off every item coming and going, but indexed it by the item's location, both the bag it was packed in and its destination when unpacked. Or in the case of some items, a temporary location, such as the basket for beach towels that needed washing.

Within thirty minutes, both Twilight's and Spike's cases, purple and green respectively, were back in their own closets, waiting for the next trip. "I think that might have been a new record," said Twilight as she looked over everything, rolling up her list with a smile.

"I still don't get why we have to unpack _everything _right away," said Spike, pushing a book back on the shelf. "It's not like the luggage is going anywhere."

"Just because we just got back, that’s no reason to leave suitcases sitting around. It's messy," lectured
Twilight. "Shining was like that you know. The year he and Cadance got together at the Fall Formal, we went on this camping trip after Hearth's Warming.

"While we were away, Shining found this piece of quartz shaped like a robin. He brought it back with him to give to Cadance as a Hearts and Hooves Day present. Then when it came around..."

"What? What happened?" asked Spike curiously, fully invested in her story.

"He couldn't find it," said Twilight flatly. "He practically turned the house upside down looking for it. And you know where it was? In his suitcase. He never emptied his case from the trip, put it in his closet to get it out of the way, and totally forgot he hadn't emptied it." Twilight laughed. "Mom found it the day after Hearts and Hooves, and only because she'd thought to look there."

She poked Spike’s scaly belly with a hoof. "And that's why it's better to empty suitcases as soon as you can."

"Okay, okay, I see your point," conceded the dragon. His stomach let out a loud growl. "Can we get lunch now? I'm hungry."

Twilight looked at the clock on her wall. "It is getting about that time, isn't it? Alright then, let's go down and eat. Maybe Starlight will join us if she's done soaking."

As Twilight turned to leave her room, her eyes fell on the mirror, decorated with photo after photo of friends and family. Rainbow and Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Fluttershy, Cadance, Owlicious, and even Moondancer.

Oh, Moondancer. If that hadn't been a learning experience for her as the princess of friendship, she didn't know what was. Reconnecting with an old friend, and helping her open up when she'd shut out everypony else-

Twilight froze, mind turning rapidly as the seed of an idea blossomed forth into the flower of a plan. Yes! Yes, that's perfect!

"Twilight?"

Twilight snapped out of her seeming trance to look down at her assistant. "Sorry Spike. I just had an idea. After lunch, I want you to write a letter to Dean Strawberry Moon of Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns."

"Is this for one of those... aluminum things?"

"That's alumni, Spike. And yes, sort of." As the two approached the hallway near Starlight's room, Twilight lowered her voice. "I want her help tracking down Sunburst's current address."

"Sunburst?" asked the dragon before comprehension began to set in. "Wasn't that Starlight's friend?"

"Yes. He went to Celestia's school. If we presume he graduated, then the CSGU Alumni Association should have a current address on file, or something close that we can use."

Spike nodded. "You want to get them back together."

"Right," said Twilight, happy her number one assistant was on the same page. "I think it will be good for her. But not a word to Starlight."

"My lips are sealed," assured Spike, dragging his claw across his mouth in a zipping motion for
emphasis. His stomach growled once again. "Hey, do you think we could go to get ice cream?"

Twilight almost said no. Dragons, being fire-breathers, had internal organs that generated large flashes of heat on command, and kept their average body temperature high. It made them qualify as warm blooded, allowing them to avoid things like hibernation.

That wasn't to say their ability to control their body temperature was as effective as that of other warm blooded species. There was evidence to show that dragons weren't quite as resistant to cold on the inside as they were on the outside, and that eating sufficient quantities of something freezing, depending on size, could leave them as crippled as a normal reptile.

Twilight had once heard a story of a full grown dragon that had crashed in an ocean in the far north during the winter. The dragon had swallowed so much of the freezing water on impact that he'd been completely paralyzed, forced to float on his back until his organs and the sunlight warmed him back up.

Baby dragons, Twilight knew, were particularly sensitive due to their age. And for a baby dragon of Spike's size, eating large amounts of ice cream was enough.

He liked ice cream of course, but Twilight tended to make it a rare treat, and always had to regulate how much he ate and how fast he ate it, lest he get sick and become completely unable to move.

But he had been pushing around their bags, and he'd offered to take Starlight's saddlebags as well. "Sure Spike. But not too much. I don't want you getting cold sick."

"I know Twilight, I know," replied Spike in exasperation. "That only happened once! I was a hatchling."

Yes, he had been. He'd been so young he hadn't even been able to talk. She'd let him eat half a carton while trying to study for a test. "And I'll never forget it. It practically gave me a heart attack."

Twilight and Spike haggled over the number of scoops all the way down the stairs.

Princess Luna was a huntress.

It was a concept not many ponies really grasped. Her duties included not only driving back nightmares in the land of dreams and bringing the night sky, but driving back the monsters that prowled her domain for ponies to devour.

Dealing with monsters was different in many ways from dealing with nightmares. For one, Luna didn't need to put real effort into finding nightmares. But the monsters? They liked to hide, particularly from her. In response, Luna had become adept in tracking them down when she needed to.

Hunting was not a common practice in Equestria, mostly due to ponies being herbivores. But Luna considered herself a capable huntress. Millennia ago, the griffons, hunters themselves, had lauded her skill for tracking beasts in the dark of the night, and her equal talents in rendering them unconscious.

She may not have killed her prey, but she made quite sure they would be in recovery for a good, long time, and hesitate before attacking ponies again.

The blue alicorn walked down the halls of Canterlot Castle, now bathed in a mix of shadow and torchlight. The Night Guard, a mix of thestrals and nocturnally-inclined ponies, saluted her as she passed. Technically she should have already left in search of monsters, reports having reached her of
several sightings near settlements big and small. Bugbears, hydras, and other such creatures.

But those monsters would wait. Right now, Princess Luna was engaged in a hunt of a different sort, one through the very halls of Canterlot Castle, a hunt she had to undertake alone.

The actual hunt for her quarry would be a short one, for she knew precisely where to go in order to find it. But this quarry, this quarry was one she placed as more important than all the monsters that wandered Equestria combined. But like those others, she was determined that it would be dealt with before this night was out.

Reaching a set of doors emblazoned with a familiar golden sun, she knocked her silver-shod hoof against the wood. "Tia? Tia, I know you are in there."

Golden magic surrounded the doors before they opened wide. Celestia was seated in one of the chairs. On the stand beside her was a novel, bookmark barely scratching the literary surface, while a silver tea set was placed on the small table between her chair and its twin. Philomena was nowhere in sight, most likely having gone to sleep at this hour.

"Good evening Luna," greeted Celestia with her usual warm smile. "I thought you'd be busy with your duties by now."

Luna shut the doors behind her, the lock turning with a click. She faced her sister, face stuck in a decidedly cross expression. "Sister," she said sternly. "We need to talk."

Celestia raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Instead, she turned her attention to the tea set, and lifted a second cup with her magic.

"I am not interested in sharing tea tonight," Luna commanded.

Celestia set the still empty cup down and looked back at Luna, concern flashing in her eyes. "What is it Luna? Is there something wrong with Tibbles?"

"Tibbles is in the best of health. He is currently consuming dinner," replied Luna. Or possibly inhaling. The little possum had a healthy appetite. "If my pet needed assistance, I would have called a veterinarian."

"Then perhaps you could tell me what is wrong?"

"That is what I wish to know!" snapped Luna, glaring at her sister. "What is going on with you as of late?"

Celestia's eyebrow shot up higher. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Luna snorted. "Then allow me to be clear, sister. For the last week you have been acting oddly. Both Raven and Kibitz said you seemed strangely preoccupied last Saturday. Not only that," added the night princess as she took a step forward, "but you have also been spending far more time in your chambers as of late than is your norm."

It had started with Kibitz. The castle's majordomo often irritated Luna, though it wasn't like they'd gotten off on the right hoof anyway. But despite how aggravating his meticulous scheduling could be, Luna knew he was a tireless worker. He'd been at the castle for many years, weathered countless crises, and was as loyal to the crown and the two princesses as a pony could get.

So when he showed up in her chambers this evening to talk privately with her about Celestia, Luna took it seriously. The matter grew even more serious when Raven joined in. Normally she was fast
asleep at that hour. And yet, there she was with Kibitz, clad in a nightdress and her normally well-kept mane falling freely around her shoulders in tangles.

"I hardly see how that's cause for concern Luna," replied her sister, her guard rising. "And those two should know better than to bother you over something that trivial."

"I am not done," Luna snapped, wings flaring. "Your behavior has been even stranger as of the last few days. You forgot several key documents for Day Court on Wednesday, and then there was the petition for that bridge in Coltifornia."

"What about the bridge? I approved the design, and relayed the plans to the royal engineers."

"Yes, and when you were relaying the schematics, you misquoted the proposed numbers. And I heard that today, during your meeting with the Manehattan Board of Education, you had to have something repeated to you on no less than five occasions."

Luna's eyes narrowed, and she took another few steps forward, closing the gap between them. "Raven has been telling me about other strange behaviors, that you've been reaching out for things with your hoof rather than your horn, only to suddenly levitate them.

"All of these would be odd, but innocuous enough on their own. But combined? Something is going on with you Tia, and as your co-ruler, nay, as your sister, I demand to know what it is."

Luna glared at her sibling, silently daring her to even try to deny her words. What she'd heard from the two unicorns had told her one solid and undeniable fact. There was something wrong with Celestia.

She studied the alicorn before her, wondering if perhaps it was some kind of double. Queen Chrysalis was still at large, and it was no secret how much she detested Celestia.

Anger and worry warred inside Luna's chest, as it had ever since Raven and Kibitz relayed their stories. That oversized bug had already injured Celestia once, all while Luna had been fast asleep.

If she, or anything else had harmed her sister, she'd tear whatever or whoever it was asunder with such fury, it would make Nightmare Moon look tame.

Celestia stood there, eyes locked with hers, before she heaved a sigh. Her whole body seemed to slump. "Alright Luna, you win. Sit down, and I'll tell you everything."

And so, amidst the pouring out of more Chineighse tea, Celestia told Luna a story, a story that went from last Saturday to now, a story of the world beyond the enchanted mirror and everything Celestia had done.

"I see," said Luna when her sister had finished explaining, taking a sip of her tea. "This construct spell, it sounds vaguely familiar to me. What precisely is it?"

"The technical name is the Multiple Magical Marionette Me spell," answered Celestia.

Luna rolled her eyes. "I shall never understand the modern wizard's fascination with alliterative spell names. That one is just a twister of tongues." She took a sip of her tea, savoring the taste on her tongue. "And this was why you were using your hooves instead of magic?"

"Phantom signals," said Celestia. "Humans use their hands. The construct and I are connected via the brain, so we occasionally share some neurological feedback along with thoughts and memories."
Luna nodded, her brow furrowing in concentration. She definitely recalled that spell from somewhere. But where? Where had she seen it, and when? The night princess took another sip of her tea as a memory flashed into her mind. "Ah, I remember now. Was that not a spell crafted by Crossmodal Attention?"

"Yes. Not the most well-known of unicorn wizards, but still quite talented in his own areas. He called the spell his crowning achievement."

"I remember reading about him while I was in recovery." After being brought back to sanity, Luna had been so weak. It had taken months before she had the magical strength to move the moon again without a problem. Even the earth pony part of her had suffered, her strength little better than that of an underweight weakling.

As a result, she'd thrown herself into catching up on the world, reading a quantity of books that would have made Twilight Sparkle green with envy. She'd covered something from every topic, including notable and somewhat less notable wizards of years past, like Crossmodal Attention.

The blue alicorn set down her cup, tapping her chin with a hoof as the memories of what she'd read came back to her. "Tia," she said slowly, "are you sure using that spell is a good idea?"

"I don't see why not." Celestia's porcelain cup clinked as it was set down on the tray. "It was the best option I had available, and I have more than enough magical capability to use it."

"I was not jabbing at your magical ability," replied Luna. "I was thinking more of your skill at using it. I recall reading that Crossmodal created that spell to help with multitasking, allowing him to perform multiple tasks without worrying about the independent will of full duplicates."

"What's your point Luna?" asked Celestia, tension rising in her voice. "You know I've done multitasking before. Many times in fact."

"My point," replied Luna bluntly, "is that I also recall reading that Crossmodal's special talent was multitasking. And while you are most certainly experienced at doing multiple things at once, it is not actually your specialty."

"I'm fine."

Luna shook her head, sending her star field of a mane swirling around her. "No, I don't think you are, not as much as you want me to believe." Her tea was forgotten now, what little remaining in the cup left to sit on the table between the two sisters. "Tia, what about those forgotten documents?"

"It was an accident," replied Celestia. "I'm allowed those sort of things."

"And the bridge? You told the engineers the bridge specifications when you gave them the plans, contradictory specifications to what was written. In fact, you completely flipped the mathematics involved. I checked the calculations myself Tia."

In truth, she'd checked the calculations twice. The first time, the results had been so bad she'd nearly dropped her abacus. The second time hadn't produced anything better. "Had they not double checked the written plans right there and instead presumed what you said was correct, it would have been disastrous."

Celestia winced. "Well, I-"

"And the Manehattan Board of Education. I know that those meetings hold your interest, how you enjoy speaking about the future of education. Raven said that afterwards, the head of the board was
deeply concerned he'd done something to offend you."

"I-"

"All this has happened within the last few days. Mistakes like this happen to you, yes, but not usually
this much and this close together. Don't you see Tia? It's the spell. You share one mind with the
construct, and in order to do that you are literally splitting your attention in twain."

"I have more than enough power for the spell," repeated Celestia weakly.

"I am speaking of attention, not magic," responded Luna sternly. "Attention is a finite resource, and
alicorns do not possess it in abundance as they do magic. You have been more forgetful and
distracted because of the construct."

Celestia grimaced. "I admit, you are probably right about the side effects."

"No probably about it," snorted Luna.

"But," continued Celestia, "I'm sure I will be able to adjust to the spell. It's only been a few days.
With time, I'll be able to get used to the effects."

Luna felt a headache forming right above her horn. Why did her sister have to be so stubborn?
"While I cannot deny that possibility sister, I still worry. You've been lucky avoiding any lasting
problems so far, but that luck may not hold."

"I had no choice," said Celestia, getting up from her seat to pace along the carpet. "It was the best
plan."

"And I agree, your stratagem was most effective," said Luna, getting up to stand by her sister's side.
"But did you not say that you drove off that vile mare? Your goal is accomplished. Can you not end
this charade and stop using the spell?"

"Woman, Luna. For their species, it's woman," corrected Celestia. "And yes, I got rid of her, for
now. But there is a basic certainty that she'll come back. I need to be there when she does. Sunset
needs me. She's still a minor there Luna, a child."

The sun princess's wings drooped. "I can't stop, not until I know she's going to be safe over there."

Luna's face softened, her ire cooling. When Sunset Shimmer had reappeared, a weight had fallen
over her sister. She'd tried to mask it from those around her, but Luna had known Celestia far too
long to be fooled.

Yes, weight was the right word. It was like there had been a tremendous boulder perched on
Celestia's back during those days and nights in which Twilight had gone through the mirror.

It slowed her steps as they walked down the halls, the duties of the crown forcing them to leave from
time to time while the element bearers stayed by the mirror. Luna actually had to slow down to stay
by her sister's side, despite Celestia's somewhat longer strides.

Initially, Luna thought her sister's gloom was mostly just worry over Twilight and the loss of the
Element of Magic. She'd tried to reassure her sister of Twilight's return. Celestia's mood had
lightened a little at her efforts, but the weight had remained largely in place.

When Twilight did return, and Celestia asked after Sunset's wellbeing, it was clear to Luna that,
however she had parted with Sunset, it had left a mark.
Not that Celestia would talk about her, or their parting. Even after Twilight had returned, she barely said anything regarding the unicorn.

Looking at her sister now, it was evident that weight was still there, just as heavy as it was before, or perhaps even heavier. "I didn't realize how much of a burden her departure was for you."

"I failed her," whispered Celestia, her wings drooping further from the guilt that rang clearly in her voice. "She was my student, a wonderful student for years, before she went down the wrong path. I failed her, now she needs my help."

She turned her head, looking right into Luna's eyes. "I know you're worried little sister, and you have the right to be. But I need to do this."

"Alright Tia," sighed Luna. "I yield. I shall stop pressing you on the issue." She then gave Celestia a stern look. "But Raven and Kibitz are still concerned, and they will be looking to me to quell those concerns."

"I'd rather this be kept private, Luna. I'd be getting angry reprimands from both of them if they found out what I was doing."

Luna raised an eyebrow. "Thy schedule keeper, I can see," she said, slipping back into more antiquated language. "But Raven as well?" She's seen her worried earlier tonight, but Luna couldn't picture the mare as truly angry.

"Oh she wouldn't verbalize her criticisms," replied Celestia with the tone of someone all too knowledgeable on the subject. "But you'd be able to tell they're there. Really, I'm not sure which approach is worse."

She sighed. "I care for both of them a great deal, but I'd rather not get into an argument with them over this."

"If that is your wish sister, then I will oblige." Still, she'd need to tell them something. She looked toward the ceiling, gears turning in her head until she struck upon an idea. "I will tell them that you are working on a most delicate and private experiment, and that they will need to be more vigilant in their assistance as a result."

Celestia looked like she wanted to argue, but Luna cut her off. "Don't. You believe you will adjust, and perhaps you will. But that is not today. You still need them to help you keep everything together." She wrapped a dark wing around her sister's body, as if she were the older sibling instead, before giving Celestia a nuzzle. "Do not forget that you have ponies here to help you."

Then, another idea came to mind. "Perhaps Twilight Sparkle could be of aid as well."

Celestia tensed under Luna's wing. "I don't think I need Twilight's help, Lulu," she said, her voice turning stiff.

Luna quirked an eyebrow, not missing the change in tone. "Why ever not? She's helped save Equestria many times, and solves problems regularly. Surely she might be able to offer some assistance or ideas for your plans in the other dimension."

"No," said Celestia, pulling herself out from Luna's wing to look at her directly. "I'm fine doing this myself. Besides, this is not the sort of thing Twilight usually handles. I was and still am far better suited to deal with this. Twilight is already known to the students at the school, not to mention that over there she's the same age as Sunset."
"That could be potentially remedied with a disguise spell," argued Luna. "I'm actually surprised she hasn't asked to help you already, considering her friendship with Sunset Shimmer."

She paused, eyes widening a little as she gave her sister a sideways look. "You... did inform Twilight of this affair, didn't you?" Celestia didn't respond right away, her eyes breaking contact by just a fraction. It told Luna enough.

"You didn't," she said flatly. "Celestia, why on Terra not?!"

"I didn't want to ruin her vacation," defended Celestia. "She's just getting to know her new student and things are still delicate. Twilight and her friends deserve rest for all they've done. Even if I assured her that I was handling it, the news would have caused her nothing but stress."

"That is... true," conceded Luna. She might not have known Twilight for as long as Celestia, or even Cadance, but even she had learned Twilight was... what did they call it these days? Something with string.

Ah, yes, high strung. Even with Cadance's breathing exercises, Twilight was still extremely excitable and prone to high anxiety. Celestia had said she'd been that way since fillyhood.

"Thank you for seeing my point."

"But," Luna argued, "Sunset reached out for her support in the midst of a great personal crisis. Twilight Sparkle has been young Sunset's friend, her confidant, and her teacher in the ways of-"

"Sunset Shimmer is my student," hissed Celestia, her tone cutting through the air like the point of a javelin in mid-flight. "She is not Twilight Sparkle's."

The princess of the night's mouth slammed shut. Was that... did I hear... no, it couldn't have been... could it? Her cyan eyes scrutinized the alicorn standing before her, as if seeing her for the first time.

"Luna? Luna what is it?" asked Celestia, more than a little discomforted by her sibling's sudden silence.

Luna tilted her head, letting her long, ethereal mane brush against the floor. "Tia," she began slowly, "are you perhaps..."

"Perhaps what?"

"Are you perhaps jealous of Twilight?"

Celestia took several steps backward, almost staggering. "W-What? Luna, that's ridiculous." She let loose a short laugh. "I'm not jealous of Twilight. I'm proud of her. She's an amazing mare. Why on Terra would I be jealous of her?"

Luna pursed her lips, trying to find the right words. Part of her wanted to agree with her sister. On any other day, the idea would have been preposterous.

But she couldn't ignore that reaction just now, the words, the inflection. It was all too familiar to her, like an echo from that dark and awful period of her life.

"I know you are proud of her Celestia," she began softly. "But... I think that perhaps there is a part of you that resents the way Sunset Shimmer has clung to Twilight in place of you."

"And I'm telling you it's ridiculous," repeated Celestia firmly. Turning her head away, the princess of
the sun ran a hoof through her mane. "I appreciate your concern Luna. And thank you for keeping
this between us. But I think I'd like to be alone now. I'm quite tired, and you have your duties to
attend to."

The muscles in Luna's jaw tightened. Celestia was trying to deflect her, change the subject and end
the conversation. Clearly, she'd hit a nerve, even if Celestia didn't seem to recognize it as such.

"Alright sister, I shall do as you wish," she relented. Turning toward the doors and taking hold of
them in her magic, she looked back at Celestia. "Tia, jealousy is anger caused by somepony having
something you think is your own."

"I know the definition little sister," replied Celestia with rising irritation. "And I am not jealous."

"A hypothetical then," suggested Luna. "If you were, then that feeling is not altogether wrong to
have. The danger is in how we respond to it, and whether our actions cross a line."

Memories played before her eyes, of looking at the empty streets of towns and cities, of ponies
scurrying into their homes to escape the darkness and the night, as if moonlight were poisonous to
the touch. Memories of wishing they acknowledged her like they did Celestia, acknowledged the
tremendous effort she put into every night sky, in beating back monsters inside and outside of their
dreams.

_They are my subjects as well, she had cried on more than one lonely night, not just Tia's. Equestria is
ours, not hers alone. Why have I been pushed aside? Why does nopony care?_

Looking back, she knew her questions weren't wrong, her grievances unfounded. But she'd let that
anger drive her over the edge, make her vulnerable to dark and twisted forces.

"Be wary Celestia," continued Luna, the memories adding a gravity to her words. "Do not let such
feelings fester, for if they do, they can grow into something horrible."

"Sound advice Luna," replied Celestia tersely. "But let me repeat myself. I am not, nor have I ever
been, jealous of Twilight Sparkle."

Luna's face fell, but her eyes never moved from Celestia. "Then before I depart, let me provide one
last bit of advice, not just as your co-ruler, but as your sister. You need to tell Twilight Sparkle what
has happened, and very soon. From what you told me, she should have arrived back in Ponyville
yesterday morning. If she or Sunset decide to write each other again before you tell Twilight, things
will not go well."

Finally, Luna opened the doors, walking back out to the darkened hall. "Goodnight sister."

"Goodnight Luna."

Luna shut the doors behind her. It was past time to begin her duties, and she couldn't avoid them any
longer.

She'd tried, but if Celestia was still in denial, there was little she could do. Those feelings, which
Luna knew existed, needed to be confronted by their owner if a resolution were to happen.

Hopefully her sister would recognize it for what it was and deal with it. She certainly wouldn't be
able to keep Twilight in the dark for long, not with her being home. At least, not unless she did
something drastic.

But that was highly unlikely in Luna's opinion. Her sister's issues didn't seem nearly as bad as her
own a millennium before, the emotions clearly in their infancy. Emotions connected to one pony instead of tens of thousands.

Not that Luna could relax either. The fact that such feelings existed at all was a potential source of trouble. A little seed germinating into an angry weed that could choke out every happy feeling in a pony's heart. How many times had ponies done horrible, unjust, even violent things to another in the name of jealous affection for a single pony, or even something else they felt was theirs?

"Perhaps it would be better if this entire debacle with Twilight blew up in Tia's face," she mused, walking out into the cool night air toward the garrison. "At least it would force her to sort out her feelings." The sooner, the better in Luna's opinion.

Either way, Luna would be keeping an eye on her sister. The last thing Equestria needed was tension between two of its ruling princesses... again.

"Goodnight Luna."

The minute the door was closed, Celestia let out a huff. "Of all the preposterous... me, being jealous of Twilight?" She shook her head. Luna must really have been letting her worries get the better of her, if she was seeing problems that didn't exist.

A pang of guilt struck her heart at how she'd cut Luna off. She hated to do it, but there was no point in wasting any more of their time on such an absurd topic.

Still, Celestia appreciated her little sister for being concerned for her wellbeing, and she'd been right about the side effects. While Celestia was confident she could adjust to the strain, it was good to know Luna would ensure that Raven and Kibitz were going to be providing extra help, even if they didn't know precisely why.

Celestia opened the door to her private study. Luna's arrival had one additional benefit. It was a reminder of the work she still needed to do tonight.

She trotted up to a table, looking over the items spread over the surface. The largest of them was a set of white saddlebags, the buckle decorated with the purple glass circle. There was a small stack of papers, notes written by Principal Celestia and Vice Principal Luna.

The last four, however, were more foreign items. Human identification.

They'd been unchanged by their trip through the portal, though that might have only been because of the protective barrier Celestia had woven into the bag just in case. A birth certificate, a passport, a "Social Security card" as the principal and vice principal called it, and a state issued ID stared back at her. It was the last of these that had her attention now.

Turning to an adjacent table, she saw a duplicate of the little card, this one bearing Sunny's picture and name rather than her human doppelganger's.

She scrutinized this latest card in her magic, holding it aloft before also picking up the original, comparing them down to the smallest detail. She'd been working on this particular form of identification for days in between her duties, and it was giving her nothing but trouble.

For the paper inside the card, she had to make sure the letters and numbers looked the same. But it was the lamination process and the... Sunset said they were called holograms, which made the real difficulty in creating her forgery. With the latter, the problem came in the precision required to shape the proper images.
But the former? That was more complex, and far more time consuming.

It involved a plastic unfamiliar to Equestria. It was like photographic film, but not quite the same, and replicating it hadn't proven easy. Her chemical worktable across the room attested to her many efforts, covered in beakers and jars filled with various substances. And then of course there was applying the material to the paper.

The table where she'd gotten her duplicate card from had a small stack of other duplicate cards, each of varying quality, each a failed attempt. Some resulted in the plastic being too brittle, some, the paper got damaged in the lamination process, while with others, the holograms looked wrong.

At one point last night her efforts with lamination were going so poorly that she'd needed to ask Sunset to help look up how it was done.

Celestia had hated to do it. Sunset had been getting a little head start on her work for next week before she had to leave to Applejack's farm for a sleepover. But the effort might have paid off, because this time, she might have gotten it right.

She spun the duplicate around, her face a stoney mask, before looking again at the original. Finally, her mouth split into a smile. Yes, this one was perfect. A perfect replica in form and design. Celestia made a mental note to borrow Sunset's fake ID and make her a new one. Hers wasn't bad, but not as convincing as this.

Celestia went back to the table with the other identification documents, taking a quick glance at the remaining three. She could tell the paper stock would be a potential problem, not parchment quality, possibly as foreign to Equestria as the plastic. More nightly experiments no doubt awaited her.

She sighed. I suppose my chemical worktable is making up for its lack of use over the last few years.

Well, it was what it was. Right now, she'd at least send this to Sunny.

The thought made a chuckle rise in her throat. It was funny, thinking of her construct like she was a truly separate being. Picking up the set of saddlebags, she slipped the little card inside, securing the buckle.

She was quite proud of the transport system she'd devised. The saddlebags were the same brand as the kind Sunny had gone through the portal with. Only the buckle was different, lacking the personal touch that most ponies preferred. And while those ponies would call the little decoration generic, it was actually very special indeed.

The piece of purple glass had a magical tether bound to it. On one end, it was tied to Celestia herself, and at the other end to Sunny's necklace. With a single spell, Celestia or Sunny could teleport the bag to the portal, push it through, and once on the other side, it would teleport again to the other end of the tether.

It was quick, covert, and allowed Sunny to transport items without being at the portal. Most important of all, what with the limited amount of magic Sunny's necklace had at any given time, it was simple and efficient.

Checking that the buckle was secure one more time, Celestia flicked her horn, letting the magic flow freely. The buckle glowed with golden light, and the bag disappeared in a flash...

... Before reappearing in front of her.

Celestia slapped a hoof to her forehead. "Of course, the portal is closed. I really must be getting
tired.” She always shut down the portal machine when she was done with it. No need to waste power or risk some random person or object falling in from the other side.

She’d have to go open the portal. Slipping the saddlebags over her back, she prepared to teleport, only for hesitation to set in. Twilight was home now, as Luna had pointed out. Was it right to barge into her home in the middle of the night like this?

Her sister’s words rang again in her head. *If she or Sunset decide to write each other again before you tell Twilight, things will not go well.*

Twilight was Sunset’s friend. She did deserve to know what was happening, didn’t she? That alone should have been enough reason to tell her, especially now that she was back. And Luna did have a point. All Twilight would need to do is pick up her journal and read the last few-

*It’s my journal, not hers,* cut in a little voice in her head.

Her stomach burned, acid climbing up into her throat. She forced it back down, giving a frown as she did so. That was definitely becoming more frequent. *I need to start looking into an antacid tomorrow.*

Taking a deep breath, Celestia came to a decision. She’d inform Twilight later. As she’d told Sunset, Twilight had a new student to adjust to, a unicorn that needed her help right here in Equestria, a pony who would require Twilight’s time and energy.

Why bother her with more? Twilight would certainly understand.

She’d also understand about the use of the mirror. It really was best to send this item to Sunny as soon as possible. The sooner Sunny Skies started accumulating real, physical identification, the better. She’d just make sure not to disturb anypony.

Without another thought, Princess Celestia vanished from her study.

Starlight Glimmer walked groggily in the dark castle hallways, her horn lighting the way. As she took another couple steps, her eyelids drooped, feeling like a pair of iron curtains. She forced them back open, focusing on finding her way around, and keeping the tip of her horn lit.

As nice as Twilight’s castle was, not that Starlight had been in many castles to do comparisons, the unicorn hated how confusing and uniform the halls could be.

It made navigation a daily struggle, especially for a brain running purely on bursts of energy that just wanted to go to bed. A nice, comfy bed that the princess had sprung for because Starlight was almost flat broke. That was the thing about running a cult or a revenge scheme, you didn't really make many bits.

Right now though, Starlight didn't feel bad about Princess Twilight paying for her bed because she was just so *tired.*

And yet, despite the quality of the bed, here she was outside of it. Blame lay on her rumbling stomach, and her less than substantial dinner this evening. When the grumbling woke her up at 12:53 AM, she knew she had to satisfy it, and went off to find the kitchen.

She’d eaten a couple of carrots and washed them down with a glass of water. Not much, but it was enough to satisfy her stomach. After finding the bathroom, she’d began the trek back to her room. Finding the way there had been one thing, but finding her way back was a whole new search.
A search she was still conducting.

She grumbled as she went up a staircase, only to find herself in the wrong section of the castle. Honestly, she understood that this place had been created by deep and powerful magical forces, but while they'd made an impressive-looking crystal castle, the ancient magic clearly had no sense for architecture, or interior design.

The lack of interior could have just been to allow its owner to fill it how she wished, but Starlight still wasn't going to forgive whatever force had built this place. What had Twilight called it? The Tree of Harmony? Yeah, that was it.

That explained a lot actually. What would a tree know about architecture?

The one thing Starlight was thankful for was that there were no doors that led to sheer drops outside. She'd heard of a massive house out west with things like that, along with staircases that led to the ceiling.

She couldn't remember the name of the place, but from what she remembered hearing, it had been owned and commissioned by an old mare gone mad with superstition, which made a great deal of sense when you thought about it.

Still, she'd take living here over a house like that any day of the week.

Starlight turned her head left and right, trying to decide where to go. Her bangs swung into her vision, and she pushed them back with a hoof.

A little over two weeks had passed since she'd changed her mane. She'd gone to the local spa to give Rarity something from Twilight, and the dressmaker, along with the two spa owners, had talked her into it. Symbolic, they'd said. It wasn't the biggest change in the world, and Starlight had to admit, she looked great.

Yet, even after all this time, she still hadn't gotten used to them. The feeling of hair brushing her cheek was just as alien now as it was the day she'd had it done, and she still shivered sometimes when the air struck her forehead where her bangs used to be.

At least it was helping to keep her awake right now. She really didn't want to fall asleep in the middle of the floor.

Just as she was about to start walking again, Starlight saw a flash of light come from under a doorway. It couldn't be Twilight. The alicorn had said she was going to bed early tonight. Spike should have definitely been asleep now, and Owlicious was out flying.

A burst of adrenaline shot through Starlight's body. What if it was an intruder?

It's not like it wasn't possible. That was the other problem with the crystal castle: no locks, on doors or windows.

It had surprised her the day she'd snuck in to perform her time travel spell. Starlight expected to have to force her way in, but no, she'd simply walked right inside and found what she'd wanted, even if she had gotten lost for a bit in the middle.

Okay, Canterlot Castle didn't have a lock either, but its "front door" consisted of a moat, a drawbridge, and an iron gate. This castle had a literal front door, and no lock. Not even a keyhole, or even hooks to bar the doors with for Celestia's sake.
True, Ponyville seemed like one of those places that was so quiet, no, trusting, it was hard to call it quiet with all the chaos that showed up, that ponies could reasonably leave their doors unlocked. But Starlight felt like a royal castle with an actual front door and a priceless mystic artifact should at least have a lock for security.

Charging her horn with more power, she quietly opened the door. If it was an intruder, maybe she could catch them off guard. The door creaked, much to Starlight's displeasure. She'd have to be fast. Once there was enough room, she jumped inside, ready to face whoever, or whatever, it was.

"Alright, whoever you are, I don't know who you are or what you're doing here, but you'd better stop... right... now?"

The first thing she noticed was that she was in Twilight's private library. The second thing she noticed was that she was completely alone. Not a single soul was here other than her. She glanced around, illuminating her horn to cut through any shadows in the corners. "Hello? Is anypony in here?"

She tilted her head up to the high ceiling, extending her illumination spell. Still nothing. There was nothing here but books upon books, that weird mirror, and its even weirder machine.

Starlight had wondered about that thing, and the journal set aside near it. She'd never been a mechanically inclined pony, so she couldn't really tell what the machinery was for, but it looked to her like something out of a novel.

Twilight had explained that the mirror was enchanted in some way, crafted by Starswirl the Bearded himself, but didn't go into further detail. It was a long story, she'd said. But she'd stipulated quite clearly that other than herself and Spike, nopony was supposed to touch it, even Starlight.

As fascinated as she was with the knowledge that it was Starswirl's, she didn't want to anger her newfound teacher and friend, so she obeyed. Besides, it's not like her last interaction with Starswirl's work had gone all that well, and that was when she knew what she was dealing with and how to use it.

The pink unicorn yawned, falling back on her haunches as exhaustion crashed down on her anew like a lead weight, made worse as the adrenaline began to wear off. "Must have been my imagination," she muttered, rubbing an eye with her foreleg. "I'm so sleepy I'm seeing things."

Walking out of the library and shutting the doors behind her, she continued searching for her coveted bed, and made a mental note to talk to Twilight about a locksmith in the morning.

As Starlight walked away, she never noticed the spark of power discharging from the machines.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: And there we have the end of chapter 9. I hope you enjoyed it. Don’t forget to leave a comment or favorite or follow the story.

So many things to say. First of all, Lindsey Spurling is a reference to musician and performer Lindsey Stirling. A friend introduced me to her music and I love it. She’s really amazing. Specifically, I was referencing her Master of Tides video. Go check her out on YouTube.
Perhaps it was shameless. But hey, I like her, and the pun just worked. XD And for those interested, the same scene has another sort of pun. I challenge my readers to try and figure it out.

“Terra”, for those that hadn’t guessed, is the name of the planet Equestria is on, as opposed to regular human Earth. I didn’t mention that before but I realized there might be a little bit of confusion. It’s an idea I’ve seen bounced in the fandom/fanfic. I’d list the specific fics where it’s used, but I don’t remember where I saw personally saw it, and I’m pretty sure it’s in multiple.

It used to be "Equis" (which should have been "Equus", I’ve been told, but one of my readers on FIM pointed out how that name didn’t fit a world not just populated by equines, so I changed it.

The abacus is a reference to Andrew Joshua Talon’s fanfic “Progress”, used with permission of course. If you haven’t read it, well, shame on you. XD I really recommend that you should though. Like Sunny Skies All Day Long, it’s a classic in both age and quality of content.

What will happen next? You’ll just have to wait and see.
Princess Twilight Sparkle stretched her back on that Wednesday morning, clad in a robe and her mane haphazardly tied back behind her head, still waiting to be brushed into place. She let out a yawn, before settling into her seat at the breakfast table.

Her favorite mug, a white one labeled "I love books" with a heart for the word love, was already filled with rich, dark coffee. "Thanks Spike," she told her assistant through another yawn, right before taking a long sip of the steaming liquid.

"No problem," replied the dragon, still in the middle of making a stack of pancakes for himself and Starlight, the latter of which had yet to come down.

Twilight levitated the box of Tasty Oats cereal waiting for her, popping open the box and pouring out some of the contents into the bowl Spike had left for her, catching the little prize advertised on the box as it tumbled out, a little plastic Celestia doll.

She rolled her eyes. The cereal had been a favorite since fillyhood, and their prizes hadn't changed all that much. She'd gotten this exact same figurine countless times. At least they'd incorporated Princess Luna, Cadance, and herself in the last few years. And speaking of additions, there was one very recent change advertised on the box, Elements of Harmony marshmallows.

Twilight sifted through the bowl, sorting out the little sugary apples, butterflies, diamonds, balloons, stars, and lightning bolts. It was so strange, being honored in cereal treats of all things. Pinkie had been ecstatic over the idea, giggling like mad as she found every little balloon in Twilight's last box.

Though, the cereal company hadn't actually asked any of them about it. It seemed to her that they should have at least contacted them before releasing it, just as a courtesy. But then, she supposed it was still better than those ugly imitation figures that minotaur Well-to-Do had wanted to pass off for that horrible amusement park.

Adding a healthy dose of milk, she took a few spoonfuls, letting the oats slide over her tastebuds. Lighting up her horn, she picked up the waiting newspapers, flipping through the articles. The Ponyville Chronicle was a fine paper, but it didn't span much beyond local affairs, so Twilight subscribed to multiple, like the Daily Corral and the Equestria Daily. The latter had her attention right now.

"Let's see," she said as she swallowed another bite of oats. "New petition against tax... another one? That's got to be the fifth one this month. Building code under fire in Seaddle. Marina lawsuit drama drags on in Baltimare."

She quirked an eyebrow. "Marina lawsuit drama?"
"You didn't hear about it?"

The sound of hooves on hard floor caught Twilight's attention, and she looked over to see Starlight walking into the dining room. "The ponies at the hotel were talking all about it while we were waiting to check in." She rubbed an eye with a hoof, taking a seat at the table as Spike placed a large plate of pancakes in front of her, along with a bottle of syrup. "Thanks Spike."

The little dragon set down his own plate. "Welcome."

"I don't remember hearing anything like that," answered Twilight, slipping another spoon of oats into her mouth.

Spike sprinkled gems onto his stack from a small jar. "That's because you were buried in maps and charts."

"W-Well," blushed Twilight, "um, let's see what I missed," she answered quickly, hiding her reddened cheeks behind the paper as she scanned the lengthy article.

It seemed that some time back, a prize winning racing ship called The Emerald Mare was stolen from its resting place at Marina's Marina. The Emerald Mare was known for its distinctive emerald green sails and haul, not to mention a small but intricate sculpture of a mermare fixed to the deck.

The article included a photograph of the sculpture, and despite the size of the picture, Twilight could still tell the amount of skill that went into it, from the expression to the flowing mane to the tiny scales carved into the lower body.

The ship's owner was a local celebrity, Weigh Anchor, a long time boat racing champion. The article provided a photo of him as well, and it showed him to be a very gruff looking tan earth pony of advanced age, marked by his weather beaten face and coarse white beard. Combined with his long coat, white hat, and the anchor and chain decorating his flank, he was the very picture of an old sailor.

The thief had made off with his prize vessel in the dead of night, despite the owner having security guards on the premises. A long and intensive search followed, but nopony had managed to find it. The furious sailor pony had responded by filing a heavy lawsuit against the marina.

The argument itself was causing a local commotion, since Marina, the owner of the establishment, was a well-loved fixture of Baltimare herself. Her picture revealed her to be something of an opposite to Weigh Anchor, a fairly young teal pegasus with a long, green wavy mane and tail, and a boat-shaped cutie mark.

Weigh Anchor was claiming that there should have been more than one guard on duty that night for The Emerald Mare, and was calling not only for heavy monetary compensation, but for the offending guard to be fired.

Marina had countered that Night Stick was a veteran that had been watching over the boats when her father had been in charge, and refused to fire him on any grounds. The dispute continued on day after day, week after week, and had now evolved into a civil suit so vicious that it had caught the attention of the national papers.

Just reading the quotes from the two litigants made Twilight wince, the phrases peppered with redacted words. The alicorn shook her head. "I can't believe things got so out of hoof. Can't they just calm down and resolve their differences peacefully?"

"You can't blame Weigh Anchor for being angry," said Starlight in between bites of her own
breakfast. "From what I heard, it cost him a fortune to put together."

"I suppose you're right," conceded Twilight. "But he seems to be taking out all his aggression on ponies that didn't even steal his ship." She pursed her lips in thought, letting the taste of milk-soaked oats tingle across her tongue. "I wonder if this might have been something the Cutie Map would've called us to deal with."

"Maybe," said Spike as he chewed on a piece of topaz. "If it wasn't broken, anyway."

"... It's broken?" whispered Starlight, anxiety spreading across her now paler face. "I broke a mystic artifact?!"

Twilight looked up from her paper, panic shooting through her. "Well, it... hasn't exactly been working quite right since your spell." She watched the unicorn's face grow even more anxious. "But I'm sure there's a way to fix it," consoled Twilight. "I just haven't had enough time to research it yet."

Starlight seemed to relax a little at that, and Twilight struck upon an idea. "Why don't we both work on it together?"

"You sure you want me helping you?" asked Starlight. "I, um, didn't really have any. I kind of kept it all in my head."

"I can't think of a better pony to help me," replied Twilight with a smile. Finishing off the last of her breakfast, she dabbed her mouth with a napkin and got to her hooves. "We can start with pulling together all the relevant material we can. And... the gears in my brain turned. "I'd be interested in any notes you had regarding your time travel spell." Knowing how the temporal magic had been used would provide key insights into fixing the map.

"Notes?" Starlight fidgeted in her seat as she faced her mentor. "I, um, didn't really have any. I kind of kept it all in my head."

Twilight's face fell. She hadn't taken any notes at all? That was definitely going to change if Starlight was going to be her student. "Then you can tell me everything you remember. Let's go to the library. I'm sure we'll find a few books to help."

As the two started to trot off down the hall, Spike had busied himself clearing the table. "Hey Twilight, are you going to need my help?" he asked.

"I don't think so," replied Twilight. She glanced back at the unicorn, before giving her assistant a smile. "Between Starlight and myself, we should be fine. If we need anything, I'll let you know."

The baby dragon was already carrying away the syrup-stained plates. "Good. I've got some serious comic reading to catch up on."

Twilight hummed to herself as she led the way to the private library. She had the feeling that this was going to be a great day.

Sunset Shimmer stretched her long legs as she sat at her desk, before placing her feet back on the metal basket fixed to the underside of the seat in front of her. It was the last class of the day, literature to be precise. But rather than her teacher's lecture, the class was filled with the constant chatter of the students.

Ms. Paige Turner had been called to the faculty office for some sort of issue, so the class had been made to read while she was away. But of course, it seemed like the class had developed temporary deafness when it came to that order, and broke out into conversations the minute the door closed. It
was, she found, yet another of those strange constants across the multiverse.

As for Sunset, she'd chosen to go over her notes for the day. Ms. Turner had an enthusiasm for her subject that could be seen by a blind man, and her tests and quizzes delved into the details of every text they went over. Combined with her friendly personality, there was no denying she was an excellent teacher who challenged her students to excel.

Unfortunately, that same enthusiasm was also one of the problems with her class. When she really got into something, her lectures accelerated, gaining momentum with every single sentence. It was difficult to take proper notes whenever that happened. Even Sunset, who'd been instructed by professors from the most prestigious school in Canterlot, and Princess Celestia herself, had trouble keeping up with Ms. Turner when she got rolling.

As things were right now, her notes were mostly just a mix of shorthand and abbreviations, the best Sunset could manage against the deluge of words and ideas Ms. Turner had thrown at them.

Adding in a few proper sentences, she gave another stretch and looked up at the rest of the class. It seemed there were actually a few students that had chosen to read rather than talk. A couple rows over, Sunset spotted a girl with her nose buried deep into the same fantasy romance novel she'd seen at the grocery store last week.

I should really write Twilight. Even if she was busy, it wouldn't hurt to leave her a message. Sunset really was missing talking to her. She hadn't waited for Twilight to respond like this since the Friendship Games, though at least this time lacked the same level of stress.

A light buzzing from her jacket pocket caught her attention. Surprised at the interruption, she pulled out her phone to see an incoming text.

Rainbow: Don't forget about band practice today. Got awesome new song I want to try out!

The message was followed by a guitar emoji. Sunset let out a chuckle and let her fingers glide over the keys.

Sunset: I'll be there. But you really shouldn't text me. Do you WANT Doodle to take your phone again?

It was a well-known fact among her circle of friends that Rainbow Dash frequently had her phone confiscated in Cranky Doodle's class. Not that it seemed to do any good, since Rainbow still texted in his class undaunted. It honestly wouldn't surprise Sunset if, at some point, he'd just take her phone before class even began.

Rainbow: Don't worry. He's not even looking this w

When nothing else followed, Sunset put her phone away, giving her head an amused shake. Looking back over her notes, she smiled in satisfaction as she made one last addition. Slipping the pages into her bag, her thoughts turned back to Twilight, and her hand moved over to grab her journal.

Opening it up to a blank page, she twirled the pen between her fingers before pressing the tip gently into the page, already composing the first few sentences in her head. Dear Twilight, I'm doing just fine with Celestia, though it's definitely been weird having her around. How are things going with Starlight?

With a bang, the door to the room swung open, jolting the teenager in her seat. Her hand pulled away from the page, the pen not even leaving a mark on the paper's surface. The noise of the classroom vanished, students desperately scrambling back to their desks as Ms. Turner stepped back
"I can't believe I had to deal with that," she muttered irritably, turning to look at her pupils. The teacher forced a smile over her disgruntled expression. "Sorry about that. Now, where were we?"

She picked up the book on her desk, opening it up to where she'd left a tasseled bookmark. "Right, chapter five. Now up to this point, we've seen the protagonist-

Whatever she'd meant to say was cut off by the shrill ring of the bell. Heaving a sigh, she closed the book back up and set it on her desk. "Rats. Alright everyone. I want you to read all of chapter five before the next class. I'll be giving you a quiz to make sure you've properly digested everything."

Several students broke into groans as they packed away their belongings, filing out the classroom door. Returning the journal to her backpack and throwing the bag over her shoulder, she joined the river of bodies down the hall, moving to the staircase that would make the shortest route to the rehearsal room.

If Rainbow had a new song she wanted them to try, that meant not being late. They'd be doing more repetitions and adjustments than normal as they got into the rhythm. Playing with the Rainbooms was great, but there were times when it blurred the line between hard work and fun.

Walking through the countless bodies, she readjusted the strap on her shoulder. *I'll just write Twilight after band practice.*

And who knew? Maybe Twilight would answer her before then.

Spike walked down the halls of the castle, letters carefully held in his claws as he made his way to the door of the private library. He'd been in the middle of a gripping issue of Power Ponies when Ditzy Doo crashed into the front door.

Twilight got most of her letters by dragon fire, but some still came by hoof, along with packages, magazines, and other such things. Though Spike would have preferred it if it'd come around at its usual, earlier time. They'd been eating lunch together then, the two ponies emerging to take a short break from their research.

Annoyance buzzed in his head. He didn't blame Ditzy. Mail delivery always varied. But six of the Power Ponies' greatest enemies had banded together to defeat them, and Spike had just been turning the page to find out what they had planned. It really was the worst, being interrupted right when you were getting to the good part of the story.

Though perhaps his soured mood also had to do with how he'd jumped and nearly torched his comic at the loud bang Ditzy had made.

Reaching the library, he tapped his free claw against the wood. "Twilight?" Not getting a response, he opened the door and poked his head inside. "Twi-WHOA!"

A book hurtled across the room, coming dangerously close to his face. Spike stumbled backwards onto his back, his tail curling under him. The mail he'd been holding spilled itself all over the floor.

"Spike!" In an instant, Twilight was hovering over him, lifting her assistant off the floor with her magic. "I'm so sorry. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," replied the dragon with a groan. An aching sensation made itself known from his tail, but he ignored it, instead dusting himself off. On the far side of the room were stacks and stacks of books. Starlight sat at a nearby table, a thick tome set before her and similar books to her left and
right, though right now her attention was on Spike.

"I really should have been more careful moving the books around," continued Twilight, inspecting the little dragon for injuries.

"I'm fine, Twilight," he repeated. "It's okay."

"Sorry," said Twilight. "Did you need something?"

Spike picked up the mail he dropped, noticing the other piles of books scattered all over the room. Twilight had said during lunch that while they hadn't found too much that was useful, they'd been making great progress through the library. The raw number of books pulled from the shelves attested to that fact.

"The mail came," he answered, holding the items out to her.

"Only now?" asked Twilight, raising an eyebrow. "A little late today. But you didn't really need to bring it to me now, you know."

"I thought you'd want to see this," he replied, holding out a particular envelope. The return address read "Dean Strawberry Moon, Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns".

"Oh, I see," Twilight whispered conspiratorially. "Thanks Spike." Taking the envelope and everything else in her magic, she set them on a nearby table. "I'll take a look at them the next time we take a break."

"Hey Twilight," called Starlight. "I think I might have found some passages that could be helpful." The unicorn held up a book titled Interactions of Magical Forces.

"That's great! I'll be right over!" Turning back to Spike one more time, she smiled. "Why don't you get back to your comics? If we need anything, I'll come ask."

"Sure." Giving his tail a stretch, he was about to turn around, when a little flash of red light caught his eye. Turning around, he saw the magic mirror, and the journal on the stand.

Had... had the journal glowed? Was there a new message inside?

Watching it for a little bit longer, the journal remained totally still. Glancing back at the two ponies in the room, he saw that they were totally preoccupied by the contents of the book.

The little dragon shrugged his shoulders. He shouldn't bother Twilight about it. It was probably just his imagination. And he did have a dream about rubies last night. Walking back out the door to the library, Spike made his way back to the throne room to read. He needed to see what happened to the Power Ponies.

"We're the Rainbooms! Oh yeah!"

Sunset strummed the last notes on her guitar as Rainbow's voice carried through the rehearsal room, rising over the fading sounds of their instruments. Once everything quieted down, the jock turned to them, a beaming grin threatening to leap from her face. "That was great!"

Pulling her guitar over her head and setting it beside her, the fire-haired girl nodded in agreement. "Definitely better than the first time."

"Yeah," chuckled Rainbow with some embarrassment. "Those changes you made to the chorus
really rocked, Fluttershy."

"You're welcome," replied the pink-haired girl, giving her own gentle smile as she slipped Angel a carrot.

"And thanks again for catching those bad notes Twi," continued Rainbow, turning to look at the girl who had been serving as an audience.

The initial run of the song had gone wonderfully, filled with energy and vigor, until they got to the chorus, that was. Sunset's part of the song had sounded flat when she'd played it, and the lyrics took a rougher turn. With similar mistakes from several of the others, it had created a cacophony that ground their practice to a halt.

Arguments had broken out immediately, before Twilight stepped in and pointed out notes on Rainbow's music sheets that looked to be in the wrong places. A few small corrections from her, and some lyrical fixes from Fluttershy, and the song had blossomed to new life.

"It was nothing," she replied, averting her eyes from Rainbow's.

Applejack lightly elbowed Rainbow Dash in the side. "That should teach you to write songs while watchin' a soccer game."

"Who wants snacks?" called out Pinkie, holding out a box of homemade cupcakes. She always brought some kind of snacks to band practice so everyone could have a little boost in between songs.

Rarity took a small pink one. "I'm surprised you know how to read music, Twilight darling," commented Rarity as she took a bite. "You seemed so focused on academics. Do you play an instrument as well?"

"Not at all," answered Twilight, "I just learned a lot about musical scales and notes while I was doing an extra assignment for math class back at Crystal Prep."

"Math?" Rainbow did a double take. "What's that got to do with music?"

"Quite a lot actually," stated Twilight, slipping into a lecturing tone as she found a moment to share her vast knowledge. "Mathematicians in ancient Greece used ratios of string length to create the musical scale."

Rainbow's shoulders slumped. "Are you serious?" She looked down at her guitar in dismay, like a kid who'd just discovered her chocolate was mixed with spinach.

"Ooh, I remember that from some really old Elmer Eagle cartoon I saw once," declared Pinkie. "It was really weird now that I think about it."

"Absolutely correct Pinkie Pie."

Sunset turned to see the music teacher entering the room. Ms. Mi was a short woman, standing just a hair over five feet tall, with peach-colored skin and large, apple red eyes matched by equally red hair that she always kept in a pair of buns atop her head, and bangs held in place by a clip in the shape of a simple musical note. "Music isn't completely mathematical, but there's a lot of overlap. Though trust me Rainbow, I had the same thought at your age."

"Hi Ms. Mi!" cried Pinkie, waving to the teacher. "What are you doing here? Did you forget something again?"
The teacher took no offense at the comment, merely laughing in flushed embarrassment. "Unfortunately. I hope I'm not interrupting you girls."

"We're taking a break," said Sunset as she gave her fingers a stretch. "What did you forget? Maybe we can find it."

It was well known around CHS that Ms. Mi was a terribly forgetful woman, and this wasn't the first time she'd interrupted their practice sessions to look for one item or another either. During Sunset's eighth grade year her fellow classmates had celebrated Ms. Mi's birthday, and Principal Celestia came by to give the woman a watch with programmable reminders.

"I think I left my purse somewhere in here," she answered back, stepping around the instruments to search the room. "It has to be here," she muttered, more to herself than the teens. "I already checked everywhere else."

There was a knock at the door, and Applejack turned her attention away from the apple-flavored cupcake in her hands. "This room's turnin' into a real party today, ain't it?"

Beside the farmer, Pinkie Pie shot up to her feet. "Today's supposed to be a party? Why didn't somebody tell me? I could have brought cake!"

AJ put a hand on her shoulder, pulling her gently back to her seat. "I didn't mean a literal party, sugarcube."

'Awww, but I love cake," lamented Pinkie.

"I'll get it," offered Sunset, getting up from her own seat. To her surprise, she found Sunny standing on the other side of the doorway. "M-Mom," she staggered. "What are you doing here?"

Ms. Mi's head popped up from the collection of instruments she'd been searching. "Are you Sunset's mother?" Straightening her back, she walked over to Sunny, holding out her hand in greeting. "I'm Dorey Mi. I'm the music teacher here."

Sunny took her hand, giving the woman a polite smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Sunny Skies."

Ms. Mi took a moment to regard the woman in front of her. "I've been rather curious to meet you. Sunset's certainly made life here at CHS... interesting."

Sunset looked between the two adults, nervousness growing in her stomach. Of course Ms. Mi was curious. Here she was, meeting the mother of the girl who'd turned into a demon, and whose friends sprouted wings and tails. With all the teachers that had been witnesses to the outbrakes of Equestrian magic, which of them wouldn't be curious?

And she wasn't alone either. After the Fall Formal, Principal Celestia had told all the teachers present not to harass Sunset, or the others, with questions. All of them complied, though some just seemed happy with reassurances that Sunset wasn't doing any further harm.

There were others however that desperately wanted to ask. Sunset had seen the questions brimming in their eyes in those first few weeks after the Fall Formal. And Ms. Mi was in that latter set.

She was certain there was nothing malignant in Ms. Mi's intentions. But all the same, her full origins were on an absolutely need-to-know basis.

Sunny gave a hearty laugh. "Yes, I've heard all about it."
The music teacher just raised an eyebrow. "Even the Fall Formal last year?"

Sunny nodded. "In full detail. Quite the momentous night, I'd say." She chuckled. "Though not something to put in the yearbook."

"And it doesn't..." Ms. Mi paused, licking her lips. Whatever she'd been expecting, nonchalance clearly wasn't it. "It doesn't bother you at all, hearing about what happened?" The real, unspoken question hung in the air: *Does it bother you to know your daughter has magical powers?*

"Well I was sorry to hear about the damage to the front entrance," answered Sunny, as if she were simply talking about the weather. "But why would it bother me?"

"W-Well, I..." The red-haired woman seemed taken aback by Sunny's calm demeanor. Thinking for a moment, she let out a long sigh. "Nevermind," she muttered. "She's been a great student for me though," she continued, clearing her throat. "Your daughter is quite the capable musician."

It was only then that genuine surprise spread over Sunny's features, and the look she gave Sunset radiated skepticism. "You play a musical instrument?"

Sunset pointed over to her guitar. "You didn't notice that sitting in my room?"

Sunny laughed sheepishly. "I thought it belonged to one of your friends."

Ms. Mi's eyebrow shot up again. "You didn't know she was in my class? She told me she practiced quite a bit at home."

Sunny shook her head, brushing a lock of pink hair back over her shoulder. "No. I've been away for quite some time."

The other woman let out a horrified gasp. Her eyes snapped to look at Sunset with sharp disapproval, and her next words were slow and measured. "You disassembled a Victrola?"

A tiny bead of sweat formed itself on Sunset's face. "I-I wanted to know how it worked," she sputtered. The woman's expression darkened, and the former unicorn's hands flew up in a defensive position. "But I put it back together and it worked fine, I swear."

That was basically the truth. It wasn't long after she'd come to stay at the palace. Her parents had never been interested in Victrolas, so it had been the first time she'd ever seen one. And she had put it back together successfully, with Celestia's help that is, and only after a scolding.

Though as far as her involvement with music, Sunset did recall the time she'd sabotaged the performance night for the CSGU orchestra. She'd done it to get back at a stallion named Woodwind after he'd startled her and ruined a personal experiment she'd been laboring over for weeks.

It was a disaster for Woodwind. She'd enchanted his flute to play by itself, which it did the moment he was on stage, in front of parents and faculty. To all in attendance, it appeared as though he'd failed to get down the song he'd been meant to play and tried to cheat his way out. He'd been totally humiliated, and nopony, not even Princess Celestia, ever discovered it was her.

What happened to Woodwind anyway? Had he graduated? Her prank would have left a mark on his record for sure. She'd have to ask Sunny... later that is. Now wasn't the time or place to bring that to light. Not with an angry music teacher standing so close.

Ms. Mi's body relaxed, seeming satisfied with the answer as she drew Sunny back into normal
"Sunset and her friends have formed a band you know," she said with no shortage of pride. She’d been rather taken with them after the Battle of the Bands. "They've got some real talent too. If they'd wanted, I'm sure they'd be able to get a recording contract." She paused, putting a finger to her chin. "Although I guess there'd be a problem with their... special effects."

"So I may have a star for a daughter one of these days, hmm?" The pink-haired woman laughed again. "I'll have to be careful of incoming paparazzi then." She paused, lips turning upwards. "Not that she isn't the biggest star in the world to me already."

She looked over to Sunset, her voice turning so sweet it could induce diabetes. "Isn't that right my little sun?"

Sunset glanced away, trying to hide her now pink-stained cheeks behind her hair in a decent imitation of Fluttershy. "M-Mom," she groaned, sounding every bit like the teen she appeared to be. When some muffled snickers floated her way, she shot her friends a glare.

"Hey, she's nowhere near as bad as my parents," argued Rainbow as she took a sip from a can of soda, the only one among them not laughing at all.

Ms. Mi, however, didn't bother containing her robust laughter. "I know the feeling. I have a daughter of my own actually." She pulled her phone from her pocket and flipped through several pictures, before presenting one to Sunny. It showed a little redhead with braided pigtails dressed in a pink witch's outfit, and holding a plastic, jack-o-lantern shaped bucket.

"She's adorable," cooed Sunny.

Ms. Mi beamed. "Her name's Lottie Doe. This is from Halloween last year. That poor costume took so much abuse. I love her to pieces, but unfortunately for both of us she's as klutzy as I was at that age."

Before Sunny could somehow embarrass Sunset any further, Applejack mercifully spoke up. "Ms. Mi, ain't that your purse under the piano?" The farm girl squatted on the floor before holding up a small leather bag.

"Ah!" cried the teacher, taking it from Applejack's waiting hands. "Now how did you end up under there?" She brushed several pieces of dust that clung to the strap before putting it on her shoulder. "Thank you Applejack."

Walking back over to Sunny, she shook her hand one more time. "I'd better be off. It was wonderful meeting you Miss Skies. I hope we run into each other more often." She turned to address the assembled teens again, giving them a final wave. "Goodbye girls. Keep up the good work."

And with that, she was off, the clicking of her heels on the floor rapidly fading away. A relaxing quiet fell on the music room, one that lasted a fleeting five seconds before being completely shattered by a cry of "AHA!" from a certain pink drummer, causing Sunset and everyone else to jolt from the raw volume.

The curly-haired girl hopped up from her seat. "Now I remember!"

Nearby, Rarity frantically got a grip back on her compact mirror, nearly dropping it from the blast of noise. "Remember what, darling?"

"The Victrola! Great Granny Pie had one too!" exclaimed the energetic girl. With a single bounce, she was in front of Sunny. She would have been nose to nose with her if not for the height difference, though her constant hopping continued to challenge that fact.
"I got a question," piped up Rainbow. "What's a Victrola?"

"It was the brand name of an old type of phonograph, or record player," answered Twilight. "The company that made them was eventually bought out, and the name ended up being used for a lot of phonograph products, but those weren't proper Victrolas."

Rainbow pondered that for a moment, before turning back to Pinkie. "Didn't you tell me your great granny was born before 1920 or something?"

"Uh huh, July 27, 1915. That's Great Granny Pie. And she told me Great great Grandpa Pie bought hers when she was a kid. She used it a couple times when we visited. It was fun. It looked just like a piece of furniture, but it played music!"

"That's about right," commented Twilight. "From what I read, proper Victrolas were only made from 1906 to 1929."

"Whoa." Rainbow looked at Sunset with a little bit of awe. "You took apart an antique?"

"I've sort of done worse actually," admitted Twilight quietly. "When I was nine, I took apart Dad's computer. You wouldn't believe how angry he was." Her face took on a horrified expression. "I couldn't read anything for three days."

"Oh my," gasped Fluttershy.

"But on the bright side," she added with a shaky laugh. "I did learn how to build a computer."

"Where did you get yours?" asked Pinkie excitedly, undeterred by the conversation's detour. "Garage sale? Antique store? Did your great granny give you one too? Huh? Huh?"

"Actually Pinkie, it wasn't an-" Sunset began.

"It was brand new," finished an abashed Sunny. "Victrolas are quite popular in Equestria."

An uncomfortable silence followed, and even Pinkie had stopped bouncing as it dawned on her how she'd inadvertently put her foot in her mouth.

Sunset cleared her throat. "Not that I mind, but what are you doing here anyway, other than embarrassing me in front of my teachers and friends?" She gave her pseudo-mother a pointed stare. "And did you really need to do that?"

The question appeared to pull Sunny out of her embarrassed thoughts, because she began to chuckle lightly. "I was only staying in character, Sunset," she said innocently. "It's just the way I decided Sunny to be."

Sunset rolled her eyes. Yeah, I'm sure it's not also because you just enjoy messing with me. Princess Celestia always did have a prankster's sense of humor, her and Philomena both. Sunset could still remember the time the princess had her act as a distraction while she put itching powder in her guards' helmets. Sunset had felt sorry for them, even if it had been pretty funny to watch.

"I actually came by to return some things to your principal," continued Sunny. She reached into her purse, pulling out a small dark brown object. "And I wanted to give you your wallet. I found it on the floor after you left."

"My wallet?" Immediately, her hand shot into her pocket, finding it empty. Looks like Ms. Mi isn't the only forgetful one today. "Thanks," she said, taking the little object and returning it to its rightful
place, right before another thought cropped up in her brain. "You came here all by yourself?" Worry nagged in the pit of her stomach. The last thing she wanted was Princess Celestia wandering around the city alone.

"I have a firm grasp of the way from here to your apartment by now," replied Sunny confidently. "And I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself." She looked past Sunset at the assembled teenagers, still munching away at the remains of their snacks. "I didn't mean to interrupt your rehearsal however, so I think I'll head back now."

Sunny turned for the door, only to be stopped by Applejack's voice. "Actually, I don't think it'd be a bother havin' you sit in."

"Are you sure?" asked Sunny. "I don't want to intrude."

"I'm already sitting on the sidelines," said Twilight. "I don't mind having somebody next to me at all."

Applejack turned her attention to Sunset. "You mind havin' her here?"

Sunset blinked in surprise, but shook her head. The idea of performing in front of Princess Celestia... she'd never even considered it as a possibility. It had been years since she'd ever shown off in front of her mentor. Memories of various tests and magical feats flashed through her brain, feelings of accomplishment transitioning to arrogant self-assurance. And here she was again.

Finishing off the last scraps of their snacks, the six girls picked up their instruments. "So," asked Sunset, plucking the chords of her guitar, "are we doing another run of the new song?"

"I'm feeling rather nostalgic at the moment," said Rarity as she lifted her purple curls over the strap of her keytar. "Why don't we play an old song?"

"You gotta point Rare," agreed Applejack. "We did skip that part today." They usually played an old song first as a warm up. Rainbow had been so excited for this new one that she'd insisted they jump right into it.

"How about the one from the Battle of the Bands?" suggested Fluttershy.

"I love that one!" declared Pinkie, drumsticks fidgeting in her hands. "We were all pow! Zap!"

Sunset smiled at Pinkie's enthusiasm. "I say we do that one." A round of agreements followed. Rainbow took her usual stance, fingers resting on her guitar. "Okay, one, two, three."

Sunset took the mike in her hand, feeling the beat of Pinkie's drums as she sang the words that had been burned into her memory. "You're never gonna bring me down. You're never gonna break this part of me."

On the sidelines, Twilight and Sunny were bobbing to the music. A familiar warmth flooded Sunset's body, a mix of pure joy and Equestrian magic. The odd but not entirely unpleasant feeling of pony ears coming into being against her head made itself known just as they reached the song's chorus, music and magic rising up together.

"We've got the music in our hearts..."

Twilight Sparkle was in a good mood.
She and Starlight had found a few good resources that would help them to unravel what happened to the Cutie Map. It wasn't a complete solution, not by far. But it was a promising start, and being able to accomplish that with her new student had made the princess of friendship feel great.

She’d even get to reorganize all the books afterwards, and her sharp mind was already debating what system to use. Should it be by publication year, or by title? Should it be A to Z, or Z to A? Or perhaps she should just sort them by subject matter like last time.

As of right now however, the two of them were on break. Starlight was off to the kitchen to get herself a snack. Twilight, meanwhile, was going to sift through the mail.

Sitting down at a table and humming to herself, she started by sorting the letters and magazines into separate, orderly piles before picking out one letter in particular, the one from Strawberry Moon. She hadn't expected the dean to get back to her so quickly, but it was a welcome surprise all the same.

"Let's see..." she said, scanning the elegant writing. "Dear Princess Twilight... I told her not to call me that... Sunburst did indeed graduate. Most recent address we have is... The Crystal Empire?"

According to the dean's letter, Sunburst had been an incredibly studious pony, which lined up with the impression she'd gotten from Starlight. Once the Crystal Empire had reappeared, he'd been eager to move there and observe the lost part of pony history.

Twilight smiled at that. He sounded like somepony after her own heart. If anything, the antecedent made her want to reunite him with Starlight even more.

Speaking of the Crystal Empire, another letter caught her eye, one with equally flowery writing, but far more familiar. Shining had mentioned that Cadance’s pregnancy had been interfering with her ability to use Spike to deliver mail.

Breaking the envelope open, her little smile from before broke into a huge grin. Cadance was writing to remind her that the foal was due soon. Had that much time really passed since their last visit?

"Actually, this is great," she remarked, an idea forming in her head. "I can have Starlight meet Sunburst at the same time we go to see Cadance’s baby." She was still debating on whether it would be Starlight's first lesson, but the timing was too perfect to ignore.

Reading the letter further, she raised an eyebrow. "What the hay is a crystaling?"

Whatever it was, the crystal ponies were talking about it. Cadance wasn't sure about the details herself. Twilight had borrowed a few books from the Crystal Empire Library a few weeks ago by mail. Perhaps they might have something?

Her head shot up, ready to start searching, only to remember the piles upon piles of books scattered across the room. She frowned in disappointment. That particular line of research would have to wait until after everything had been cleaned up.

The rest of the mail was fairly standard. Magazines, subscriptions to academic journals, and a catalogue of laboratory equipment, a must for the number of experiments she did. Then there was a letter from Moondancer, telling her all about what she and Minuette had been up to in the last week.

Gently folding the letters back up, she got to her hooves, walking around to improve circulation to her legs. So many letters, from friends and family alike. Reading them sent a warmth through her chest. To think that there was a time when she'd barely gotten any letters like this.

The glimmer of the afternoon sun on the mirror caught her attention. Come to think of it, she hadn't
heard from Sunset Shimmer in weeks, not since before her vacation. It was an unusually long span between contact.

Maybe I should write her instead? Sunset usually initiated their conversations, so it would be a nice change of pace. It was always interesting to hear back from her, not just as a dear friend, but as one living in a different universe, not to mention a fellow pupil of Celestia, even if Sunset didn't talk much about those days.

"She should be out of class by now," she realized, looking at the nearby clock. It would be the perfect time to send her a message.

Trotting over to the stand, she flipped through the pages, searching for a blank one, before stopping at a page with a date she didn't recognize. "Huh?"

This was from when she was on vacation. Why hadn't the journal been glowing? No matter, she'd figure that out later. Right now, she was very late in answering back.

Moving onto the message proper, she began to read.

Starlight was headed back to the private library, a pair of daisy sandwiches and plates held tightly in her magic, one for her, and one for Twilight. It seemed like the right thing to do since they were on break.

Friends did that sort of thing, right? She vaguely remembered making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for Sunburst once, and never again because she'd gotten the contents more on her than the bread. But she felt like she needed to do something for Twilight for letting her help fix the map.

Spike was sitting on her back, helping her to navigate in between telling her about some of the various adventures from the comics he'd been absorbed in. She'd never been into them herself, but Spike certainly was. She'd stumbled onto him in the throne room, curled up in his chair and surrounded by piles of issues the same way Twilight would surround herself with books.

After noticing the issue with the insane-looking earth pony mare, her curiosity had been piqued. Thus, she'd gotten a lesson on the history of the Power Ponies, and then a bizarre adventure inside a comic.

"You really went into the story?" she asked in disbelief. "Wasn't that dangerous?"

"I guess so," admitted the dragon. "But it was sort of fun too. I got to beat the Mane-iac and see the Power Ponies in action, sort of. Though it would have been nice to have real super powers." The dragon lit up as an idea struck him. "Like maybe super strength. Or maybe flight. Ooh, that would be good."

Starlight shook her head, letting Spike lose himself in his daydreams. "You guys go on so many weird adventures." How did you go from cleaning an old castle to getting sucked into an enchanted comic in one day?

She'd already heard all about various disasters that had struck the town alone, from paraspites, love poisons, and bookworms, to Ursa Minors, Cerberus, and Discord. The more stories she heard, the more she was starting to feel that her own escapade through time with Twilight was just par for the course.

Spike shrugged. "You get used to it."
As they reached the door, the two heard a high-pitched shriek. Starlight's magic tensed, crumbling the bread as she reached out and threw open the doors. "Twilight? Are you okay?"

The purple alicorn was fumbling with the machinery around the mirror, muttering to herself the whole time. Strands of her mane had popped out of place in a frazzled mess.

"Twilight," asked Spike, hopping off of Starlight's back. "You okay?"

Twilight's head twirled around, her neck practically making a snapping noise. "Can't talk Spike. I need to go. Sunset might be in serious trouble." She whirled back around to mess with the machine. Was she inserting that book into it?

"Come on, start up. Start up! Oh this is bad. Celestia, this is bad. How didn't I see the messages?!" Twilight hopped on her hooves, the look on her face making it seem like she was about to strike the equipment. Suddenly the mirror glowed with light, and Twilight turned around again. "Spike, Starlight, stay here and watch the castle. I'll be back later!"

Starlight wanted to interject, but before she could, Twilight darted straight into the mirror before disappearing from sight.

The machinery powered down, and Starlight just stared straight ahead at the mirror. The mirror through which one of the rulers of Equestria had just vanished. ".... Spike? Did Twilight just go through the mirror?"

"Yup."

She pivoted her head to look at the little dragon, who seemed completely unfazed by what had just happened. "Shouldn't we be worried?"

"Nah." Spike waved a claw dismissively. "She actually did something like this right before you moved in." He took a seat at one of the tables, munching on an emerald he brought along. "Besides, she'll write us if she needs us."

"R-right," she stammered, looking back at the mirror machine. "So..." she started slowly, "where does it go?"

"A parallel universe," replied Spike casually. "I can tell you about it. It's a long story though."

Starlight took a look at the two sandwiches still locked in her magic, and found them to be woefully inadequate for this situation. "... I'm going to go back and get something else to eat."

Spike leaned back in his seat, polishing off the emerald. "Need me to go with you?"

"No, I think I'll try it myself this time." Walking back out the doors, she felt her whole body slump as she made her way to the kitchen.

"I am never, ever getting used to this place."

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! I'm sorry this took so long to come out. I'm really trying to find a balance as far as time is concerned. But in my defense, we did have to deal with Irma,
and there were some personal issues that came up. Don't worry, I'm fine. But it did leave me out of sorts for a few days.

I also have two chapters ready for all of you. But before you hit for doing something I said I wouldn't do again, it wasn't intentional this time. Like last time, the chapter text was intended to be one, but was later split into two. The decision to cut it in half was something that didn't occur to me until I was literally pasting the text on FIM and getting ready to publish.

I also wanted to talk about the teacher names I used here. Punny Names are a must, but their sort of pun was derived from a background pony of the comics, one Nat Tally, the Ponyville accountant who appeared in issue 32 of the main series, aka part 1 of the "Night of the Living Apples" storyline (trade vol. 8). I'll probably lay off that sort of pun after this, since it's sort of hard to do, but hey, these just came to me and I had fun playing with it this round.

Dorey Mi is another interesting story. For those of you that are anime fans, you may recognize her and her daughter as a reference to Doremi/Dorie of Ojamajo Doremi/Magical Doremi. I'm not really a fan myself, though I did see some of the dub years ago. Not sure when or where.

Originally I just picked the name as a plain music pun. But as I was talking about it with a friend of mine (who is a huge anime fan), she said that the forgetful music teacher I'd created sort of sounded like an older version of Dorie, the protagonist. So after some consideration, I made a few modifications. XD

This chapter in particular is also rife with comic references. See if you can spot them. Go on, try. I will be releasing the next chapter within the next few days I think, so keep an eye out for that.
Chapter 11: Teachers and Students

"Shine like rainbows." With the last few words, the song ended, and Sunset stepped away from the microphone. Twilight and Sunny were clapping their hands enthusiastically.

"That was a wonderful performance," praised Sunny. "And a particularly lovely song as well."

"Thanks," replied Sunset. After that first old song, they followed with a mix of old and new. Like the song from the Battle of the Bands, that last one had a special meaning for Sunset. It was the first one they'd written after she'd joined in the band, the first one written to include her.

"I'd almost be tempted to have you play for the Grand Galloping Gala," Sunny continued, "if it weren't for the confusion it would cause."

Twilight tilted her head. "The what?"

"It's a large formal event we have every year at Canterlot Castle. Think of it like a ball."

Rarity's blue eyes sparkled like polished gems, filled with the possibilities of imagination. "A ball?!
She gave a theatric swoon. "Oh I'd love to play for a royal ball. The atmosphere, the decor! Would there be a handsome prince? Or knights in shining armor?"

Sunset froze, memories of that dreary event bubbling to the surface. She gave Sunny a cold stare. "Over my dead body."

"Oh but why?" whined Rarity, unwilling to let her fantasies be shattered so easily. "What could possibly be wrong with playing for a ball?"

"Yeah, you think they wouldn't like our music or somethin'?" asked AJ with a sideways glance.

Sunset grimaced. "Trust me, the Grand Galloping Gala is the most pretentious waste of time in all of Equestria. The nobles just use it as an excuse to show off." That, and they probably wouldn't take well to their brand of music anyway.

"Now, now, it's gotten... better in the last few years," retorted Sunny, her words sprinkled with a touch of laughter.

Sunset didn't know what exactly was funny about it, but she didn't miss that moment of hesitation. *Somehow, I'm not convinced.*

Around her, the other girls began packing their instruments. "I think we'd better call it here," said AJ, placing her guitar back in its case. "I have chores I need to get to back on the farm."

"Yeah," agreed Rainbow. "And I need to help Soarin whip some new guys on the soccer team into
Several other affirmations of after school jobs and errands followed. "I think we're just going to head home," said Sunset, cyan eyes turning to Sunny. Her hand reached out for the door handle. "See you lat-"

"Sunset!"

Her sentence lay incomplete because the second she opened the door, a purple blur smashed right into her. Sunset tumbled to the ground, feeling pinned down by a large weight. Giving her head a shake to reorient herself, she was greeted by the frantic and yet relieved face of Princess Twilight Sparkle.

Twilight's arms wrapped tightly around the other girl's torso. "Oh thank Celestia you're still here!"

"Twilight?!!" Sunset choked, struggling to catch her breath with Twilight's arms binding her diaphragm. "What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

"I'm so sorry!" continued the princess, not even hearing the question. "I only read your messages now. How are you still here? What happened? Is there anything you need?" she babbled frantically.

"A little air would be nice," croaked Sunset.

Twilight seemed to realize how tightly she was gripping her fire-haired friend, and quickly let go. "Sorry," she said, cheeks pink.

"It's okay." Getting to her feet, Sunset dusted herself off. Twilight's words repeated themselves in her head, and meaning began to sink in. "Wait, what do you mean you just read my messages?"

"I don't know what happened," declared Twilight apologetically. "The journal wasn't even flashing. Do you think the spell might be breaking down somehow? I haven't heard of that happening but then, I haven't used a magic journal before, so I don't really have evidence to the contrary."

The princess paused in her theorizing, finally noticing the adult standing in the room. "H-Hello," she greeted nervously, an overly large grin plastered on her face. "D-Did I say magic? No, I meant...technology!" The princess gave an unsteady laugh. "Because technology is so incredible these days it's just like magic! Am I right?"

"Uh," Rainbow whispered, leaning close to Sunset's ear. "Doesn't she know that's Princess Celestia?"

Sunset studied Twilight's face. She seemed genuinely confused. And she'd tried to cover up the fact that she'd talked about magic in front of Sunny, as if the woman was just another teacher. There was no doubt in Sunset's mind that Twilight didn't know who Sunny was.

But that didn't make any sense. How could she not know about everything Celestia had been doing? Her portal machine made Celestia's entire plan possible. Considering how it had been used on multiple occasions, Twilight would have to know.

And why had she only read the messages now? Two whole weeks had passed since the first of those two messages had been written. And yet somehow, the journal hadn't given any indication of new messages in all that time?

Cyan eyes moved over to Sunny. Instead of mirroring their confusion, Sunny's face was showing signs of stress. She was trying to control it with a polite smile, the same sort of mask she used in front
of many a dignitary. But this one wasn't holding very well. There was also a rigidity to her posture that hadn't been there a few minutes ago. What could she possibly be stressed about?

So many questions, and so few answers. The more Sunset thought about it, the more she became certain of one thing: There was something going on here between these two. Something was off, and she was going to get to the bottom of it.

Sunset turned to her friends. "You guys should get going. I think we're going to need the room for a bit."

The six girls hesitated, glancing between each other, before Applejack spoke up. "If you say so sugarcube."

As one, they left quietly. Even Pinkie's usual energy was subdued as she made her exit. Once the rehearsal room doors clicked back into place, Sunset whirled around to look at her fellow Equestrians. Her arms crossed themselves over her chest.

"What's going on?" Across the room, Sunny averted her eyes in discomfort, further confirming her intuition.

"Sunset, I don't understand. Who is this?" asked Twilight innocently, still focused on Sunny.

Sunny seemed like she was going to say something, but Sunset cut her off. "That's Princess Celestia." Her words came out harsher than she'd wanted, making Sunny visibly wince. But Sunset didn't care all that much.

"Princess Celestia?!" Twilight screamed, slapping a hand over her mouth as soon as she did so. She peered closer, recognition blooming on her face. "What are you- why are you here? How are you here? Why do you look like that? I-" Catching herself, she took a deep breath. "Wait, too many questions." She turned back to Sunset. "How are you still here? What happened to CPS?"

"She did." Sunset gestured to the pink-haired woman. "There were problems with Applejack and the other you, but she came in and posed as my mom. They can't take me away from her without a warrant. She's been sticking around until the coast clears."

The princess of friendship breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh thank goodness." Her attention migrated to Sunny. "Princess, how-"

Sunny cleared her throat for several seconds, as if she had a haystack-sized lump in her throat. "I'm here and not here at the same time," she explained quietly. "It's called the Multiple Magical Marionette Me spell."

"Oh, I think I read about that spell once," said Twilight. "I never tried it though. It seemed a bit complicated, at least at the time."

"Now I want some answers," interrupted Sunset, focusing on Twilight. "You really didn't read my messages until today?"

Twilight shook her head. "I was opening the journal because I thought I'd send you a message for once, and I noticed the filled pages. I don't know what happened. You must have thought I was a terrible friend."

Sunset frowned. She knew all too well how the journal spell operated, and that didn't sound right at all. "Honestly, I thought you were just really busy with royal duties and teaching Starlight."
"Well, I am working on making lessons for Starlight," Twilight explained. "But I haven't been that busy otherwise. Actually I just took a vacation with Spike, Starlight, and the others to Horseshoe Bay." Her eyes lit up with a spark of excitement. "I did some fascinating research there."

"Vacation?" Sunny hadn't mentioned anything about Twilight being on vacation. She glanced over at her, the woman falling silent once again. Her magenta eyes were watching the two girls intently, while her spine was still as rigid as a steel beam.

Once again, she was struck by that strong sense that something was off here. Why hadn't Sunny said anything about that? The omission didn't seem like much, but the feeling wouldn't stop prodding her brain. "When exactly were you gone?"

Twilight seemed surprised at the question. "Um, we left on the morning of February 15th, and we got back late morning last Friday." The princess began to pace back and forth, her brain kicking into a higher gear. "I'm still worried about the journal though. Why didn't it tell me about your messages? Do you think there's something wrong with the spell?"

Sunset doubted that. While she knew it wasn't totally out of the realm of possibility, what with the journal being used to power the portal machine, her intuition was saying something else at the moment.

If Twilight had been gone when the messages came in, then that raised an important question: How had Princess Celestia learned of Sunset's problems? Seeing the still present stress on her mentor's face, she was sure that the problems with the journal were much simpler.

"I think," she started slowly, turning a pair of hard cyan eyes to Sunny. "That somepony just read the messages before you and didn't reset the message indicator part of the spell. Right, Sunny?"

Sunny's hand tensed around the strap of her purse as another lump formed in her throat. This was not how she'd imagined today going, not in the slightest. Certainly not with Sunset throwing an accusatory glare her way and Twilight standing there in confusion.

Somewhere in the back of her head, she could almost hear Luna shouting I told thee so, Tia!"

"Wait," interrupted Twilight. "You can reset the spell?"

"Yeah," said Sunset, shrugging her shoulders. "It's not a nice thing to do, but it's not very hard. And it doesn't hurt the enchantment at all." Sunset's attention returned to her. "Well?"

Sunny cleared her throat again. "Well, yes, I read the messages. I was there to borrow a book from Twilight's library. You saw my note, didn't you Twilight?"

"Of course," said Twilight. Her face scrunched up in thought. "But you didn't mention anything about Sunset's messages."

"You were on vacation with your friends and your new student. I didn't want to interrupt you." she defended.

"So why didn't you tell me she was away?" asked Sunset.

"It didn't seem important at the time." And it hadn't been. There were far more pressing things, like reconciling with her student, and securing money and an identity. Besides, by the time Sunny Skies crossed the portal, Twilight had only been a few days away from returning, so there was little point in mentioning it after the fact.
Sunset however, wasn't satisfied. "What about the things you've brought over?"

Twilight's head turned to face the other girl. "What things?"

"She's been using an enchanted bag to bring things over from Equestria," Sunset explained, her cyan eyes still rooted on Sunny. "Mostly fake identification for herself and me. She's been sending things over the last two nights in a row." She turned to Twilight. "You didn't know?"

"No." Another moment, another few heartbeats, and Twilight's eyes widened. "Wait, that means you've been using the portal while I've been home." She turned to Sunny, mouth hanging open. "Starlight told me she thought she saw a light in the private library. She was sure she was seeing things. That was you, wasn't it?"

Her eyes grew wider still, until they were the size of dinner plates. "You broke into my castle?! That's... that's breaking and entering!" The princess began her pacing anew. "Princess Celestia broke into my house. Oh my gosh, Princess Celestia broke into my house!"

"I'm... sorry about that Twilight," replied Sunny. "I thought it would be better if you focused on Starlight for the time being." Guiding Starlight Glimmer was an important task, considering her magical potential and the raw nature of her emotions during her struggle with Twilight. And besides, Sunny had the situation here perfectly under control.

Sunset's eyes narrowed. "That time we were talking in the grocery store. You told me Twilight would be busy with Starlight. Now that I think about it, it was almost like you were discouraging me from talking to her."

An idea flashed across her face. "You were keeping us both in the dark. You didn't tell Twilight anything and you convinced me not to talk to her so we wouldn't put together that you were doing this behind our backs."

Twilight's pacing stopped dead. "Is that true?" she asked, her voice like a whisper. "But why would you do that?"

"Well, I-" Sunny began, only for her tongue to catch itself. Of course she hadn't been trying to discourage them like that. She hadn't. Twilight had so many duties to fulfill. There was no need for Sunny to burden her student and fellow princess with a problem she was handling quite well.

And she just hadn't wanted to ruin Twilight's vacation. The purple alicorn would've gone into an absolute fit upon reading those messages. But... she still had, hadn't she? That fact alone left her arguments feeling uneasy.

"I wasn't trying to do that," she answered finally. Why did it feel she was saying it for herself as much as for them?

"You could have just avoided all this and told her about the messages," said Sunset, before turning to Twilight. "I'm sorry for all the confusion."

Twilight wrenched her eyes away from their mentor. "No, I'm sorry. You needed my help, and if I'd known, I would have responded back immediately, vacation or no vacation. I just hope you weren't mad at me."

Sunset gave her a little smile. "I was more worried than anything else."

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. She pulled Sunset into a hug, a much gentler one than before. "Maybe I'll bring the journal with me next time I go away. That way we'll always stay connected."
This way we'll always stay connected. Those were the words Celestia had used when she'd given Sunset the journal on that September day all those years ago. And now here Twilight was, quoting it almost exactly word for word to the same pony.

Something inside Sunny rumbled, like a dark thundercloud had anchored itself to her heart. Her fists clenched. "You mean my journal, don't you?" she said, her tone low and approaching something dangerous. "The one you took from me?"

Twilight had let go of Sunset, taking a few steps backwards. "W-What? But I didn't-"

"Yes you did!" she shouted. "You stole my personal property! In all the time that you were telling me about the Sirens, did you ever once ask if I wanted my journal back?! No, you didn't, not once. You were too enthralled with your machine and the entire adventure. I'm willing to bet it never even crossed your mind!"

The words flowed fast from her mouth, guided and shaped by the anger until they were one and the same. The thundercloud in her heart grew and grew, from a cloud to a roaring hurricane slamming against a defenseless coast, wind and water whipping against trees, rocks, and houses alike.

"But Princess, I thought-"

Sunny wouldn't be deterred, rumbling crimson clouds forming before her eyes. "But you were already replacing me by then, weren't you? So of course you commandeered my journal without a thought. After all, it's not like it was important to me, or that I might have a use for it, or that there was any point in my using it anymore, was there? What point could there possibly be for a pony like me to have it when you were the one all the messages were for?!"

"I-"

"In case you've forgotten Twilight Sparkle, you have a student of your own now. So I suggest you actually direct your attention towards her rather than continuing to take mine!"

Finally, the words stopped, her breath turning heavy and ragged. And for the first time since that dark thundercloud had been set free, Sunny Skies actually noticed the way her students were looking at her.

Sunset simply gawked at her, arms limp at her sides. But Twilight, Twilight's eyes were brimming with hurt and fear and guilt, her head angled away as if Sunny had physically slapped her across the face.

"I... I'm sorry," she whispered, voice hiccupping. Prickling tears formed in the corners of her eyes as her arms shot up to shield her face. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"Twilight, I-" Sunny reached out, only for the girl to flinch at her approaching hand. For Sunny, it was a shock. Twilight had never flinched from contact before, not with her. Never. Even when she'd been upset, Celestia had always been able to pull her close and comfort her.

It's only after a storm passes that you can truly see the devastation it leaves behind. Landfall had been made, and the storm withered and died, clouds passing from her eyes. Now, she could see the damage. She could see it all.

Dear, sweet Twilight, always so afraid of angering her princess, her role model, always eager to please and be liked. Always deeply worried about failure, even now. And she'd gotten angry at her, yelled at her, torn into her with a verbal barrage.
"What have I done?"

Heaving a sigh that felt more like a boulder than a breath of air, she sat down on the piano. "Twilight." The girl only flinched again. "Twilight," she repeated, her voice as soft as velvet. "Please, come here."

Twilight had to be prodded by Sunset, but eventually, she sat at the woman's side. Sunny wrapped a comforting arm around the stricken girl, her body tensing at the contact. "I'm sorry Twilight. I'm so sorry. I..." she sighed again. "Luna was right. I'm jealous of you."

"Me?" Twilight squeaked in disbelief. "But... but you're Princess Celestia!"

Sunny chuckled. "I do have something of an ego, Twilight. And when it came to the journal, I... I was so proud of you for what you did, what you both did against the Sirens," she glanced at Sunset. "But on some level, it hurt too. More than I was willing to admit."

"I thought you'd wanted me to have the journal," muttered Twilight. "You gave me the mirror, and you'd given me the book with Starswirl's spell. I thought it was just another of those things. I thought... maybe you'd been hoping I'd be able to open the portal."

Sunny shook her head. "Not so much, I'm afraid. It was an accident. A fortunate accident in hindsight, but an accident nonetheless. Though I suppose I'm getting a track record for that sort of thing, aren't I?" She let out a self-deprecating laugh.

"Twilight, when I gave you the mirror, it was a sign of trust. I'd trusted you to watch over it, to keep it safe and watch for Sunset in the event she returned again. It's not that I didn't think you'd be able to open it manually the way you did. I honestly didn't think such a thing was possible."

"If I had, I would have done it long ago." A memory flashed through her mind. Another time, another adventure, another threat. Heartbreak. "Very long ago." She pushed the memory back. Now was not the time.

"Why didn't you ask for it back?" asked Twilight, her body finally relaxing at the contact between them. "You could have,"

Sunny shook her head. "Part of me wanted to. But after everything you told me, how could I ask for it back?"

Twilight's eyes moved to the floor. "I guess you couldn't, could you?"

"When you told me about that first message Twilight, it hurt. It was for me, but only as a means to contact you. I was just the middlepony, and nothing more. I was the teacher, and yet I was being overlooked for another. And as time went on, and Sunset continued to only speak to you, that feeling just got worse."

Sunset walked over, sitting down on Sunny's other side. "I was scared of talking to you," she whispered.

"I know that now Sunset," she said, wrapping her other arm around the girl. "But it still hurt at the time." She pulled the two closer to her, feeling their body heat radiate right through to her skin.

"I love teaching. I love working with students. Yet in all the years I've lived, I've had relatively few of my own. And as a teacher, I'd never felt replaced before."

That unhappy little feeling that had been in the back of her mind returned. It lay bare for Celestia to
see now, the heavy cloak of denial torn away by the angry winds.

"I'd been discarded. It wasn't just that I'd failed as a teacher. I was simply no longer wanted as well. But you Twilight, you were wanted. You were very much wanted."

She remembered all the times since the incident with the Sirens that Twilight mentioned her messages with Sunset, how she was doing well, how she was better liked at school, how she was helping her friends with all sorts of things. It was almost like when Celestia shared one of Twilight's friendship reports with Luna.

Every instance was accompanied by a little sting to her heart, because whenever Twilight brought it up, there was nothing for her, not even a simple greeting. All the sun princess received were indirect tidbits of conversations she was no longer privileged to partake in.

Sunset was making friends, opening herself to others, and yet she seemed totally uninterested in Celestia despite all their years together and the gap between them. Instead, all her attention seemed directed at Twilight and Twilight alone.

Even the prospect of passing her own message along seemed too awkward to pursue at the time. Would she even get a response? Would it hurt worse to be verbally rejected, or to be ignored altogether?

"You'd not only taken my journal Twilight, and all the memories that went with it, but it was like you'd taken my role as teacher from me as well, taking it upon yourself as easily as lifting a quill." A sick feeling passed through her stomach. "I love teaching, but for the first time, I'd been outdone, and part of me felt... humiliated."

She glanced at the two teens. "Those feelings came out in all this, and because I denied they existed, because I buried them, they tampered with my judgement. I only hope you can forgive me."

Sunset snorted. "I think I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't forgive you for something like this."

"I forgive you," said Twilight. "You're right. I didn't even think about giving the journal back. I just presumed you gave it to me, and I never thought about what it might have meant to you." She looked up, apology written on her face. "I can have the mirror and all the equipment sent back to Canterlot right away. It'll make things easier for you."

"That won't be necessary," replied Sunny. "The mirror and your amazing device are perfectly safe where they are. However, I would humbly request that you allow me to continue using it."

"You mean without breaking and entering, right?" smirked Sunset.

Sunny's cheeks tinged just the slightest bit pink. "Yes, without that."

For the first time since Sunny's outburst, Twilight smiled. "I'd be happy to."

She sighed in relief. "Thank you. I-" Sunny was cut off by a wail, followed by a loud crash from outside the room, and a few poorly muffled groans.

Sunset got to her feet. "I'll check it out."

Turning her attention back to Twilight, Sunny nuzzled her cheek. It felt alien in this body, but at the moment, it seemed the most appropriate. "Twilight, do you remember what I said when you first told me about Starlight staying with you?"
"You said I'd be a wonderful teacher."

"I meant that Twilight. I know you're still working things out with her, but after all this, I want you to know that I believe with all my heart that you will be a most excellent teacher."

"Thank you," she blushed. "I've made so many plans, but sometimes I've had my doubts."

"And that's perfectly normal. Trust me when I say this Twilight, you'll be just fine." She smiled. "However, if you ever feel like you need some advice, my door is always open for you."

"Thank you, Princess. And if you ever need my help with... this," she pointed at Sunny. "I'd be glad to lend a hoof."

The older woman's eyes danced with warmth. Her student was willing to offer her aid, just like Luna was. "If I ever need it, I'll gladly accept."

Just then, Sunset walked back into the room, six slightly red-faced girls in tow. "Sorry, it was just them."

Applejack directed her attention to Princess Twilight. "You okay there, sugarcube?"

"Yes, I'm, no, we're all going to be just fine. It was just a misunderstanding." With great reluctance, she freed herself from Sunny's side, and slid down from the piano. "I should be going."

"Aww, you're not staying?" lamented Pinkie.

Twilight shook her head. "I'd love to stay, but Starlight Glimmer and I were working on a project today. I should really be getting back to it. It was great seeing you all."

The princess submitted to a series of hugs from all of them before she left down the hall. Everyone followed soon after, offering real goodbyes and going their separate ways.

The halls were silent except for the clicks of their shoes. "You know Sunset, there was one other reason I came here today. When I saw you in the middle of practice, I thought it could wait."

"Is it going to be something big, because I'm kind of worn down after all of that."

Sunny chuckled uncomfortably. "Nothing so personal, no. The..." What had Sunset called it again?

"Ah, right, the air conditioning unit in your apartment seems to have stopped working."

The teen groaned in frustration. "It died again? Ugh, that's the third month in a row." Sticking her hands into her jacket pockets, her steps transitioned into an angry march. "Rusty Nail will probably take a week to fix it, just like last time." She let out a grumble. "At least it's not summer. Last year I nearly fried when that thing broke down."

"Yes," Sunny cleared her throat. "About that. I was thinking that perhaps it's time that we move out of that building."

"I don't think I can afford a better place," argued Sunset as the two made their way out into the daylight.

"That's precisely what some of the new money should be for," Sunny said, smiling as they passed the base of the Wondercolt statue. "And besides, it would probably be best to move to a nicer location should we have any visitors."

Not to mention that Sunny just didn't like the idea of Sunset continually living there. She'd passed
Rusty Nail on the way out today, and he seemed even more disreputable than she'd imagined. The glimpse she'd gotten at his office through a half open door had made her want to gag.

"Okay, you've got a point there," conceded Sunset. The grassy campus of the school had given way to concrete as she led the pair towards the parking lot where she'd left her bike. "But where would we go?"

Sunny grinned. "I think I may have found an answer. I saw this on the walk over here." She pulled a folded piece of paper from her bag, revealing it to be an ad for vacant apartments. "If I understand the geography correctly, this isn't too far from the school, correct?"

Sunset peered at the address. "Yeah, a couple blocks further than where we are now, but still in Appleville."

"Then why not go talk to the proprietor right now?"

Sunset looked hesitant, warnings of frugality no doubt still ringing in her ears. "Okay," she said at last. "But I should drop my stuff off first."

"I think I can manage the walk. Why don't we meet there when you're done?"

Finding her bike in the lot, Sunset pulled on her helmet and put the key in the ignition. "Sure. I'll meet you there in twenty minutes."

With a wave and the roar of an engine, she was off. Sunny watched her disappear down the road before resuming her walk, heading for a crowd of pedestrians while she navigated her way to the new address. Today was certainly turning out to be an eventful day.

With a flash of light, Princess Twilight Sparkle was thrust back into her library. "Maybe I should have laid down some pillows," she remarked as she got to her hooves.

"Twilight!"

The alicorn turned to see Starlight sitting at one of the many tables, relief plastered across her face. Several books lay scattered across the table's surface, as well as the remains of what appeared to be a daisy sandwich and several snacks.

The pink unicorn trotted up to her. "I'm so glad you're back."

"I wasn't gone that long," Twilight laughed.

Starlight craned her neck past her teacher to stare at the still glowing mirror's surface. "So it's really a portal to a parallel universe?" she asked in wonder. "Spike told me all about it while you were gone, but it was so hard to believe. An actual parallel universe..." She reached out a hoof towards the mirror, before pulling it back. "Was everything okay over there?" she asked worriedly. "You were in such a panic when you left."

"Everything's fine," Twilight reassured her, trotting away from the mirror. "There was just a... really big miscommunication." She stopped, turning around to pull the journal free of the machine and gently place it back on the stand. It was funny how such a simple thing could create so much emotion.

It was when she turned back around that she spied a floating bubble of magic. Was that a daisy sandwich inside?
"It's for you," explained Starlight, popping the bubble and levitating it over. "I was going to give it to you, but you left, so I was keeping it warm."

Twilight took the sandwich in her magic, savoring the first bite. Still fresh. "Thank you Starlight."

She swallowed her second bite, setting the sandwich down on a clean plate placed on an adjacent table. "So, have you been working while I was out?"

"A little," replied the unicorn with an edge of resignation. "I was going over some of the books we found, but I think we might have hit a roadblock." She looked away. "What if... what if we can't fix the map?"

For a moment, the possibility crossed Twilight's mind. But then she saw the hurt on Starlight's face, the idea that she'd permanently damaged the map. And then Twilight remembered Celestia's words to her.

She would be an excellent teacher. And an excellent teacher inspires their students. "I'm sure we'll figure it out Starlight," she said with a reassuring hoof on her shoulder. "Now come on, show me what the problem is."

Starlight just stared. "Wow, you did a total 180 since you left. Things really went that smoothly?"

"I wouldn't say that," remarked Twilight, remembering the argument they'd had. "But they ended well. Honestly, I'm glad for the whole trip." Even with all the high emotion, it had only served to pull her closer to her mentor, and wasn't that worth it?

She sat down at the table amid the books Starlight had been looking through. "And best of all," she remarked as she levitated one over, "there isn't some new crisis to worry about."

Somewhere in the near future...

In an elegantly furnished office, high in one of the many gleaming towers of Canterlot, sat Castor Oil, Minister of Health and head of the Ministry of Health and Public Safety. The unicorn scowled at the piles of paperwork spread out across his desk. So much work, so much tedium.

He took out a watch from his vest pocket. It was almost two o'clock. He was expected to be on the golf course in half an hour. His wife’s cousin had bet him a considerable number of bits that he could defeat him in a match. “A friendly bit of sport,” he’d called it.

Highly improbable, in Castor's opinion, especially because, as the other pony was seemingly unaware, Castor had learned to play in Trotland, home to the masters of the sport, and had multiple trophies to his name. His wife’s cousin, by contrast, was an amateur with a large wallet and an equally large mouth.

But if the stallion wanted to waste his money, that was his business, wasn't it? The winnings would certainly be a boon for Castor, considering how many bits his wife had burned through redecorating their house for the third time this year.

Scowling once again at the bureaucratic irritation before him, Castor got up from his seat and grabbed his satchel. He had just enough time to get home and get his clubs if he was going to reach the course on time.

As he placed the satchel over his back, his secretary trotted in. "Sir," said the demure pegasus, "this letter just came in from the Equestria Center for Disease Prevention."
"I'm about to leave, Miss Pencil Point," huffed the unicorn. "Can't it wait?"

"It was marked urgent, sir." She placed the envelope on top of the smallest pile on his desk, before quietly letting herself out.

Glaring at the thick envelope, Castor Oil grabbed it in his magic and tore it open, quickly scanning the page.

"What nonsense is this?" he said sharply, his tail lashing at the air behind him. "A few sick ponies in poor living conditions, and they think there's a problem worth the attention of the princesses?" He shook his head in disbelief. The ponies at the ECDP could be so hyperbolic sometimes.

Feeling particularly annoyed by the delay, he crumpled the letter before tossing it in the wastebasket, slamming the office door as he left.

The force of the door was enough to make the little basket wobble, and the letter tumbled to the floor. The last two paragraphs were still visible.

The cause of their condition was unable to be determined. We ask, Minister Oil, that you bring these cases to the immediate attention of the princesses. It is our belief that they, or the contents of the Canterlot Archive, will be able to provide some clues.

It cannot be stressed enough, Minister Oil, how URGENT this is. We are HIGHLY concerned that these cases, few as they are, represent an emerging pattern, one which may spread if something is not done. The entire population of Manehattan could be at risk.
Chapter 12: Picture Day

The following day found Sunset Shimmer and her pseudo-mother out in the city once again. Inspecting the apartment building had gone swimmingly. The landlady was a friendly sort, and had actually offered them tea before showing them the vacant units.

The first apartment had ended up being the winner. It was similar to the old apartment, with a large living room area fit to put a TV in, and a kitchenette. But this one had sported two bedrooms instead of one, connected by a bathroom with a dual tub and shower. There was even a small alcove where the last tenant had installed a washer and dryer, though the machines were no longer present.

It was a cozy space, perfect for a single mother and daughter to be living in. And the rates had been fairly reasonable, even if it was still much higher than what Sunset had been paying before.

Since it was unfurnished, and most of Sunset’s furniture wasn’t fit to move (or keep, for that matter), the next step had been a large shopping trip, which led them to the shopping center on Onyx Street. It was a wide area, but was composed of only a handful of very large stores bordering the perimeter of an equally massive rectangular parking lot.

The furniture store had been the first stop. Sunset allowed her mentor to take charge on most of those purchases, since she had the better eye for that sort of thing. Together, they’d gotten a pair of beds, new bedsheets, pillows, towels, a sofa, chairs, some small tables, and everything else a home needed.

After that, they’d moved to the conveniently placed Best Purchase store located right next door. Here, Sunset had to take over, since the very minute Sunny started talking to the salesman, her eyes glazed over in complete non-comprehension.

Unfortunately, it was a sale day today, and the store was bursting with activity, shoppers headed this way and that in search of whatever hot items were on sale, while off to the side, a long line had formed in front of the technical support service desk. The noise of the shoppers and beep of the registers was blended together with the chatter of TVs and soft music from the overhead speakers.

Working her way through the chaos, Sunset had already picked out a toaster, a blender, and a microwave. Sunny had insisted on getting a washer and dryer for the apartment, since there was already a dedicated space for them anyway. The teen was pushing the cart in their direction, following the very helpful salesman.

Well, salesman was something of a misnomer, more of an aide. He was actually quite young. Probably still in high school if Sunset had to guess. He had tan skin and long, messy dirty blonde hair that he’d tied back in a low, very loose shoulder length ponytail, while his bangs crept into his eyes so much that Sunset had to wonder how he could even see.
He seemed distinctly uncomfortable in the uniform he was wearing, tugging constantly at the shirt collar, which only succeeded in making the small turquoise surfboard at the end of his necklace jangle loudly.

"I totally miss California, but dad needed to come here. But you know there's this gnarly wave pool I found so I can still surf. I could give you some private surfing lessons if you want. Course I'd need your number so we could keep meeting up. Nobody learns how to do it the first time, not even an awesome guy like me."

And he was also flirting with her. Very clumsily, she might add.

"I'm not really interested in surfing, uh, Rip Tide," she said politely, catching a glance at his name tag. "But I am still interested in the washing machines."

"Right," said the young man, a touch of dejection in his voice. "This way." He started walking ahead of her, only to smack right into a customer just as he left the aisle. A customer who let out a very familiar "ooof".

Sure enough, when Sunset caught up to him, she saw Rarity sprawled on the carpeted floor. "Rarity?"

"Oh, hello Sunset darling," she greeted, a few shopping bags scattered at her side. She got up, dusting off her dark purple skirt. "Fancy running into you here. Though I could have done without the literal run in."

"So sorry dudette!" apologized Rip. He grabbed her bags, holding them out to her, but froze when he noticed the glare Rarity shot his way at being called "dudette". Rip's face turned to one of panic. "Um, I mean, sorry ma'am," he backpedaled. "No, uh, miss, yeah, miss!" He cringed. "Please don't tell my manager."

Rarity's face softened as she took the bags back from him. "I wouldn't dream of doing so for such a simple accident, especially since you had the decency to apologise." She turned to Sunset. "Sunset, darling, am I to assume you're out shopping for the new apartment you mentioned this morning?"

"Yup. What about you? I thought you were going to be busy working on some designs at home."

"I was," replied the fashionista with a sigh. "But mother wanted to go out and replace some of the furnishings we lost with the flood, and she needed me to help her."

Rip looked back and forth between them. "Uh, you two know each other?"

"We're friends," Sunset told him. "Now could you show me where the washing machines are?"

"Sure." He glanced back at Rarity, and his face flushed, studying her image for the first time. "Hey, uh, any chance you'd, like, go out with me? I mean, to make up for running into you."

Rarity's face fell for a second, eyes honing in on his messy hair, but snapped on a polite smile. "I'm afraid I'll have to decline. Now, I do believe my friend asked you about the washing machines. What direction are they in?"

"Uh, they're totally that way," he said, pointing toward the left side of the store. "Almost to the wall."

"Thank you. Now I believe the two of us will be off." She brushed by the still flustered teen. "And for the record, Mr. Tide, I prefer gentlemen who can see."
The two girls left Rip Tide behind, laughing to themselves. "Thanks," said Sunset. "It was getting sort of awkward."

"It was nothing," replied Rarity with a wave of her hand. "Though it certainly wouldn't hurt you to dabble in romance again." She gave a polite cough. "For real, that is."

Sunset glanced away. "Not really sure I'm ready for that just yet." Just the thought of trying for real made her remember how she'd played Flash like a fiddle, and all the shame that went with it.

"I understand. Just remember darling, when you do finally find yourself a date, I'd be more than happy to help you pick an outfit."

Sunset laughed. "I'll keep that in mind." Something told her that Rarity would help her with that whether she wanted it or not. Taking a few more steps, Sunset finally realized the sudden absence of a certain someone's voice. She turned around, finding nothing but an empty space. "Hey, where did Sunny go?"

"Dear me, it seems we both lost someone," said Rarity, taking her own look around at the busy store. "I was trying to find Sweetie Belle and her friends."

"What are they doing here?" Sunset could understand Rarity being asked to come along for this sort of trip. She had a sharp eye. But why would Sweetie Belle and her friends be here?

"They wanted to pick out a few movies for their club," explained the fashionista. "So mother let them come along. She decided to go here before we went to the furniture store."

Sunset remembered that the trio had formed a club, the Canterlot Movie Club. When they couldn't get to the theaters, they made a makeshift one in their own houses. Sunset and her friends had had to postpone a movie night once because it'd ended up being at the same place and time as the CMC.

She pointed with a finger. "I think the movies are back the way I came. Let's go, maybe we'll run into them or Sunny on the way."

Tracing her steps back through the busy store, the pair scanned their surroundings. They spotted plenty of adults and even teenagers, all attracted to the sales going on, but nothing of their companions.

"Where could they be?" asked Sunset as she took another look around. Still nothing. She sighed in frustration. "Why'd this store have to be so big?"

"It does make it easy to get lost, doesn't it?" mused Rarity as the two continued to walk.

They were now headed down the last of the aisles, quickly approaching the store’s eastern wall. Sunset ran a hand through her long hair. "Maybe we should circle back," she suggested. "They could have gone to the other side of the store looking for you."

"Perhaps, I-wait, do you hear that?"

Being as close to the wall as they were, the noise of the many shoppers had become just a bit fainter. And in that relative quiet, Sunset managed to pick up a few familiar voices.

"And then we stole Sunset’s phone and posted the pictures," came a squeaking voice with a distinct country twang.

"But then the whole school started sharing stuff, and we started posting those too," followed another
that distinctly sounded like Sweetie Belle.

Rarity’s blue eyes blinked in confusion. “Are they talking about what I think they are?”

“Before we knew it,” continued what was clearly the voice of Scootaloo, “it was totally out of
control.”

“We’re really sorry, Miss Skies,” said Apple Bloom. “Honest.”

The two teens moved to the end of the aisle. There, just a few feet away, were their missing store
companions. The three girls were looking about fifty shades of guilty, while Sunny merely stood
there, back leaning on the wall, arms crossed.

“Darling,” spoke Rarity, her words slow and quiet to avoid interrupting the scene before them. “Did
you happen to tell the princess about the,” she coughed, “Anon-a-Miss incident?”

“No.” It hadn’t even occurred to her among all the other things that had gone on. And it wasn’t like
Sunny had asked about it.

Though as things stood, this could be… problematic. Sunny’s face was particularly dour as she
listened to the girls go on. She didn’t interrupt them, didn’t say a word, but her eyes didn’t waiver
from them.

“What I don’t understand is why they’re doing this here,” said Rarity. “This seems like a rather odd
place and time to hold this sort of conversation.”

“If I had to guess, it’s because they think she’s my mom,” answered Sunset. And as far as they
knew, Sunny was. They’d all agreed long ago to leave their families out of the magical loop unless
absolutely necessary. “Better to admit it right now than wait for her to find out from someone else,”
she reasoned.

“I suppose that’s reasonable,” said Rarity, giving a little hum. “But darling,” nervousness edged into
her voice, “the princess isn’t going to punish Sweetie Belle for her part in that fiasco, is she?” She
paused, her imagination spinning. “I’d rather not have to explain to mother why my little sister is
suddenly a mouse.”

“She wouldn’t do that,” replied Sunset. Though in all honesty, she wasn’t sure how her mentor was
going to react. She was confident that the princess wouldn’t do anything severe to three preteen girls,
but at the same time, that expression didn’t bode well.

And Sunny had established a precedent for surprising her since she arrived. Memories of yesterday’s
outburst flashed through her head. Yeah, a repeat of that would be bad, to say the least. Not to
mention this was a busy store full of people.

“When I saw Sunset runnin’ down the halls after gettin’ knocked down, I knew we’d gone way too
far,” continued Apple Bloom.

“We admitted to everything,” said Sweetie Belle, voice cracking. “And we took down the profile.”
Her green eyes sank down to her tennis shoes. “We couldn’t get rid of all the secrets though…”

“Vice Principal Luna gave us six months of detention for it,” lamented Scootaloo.

Sunny took a few deep, long breaths, closing her eyes. For a moment, she seemed to Sunset like a
meditating monk. When her eyes opened again, they flicked in Sunset’s direction. Sunset took a few
steps back. Had she spotted them?
“I see,” said Sunny evenly as she directed her attention back to Apple Bloom and the others. “And why exactly are you telling me this now?”

“Because you’re Sunset’s mom,” answered Sweetie Belle, confirming Sunset’s hypothesis.

“And because of what happened with that lady,” added Apple Bloom. “Applejack told me that she was usin’ what we did against them. And she almost got away with it too.” The small redhead bit her lip. "I made my own sister look like a horrible person."

“If we hadn’t come up with Anon-a-Miss,” continued Scootaloo, “then maybe things wouldn’t have been so bad.”

Sweetie Belle’s eyes rose back up to Sunny’s face, looking like a couple of big green puddles. “Are you mad at us?”

Sunset felt her hands tighten around the shopping cart handle. If things got bad, she was going to step in. Sure, what they’d done was bad, but she’d forgiven them for it long ago, and they’d been paying for it in spades.

Besides, the three of them looked absolutely miserable right now. They were standing with an uncharacteristic stillness, like someone had stolen all their overwhelming energy and enthusiasm and dumped it right down the drain. I guess hearing about what happened to me really opened some old wounds.

Sunny took another deep breath, and for a whole minute, there was nothing but silence. Finally, the woman shook her head. “No, I’m not mad at you.”

"You're not?" asked Apple Bloom, flabbergasted. "But-

"Don't misunderstand me. If I'd been there at the time, I would have been angry. Very angry, in fact. And I would have had a long talk with each of your families. What you three did was incredibly selfish, foolish, and horribly cruel.”

Apple Bloom withered under the words. "That's pretty much what Principal Celestia said too."

Sunny’s lip twitched, and her expression softened. “However, I wasn’t there, as much as I would have wanted to be.” She came closer, bending down so she was eye to eye with all three of them. “I think what matters right now is that you’re truly sorry for what you did, and you’re doing your best to make up for it.”

She smiled reassuringly. “Thank you all for being honest and telling me right away. That was very brave of you. And I think your sisters would be very proud of you for doing that.”

Scootaloo looked surprised. “You think so?”

Sunny nodded. “I know so.” Her magenta eyes moved over to where Sunset and Rarity were watching. “And speaking of which, here’s one of them now. Hello Rarity, how are you today?”

Having been discovered, the two girls came forward into view. “I’m quite well today, thank you,” greeted Rarity politely. “Thank you for keeping an eye on my sister and her friends.” She put a hand on Sweetie Belle’s shoulder. “Come along Sweetie, we shouldn’t keep mother waiting,” she glanced over at the maze of aisles she’d just come from. “Wherever she is.”

“Sorry,” apologized Sweetie. “We thought we’d be able to find the movies while you were busy.”
With a few more goodbyes, the two groups traded partners and went their separate ways through the store. The trip was quiet for about a minute, the sounds of shoppers washing over them, until Sunset broke the silence. “So...”

“Yes?”

“You heard all about Anon-a-Miss.”

Sunny nodded solemnly. “I found myself rather distracted and realized I’d lost track of you. Then I ran into those three. The moment I introduced myself, they broke down and told me everything.”

Before she knew it, Sunset was pulled into a soft hug. “I’m sorry you had to go through something like that alone,” Sunny whispered, her voice overflowing with sympathy. “It must have been so hard.”

Sunset let go of the cart, letting herself be pulled closer. The smell of the lily perfume Sunny wore filled her nostrils. “It was,” she admitted. “But it’s all in the past by now. And in a way, it brought us all closer.” They’d managed to clear a lot of bad air between them, even if Sunset had been extra skittish until the Battle of the Bands.

Her eyes met her mentor’s. “I’ve got to say though, I thought you’d be angrier at those three.” She chuckled sheepishly. “I was actually kind of worried you were going to chew them out in the middle of the store.”

Sunny pulled away. “It was hard listening to them, I’ll admit.” The woman shook her head. “But I couldn’t stay angry at them. And besides,” she added with a light laugh, “I think six months of detention is punishment enough for students.”

The two slipped into more normal conversation, up until Sunset's cart rammed into another around one of the aisles. She grunted in pain as the handlebar collided with her stomach.

"Oh dear," came yet another familiar voice. "I'm sorry... Oh, Sunset, I didn't know you were here." 

Sunset hunched over, clutching her bruised abdomen, before looking up at the face of Cookie Crumbles, Rarity's mother. "Hi," she groaned.

Sunny bent down to look at her stomach. "Are you alright sweetheart?"

"I'm fine P-Mom." She rubbed the injury. "It's just sore."

That caught Cookie Crumble's attention, indigo eyebrows shooting up. "Mom? You're her mother?" She made her way around the cart and held out her hand. "Rarity told me you were back in town. I'm Cookie Crumbles. I'm Rarity's mother."

Sunny returned the gesture. "Sunny Skies. It's a pleasure to meet you. Sunset and I actually ran into both of your daughters just a little while ago, though not so literally in my case," she chuckled.

Cookie looked around at the chaos of the store with a trace of irritation. "I swear, this place is a madhouse today." Looking over at Sunset, her face softened. "I'm really very sorry about that. Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine," she insisted, straightening her back.

Relief passed over Cookie's features. "You can't imagine how happy we were when Rarity told us you showed up Sunny. Do you mind if I call you Sunny?"
"Not at all."

"Hondo and I would have been more than happy to share our guest room, well, if the flood hadn't happened." In an aisle nearby, another shopper went running by at a breakneck pace. She sighed. "It just had to be a sale day today, and not for anything we need."

"That's right," said Sunny. "Sunset told me you had a flood of some kind?"

"It was horrible," proclaimed Cookie, her tone echoing with exhaustion and frustration. "The water got above ankle deep. Between the plumbers and this restoration company, it took hours to clean it all up. And we needed to keep these giant dehumidifiers in the house for days. They were so loud, and they tripped the power four times."

"Yeah, Rarity made it sound pretty rough." Her fashionista friend had told them all about the cleanup problems during lunch. Her own bedroom wasn't far from the damaged guest room, and the noise and power outages had caused no end of distraction and irritation for her. She'd had to use earmuffs in addition to her mask just to sleep through the night. As much as Rarity's tale had been infused with a dose of melodrama, it really hadn't sounded pleasant to Sunset at all.

It made her thankful that her old apartment hadn't sprung any major leaks in the years she'd lived there. Not yet anyway. Considering the shape it was in, who knew what would've happened down the road?

"I'm just glad we were able to finally get rid of them," said Cookie. "It was so hard to bake with those things running all the time." The fuchsia woman looked around. "Have you seen Rarity or Sweetie Belle and her friends? I don't come here too often so I don't remember where everything is."

"The movies are over that way," said Sunset, pointing with a finger. "They were just headed there now."

"Pardon me for asking," interrupted Sunny. "But what is that?" she pointed to a particular item in Cookie's shopping cart.

Cookie held up the box. "Oh, this? It's a digital picture frame. It cycles through pictures like a slideshow." She smiled. "I wanted to give it to my mother as a birthday present. She loves looking at the photo albums, but they're getting rather heavy for her these days."

Sunny's face lit up in both happiness and wonder. "That sounds like the perfect gift for her then." She shook her head in amusement. "Honestly, these computers never cease to amaze me. First being able to see films on the internet, and now this."

When she saw Cookie raise an eyebrow, Sunset scrambled for an answer. "Uh, my mom's really not that great with tech stuff," she explained quickly, hand slipping behind her head. "That's an archeologist for you, right? She's better with ancient technology than anything really modern."

Please let that be convincing, please let that be convincing.

Thankfully, her improvised half-lie seemed to have worked, because the baker just laughed. It was a warm, comforting sort of laugh. "Oh, don't I know the feeling. Anything beyond a cooking appliance usually leaves me stumped." She dropped the box back in the cart. "I'd better find my daughters. We still need to go to the furniture store."

"It's not as busy as here," said Sunset. Without the sale-induced high activity and the constant noise of the running TVs, the furniture store was practically a zen garden.
"Thank goodness," sighed Cookie. "Well, goodbye. It was wonderful meeting you Sunny. Hopefully we'll get to see each other again when it's quieter."

The pair watched Cookie wander off in the direction of the movie section, and then resumed their own trip toward the washing machines. As they walked along, Sunset noticed the thoughtful expression on Sunny's face. "What's up?"

"I was just thinking," said the woman slowly. "There's something else we could add to the apartment. But... you may not like it."

The teen raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"Sunset, are you finished changing?" called Sunny.

"I'm not coming out," she replied, voice muffled by the bathroom door. "Haven't we done enough?"

Behind her, Rarity shifted on her heeled shoes. "Oh but you have to darling! I simply won't allow my hard work to go to waste."

Sunset began to protest, only for a pair of pale hands to slip under her armpits. "Rarity!" protested the girl. "Let me go!"

The door was swung open, and Sunset found herself ushered into the room. Sunny was on the sofa. Twilight and Spike sat on the floor nearby, tinkering away on a laptop, while Fluttershy stood behind a camera fixed to a tripod, and the rest of her friends stood in various places around the room.

"Put me down!" she squeaked, overflowing with indignation.

Rarity did as she was asked, and Sunset's feet were returned to solid floor. The fire-haired girl huffed, crossing her arms over her chest as she cast a dark glare at Sunny. "This is my punishment for running away, isn't it?"

It was Saturday. Much of the furniture had been delivered to the new apartment, and for what could be moved from the old one, Applejack had loaned the use of her brother's truck. It felt good to get out of that apartment, though surprisingly, there had been just the tiniest bittersweet sting. It had been her living space for most of her years in this world, true, but it wasn't until she walked out the door that last time, boxes in hand, that she'd felt any real, sentimental attachment to it, like a rope pulling her back, willing her to stay.

Not that it lasted long. Running into Rusty Nail just reminded her of how crumby, and hot, the apartment was. Sunset didn't even stop herself from beaming when she tossed him the keys.

Right now, however, they were working on Sunny's extra addition to their new home. As it happened, Sunny had been correct. Sunset definitely didn't like it, and she was wishing more and more that her mentor hadn't thought of it.

Family photographs.

Sunset huffed again, one increasingly frequent question replaying in her head. How the hay did I let her talk me into this?

Over on the sofa, Sunny chuckled merrily. "Now, now, Sunset, don't be angry. I think you look adorable."
"I think so too," said Fluttershy, grin threatening to break free of her face as her fingers twitched over the camera button.

"Abso-poso-lutely," agreed Pinkie, rushing over to the kitchen to wrap an arm around Sunset's shoulders. She wore a simple white shirt, a pair of poofy pants, riding boots, a black beret, and a long white scarf wound around her neck. She'd had a monocle on earlier, but traded it for a pair of sunglasses after it kept falling out.

"Don't be shy. The camera loves you, kiddo!" she declared, stretching her free arm out in a dramatic fashion. "Trust me, you're going to be a star, with your name up in lights and everything! When this shoot is done, they'll be calling you the next Shirley Trample!"

"I'd better not be," growled Sunset, slipping out from under Pinkie's grip.

With a bounce, Pinkie was off to a small folding chair with her name on it. "Alright people, let's get this show back on the road!" she called through her non-electric megaphone.

The entire production was being run like a magazine photo shoot. Fluttershy had volunteered to be the photographer, while Twilight would handle the photos in post, adding in the necessary backgrounds and other details. Applejack and Rainbow were in charge of moving around the props they'd assembled yesterday and today.

Pinkie Pie handled the edible props, but had otherwise made herself the director. Sunset was fairly certain that applied to cinematography and not photography, but Pinkie wouldn't be dissuaded.

Rarity, naturally, had been put in charge of hair, makeup, and wardrobe, ensuring that both Equestrians looked the part for every single shot. The bathroom had likewise been converted into her workspace, with beauty tools spread over the counter and clothes hanging on the shower rod, or otherwise set aside in neat folded stacks around the apartment when there wasn't proper room.

Still frowning, Sunset turned to look at herself in a nearby full-length mirror. Instead of her usual teenage human self, she saw another, by now familiar girl who looked barely a day over five. All courtesy of the latest in a series of age spells Sunny had cast on her.

Not for the first time today, she studied her reflection. The mirror girl was small, the smallest so far, with a head that was far too large, and eyes that seemed gigantic as they took up far more room on her now tiny face. A face with an equally tiny nose and mouth, and two rosy cheeks swollen by layers and layers of soft baby fat, the same sort that had suffused her limbs and belly. As for her clothes...

She was clad in an orange day dress, the hem and waist colored a pale, sort of golden yellow. Her cutie mark had been sewn onto the front, leaning more to the right, the large two-tone sun reaching from a few inches below her waist to the very bottom of the dress before getting cut off, while black shorts poked out from underneath.

Complementing the outfit was a pair of bright red Marey Janes, the sort of shoes Sunset had come to recognize as a classic symbol of girlish childhood. Her hair, meanwhile, had been brushed back into a ponytail and secured with a dark red ribbon tied into a large bow. Her natural waves allowed the tail to curl at the ends, while that same loose, wavy lock still sat against her forehead as it always did.

All in all, it was downright diabetes inducing. And it was also utterly embarrassing.

"How did you sew this outfit together so fast Rarity?" she asked, tiny fingers toying with the hem while letting her eyes turn away from the mirror.
Rarity bent down, smoothing out a minute wrinkle in the dress' fabric. "You'd be surprised how quickly I can work when I'm properly inspired. And this one was so simple."

"Gotta say," added Applejack, still busy putting up the removable plastic hooks that would hold some of the photos, "with that there ribbon you remind me of Apple Bloom when she was a young'un."

"I'm simply happy that I'm finally getting a chance to work with your hair," Rarity continued. "Why you're so stubborn about letting me so much as touch it is beyond me."

"I wouldn't be too offended Rarity," replied Sunny casually as she stretched her legs. "Not too long into her stay at the castle, Sunset decided that not even I could take a brush to it, even if I gave a royal command."

"I could brush my own mane just fine!"

"That's what you said before, but there were some mornings I had serious doubts."

"Remind me why we have to do this again?" Sunset asked, trying her best not to sound like she was whining, even if her new pitch made it difficult. "Why couldn't you use the portal on some of the pictures I know you have?"

"I told you already Sunset," replied Sunny patiently. "I tried that. For whatever reason, the transformative magic of the portal doesn't take well to photographs." She reached a hand into her purse, pulling out a blurry mess of an image. "Families always have photos, so it would be odd for us not to have any. And they'll only strengthen the proof we already have."

"Still embarrassing," the girl muttered back, her already rosy cheeks turning even redder.

"Hey, look at it this way," offered Rainbow over her shoulder. "If that Circinus jerk ever sees these, it'll totally mess with her head." She turned around, finally getting a look at Sunset, before breaking out in roars of laughter. "Oh man Sunset, that's even worse than the last one! You look- Oof!"

Whatever she was going to say was cut off when a pillow-turned-projectile collided with her face, sending her falling backwards onto the bike parts she'd been working with.

"You were saying?" Sunset asked, another pillow already in hand.

The athlete groaned. "Nothing."

"Come on Rainbow, quit your laughin'," said Applejack. "I think she's puttin' up with enough already without you impersonatin' a hyena."

"Okay, okay, fine." The rainbow-haired girl rubbed a sore spot on her back. Glancing back at Sunset she covered her mouth, obviously suppressing more laughter, before turning back to her job.

The girl sighed. "What's the next one on the list?"

Sunny had written out a list of various types of pictures to take, with some advice from the others. Of course, Sunny had completely excluded her from that particular talk, or even from seeing the list before they started. "I was afraid that if I let you have any input, you'd be too biased and try to veto most of the ideas," she'd told her.

Logically, it was a fair point. But that didn't mean the former unicorn wasn't ticked off about it. And as the pictures went further and further back in time, the less happy she became.
The pictures had mostly consisted of childhood milestones. Birthdays, Christmases, and the like. There had also been a few more casual shots mixed in to be more realistic, all based on whatever props they'd managed to assemble yesterday afternoon and onwards.

The living room of Sunset's new apartment was littered with such props. Birthday hats, wrapped Christmas boxes, a couple of Halloween costumes, one of a black cat and the other of a dragon, some other stacks of old clothing that suited her at various ages, and several old toys. There was a child's swim suit in one stack from her first swimming lessons, using the bathtub to simulate the pool.

Sunset's eyes drifted over to the corner, where a small red backpack sat. On the back, it bore a golden star with a giant smiley face, and a tag that read "Sunset Shimmer" in Sunny's elegant handwriting. The five year old cringed internally. That particular prop was one she wished she could forget.

Sunset Shimmer tightened the knot on her fluffy cotton robe as she exited the bathroom. According to Sunny, it was better to return her to her proper age for a brief time rather than stack the age spells, so the robe had become a faster, more efficient alternative than changing in and out of her usual clothes.

"What's the next one?"

Sunny picked up the list. "The next one is... the first day of kindergarten." She turned to Sunset. "I presume you had to list previous schools when you entered CHS?"

"Mountaintop Elementary and Sapphire Hills Middle School," answered the girl, barely suppressing a groan. Primary school? Really?

Mountaintop Elementary and Sapphire Hills were located at opposite ends of the same street. Around the time Sunset entered CHS, there had been a freak electrical fire in the middle of the night. It had consumed the entire block, burning both schools to the ground. Naturally, a fire like that had been major news at the time, news that Sunset had picked up on from her hiding places inside CHS.

For the school district, it was a disaster, but for her, it had been a tremendous stroke of luck. Formally entering the school had posed the problem of records. But with a single spark, her problems had been solved.

Canterlot High was flooded with transfers from Sapphire Hills, many of whom had gone to Mountaintop. No one batted an eye when she slipped into the exodus. And since the widespread destruction had the benefit of destroying both schools' computer and paper records, there had been no evidence that she hadn't attended either one.

"Did you say Mountaintop and Sapphire Hills?" asked Rarity, eyes lighting up in recognition.

"What's the matter, Rare," asked Applejack. "You go there or somethin'?"

Rarity scoffed. "Oh no. I went to Appleville Elementary. But our store does sell their uniforms when the school year starts."

That caught Sunset by surprise. "How? They were nothing but burned out husks."

"Yes, but they both rebuilt themselves," explained Rarity. "You never heard that?"

Sunset shrugged. "I must have been too focused on other things. It only mattered to me that their records were gone."
Well, I talked to someone from Mountaintop once when they came to drop off the uniforms. Apparently, both schools banded together to rebuild, to literally rise from the ashes as it were.

Sunset chuckled. "I can appreciate that."

"They're doing quite well from what I hear." Her nose wrinkled. "Mountaintop's colors are a bit drab in my opinion, though Sapphire Hills does use the most lovely shade of blue in their jackets." She paused, lips dropping into a frown. "Oh, but that does present a problem."

"Like what?" asked Rainbow. "So you don't like the colors. I don't see the big deal."

"Not that," explained Rarity. "What I mean is, when the schools rebuilt themselves, they took the opportunity to redesign everything, their buildings and their uniforms. They both changed not only the colors, but their school logos, and those logos are sewn right onto the clothing. Our store only sells the new styles."

"So essentially our chances of finding a pre-fire Mountaintop uniform these days are near impossible," concluded Twilight.

Rarity nodded solemnly. "I'm afraid so, yes."

"Well, isn't that just too bad?" laughed Sunset. "Can't fake the picture without the uniform, right? Guess we'll just have to skip that one." As much as Sunny had convinced her of the necessity of taking these things, she was more than happy to try and weasel out of one if she could. She turned to the pink-haired woman, putting on her most eager expression. "Sooooooo, what's next on the list?"

"Don't worry Sunset, I've got you covered!" declared Pinkie Pie, popping up from whatever she'd been doing in the kitchen.

The girl faltered. "Y-You do?"

"Sure!" Pinkie Pie brought out a cardboard box labeled "Old Girl's Clothes #5." She plopped it down on the kitchenette counter, sending up a small puff of dust. "So it was my turn to make breakfast this morning and I decided to go for my triple decker pancakes with strawberries and whipped cream since I hadn't made those in a while, but I ended up making a huge mess and Mom was mad at me so I had to clean it up and--"

"Pinkie," interrupted AJ. "You had a point somewhere in there?"

"Oh, right." Pinkie Pie took a deep breath. "By the time I finished I realized, 'Oh no, I'm going to be late!' But then I also remembered how you said you needed props and Mom and Dad kept all sorts of clothes from me and my sisters in the attic. So I decided to run up and grab a box before I left."

The energetic girl popped the box open and started digging around. "I didn't have time to look through it but I thought there'd definitely be something that would come in handy."

"And you think there might a uniform in there?" asked Sunset, trepidation nibbling at the inside of her stomach.

"Uh huh," replied Pinkie. "All of us went to Mountaintop and Sapphire." Her smile diminished. "I didn't really like Mountaintop. It was kind of strict and not really fun. They had a really nice playground though." Pinkie's face disappeared into the box. "I know Mom and Dad kept at least one of our uniforms."

"Really?" Sunset crossed her fingers. Pinkie said she grabbed that box at random without checking
the contents. If she was wrong, Sunset could still get them to skip it. After all, it would take far too long for Pinkie to go home, search through potentially all the other boxes, and come back. It would be far more practical to just forget the picture entirely.

Granted, it was a rather bizarre coincidence that the Pie sisters went to Mountaintop, and that Mr. and Mrs. Pie kept the very uniform they needed. But what were the odds that Pinkie had ended up grabbing the exact box with the uniform at random this morning while in a rush?

"Aha! Here it is!" Pinkie pulled some articles of clothing from the box, holding them up in the air like a fisherman with a prize catch. "One pre-fire Mountaintop Elementary girl's uniform!" She peered at a little card that came with it. "Ooh, this one was Limestone's."

Apparently, the odds were very good. "Horseapples," she cursed loudly.

"Sunset Shimmer, watch your language," chastised Sunny.

Pinkie beamed, oblivious to her friend's reaction. "Aren't I a great director? I just saved the shoot."

Sunset's shoulder slumped. "Yeah Pinkie, you're a real life saver. Now if only you'd save my dignity.

Pinkie shook the items off and handed them to Rarity. "Go see if they fit."

Sunset was herded back to the bathroom with Rarity and Sunny, the latter only staying to apply the spell. Several minutes later, Sunset reluctantly reemerged.

If it was by sheer, unfortunate coincidence that the Pies had kept that old Mountaintop uniform, and that Pinkie Pie had brought it along, then it was even more unfortunate that it was completely intact, undamaged by wear, tear, or even moths as she'd been hoping.

In fact, there wasn't even a single, solitary wrinkle. Every piece seemed like it had been freshly pressed and ironed that very day. According to Rarity, even the new uniforms were like that, as required by the dress code. No, the only thing that had marred the illusion of pristine newness was a light layer of dust, and that had been easily dispelled before Sunset put it on.

Most unfortunate of all, it was a perfect fit for a diminutive, five year old Sunset Shimmer. An absolute, perfect fit. It was as if it had been measured exactly for her and not for another girl more than a decade ago.

The uniform was an altogether prim and conservative sort of outfit. There was a snow white polo shirt with the school's logo, a cloudy mountain peak, sewn right over the heart inside a shield-like shape, a pleated skirt the color of sandstone that went past her knees, white cotton socks pulled up the length of her shins, and a pair of heavily polished black Marey Janes.

The worst part of all though was the cardigan. A slate gray wool cardigan which also had Mountaintop's logo sewn over the heart. It had to be the itchiest garment Sunset had ever worn in her entire life. Just putting it on had thrown the skin on her arms into a fit. If Mountaintop still used these things, then Sunset felt very sorry for those poor kids.

As she exited the bathroom, she heard Rainbow snicker, and shot her a death glare, feeling her hair swing behind her. It had been arranged in a neat, simple braid that fell down her back, as mandated by Pinkie through the bathroom door. According to the dress code, she'd said, girls with long hair had to have it tied neatly back or up, and never loose.

Pinkie raised her megaphone. "Everyone on set!"
"Let's get this over with," Sunset grumbled, scratching at her arms before grabbing the little red backpack and stepping up to the camera. Sunny moved to stand beside her.

"Wait!" Pinkie gave a frantic jump in her chair. "You need to button the cardigan."

Sunset looked down at the offending garment. "I did." She pointed to where she'd buttoned it at the bottom.

Pinkie shook her head, sending her wild mane this way and that. "All the way. They were picky about that too."

Sunset muttered under her breath about the ridiculous dress code, fumbling with the shiny gold buttons. She grimaced as her little fingers failed to maneuver them through the holes. Even in the bathroom, she'd noticed that her finger coordination had worsened. No doubt an effect of the age spell. *Come on, they're just buttons for crying out loud!*

"Here, I'll get it," offered Sunny. Bending down, she took the two sides of the cardigan in her hands, working the buttons with ease. Sunset flushed. *Stupid spell.*

*Click.*

The two turned at the sudden flash. Behind the camera, Fluttershy joined Sunset in blushing. "Oh, I'm sorry, I just..." A pink shade fell over her face. "I thought it would make a good photo."

Sunny laughed. "I suppose it does." Finishing the last of the buttons, she got to her feet. "Shall we get back to the planned picture?"

Sunset looked up at her, cheeks still tinged pink. "Sure," she muttered.

As the two moved into position, Fluttershy's face came out from behind her hair again, and this time, it sported a grin. She put her eye to the screen, and set her finger to the button. "Okay, smile for the birdie..."

She'd done the shot with Sunny, and one where she was walking off to her to-be-added-later school. After that, it was onto a black cat Halloween costume (with some lightly painted whiskers on her cheeks). Then it was her first bike ride using the one Rainbow was disassembling now, plus a fan to simulate wind. Finally, she'd changed into what she was wearing now.

So far, she'd found the uniform to be the pinnacle of embarrassment. Just the idea of wearing something so juvenile, let alone having her picture taken in it, was a blow to her self-esteem. Not to mention the cute, prim little outfit was so far removed from the leather jacket and boots she'd come to favor. The fact that she'd failed to get out of taking those pictures just made it worse, like the universe was laughing at her.

At least she could take solace in the fact that *this* outfit wasn't itchy. Very cutesy, yes, but not uncomfortable in the least.

"Next, we're going to take a few more casual shots," said Sunny. "I talked to Fluttershy and Twilight, and we think it best to simply have you pose in front of the sofa."

"Fine." Sunset glanced at her again. There was at least some compensation for all this, she supposed, staring at her mentor who was still dressed in a spaghetti-strap tank top and flared jeans.

This was only one of several outfits Sunny had needed to change into, all sprinkled to various
degrees with trends from the turn of the millennium to add authenticity. Rarity had balked at the idea, but after much debate, the others had convinced to assemble the necessary clothing, though she remained openly unhappy about it.

It wasn't exactly the biggest difference, not like, say, when some people see pictures of their parents from the eighties, but Sunset could find some amusement in it. And she got a few laughs whenever Sunny questioned some of those old trends, like why a pair of jeans didn't have back pockets like the ones she'd been wearing normally.

It would have been fairer, in her grumbling opinion, if they were able to take pictures of Sunny from before Sunset's alleged birth, other than the one they'd taken utilizing the old pillow under the dress trick, that is. At least that way, Sunny could really share in the suffering.

Unfortunately, they were trying to be as efficient as possible with this production, and that need had struck the idea dead. They all had things they needed to do even on a Saturday, and Sunset didn't want to impose more on her friends than she already had.

Behind the camera, Fluttershy checked the shot. "Sunset, could you scooch a little to the left please? And, um, a little more to the right? There, that's perfect. I just need to get this in focus now..."

Standing once again before the camera, Sunset placed her arms behind her back and put on her best smile. It was getting harder and harder to do with every picture. Sunny always made it seem effortless. Clearly all those years of experience with the press had paid off.

Pinkie Pie bounced in her chair, shouting into her megaphone. "Alright, places everybody! Quiet on the set!"

"Click." The camera went off. "That was wonderful," complimented Fluttershy.

"Thanks," replied Sunset, rubbing her eyes to clear away the colored spots dancing before her. Why did flash bulbs have to be so bright?

"And now we're going to do a shot at the park," said Sunny, reading off the list. "This one requires Spike."

Pinkie aimed her megaphone down at the floor. "You're up Spike!" she declared.

Wincing at Pinkie's volume, the purple dog rose from his place in Twilight's lap, walking up to Sunset. "You know it's still really weird seeing you this small," he commented.

"It's weird being this small."

"Okay, Sunny," Pinkie Pie said, only to pause. "Ooh, that nickname is so confusing with Princess Celestia around." Shaking her head, she snapped back into character. "Okay kid, so you find Spike in the park. You see him, and you think he's the cutest puppy you've ever seen in your whole life. You have to pet him. You need to pet him." Her face took on a bizarre seriousness before she turned to Sunset's costar. "And Spike, you're going for friendly and lovable, got it?"

"That I can do," said the puppy grinning. "After all, I'm already super lovable anyway." Over by her laptop, Twilight giggled.

Sunset raised an eyebrow. "That's it?"

"That's it!" beamed Pinkie.
"Simple, but effective," added Sunny. "And easy to imagine being taken on the spot."

"I want some dialogue in there too," added Pinkie. "Spike, you need to give a little woof. And Sunset, you need to seem excited."

Spike gave the pink director a strange look. "But it's a photograph, not a movie."

"Yeah," replied Pinkie, undaunted. "But it'll help you get into character and make it seem more real." She waved her megaphone wildly. "So give me a little acting!"

Sunset rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say, Pinkie." She turned to face Spike. "You ready?"

"Ready when you are." He turned to Fluttershy, puffing out his chest a little. "Be sure to get my good side."

Fluttershy giggled. "Of course."

Turning back to his co-star, he wagged his tail, before putting on his friendliest expression, opening his mouth wide and allowing his tongue to hang free. "Woof!"

Sunset gave another manufactured smile, running her small hand over his back. "Puppy!" she declared with as much innocent excitement as she could muster. In the background, she heard Rainbow snicker, but chose to ignore it in favor of maintaining the facade.

Click. Fluttershy looked up from the camera. "Done." Opening up the digital camera, she took out a small blue memory card and passed it down to Twilight.

"Thank you," was all she said, barely letting her eyes veer away from the laptop. Inserting the card, her fingers moved with effortless speed, and the new photo came up on the screen.

Sunny bent down to peer over her shoulder. "I'm still amazed that you can really insert all those backgrounds, Twilight. Is it particularly difficult?"

Twilight brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "Not really, at least not for me. I've had experience tinkering with Picshop before when I was trying to verify the photos I took of CHS. And I went over some online tutorials last night as well." She stroked a few keys. "Adding in the appropriate backgrounds and shadows will be easy. I should even be able to make Spike look like a different dog."

"You're not going to make me look like something super fluffy, are you?" asked the puppy.

Twilight smiled weakly at him. "U-Um, of course not Spike." Sunset saw the image of a small, curly-coated dog flash by on Twilight's screen before it was quickly replaced by a picture of a beagle.

"What I don't understand," continued Twilight, clearly trying to draw the conversation away, "is how exactly you plan to make them look authentic. I'll admit, it can get pretty difficult to tell if a photo has been digitally altered, but these are all going to be new. Wouldn't that be a dead giveaway?"

"Simple," answered Sunny. "I'll artificially age them using a time bubble."

Twilight's fingers froze, her head twisting around uncomfortably to look up at the woman. "You'll what?"
"Oh right, a time bubble," exclaimed Sunset, memories flowing to the forefront of her mind. "Basically, you create a bubble out of magic. Then you use another spell to alter the flow of time inside of it. In this case, she's going to put the photos in a bubble and then speed things up so the pictures will become rapidly aged."

"That's..." Twilight trailed off, mouth falling open even as her glasses threatened to fall from her nose. Before Sunset could ask her if she was okay, Twilight exploded with excitement, something to rival Pinkie for certain. "That's amazing! You can alter the flow of time just like that?! How does that even work? What else is it applied to? Could you use that to preserve historical buildings? What about time travel? I know Princess Twilight mentioned something about that. Can you really travel in time?!"

"It's not as simple as you may think," said Sunny. "Time magic is both very dangerous and very difficult, time travel in particular. Most works on the subject are only available in the Canterlot Archives. Altering the flow of time is somewhat easier, but still not foal's play."

"As for the bubble, the difficulty of changing the flow of time grows exponentially with the bubble's size, so it doesn't work on a truly large scale. The largest I've ever seen was one big enough for a full grown pony or two."

Twilight sat in silence for a moment, mulling over the information. "I see. So structural stability decreases with scale." She turned to Sunset, curiosity still blazing behind her glasses. "Did you ever try one of those?"

The fire-haired girl shook her head. "Nope. I only read about them in theory. Never got around to experimenting with them."

"I think I'll go change for the next shot," said Sunny. Picking up another outfit Rarity had laid out, she retreated to the bathroom.

Sunset, meanwhile, climbed up onto the sofa, stretching her short legs as she leaned back into the cushion. Being bounced between ages like this was tiring. Looking around, her gaze fell on a framed photo sitting on a small end table beside the sofa. When had that been put there?

Scooting across the sofa, she picked it up. It showed a young man, probably college age, taken at about waist height. He stood with his back to a plain white wall, dressed in a dark suit like he was going to a formal event.

He had a broad, masculine set of shoulders, and even beneath the dark jacket, Sunset could see his arms and torso were fitted with big, athletic muscles. His skin was amber, and he had wavy hair that fell long, almost to his shoulders, a golden shade broken by a single crimson streak on his left side. The dark green eyes that looked back from that photograph glowed with an adoration that even the glass frame couldn't hinder. To Sunset, it was something almost tangible, and was matched by the warm, happy smile across the young man's face.

"Who's this?"

Rarity sat down next to her, sipping from a bottle of mineral water. "My word, what a handsome face," she commented with a swoon. "I certainly wouldn't mind meeting him. He's positively dashing."

"That's supposed to be my fiancé, and your father." Sunny poked her head out from the bathroom. "His name is Blazing Shield Shimmer. I had to manufacture that from scratch," she explained, right
Sunset regarded the photo again. "So this is supposed to be my dad, huh?" she mused. He certainly looked the part. Automatically, her mind compared this picture to the mental one she had of her real father. "He's got the same coloring," she muttered. As far as coat and mane, or their equivalent, it was dead on. But beyond that, she catalogued a multitude of differences.

In many ways, the man in this photo was the physical opposite of her father. Height, at least, was an unknown, since there was no way to really tell how tall this man in the picture was supposed to be. Gold Leaf Shimmer had been on the taller side of pony height, but unlike Blazing Shield, he'd been lanky in frame. His mane had been short and straight, filled with multiple red streaks and not just the one.

The eyes too, differed. Both had been green, but her father's had been a bright green, not the darker shade here, and set just a little closer together. The face lacked her father's more prominent, bristly jaw. A faint tactile memory passed through her brain, of the times when he'd be watching her and she was up on his back, the feel of her hoof brushing past those prickly hairs.

"Pardon me for asking," Rarity said, breaking Sunset from her analysis. "But I was wondering, what did your father do?"

Sunset put the photo back on the table. "He worked with art and antiques, things like that."

Rarity's face lit up with curiosity. "He was an artist?"

"No, I think he just sold it." Sunset's eyebrows furrowed, trying to bring up those few, old memories she had. "Although, I remember seeing him with paint on his coat once, so maybe he was trying to paint too?" Possibly without success, since that vague image was accompanied by a particularly disgruntled expression. You didn't necessarily have to be able to create art to have an eye for it.

Sunny reemerged from the bathroom. This time, she'd changed into a different, less dated pair of jeans, a pink polo shirt with a tiny crocodile stitched onto the front, and a denim jacket.

"Rarity, I know I'm not the most knowledgeable about human clothing, but is this belt supposed to have this many... what did you call them? Studs?" She pointed at the incredibly wide belt covered in equally large silvery lumps.

Rarity grimaced at the item before averting her eyes, as if looking at it too long would induce blindness. "That was one of the popular trends at the time, unfortunately." The purple-haired girl held her head in her hands. "Oh please, don't ever let anyone know I put together these outfits."

Sunset gave her a pat on the back, or as much as she could with her small size. "Hey, how many more of these do we have to go? We've been at this for an hour."

Spike, having returned to his place in Twilight's lap, curled himself tightly into a ball. "More like an hour and a half."

Sunset's brow furrowed. "What?" An hour and a half? That couldn't be right. "Hey Fluttershy, what time is it?"

The girl looked down at her phone. "Um, it's one forty-five."

"But... you girls got here at twelve-fifteen, didn't you?" She was sure of it. That's when they'd set up the camera and brought all the props. "All the pictures we've done couldn't have taken more than an hour."
Or had it only been an hour? Hadn't... hadn't the camera and tripod already been set up when she'd come out of her room to greet them? She'd been sitting on her bed when Sunny told her the girls had arrived. But now that she thought about it, she couldn't remember what she'd been doing before that.

It was then that she noticed an item pushed into a far corner of the living room. It was a cardboard box, just like the ones they'd used to bring in props. But what caught her eye was the thing just barely sticking out of it, something with wooden bars.

Something that looked an awful lot like... a crib.

Jumping to her feet, the girl made a dash for the box, pulling herself up to look over the edge. There, sitting inside, was a crib with simple flower designs carved into it, filled with fresh blankets, a pillow, and a stuffed rabbit. She also spotted a little pink pacifier inside a plastic zip bag, as well as a few items between the box and the crib that she couldn't make out.

The horrible realization hit her like a landslide. Slowly, she turned to look accusingly at the lone adult in the room. "You didn't. Please tell me you didn't take baby pictures!"

Oh Tartarus. She'd taken baby pictures. Actual baby pictures! When she'd been a teen the first time around, she'd been sort of relieved when her original baby pictures couldn't be found among her parents' possessions. Presumably they were lost in the move.

However it happened, Sunset was sure she'd escaped that particular form of humiliation. She could only imagine what these were like. *And I thought the primary school uniform was bad.*

"Now, now, Sunset," soothed the pink-haired woman, having the decency to look guilty. "Everypony has them."

The redhead shot her a flat glare. "Says the pony who was born before the invention of the camera."

"Besides, Sunny Skies is a doting parent whose daughter is the center of her world. It would look strange for her not to have baby pictures. You agreed with me when I proposed it. You even insisted on doing it first to get it out of the way."

"I sure as hay don't remember agreeing to that!"

"That... would be my fault, though not intentionally," explained Sunny. "When a pony has an age spell used on them that makes them that young, they always have a complete loss of memory for the time the spell is cast until it's undone.

"While not as consistent, it's also not uncommon for ponies to suffer some memory loss from before the spell was cast as well. I was rather worried with how disoriented you were after I undid the spell, but thankfully you lost only a small portion of your memory."

Bits and pieces of information floated around in her head. She did remember feeling really weird right before they'd started, or when she'd thought they'd started, it seemed. She looked to her friends. They all had looks of varying guilt. "You knew and didn't tell me?"

Applejack held her Stenson in her hands. "We were a might confused when you came walkin' out of your room like we just got here, but Sunny told us about the whole memory loss thing." She shrugged. "We all figured that since this would be embarrassin' for you already, it would be better not to remind you if we didn't have to."

"If it helps," offered Sunny. "I took them all by myself. I thought you'd appreciate me saving you some embarrassment by not having your friends watch."
"Yeah, we didn't see a thing," insisted Pinkie. "Well, we did see you and Sunny go into your room, and we did see that flash of light under the door right after that when Sunny turned you into a baby. Ooh, and we did hear you start crying after that. You know, you were a really loud crier as a baby, even louder than Pumpkin and Pound Cake when they need changing."

Sunny cleared her throat awkwardly. "As I was saying, I only took a small number. They'll be in an album in case I need to use them, not in plain view. You made me agree to that."

"I guess that helps." Hanging her head to hide her flaming cheeks, she returned to the sofa, sinking deep into the cushions. "Are we done yet?" she whined, not caring how she sounded. She was five years old right now, tired, and just discovered she was the owner of a brand new set of baby pictures. She had the right to whine.

*You know, out of all the horrible ways I thought Celestia might punish me for running away, this one somehow never made the list.*

"I've got something that will cheer you right up!" Hopping from her seat, Pinkie dashed to the kitchen. In a whirl of pink, she set down a table and a set of chairs, along with a glass bowl that barely managed to contain the ice cream sundae within. "There are plenty of restaurants that serve stuff like this outdoors near the park, and they've been there for years and years. So I made a sundae you and Sunny can share to finish your day at the park!"

"You made all that?" gawked Rainbow, The dessert was a classic mix of vanilla ice cream topped with chocolate sauce, gooey hot fudge, sprinkles, and a single cherry.

"Well, I didn't exactly have Sugarcube Corner's kitchen to work with, but I made due," replied Pinkie casually, polishing her nails with her shirt. "Not bad if I do say so myself."

"Try not to get anything on the dress darling," said Rarity as she eyed the sundae.

Sunset grimaced. "I'll do my best." *Not like I'll ever wear this thing again.* From her place on the sofa, she examined the sundae. It did look good. She'd already had a few bites of a cake Pinkie had made for some birthday photos, and another dessert definitely wouldn't hurt her.

Licking her lips, she climbed into one of the provided chairs. Once there, she stretched her arm out for a spoon, only to find herself unable to reach it. Or see much above the table. She stretched her arm out again, harder this time. "Come on," she muttered.

"Uh, Sunset," said Rainbow. "Maybe we should get you a pillow or something."

"A booster seat would be more natural for this sort of setting," corrected Twilight. "But we don't have one, and I'm not sure I could insert one into the picture."

"Why don't you just sit on my lap?" suggested Sunny. "That would simplify things."

"I think it's a great idea," agreed Fluttershy, letting out a squee. "It would be so precious."

Sunset shot her meek friend a light glare, but conceded the point. "Alright, fine." She was about to get down when Sunny beat her to it, already up on her feet and taking the girl in her arms. "Hey!"

After being gently placed in Sunny's lap, Sunset eyed the food again. Now it was within easy reach. Taking up the spoon, Sunset scooped out a portion and stuck it into her mouth. Her entire face erupted into a smile. "This tastes awesome Pinkie!"

"Aww, thanks little lady," giggled Pinkie.
Sunset stiffened at the "little" remark, but let it go in favor of another bite. Pinkie's dessert seemed even better than usual, and Sunset wondered idly if it was because of the spell. She'd read once that children's taste buds were more sensitive and partial to sweetness.

"This really is excellent," remarked Sunny, taking a bite of her own.

"Okay," said Pinkie, switching back into director mode. "Now I want both of you to turn to the camera. Imagine that you just noticed a friend taking your picture. Got it?"

"Understood," nodded Sunny.

Sunset swallowed another bite. "Got it."

"And... action!"

Both Equestrians turned their heads towards the camera, Sunny putting on a quite believably surprised expression.

"Okay Sunset, now give us another smile," cooed Fluttershy.

Sunset obliged, giving a wide, milk tooth grin that was only half-forced, lips coated in fudge.

Click.

"That's all the pictures," said Twilight, checking off a list she'd brought up on her screen.

Sunset sighed. "Thank goodness." Finally she could get back to normal. She wiped her mouth with a napkin. It would be good to get back in her regular clothes and be her regular age.

Deciding to save the rest of the sundae for later, something that made Sunset more than a little disappointed, the two Equestrians helped pack up the various props and other things that had been deposited in the apartment. As she helped seal up a box, Sunset thought she heard her mentor whisper something about "extra copies" to Twilight.

Rarity had just been starting to pack up the clothes when her phone rang. "Hello, this is Rarity. Oh, hello ma'am, I- well, no, I'm rather busy right now and I was going to come- oh, I see. How dreadful. I'll be right there."

Putting the phone away, she grabbed the makeup bag she'd just put back together and made a dash for the door. "I'm sorry girls, but I need to leave right now. One of the workers at the boutique caught some horrible stomach bug, and I need to come in early. It's a positive madhouse at the store right now."

"What about the clothes?" asked Sunset.

"I shall have to come back and retrieve them later," said Rarity apologetically. "I do hate to leave so abruptly, but I haven't a moment to waste." With a few quick goodbyes, she disappeared out the door.

The rest of her friends didn't stay much longer. One by one, they said their goodbyes and departed, arms laden with whatever they'd brought. As Twilight put away her laptop for her own departure, she paused, realization dawning on her face before reaching into her bag. "I almost forgot," she said, pulling something out and presenting it to Sunny. "I wanted to give you this."

Sunset raised an eyebrow. "Is that a phone?"
Twilight nodded, turning her attention back to Sunny. "I thought if you were going to be staying here a while longer, it would be more practical if you had a way to communicate with Sunset or any one of us. Don't worry, it's an easy model to use."

Applejack, in the middle of her own packing, glanced over at the machine. "Oh yeah, I recognize that thing. It's the same one we gave Granny Smith. It's one of those phones that's made for seniors, ain't it?"

Sunny's face faltered. "Seniors?"

Twilight blushed. "W-Well, yes, in that these models are usually designed for the, uh, less technologically proficient."

Sunset hid a smirk behind her hand. Another small bit of payback. "I think it's a great idea Twi," she reassured her friend. She hadn't even considered it, but Twilight made a solid point. "I'll help her set it up. I just hope it didn't cost you too much."

"Oh no. I got it at this really big electronics sale yesterday."

"The Best Purchase on Onyx Street?"

"How did you know?" A high pitched chime made Twilight pull out her phone. "Sorry, I really need to get going. I promised I'd meet with Cadance. Come on Spike, let's go."

With a few final waves, the last of her friends departed, and the two Equestrians sank down on the sofa. "Well," said Sunny airily, "I'd say this was an interesting way to start an afternoon, wouldn't you?"

The five year old rolled her eyes. "Sure." She shifted into a slightly more comfortable position. "Hey," she said, eying Sunny. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Hmm?" Sunny glanced over at her. "Ah, yes, the spell." Taking her necklace, she closed her eyes, and a glimmer of golden magic appeared around the purple gem.

Sunset closed her eyes as well, hoping to feel the sensation of her body being restored to proper size. But the feeling never came. Cracking her eyes open, she looked at Sunny in disappointment. "Why am I still small?"

The glow from Sunny's necklace fizzled out, and Sunny blinked in surprise. "Oh."

"What?" asked Sunset, feeling suddenly uneasy. "What happened?"

"It's out of power," replied Sunny.

Sunset sighed in relief. "So you just need to recharge it." For a moment, she thought it was something worse.

The woman paused in thought, an expression Sunset had come to recognize as her keeping pace with her real body. "Ah, well," she began, with an apprehension that Sunset definitely didn't like. "Most times, I could. But I need to be within a certain range of the other crystal, and right now I'm flying off to Vanhoover. I'm afraid I'm going to be there all day."

"What?!" Sunset shot to her feet, the sofa cushion bringing the two closer to eye level. "You mean I'm stuck like this all day?!!"
"Don't worry," consoled the woman. "I thought of that already. The age spells I used were all of the temporary variety. You should return back to normal on your own in about another hour or so."

Sunset dropped back to the cushions, crossing her arms and legs. An hour wasn't so bad, she supposed. Though she really just wanted to be back in her natural body and put this embarrassment behind her.

Sitting down beside her student, Sunny chuckled in amusement, fluffing a part of the bow that had been flattened. "You know you really are adorable at this age," she teased.

"Knock it off," the five year old muttered, her lips pushing outwards in a pout.

Unfortunately, that only succeeded in making the woman burst out laughing. That in turn, made Sunset's pout deepen, which in turn increased the laughter even more in a vicious cycle of embarrassment.

"I said knock it off," the five year old growled.

"I'm sorry Sunset," Sunny apologized between giggles. "But that expression only makes it worse."

"It's not funny."

"Oh but it is," countered Sunny. "You're absolutely adorable right now and there's no denying that fact."

"Only for another hour," she corrected.

"Ah, yes, only for another hour." Sunny let loose another round of teasing laughter. "Though I'm sure Sunny would prefer it to be quite a bit longer." She pulled the little girl onto her lap in a soft hug. "It's been so many years since I've been able to hold my precious little sun in my arms like this."

Sunny flashed her pearly teeth. "Isn't that right sweetheart?"

Sunset's fat cheeks blazed red in both embarrassment and anger. Her teacher was having way too much fun at her expense. And if Sunset knew Celestia's prankster streak, and she did, then she knew Sunny was more than happy to milk this for all that it was worth.

And then, an idea popped into her head. It was an incredibly silly, downright childish idea, and normally she'd have discarded it altogether. Perhaps it was because she was stuck in a five year old's body, but in that moment, she found the idea incredibly appealing.

Sunset Shimmer looked up at her pseudo-mother, big eyes glinting with impish glee. "You know Mommy," she began innocently, emphasizing the title with as much sweetness as she could. "I've found that there are a few things fingers are much better at than hooves."

"Oh?" said a curious Sunny. She leaned in closer, still barely controlling her laughter. "And what would those be exactly?"

Her young face broke into a wicked grin. "This." With lightning fast reflexes, she reached out and ran her fingers over the woman's side.

Sunny shrieked in surprise, falling back onto the sofa as Sunset pressed her advantage, assaulting every inch of skin she could reach. Sunny tried to crawl away, but Sunset wouldn't let her, clinging like a monkey to a tree as the two rolled off the sofa and onto the floor.
The girl used Sunny to cushion her fall, not letting up her assault for a single moment. "This is for calling me adorable!"

"I s-see. Well, t-two c-can play at that g-game," declared Sunny in between both peals of laughter and gasps for breath. Before Sunset could defend herself, Sunny grabbed her and launched an attack at her stomach. Sunset let out a high-pitched squeal as she tried to get away.

The battle went back and forth, the two Equestrians just rolling on the floor, laughing away.

Arrowhead was nervous. He was still a relative rookie in the royal guard, but when a spot had opened up to pull Celestia's personal chariot, he'd been lucky enough to be selected.

He'd polished his armor extra hard this morning before reporting for duty, and as the royal vehicle soared high through the sky toward Vanhoover, Arrowhead couldn't help but feel a bit of pride as well. He was pulling the princess's chariot. Princess Celestia's chariot!

His parents would be thrilled when he told them. Would he end up being photographed when they landed? If he did, he'd have to send them a copy of the newspaper too. He was the first in his family to join the guard. His father approved wholeheartedly, and while his mother had been very apprehensive at first, she'd soon come to love his career choice, and was eager for pictures to help memorialize his "rise through the ranks" as she called it.

Who was he to deny his mom what she wanted?

He hadn't missed any spots on his armor, had he? He hoped not. That would be the worst, being photographed pulling the chariot of the epitome of grace and nobility, and having a smudge on his armor. He glanced down at his breastplate quickly. No, there was nothing.

The young pegasus was snapped from his thoughts when a chuckle rose from behind him, before exploding into a mess of loud, roaring laughter. Arrowhead jumped, making the vehicle shake just a fraction.

Making sure the path ahead was clear first, he craned his neck back to look at his illustrious passenger, and his nervousness spiked once again. He'd barely been in the same room with any of the princesses before this.

"Um, Your Highness, is something the matter?"

"N-No," Celestia replied, shaking as she tried and failed to get herself under control. "I-I j-just thought of something funny, that's all."

"Um... okay?" When the princess still couldn't get herself under control, Arrowhead spoke again. "Princess, are you sure-"

"I'm f-fine," laughed Celestia. "Please continue on."

He wanted to say something else, but was interrupted by a hoof tapping his side. He turned to look at his fellow guard, a veteran of many years by the name of Pommel. "Just forget about it," the elder pegasus whispered.

Arrowhead looked at him in confusion. "But what if-"

"Look kid, you're still pretty new, so I'll let you know something important." He pulled in closer. "If you spend enough time in the guard, you'll learn that the princess can be a real oddball sometimes."
Arrowhead stared at his flying partner like he'd just said something treasonous. "But... but she's Celestia! She's all poise and grace and-"

Pommel interrupted him again, a habit Arrowhead was starting to find annoying. "All the other vets will tell you the same. Shoot, the night guards say the same about Princess Luna. If you still don't believe me, then just wait till she's in the mood for pranks." He gave a small shudder and pulled away, fixing his eyes on the sky ahead. "My advice to you is to just ignore it and fly."

The young flier glanced back at his princess, still caught in her bizarre laughing fit, trying to process the clash in mental perception. Another hoof jabbing into his side forced him to turn around. Shoulders drooping, he did his best to ignore the shrieks behind him. He really hoped she wasn't still laughing when the cameras got there.

Their passenger laughed all the way to Vanhoover.

Chapter End Notes

Long author's note, away!

Originally it was meant to be longer, but once again, I underestimated how long the collection of scenes was going to be. Chapter 13 MIGHT be out this month as well. Maybe. I usually post progress updates on FIM if anyone is interested.

Also wanted to mention that with regards to Chapter 10, scene one, I’d wanted to add a Turnabout Storm reference, but I didn’t end up working it in. XD If you don’t know what that is, well, you really should look it up.

Sunset’s outfit in this chapter is taken directly (with permission) from the work “Sunny Twily” by CosmicPonye. It’s an utterly adorable image that I absolutely love, and when this idea popped into my head, I couldn’t help but think of it. Check out her artwork. I highly recommend it.

I know the apartment isn’t the same as the one from the Monday Blues short. I already had this idea before that short aired. While it seemed fine for someone living alone, it didn’t seem like the sort of place a single mother and daughter would be living in.

The time bubble thing wasn’t something I came up with on my own. I actually got the idea (with permission) from LordBrony2040’s Sunset Reset. I recommend checking it out, especially since it’s got a sequel in progress, Sunset’s Crowning Achievement.

And as another little note here, I made a small modification to chapter 4. Nothing plot changing, but I added something to smooth out a wrinkle that was pointed out to me, so that’s why you’ll see the word count for that chapter going up a bit. Also made a miniscule alteration to chapter 10.
Chaotic Maneuvers

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don’t own MLP. I’m just a fan.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 13: Chaotic Maneuvers

The following Monday afternoon found Sunset walking the halls of Canterlot High. The last class of the day had finished, and students were happily making their way from the classrooms to the front entrance. But today, Sunset was making a detour in the opposite direction.

Finally stopping at the door to Principal Celestia's office, she gave a light knock. "Come in," said a voice that was not the principal's.

Opening the door, Sunset saw Vice Principal Luna behind her sister's desk. "Hello, Sunset," greeted the woman. "My sister is taking care of another matter at the moment. But what brings you here?"

Sunset was about to answer when she noticed that the vice principal was not in her usual attire. She'd changed into a much more formal-looking dark blue suit, the jacket decorated with her usual crescent-shaped pin.

Luna followed Sunset's gaze. "Celestia and I are going to a fundraiser for Canterlot High today," she explained. "We'll be leaving quite soon, so it was easier to change here."

"Oh," replied Sunset, feeling just a little bit awkward at being caught staring. "A-Anyway, I just wanted to give you this." Sunset handed the woman a piece of paper. "Figured I should give it to you as soon as possible."

Luna took it, cyan eyes reading the page. "A new address?"

"Sunny's idea," Sunset explained.

The blue-haired woman gave a hum of approval. "Good. The sooner you were out of that apartment, the better."

Sunset's cheeks tinged just a little red. "Oh yeah, I forgot you actually went there." If it weren't for the fact that the woman had accepted that Sunset was from another dimension, that would have been bad. "Beggars can't really be choosers, but trust me, I was glad to get out of there too."

Luna smiled politely. "I hope the move wasn't too difficult."

"It was... memorable." That was probably the lightest word to describe her weekend move. "Anyway, the girls and I were going to hit Sugarcube Corner. See you later."

"Sunset, hold on a moment."

Turning her head, the teen found Luna staring at her with a look of uncertainty. "Yeah? What is it?"
"I..." Luna hesitated for a moment. "Sunset, are you angry with my sister and I?"

"What? No." Sunset shifted her whole body back around, taking a step closer to the desk. "Why would you think that?"

The vice principal's normally tough facade seemed to crack, betraying something vulnerable underneath. "After what happened with Circinus the second time, we... my sister and I... we weren't sure if you perhaps resented us for backing down."

A few little pieces fell into place. That was why the two administrators had been avoiding eye contact with her. They probably felt like they'd failed her. "It's okay, Vice Principal Luna," she said. "You were in a tough spot, I get it." That scorpion witch of a woman had them all over a barrel before Sunny showed up. "It all worked out."

Luna didn't seem satisfied with that answer. "Please, allow me to explain. I..." Her eyes drifted to the wall lined with photos and trophies and Principal Celestia's teaching degree. "Many people have unpleasant memories of high school, and think it a time worth forgetting. But that was not the case for Tia—for my sister and I."

Her eyes stopped at a photo of Principal Celestia standing in the middle of a group of students, holding up a large gold trophy and wearing a T-shirt that read "Canterlot City Science Decathlon 2003". She smiled. "No, our time here as students was a wonderful one, full of ups and downs, but positive nonetheless. This place was, and still is, special for us. When we graduated, the both of us knew, as surely as we knew anything, that we wanted to give back to it."

"So the two of us threw ourselves into our studies, became teachers here, then administrators. Celestia and I wanted to make this place as special for those students that came after us as it had been for us." She looked away, hands tightening into fists.

"When that woman," she continued, spitting the last word, "threatened the school, it was very hard. If we'd fought her, it would have risked this place shutting down, and risked not just our careers, but the jobs of all the teachers, not to mention separating the students and potentially shattering the friendships formed here."

She sighed. "And if we didn't, it meant leaving you, one of our students, at her mercy." She leaned back in her chair, squeezing her eyes shut. "It was like being caught between a knife and a bottle of poison."

She turned to look at Sunset again, her expression both solemn and hurt. "It's not that we didn't care enough to fight. It was simply an impossible decision. I cannot help but think about what would have happened had Sunny not appeared, and I... both I and my sister were rather worried that you held it against us."

For a moment, Sunset stood silent at the vice principal's words, surprised that the woman had opened up like this. It was true that Sunset had been hoping against hope for them to take her in during that horrible meeting, but actual resentment? It had all happened so fast, being railroaded into defeat, Sunny appearing out of nowhere. She hadn't really given much thought to how the two administrators had backed down.

On some level, she supposed that it should have made her angry. But seeing the vice principal so open, so torn up about it, and how much she cared for both the students, herself included, and the school as a whole, it was hard to really work up any kind of resentment.

Besides, they'd still been willing to let her, a teenager who had caused them nothing but trouble for
several years, into their home for Sunset's sake. That had to count for something.

"I don't hold it against you," said Sunset. "I get it. It was an impossible choice. Who knows? Maybe I might have been angry somewhere down the line if Sunny hadn't shown up." She paused to note the distress on Luna's face. "But she did, and that's all that matters. I know you two care, and you shouldn't beat yourself up over it, either of you." She gave a little smirk. "I know a little about what guilt is like."

Relief passed over the vice principal's face, and she gave a soft smile. "Thank you, Sunset. I'll tell my sister you said that." She pointed toward the door. "Now go off and catch up to your friends. Celestia and I will have a meeting shortly."

"Sure thing. See you later, Vice Principal Luna."

Luna scoffed. "I should hope not, Sunset. Otherwise something would be wrong."

Laughing, Sunset made her way back out the door to the hall, beginning her trek to Sugarcube Corner.

Breathing another sigh of relief, Luna filed the piece of paper in a drawer so her sister could update the records later. Celestia would be glad to hear that Sunset held no ill will against either of them. They'd been doing whatever they could to help Sunny with her plan, and Sunset hadn't seemed angry with them. But there had still been that nagging question. After all, she would have been within her rights to be angry for backing down when they did.

Just thinking about Circinus made acid rise in Luna's throat. They'd both dealt with a few social workers during their time as administrators, but never had Luna ever met one that was so cold.

The door opened, snapping Luna from her thoughts. Celestia walked in. "Hello Lulu," she greeted once the door was shut. "Anything happen while I was out?"

"Sunset Shimmer came by to give us a change of address," Luna replied. "It seems Sunny convinced her to move." Her voice turned soft. "She's not angry at us, Tia. I asked. It hadn't even crossed her mind."

Celestia stood there for a moment, before giving a slow smile. "Good," she whispered as a weight seemed to disappear from her shoulders. "So, are you ready?" she asked Luna as she pocketed the piece of paper Sunset had left behind.

Luna frowned, but nodded. "As ready as I'll ever be." She rubbed at one of her arms in discomfort. "I hate these fundraisers. Being in front of a crowd of students is one thing, but potential donors?"

"I know, Lulu," said her sister, putting an arm around her shoulders. "I know."

There was another, sharp knock at the door. "Come in," said Principal Celestia.

The door opened, and in walked the last person Luna had wanted to see today. Or any day.

"Good afternoon, ladies," said Mrs. Circinus with a polite smile.

Luna felt red hot bile rise in her throat, but forced it down. "What are you doing here?" she asked, not bothering to suppress the harshness of her words.

Circinus ignored the jab, instead letting her eyes land on the two women's attire. "Are you two going
somewhere important?"

"There's a fundraiser for the school today," said Celestia. "Now, what do we owe the," she paused, "pleasure of your visit?"

"I was merely looking for Miss Shimmer," explained Circinus. "You wouldn't happen to know where she is, by any chance?"

"Not really," Luna half- lied. She didn't know precisely where the Equestrian teen was, but this poisonous woman didn't need to know that. If it meant Luna could hold her off and give Sunset some warning, she was more than willing to bend the truth a little.

"She probably left the school already," added Celestia, picking up on Luna's intent. "And we wouldn't really know where she would have gone today."

Circinus's expression didn't change. "Then perhaps you can give me her address? I do need to speak to Miss Skies as well, so I might as well visit her at home."

Luna cursed silently. She hadn't thought of that. For a moment, she considered giving the woman the old address as a means to delay her, but her better judgement vetoed it almost immediately. Better not to let someone like Circinus see the living conditions Sunset had just left. With a bitterness on her tongue, she glanced over at her sister and gave a nod.

Celestia cleared her throat. "Actually, Sunset dropped off an envelope this morning," she explained, reluctantly taking the piece of paper out from her desk drawer. "She and her mother just moved into a new apartment, and Sunset left her new address with me this morning."

Circinus glanced at the pristine note. "And you hadn't taken care of it yet?"

"I had," lied Celestia without batting an eye. "I just hadn't discarded the note yet. It's been a busy day."

Circinus didn't question that, simply entering the address into her smartphone. "Thank you, Principal Celestia. Now if you excuse me, I must be getting back to my job." She turned around, looking over her shoulder to give the two sisters a polite smile. "Good luck at your fundraiser."

Once the door finally closed, Celestia's face fell into an uncharacteristic scowl. "I suppose it would have been too much for this to have been a good day."

Luna shared in her sister's sentiment, wearing a scowl of her own. "We need to warn Sunset that she's coming, for whatever good it will do." Luna pressed her lips together. "She said she and her friends were headed to Sugarcube Corner. I'll drive over there right now. You head off to the fundraiser."

"Do you think you'll get back in time?" asked Celestia, making a nervous glance at the clock. "We need to get there early, and it would be better for us to be there together when it starts."

"I may not," admitted Luna. "But one of us needs to, and better the vice principal to be late than the principal. Tell everyone I had business with a student." She smiled. "And if any of them have a problem, win them over the same way you did as senior class president."

That got her sister to smile. "Alright, Lulu, go."

Without another word, Luna was off, heeled shoes clacking on the tile as she practically raced for her car, a dark blue Volvo. Once there, she hopped into the seat and took off like a shot, forcing her way
through the ever-growing school traffic.

Sugarcube Corner wasn’t too far away. Screeching to a stop out front, Luna hopped out of the car, giving a yelp as her balance wavered. Taking a moment to confirm her ankles weren’t injured, she looked through the glass front of the shop and found Sunset and her friends.

Opening the door, she darted for them. Sunset glanced away from whatever animated conversation they’d been in the middle of, eyes widening in surprise. "Vice Principal Luna? I thought you said you had a fundraiser."

"I do, but there was an issue after you left. Mrs. Circinus showed up. My sister had to give her your new address, and she’s on her way there right now."

The teen's face went pale as she grabbed for her phone, dialing a number. "Come on, come on..." When nothing happened, she put it back in her pocket. "She must have forgotten to turn her phone on."

Luna raised an eyebrow. "She has a cellphone?"

"My idea," answered Twilight.

Sunset got up from the sofa arm. "I need to go."

Rainbow stood up with her. "I'm going with you," she said, practically growling. "I want to meet this creep."

"I'm rather curious myself," agreed Rarity.

"Why don't we all go?" suggested Applejack.

Twilight nodded as she stood up. "At the very least, it will be good for us to know what she looks like."

"I'm in!" cried Pinkie.

Fluttershy squirmed in her seat. "I hate confrontation, it's so... angry," she muttered. The girl gave a hard gulp, before shakily rising to her feet. "But if everyone else is going, I'll go too."

"Me too," said Spike, hopping down from Fluttershy's lap.

Sunset smiled warmly at the group. "Thanks, girls."

"I can take you in my car, if you'd like. I think you might fit." Though really, she knew that it would be a stretch to say they'd fit in her car. But offering to speed up their trip seemed like the right thing to do.

Heading out as a group, they approached the dark blue vehicle. "I call shotgun!" declared Rainbow, racing for the passenger seat.

"No fair Dashie!" cried Pinkie, "I wanted the front seat!"

Sunset grabbed her shoulder. "We don't have time to waste," she argued.

"She's right," said Luna, unlocking the car. "The rest of you will have to sit in the back."

One by one, the girls slid into the backseat, trying to squeeze themselves in. "It's getting kind of tight
in here," muttered Twilight. "We might not even fit. Maybe the rest of us should just walk or—"

"Dogpile!" With a whoop, Pinkie charged through the door and onto her friends, all of whom grunted in response.

"Pinkie! Watch what you're doin'!" complained Applejack.

"But this is fun!" giggled the girl, squeezing in with the rest of her friends. "It's like a clown car back here."

Luna grimaced at the comparison, but chose to simply shake her head and slide into the driver's seat. Considering the relatively short drive, she was unlikely to incur any traffic offenses. And her windows were rather strongly tinted, so it would be harder for anyone to notice how crammed the backseat was.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, she saw Sunset getting on her motorcycle and placing the helmet over her head. Luna put the keys in the ignition and revved the engine.

__________________________

Sunny hummed to herself as she walked around the kitchenette that Monday afternoon. Finding the box of tea bags, she took two out and set them aside. Sunset would be back soon enough, and Sunny thought it would be nice for them to share a cup of tea together.

It was a pleasant surprise to find this universe had some of her favorite varieties of tea, and she'd picked up a few when she and Sunset had gone for groceries. As she turned up the heat on the stove, memories from her body proper drifted into Sunny's brain like a feather carried by a spring breeze. A tax proposal of some kind, and she was on the last page. Thankfully, something like making tea, even in this world, was so easy that she could practically do it from muscle memory.

*Knock knock knock*

Sunny looked at her watch. Sunset was running a little early.

The knocking continued, and Sunny wondered for a moment why she didn't just open the door herself. But then she figured Sunset might have forgotten her keys. Shaking her head in mild amusement, she walked over and undid the lock. "Hello—"

"Hello, Miss Skies," answered the voice that wasn't Sunset's. There, standing in the hall, still dressed in her immaculate dark suit, was Mrs. Circinus. She smiled a sort of smile that was meant to be genial, but there was a sharpness to it that belied its owner's intent. "May I come in?"

Sunset cut off the engine of the motorcycle, stopping hard in front of the apartment building at the same time Luna's car came to a screeching halt. *Hope that didn't hurt the tires too much.* The last thing she wanted was to have to go out and get *another* new tire after the flat she'd just gotten.

Beside her, the doors of the car opened, and Rainbow got out from the passenger seat. Sunset dismounted quickly and took off her helmet, turning to look at her athletic friend. "You ready to go?"

Rainbow nodded, looking the same way she did right before a game. "Let's do this. Come on everybody." When no response came, she turned around. "Hey, what gives?"

The door to the backseat opened slowly. "There seems to be a slight problem, darling," said Rarity as she tried to move her shoulder. "We appear to be quite, shall we say, stuck."
"Oh come on," said Rainbow. "You got in there just fine. How hard can it be to get out again?"

"This comin' from the one that got the passenger seat all to her lonesome," replied Applejack from somewhere in the middle.

Rainbow groaned in frustration, grabbing Rarity's arm. "Here, let me help."

"OW!" cried Rarity. "Rainbow Dash, you're going to pull my arm out of its socket!"

"Oh, come on," groaned Rainbow, giving Rarity's arm another yank. Finally, Rarity seemed to be pulling free of the tangle of bodies. "Almost there, just a little more and—GAH!"

With a loud crash and a series of shouts, the five other girls and dog were released from the car, and then proceeded to fall as one onto Rainbow.

Somewhere in the mess, Applejack laughed. "Welcome to the pile, Rainbow."

"Not funny, guys. Get off of me!"

"We're trying," complained Twilight.

"I guess the dogpile idea wasn't so good, huh?" said Pinkie with a hint of regret as she rested somewhere on the bottom.

"You think?" said Spike, trying to get some wiggle room.

"Could someone get their arm out of my ribcage?" asked Rarity.

"Um, I think that's my foot," muttered Fluttershy. "I'm sorry Rarity."

Sunset set her helmet onto her bike before moving over to her friends. "Come on, let's get you guys separated."

"That could take forever," argued Rainbow as she tried and failed to get free. "She might be up there already. You go ahead. We'll catch up."

"Rainbow Dash raises a point," said Vice Principal Luna, coming over to the other side of the car. "I'll help them get to their feet. You go ahead."

Sunset glanced back at her friends. "You sure?"

"We'll be fine," assured Rainbow. "Just get moving."

Seeing the matching looks on Rainbow and Luna's faces, Sunset nodded and turned back toward the building, breaking into a run. Spotting the elevator already in use, she made a sharp turn and entered the stairwell. Thankfully their apartment wasn't that high up.

As she made her way up the steps, worry filled her thoughts. Sunny had handled herself well enough the last time, but she was still new to this place, her time measured in weeks against Sunset's years. If Mrs. Circinus had shown up again, she probably had some new angle or trick, and Sunset felt better being there when it happened. And if she was lucky, perhaps she'd be able to give Sunny at least a little warning.

Finally reaching apartment 302, she pulled out her keys. Her fingers shook with the adrenaline of the climb as she twisted the key in the lock. "We've got a problem!" she shouted through the flung open door. "Pr-" Sunset skidded to a stop, words dying on her tongue as she spotted the guest sitting in
one of the armchairs.

"Hello, Miss Shimmer," said Circinus with a tiny, sly smile. "Is there something wrong, or do you usually enter that way?"

_Horseapples, she beat us. "What are you doing here?"

"I merely stopped by to talk," replied the indigo-haired woman. "Your mother just made me some tea." She gestured to the teapot on the table between her and Sunny, before taking a sip from her cup. "I must say, Miss Skies, you have excellent taste in tea."

"Thank you," said Sunny, offering a polite smile. "Sweetheart, why don't sit down?" The woman's face was a polite mask, but her eyes revealed her own tension.

"S-Sure," Sunset replied, setting down her backpack before taking a seat on the sofa next to her pseudo-mother.

Circinus smiled in her seat. "Good. Now that we're all here, why don't we—"

"Made it!" came Rainbow's raspy voice as she bolted into the room, followed shortly by four other girls and one purple and green dog.

"Rainbow," panted Twilight, sweat dripping from her forehead. "Could... you... not... go so fast. I'm not used to... running up the stairs."

Rainbow's eyes landed on the one unknown face in the room, and instantly narrowed. "Who are you?"

"You can call me Mrs. Circinus," said the woman with an annoyed edge.

Every muscle in Rainbow's body visibly tensed. "So you're the one that's been bad-mouthing us!"

The indigo-haired woman didn't even blink. "You must be Rainbow Dash." She angled her head to look behind her. "And these must be your friends."

The five other girls introduced themselves one by one, but none seemed happy. Rarity lacked her usual pleasant smile, while Pinkie Pie had a deep frown on her face.

When Twilight introduced herself last, Circinus's eyes fell on the dog by her ankle. "Is that your dog, Miss Sparkle?" The woman checked her watch. "You must have just gotten out of school. Don't tell me you took him with you. I'm fairly certain that's against the rules in every public institution."

"O-Of course not," lied Twilight. "He just... followed me today, that's all."

The woman just lifted an eyebrow. "In any case, as nice as it is meet you, I'm afraid you'll have to leave. I have things to discuss with Miss Shimmer and her mother, and you don't need to be present."

"In your dreams!" snapped Rainbow, hands already balled into fists. "You can't just tell us to go away!"

"Mrs. Circinus," interrupted Sunny in her most diplomatic tone, "I don't mind Sunset's friends being here for whatever you wish to discuss."

The other woman scowled as she seemed to consider it, taking a quick glance at the watch. "Alright," she said at last. "I suppose if you don't mind, I can allow it."
Sunny smiled in triumph. "Excellent. Sunset, why don't you help your friends get some snacks to eat? I'm sure you're all still hungry after coming back from school."

"Sure, Mom." Sunset got up from the sofa and joined her friends over at the kitchenette. "I'm pretty sure we have some of those fudge cookies you brought over, Pinkie."

"Double fudge," corrected Pinkie with some slight offense. "Those are my double fudge cookies. I haven't made my fudge cookies since last month."

"Sorry, Pinkie," chuckled Sunset as she opened the fridge and pulled out the plate of cookies.

"So this is the woman that's been tormenting you?" Rarity said, practically hissing in Sunset's ear to avoid being overheard. Her blue eyes scrutinized the unwanted visitor. "I can't say she's a horrible dresser, but her color choice is so dreary."

"Personally," muttered Applejack as she took an apple for herself from the freezer and rubbed it on her shirt, "she reminds me of a snake."

"A really mean snake," added Fluttershy.

"She'd definitely qualify for the cold-blooded part," quipped Sunset. Though she wondered why the woman had looked at her watch. She'd never done that during the other two confrontations.

Back over in the living room proper, Sunny was keeping up the conversation. "Would you like more tea?" she asked cordially.

"No." Circinus set down her cup. "Before we begin, I was wondering, where exactly was this dig of yours?"

Sunset's hand froze as she pulled a set of plates from the cabinet. *Ponyfeathers, we didn't get to that.* Princess Celestia barely knew anything about human history, let alone the ancient history dealt with by archeologists.

Sunny, however, didn't even blink. She simply took another careful sip of her tea. "It was at the pyramids of the Sudan," she said confidently. For a moment, Circinus seemed like she was going to say something, but Sunny continued to speak. "Ah, I forgot, it's North Sudan now, isn't it?" She laughed merrily. "It's been years and I still forget that at times."

Sunset Shimmer blinked, absently placing the plates on the counter. "How did she know that?" she whispered.

"I told her," said Twilight, moving in close enough to whisper back. "I called her last night to test her new phone, and I ended up giving her some ideas for her dig."

"I don't remember that."

"She said you were in the shower at the time," explained Twilight.

A vague memory passed through her head of a ringing noise when she was taking a shower last night, but it was so mixed together with the noise of the water that she'd written it off. "Thanks, Twi." As she helped her friends gather more food, another thought occurred to her. "Wait, there are pyramids in North Sudan?"

Twilight nodded. "It's actually rather fascinating," she said with some level of enthusiasm. "They're totally different from the ones in Egypt."
"It was quite far away from civilization, deep in the desert in fact," Sunny was saying. "And I had the worst time getting back home. A sandstorm separated me from the rest of the crew."

"How harrowing," replied Circinus dryly, her eyes never leaving Sunny.

"It certainly was." Sunny took another sip, making the entire scene appear to be normal, casual conversation rather than a life-threatening experience. "And you know how inhospitable the desert can be. They say there are more scorpions there than people." Sunny gave a sly smile, glancing at the other woman's necklace before looking directly into her eyes. "But I've never been afraid of scorpions."

Sunset did her best to suppress a smirk at the subtle jab as she and the others returned with their food. From the small twitch in Circinus's right eye, it appeared she got it too.

"Thanks for letting us use your kitchen!" said Pinkie as she pulled up a chair for herself. All of the others followed her example, though Sunset returned to her place on the sofa.

"It was no problem at all, Pinkie Pie," smiled Sunny. She turned back to Circinus. "Now what was it you wanted to speak to me about?"

Circinus cleared her throat. "Sunset, of course."

Sunny raised an eyebrow. "I thought I'd cleared everything up with you last time we spoke."

"Visits like these are perfectly routine," said the social worker airily. "We have to make sure everything is going smoothly, and I'd hate to be lax in my duties. After all, your daughter's wellbeing is my highest priority."

Sunset rolled her eyes. This coming from the woman that practically sold me to the highest bidder?

"As such," continued Circinus, "I would like to extend my assistance in finding Miss Shimmer a good psychologist. I know several that are taking new patients and who would be more than able to help your daughter with her difficulties."

So she was still playing that card, was she? Of course she'd try to use that again. "You're still on that?" asked the teen irritably. "I don't need a psychologist."

"And as I told you before," shot back Circinus, voice dripping with condescension, "many people who say that still require one. And considering the nature of the problem, and that you are still a child, I don't think you're in a position to give an unbiased opinion, nor decide or even know what is best for you. So I would appreciate it if you leave this decision to your mother and I."

Anger clouded Sunset's vision. "Like you would know what's best for me? You almost saddled me with Pearl, for crying out loud!"

"Now, Sunset, calm down," urged Sunny as she set her cup down on the table. "What difficulties would those be, Mrs. Circinus?"

"Miss Skies, I'm not sure if you're aware, but your daughter was the victim of a cyberbullying in December, the work of one 'Anon-a-Miss'."

Sunny's eyes glanced back at her, silently urging her to relax. Sunset took a few deep, cleansing breaths, but the feeling of anger still burned in her stomach. This woman seemed to enjoy manipulating things to her own benefit, not unlike Sunset had for years. Nobody liked the feeling of being manipulated, but it felt even worse for other manipulators, even former ones like herself.
It would have been an experience in empathy, if anger hadn't overpowered her other emotions, that is.

And her feelings were, it seemed, shared, as the rest of her friends seemed just a bit tenser, even meek Fluttershy.

"Yes," answered the pink-haired woman slowly. "My daughter told me all about it."

"So you know all about it?"

"Yes, but I hardly think she needs professional help."

"You don't think so?" challenged Circinus, pulling out her tablet. Her fingers moved across the screen rapidly, before suddenly pausing. The woman stared for a moment, before pulling back her sleeve to fiddle with her watch, and then resumed her electronic search.

"I'd say your daughter suffered quite the trauma, and over the holidays too." Circinus shook her head in disappointment. "It's such a shame when things like that happen over the holidays. It's like someone defiled the spirit of the season. That in and of itself is such a horrible crime."

Her tone certainly sounded convincing, Sunset would give the woman that. To some, Circinus's lamentations would have been believed as honest feelings. But Sunset Shimmer knew this sort of routine. Circinus was just playing it up a bit for effect. What concerned Sunset more was the fact that she was digging into her files again.

That, and the unusual pause. Sure, it looked like she'd just noticed a difference between her tablet clock and the watch, and Sunset was pretty sure that's all it was. But that was still the second time she'd messed with her watch at all. Why was she self-conscious about the time today?

Sunset's mental questions were interrupted when, with one final button, Circinus smiled and gave her tablet over to Sunny. "I don't suppose you've seen these pictures?"

They were the same photos of Sunset crying on the hallway floor. The moment her eyes landed on them, Sunny's face lost much of its color. Her arms fell slack at her sides. The rest of Sunset's friends winced. They'd never seen these photos until now either, missing them during the period when they'd avoided MyStable like the plague.

"N-No," said Sunny, pulling herself together. "I've never seen those before." Her hand reached out to grasp Sunset's in a show of support.

"These girls," she gestured to the group of teens sitting around the two adults, "were in part responsible for what your daughter went through. Their siblings launched the entire scheme, and they abandoned Miss Shimmer in the blink of an eye, left her in the crosshairs of a school that had also turned against her."

Putting her tablet away, she folded her fingers in front of her. "I'm rightfully concerned when she's still spending time with these girls, and even going to Canterlot High. In my opinion, Miss Skies, your daughter should see a psychologist, and preferably transfer schools. Most parents would be well within their rights to transfer their children after an incident like that."

The woman's purple eyes moved over to Twilight. "In fact, you're new to their little group, are you not, Miss Sparkle? Are you sure you want to spend time with these girls, knowing what they did to Miss Shimmer? I'd hate to see you hurt the same way."

"O-Of course I'm sure," stammered Twilight, surprised by the sudden attention. "They've been
"nothing but great to me."

Circinus gave her a hard, piercing stare. "Are you sure? Appearances can be deceiving, you know."

By this point, Sunset felt it time to step in. "Hey, you're supposed to be talking to me, not Twilight," she interjected. "So back off of her."

The woman snapped her attention back to Sunset. "My apologies for getting off track," she said politely. "I'm merely concerned."

"I think you did more than get off track," said Applejack, speaking up for the first time since the discussion had started in earnest. "In fact, I think you were slingin' nothin' but hooey."

"AJ's right," agreed Rainbow. "You've been doing nothing but trash-talking us since you showed up at Canterlot High, and I've had it." The athlete rose to her feet. "Sure, we may have dropped the ball," she said, her voice containing just a hint of shame, masked as it was by determination and anger. "But we tried again. That's what you're supposed to do."

"Uh huh!" said Pinkie as she hopped to her feet. "We were really sorry for how we acted. I even made a six layer chocolate apology cake with extra frosting, and everyone knows my apology cakes are usually four layers."

"You want an excuse for what happened in December?" said AJ. "Well, truth is, we ain't got one. Not a good one, anyway. We didn't always get along with Sunset, but we still let ourselves get flimflammed." Her green eyes locked onto Circinus's purple ones. "We did the wrong thing. But that don't mean we're the rotten to the core, two-faced varmits you think we are."

"Fluttershy even let her watch her animals for a weekend," added Rainbow. "And she doesn't let just anybody do that."

"It's true," said the shy girl. "I'm always so worried something will happen."

Sunset felt the rising energy in the room, and an idea came to her. Time to push back a little more. "You know what? If they weren't my friends, they wouldn't have helped me and Mom move in here. They," she gestured to her friends, "took time on Friday after school and Saturday morning to help us move everything here and set things up, even when they had other things to do."

"That's the honest truth right there," said Applejack with a nod of her head. "I always have a heap of chores that need doin' on the farm, even after school. But when Sunset said she was movin', I came by and helped. I borrowed my brother's truck too."

"I showed up when I had soccer practice on Friday, and I'm the captain."

"I skipped my usual shift at the shelter."

"I took time off from the boutique."

"I had an experiment I needed to do, but I still came."

"And I had tons of baking to do."

"See?" said Sunset. "If they weren't really my friends, they could have made any number of excuses not to help. But they didn't. Because they care about me."

Beside her, Sunny smiled slyly. "I think my daughter and her friends raise a good point. Mrs.
Circinus, while I appreciate your concern, and your offer, I trust my daughter's judgement. If she tells me she's happy at her school, then I believe her. If she says she's doing fine and doesn't need help, then I believe her on that as well. And furthermore, while I understand that your views are based on your reports, I have a certain advantage that you don't."

"And what," asked the woman stiffly, "would that be?"

"Since I've come back to Canterlot City, I've spent time with these girls," answered Sunny matter-of-factly. "It might not be the greatest amount of time, but I have gotten to know them in a way you have not. I hold myself to be a decent judge of character, and in my opinion, these are all wonderful girls that I'm more than happy to let into my home. And on top of that, no matter what may have happened in the past, I am also a firm believer in forgiveness whenever possible."

Her smile grew ever larger, pushing against the boundaries of her face. "Thank you very much for the offer, but I don't think it's required."

The pinched expression on Circinus's face made Sunset want to grin. Without Anon-a-Miss to use as a weapon, the woman was pretty much out of the fight. It seemed Circinus understood that too. She must have seriously thought she could still win with what she had, or that she'd get something more out of this meeting. Either way, she'd lost.

The social worker's eyes moved back and forth, seemingly in search for what to say, when they fell on the wall to her right. Specifically, they landed on a single framed photograph, one showing a much younger Sunset blowing out the candles of a massive chocolate cake, Sunny by her side.

Sunset watched Circinus's expression shift from thoughtfulness to completely dumbstruck. Her entire face twisted up like she was having an aneurysm. She didn't even notice when the tablet slid from her lab and clattered to the carpeted floor.

Sunset glanced to her friends. Most of them were trying to keep their features in check, all except Pinkie Pie, who giggled with delight, and Rainbow, who let a cocky grin spread over her face. Laughter rose in her own throat, but she pushed it back, trying to make it sound like she was clearing her throat before sticking a hand in her pocket and pressing a fingernail into her thigh, letting the pain kill her laughter. Now wasn't the time to laugh at this woman. Even if she wanted to.

"You okay?" she asked, feigning concern even as a small laugh bubbled up in her throat. She pressed her nail harder.

The social worker jolted in her seat, muttering a curse as she picked up her tablet. "Y-Yes, I'm fine."

"That was her tenth birthday," explained Sunny. "If you're really interested, I just sorted through some old photos. I'd love to show them to you."

Somehow, Circinus managed to look even more shocked. "I... that is..." she stammered. "O-Of course."

Sunny looked at the assembled teenagers. "Would you girls like to see them too?"

Sunset hadn't wanted to revisit the embarrassment of the past weekend so soon. But seeing the woman who had tormented her over the past several weeks so stunned, so completely at a loss for words... there was a satisfaction in it that made the revisit well worth it.

Still, it wouldn't do to let any kind of enthusiasm show. No teenager in their right mind would be okay with this sort of thing. So instead, she made her best whining noise. "Mom, do you have to?"
"Now sweetheart, there's nothing to be ashamed of," laughed Sunny, giving her cheek a light pinch. "All your pictures are beautiful. After all, you're so photogenic."

Sunset rubbed her sore cheek. At least she wouldn't need to fake everything. Princess Celestia had gotten so good at portraying the doting parent it was almost frightening.

"Besides, if they're going to be your friends for the long term, they're going to end up seeing these eventually." Getting off the sofa, Sunny went over to a small bookshelf and returned with a white and gold album labeled Memories. Setting it down on the coffee table, she opened it to the first page. "Come closer everyone," she invited, scooting over so the group could pull in close, even lifting Spike onto the sofa and patting his head.

"Sweet ride," said Rainbow with a somehow even cockier grin than before.

*Of course you'd think that. It was your bike.*

"That was her first bike ride," explained Sunny with pride. "And this was Halloween when she was nine. I helped her make her costume all month," she said, pointing at the dark red cloth and papier-mache dragon outfit.

"Not bad work either," commented Applejack with a teasing smile as she elbowed Sunset in the ribs. "You were cute as a button."

"I was going for ferocious," argued Sunset, doing her best to fake irritation as she elbowed her blonde friend back.

"Well you were certainly close to spitting fire when you ate those red hot candies by accident," Sunny teased.

Sunset's cheeks turned red with irritation as she gave her mentor a glare. "Actually, Mom, the way I remember it, it was you that did that, not me."

It had been a real incident from Sunset's original fillyhood. At thirteen, Sunset had forsaken going out in costume for Nightmare Night. She'd even shirked CSGU's holiday dance in favor of burying herself in study material and experiments.

Celestia had been obligated to go, of course, and she'd returned with a few bags of candy for each of them. As a parting gift for the Nightmare Night Dance, attendants were given blind bags of mixed candy to take home. After all, no matter the age, not many ponies would pass up free candy. Sunset certainly hadn't, especially when it came from her teacher.

They'd been digging into the bags, deep in conversation, when the princess popped a few pieces of "Windigo Ghost Pepper Chewies" into her mouth without looking. The resulting shriek had summoned about two dozen of the royal guards, weapons drawn.

Now it was Sunny's turn to blush. "Ah, did I? I... don't exactly remember that."

"You did," Sunset insisted. "The g-neighbors thought you were dying."

"It's a good thing you weren't around to meet Shining Armor when he went trick-or-treating," said Twilight, breaking up the argument. "Mom said one year he dressed as a knight and tried to slay every dragon he saw."

"Seriously?" said Sunset, eyebrows shooting up. "I can't imagine that went well."
"It didn't. Mom said he got grounded for a week."

"Oh look," cooed Sunny, pointing at a photo of a little girl waving in front of a large, dark-colored building. "This was her first day of school."

"WOW!" cried Pinkie. "You went to Mountaintop too? Aww, I must have missed you. We could have grown up best friends!" She seemed so disappointed, Sunset would have thought it was real. Or perhaps it was yet another instance of Pinkie's strange form of madness.

Sunny looked at Circinus. Much to Sunset's amusement, the woman's mouth had been opening and closing like a fish from the moment the album was brought to the table. "Don't you think she looked just darling in her little uniform?"

"Y-Yes," said Circinus. "She looks very..." she cleared her throat, trying to regain her composure, "smart. Personally, I wish all schools would implement a uniform policy." She glanced at Sunset, mustering up the energy for a sneer. "It would certainly be an improvement to what some students wear."

Sunset stretched her legs, placing her feet up on the edge of the table as she gave the woman a smirk. "I like wearing what I want."

"As someone who just transferred from a school with a uniform policy," interjected Twilight, "I'm happy with it, even if it took some getting used to."

"While some uniforms can be quite sharp and stylish," added Rarity, "I, too, prefer being able to make my own ensembles."

Sunny chuckled. "It seems you've been outvoted." Her eyes went back to the photo, and then to its siblings. "Though it's no real surprise Sunset feels that way. Even back then, I had a horrible time just getting her to wear her uniform."

Feeling a cue to add to the memory, Sunset grimaced. "I didn't want to wear the cardigan, Mom. That stupid thing itched like crazy."

Nearby, Pinkie shared in her grimace. "Oh yeah, I remember now. Those things were super duper itchy." She turned to Sunset with a look of understanding. "No wonder you weren't happy."

"And by that she means not happy wearing it," added Rarity quickly. "Which I can completely understand. An outfit is hardly worth wearing if it itches, no matter how well designed it may be."

"Speaking of outfits," continued Sunny as she turned the page. "Here we are at the park. Sunset, do you remember this day? It seems like only yesterday."

Sunset laughed to herself. More like two days ago. "Yeah, Mom, I remember."

Sunny looked up at Circinus again. The other woman's attempts at composure had slid backwards, and she was back to a state of shock. "I took her to the park after her first week of school. You know that dress was her favorite outfit at that age. Sunset was so upset when she outgrew it. Actually... sweetheart, didn't I see you putting it in your closet when we moved in?"

"Yeah..." she said slowly, trying to make it sound as reluctant as possible. There was a truth to that however. When Rarity had come back late Saturday to collect the articles of clothing, she'd decided against taking that particular one back. On reflection, she'd said, it was a bit too customized to sell, and the fashionista couldn't bring herself to take it apart after the work she put in.
The sight of the little orange dress, wrinkled and tussled from her childish tickle war with Sunny, brought a strange sort of warmth to Sunset's chest, despite its role in a largely humiliating weekend. And because of that feeling, Sunset herself couldn't bring herself to throw it out.

So instead, she just stuffed it in the back of the closet, deciding that it would be fine as another subtle kind of evidence.

"Aww, don't feel bad," comforted Pinkie. "I've kept all sorts of old stuff, like the party hat I made when I was seven."

"I've kept a few old things too," said Fluttershy with the lightest of blushes. "I still have my favorite sweater from elementary school."

"You know," said Sunny to Cirinus, "if you're really interested, I also sorted out a few of Sunset's baby pictures."

"No!" Sunset screamed. Sure, seeing the woman's shocked expression was funny, but it wasn't worth bringing up those things, or even letting her friends see them. She didn't even want to see them, dreading far too much what they'd look like. "Mom, please no. Not in front of my friends."

Sunny gave her a look of sympathy. "Alright, my little sun, alright. I'll leave your baby pictures alone." Quietly, she whispered "I'm sorry," in Sunset's ear. "I suppose I took that too far."

"Thanks... Mom. Besides, Mrs. Cirinus probably needs to leave soon. I'm sure she's busy and we are done talking after all." From across the width of the coffee table, cyan eyes locked with purple. A triumphant grin spread across Sunset's face. "Unless there was something else you wanted to ask Mom and me?"

"Well, I..." stammered the woman, eyes darting away as she seemed to struggle for an answer. "That is... I was..."

Suddenly, there came a shrill ringing sound. Cirinus looked down at her pocket, pulling out her phone. "Pardon me for a moment." Pressing a button on the screen, she pressed the machine to her ear. "Hello?" Her face darkened. "Oh, it's you. You do realize you were supposed to call me earlier, correct? You gave me your assurance on that point." There was the faint sound of a rushed reply, but the woman cut it off. "I don't care for your excuses. Did you do as I asked?" A pause, then an answer from the other side. "And?"

Whatever the caller said, it seemed to be good news, as her whole body seemed to relax. "Thank you. I'll be in touch if I require your assistance again." Hanging up the phone, she turned back to the assembled crowd. Her lips curled into a smile as she looked directly at Sunny. "Pardon me, Miss Skies, but I do have one last question. Do you happen to have a Social Security card?"

Sunset felt her confidence falter. I don't like where this is going. What had that call been about? And what was she going for? She couldn't have some other weapon up her sleeve, could she?

Sunny, for her part, blinked in confusion. "Of course I do."

Cirinus leaned back in her chair. "Would you be kind enough to show it to me, please?"

Unsure of what else to do, Sunny got up from the sofa and went to her room, retrieving her forged card. For the brief minute or two that she was gone, Sunset felt a bead of sweat roll down her back.

The minute Sunny came back, she handed the card to Cirinus. "Here it is. And as you can see, it's quite real."
The other woman took it in her hands, fingers and eyes moving across the paper surface in tandem. "Yes, it is quite real," she muttered, looking up from the card. "A quite real forgery, in any case."

"W-Why would you think it's a forgery?" asked Sunset, her voice almost cracking. "You seriously can't still think my mom is a fake!"

"I can and I do," insisted Circinus, looking like the cat that swallowed the canary. "You see, while I prefer evidence, I do have an intuition about these things, and I've learned to trust that intuition. I wasn't entirely convinced when I met your 'mother', and I hardly wanted to risk a minor such as yourself pulling a trick on the federal government. So I decided to call the local Social Security office."

Her gaze turned to Sunny, a dark, challenging glare. "That call just now was the agent I'd be speaking with. He just double checked his original findings. And, Miss Skies, he had some very interesting things to say about you. Such as the fact that as far as they are concerned, you don't exist. Their computers have no record of a Sunny Skies from Canterlot City, or anywhere for that matter."

Sweat was forming on Sunset's face now as pieces fell into place. It made sense now. That's why she was looking at the time. She'd been waiting for that call to confirm what she'd already found. The entire conversation had been part continuation of the last discussion, part fishing for information, and part waiting game.

"Now of course," continued Circinus, eying the now equally nervous Sunny, "this raises two possibilities. One is that the name you've provided is fake, and so is this card." She waved the card at its owner. "If that were true, you would be guilty of forgery and deceiving a government agent."

The indigo-haired woman grinned like a shark. "The other possibility is that the name you gave me is your real name, and you have entered this country illegally. You'd be guilty of the same crimes if this were true. And if it were, I've made a few contacts with Immigration and Customs Enforcement over the course of my work. It would only take one call for them to be brought in to investigate you, Miss Skies. So tell me, what's the truth?"

"T-That card is real," insisted Sunny. "I have other forms of ID if you want to see them."

"And besides," added Sunset, voice shaking, "We have pictures as well. How do you explain that?"

"I'm not quite sure," said Circinus irritably. "But that doesn't solve the problem." She glared at Sunny. "They've checked twice, Miss Skies. Twice. And both times, you weren't there. How do you explain that?"

Sunny floundered. "Well... I..."

Sunset's heart raced in her chest. How could Sunny answer that? She didn't have a knowledge of computers beyond the basics. There was no way she could explain the workings of the massive database owned by Social Security. But if they didn't come up with an answer, the two of them were toast. "It's a glitch!" she blurted out.

Circinus raised an eyebrow. "Really, Miss Shimmer? You think all of this is as simple as a computer glitch?"

"Why not?" asked Sunset, trying to steady her nerves. "Every computer has glitches. It just happens, no matter the hardware or software. You can't tell me that their computers don't glitch out from time to time."

The other woman looked skeptical. "Twice in a row?"
Sunset shrugged. "Sometimes glitches can be weird. Right, Twilight?"

Twilight jumped in her seat. "Uh, yes!" She stopped, fixing her glasses. "I've built a lot of computers, and some pretty powerful ones, and I've seen a lot of weird glitches."

"See?" Sunset crossed her arms over her chest, trying her best to keep the fear off her face. "How can you say it's not a glitch?"

Circinus seemed to consider that, then smirked. "Fine. I'll have them check one more time. In fact, I'll go there myself." Her eyes landed on Sunny. "And you will accompany me."

"Me?"

"Yes. If you are indeed legitimate, then I'm sure you're as interested in resolving this problem as I am. It only seems reasonable then, that we go together. And if you're a fake..." she looked down at the card in her hands, "then I'm sure we'll get some interesting information when we enter this number into their system."

The woman held her head high in a look of triumph. "I suggest we leave right now." She took a step towards the door, stopped, and turned around. "Actually, your daughter should come as well. It strikes me as unwise to leave her unattended."

Before anyone could protest anything, Circinus's phone rang again. She turned her glare on the defiant machine, angrily pressing the button. "Hello?! Yes, I'm the owner of the house. Yes, I placed the furniture order. Now tell me what you want." She glanced at the two Equestrians. "I'm quite busy."

Confusion spread over her face. "You're what? That wasn't scheduled until tomorrow. No, I don't want it delivered a day early! You were supposed to deliver it on the scheduled day you fool! I want you to stop the truck right—oh, alright!"

Hand shaking in fury, she hung up the call. "It seems," she said stiffly, "that I will have to delay that trip temporarily. It appears there was some kind of problem at my home." She straightened her jacket, slipping her tablet back into her bag before getting to her feet. "I would like you two to meet me at the local Social Security office in two hours. Be prompt. Now if you excuse me, I have a matter to deal with."

Two hours. That wasn't much time. Stress pulsed through Sunset's body. Maybe there was a way to extend it. "Let me get the door for you!" Rushing forward as quickly as she could, her feet tangled together, and the teen found herself crashing into Circinus and knocking both of them to the floor.

"Politeness is not an excuse for clumsiness," reprimanded Circinus as she got to her feet again.

"Sorry," she apologized. "Let me help you." Gathering the woman's things, Sunset opened the apartment door. The moment the door was shut, Sunset pressed her back against it, breathing heavily.

"Well this is just great," complained Rainbow. "Now what are you going to do?"

"For one, get rid of this," reaching into her pockets, Sunset pulled a pair of keys, tossing them to Sunny. "Can you teleport those into the bushes outside? I don't want them on me." Sunny nodded, and in a flash they were gone.

"What were those?" asked Applejack.
"Her car keys," explained Sunset. "Pulled them from her pocket when I crashed into her."

"Nice!" complimented Rainbow. "I didn't know you could do that."

Sunset shrugged, offering no explanation. Now was the time to think. That would buy them a little more time, but not much. "We need a plan." She looked at Sunny. "Do you think you can use an illusion spell on her again?"

Sunny shook her head. "With multiple people in the room, it would run the risk of being discovered."

"What else can we do?" Sunset screamed. "Those computer records aren't going to change."

"And it's not like we could hack into Social Security," said Twilight. "Even I couldn't do that, not to mention the laws we'd be breaking if we got caught."

Sunset began to pace. "Well it's not like we know anyone who can just magically make computer records appear out of thin air!"

Sunny turned thoughtful. "Actually... there may be someone..."

Sunset paced around the apartment. It was 3:45 PM. Roughly an hour had passed since Mrs. Circinus had left. Spike had gone down himself and saw her get into a taxi not long after she'd left the apartment. Her car, meanwhile, had been attached to a tow truck, and Spike had picked up something about "towing it home to get spare keys."

"Sugarcube, you keep doin' that and you'll wear a hole in the floor," commented Applejack as she and the others teens, plus one dog, sat in a circle, hands filled with playing cards. "There's nothin' to do until whoever the princess called gets here, so why don't you sit down a spell?"

Sunset shook her head, doing another circuit. "Sorry AJ, but I just don't feel like I can sit still right now."

"I know the feeling," said Rainbow, the only one not part of the game of Go Fish the others had started. Instead, she kicked a soccer ball with various parts of her body, moving in a pattern. "You just feel like you need to do something."

AJ shrugged. "Suit yourself. Hey Rare, got any queens?"

"Go fish, darling."

Sunset turned around to do another circle. Her eyes landed on Sunny. "Can't you just tell me who's coming?"

Sunny hesitated. "I think it would be much easier to explain to everyone when they arrive. Don't worry, Sunset. They'll be here soon."

As comforting as the princess was trying to be, Sunset still couldn't bring herself to completely relax. Her brain was circling around questions the same way her body was circling the room.

Just who was coming? Celestia undoubtedly had formed many allies and contacts as both a ruler of a nation and as an immortal alicorn. Sunset could easily envision a list that stretched from the dais of the throne room to the castle gates and beyond, with names in dialects that she wouldn't even know how to pronounce. Even still, Sunset couldn't imagine a being that would be able to do what they
Knock knock knock

The fire-haired teen jumped, rushing to the door, swinging it open wide. "Hello?!"

A man stood before her. He was exceedingly tall, with a thin, almost gaunt frame and grayish skin. His hair was mostly black, with patches of white, matched by bushy white eyebrows and a white goatee. Despite that, he didn't seem old. The face lacked wrinkles of any kind, and his beady red eyes flashed with energy and guile.

At first glance, his clothing spoke of sophistication. A white button-down shirt, brown suit jacket and red tie, as well as a pair of dress pants and black shoes. But the well-dressed image was shattered when one saw the pants. Dress pants they might have been, but the legs were mismatched in color, one yellow, and the other green.

His hands were covered by equally mismatched gloves, one yellow and one golden brown. The right hand grasped a walking stick with a silver handle in the shape of an animal head. Was that a wolf? Or was it a coyote?

"Ah, Sunset Shimmer!" He tipped an imaginary hat at her. "I haven't seen you in years, my dear. My, my, how you've grown. I still remember you as a toddler bouncing in her stroller."

He bellowed with laughter. "Tell me, is your mother in? I brought these chocolates just for her." From a small coat pocket, he pulled out a large, heart-shaped box overflowing with little chocolate candies.

When Sunset continued to stare in blank confusion, the man chuckled at her. "Come now, my dear, you can't tell me this is the first time you've greeted a gentleman caller for your mother." The man waggled his eyebrows suggestively. Looking past her, he spotted his quarry. "Sunny!"

Slipping around Sunset, he made his way inside. "Dear Sunny. Still as radiant as ever." He tapped the stick on the floor, twirling it in his hand before a full bouquet of red roses burst from the tip. "For you," he said, presenting them to the pink-haired woman.

Finally, Sunset's brain started up again. "Who are you?"

The man turned back to face her. "I suppose you wouldn't remember me. I am Low Key. Sunny and I are quite old friends. At one point I thought she fancied me." He gave another wag of his eyebrows before sweeping his hand through the air dramatically. "But alas, her heart belonged to another!"

Sunny looked somewhere between amused and disturbed, leaning more toward the latter than the former. "Discord... I think that's enough."

He turned back to her. "Not the time for roleplay, hmm? Oh well, I suppose there are more important things."

His clothes morphed into a darker, more somber suit, complete with a pair of sunglasses. "I heard you had a job for me," he said, voice turning to a deep baritone.

"DISCORD?!" Sunset's eyes shot open so wide, she felt they were ready to pop free of their sockets. Though if the man before her was who she thought he was, that could happen anyway. "The spirit of disharmony and chaos?!"

"The one and only," he replied with a dramatic bow. "The Lord of Chaos at your service." He
smirked at her. "We really have met before, you know. Though at the time I was busy being a stone statue."

It took a moment for her to process that sentence, and the minute she did, the color drained from Sunset's face, visions of her nightmares from weeks back replaying in her mind, mingling with foalhood fears. Her eyes darted frantically to Sunny. "You promised me they were statues!"

"And they are," soothed her mentor. "Discord was the sole exception." When Sunset's face didn't change, she went on. "It was a secret to almost everypony. If I had told you at the time, you never would have slept through the night again."

"Personally, I don't recommend being a statue," said Discord as he examined his gloved hands. "It's unbelievably boring, not to mention the awful number it did on my back." He stretched his spine as if for emphasis. "I could barely move when I got free. Thankfully, I managed to get the kinks worked out before Twilight and her friends arrived, or that would have just been embarrassing."

"Uh," interrupted Applejack. "Can someone start explainin' what's going on to us non-ponyfolk in the room?"

"It's really quite simple," said the man, twirling his cane playfully. "I am Discord, the spirit of chaos and disharmony, and two time conqueror of Equestria. Oh but don't worry." He waved a dismissive hand at their worried faces. "I'm quite reformed these days."

"So you're an equine as well?" asked Twilight.

Discord bellowed with laughter. "Oh chaos above, no. I'm a draconequus."

The bibliophile's face contorted. "A what?"

With a tap of his cane, a miniature creature appeared in Discord's hand, the same anatomical jigsaw puzzle Sunset remembered from the statue garden, only full of color and life.

"That's insane," commented Twilight, staring at the image in complete puzzlement.

Discord grinned. "Thank you. I do my best."

Sunset moved to her mentor's side. "You let him loose?" she hissed. She'd read enough about Discord and chaos magic in general to know exactly how unpredictable and dangerous he could be. As much as they needed help, she couldn't help but think this was like cleaning with gasoline around an open flame.

Sunny smiled wryly. "I did say I'm a firm believer in forgiveness where I think possible."

"Now, now, don't be like that," said Discord, wrapping an arm around Sunset's shoulders. "We're both reformed villains here. After all, I heard you tried to invade Equestria with an army of mind controlled teenagers." He tutted at her. "Not the best army to launch an invasion with in my opinion, but you're young, so I'll give it a pass."

Sunset flinched at both the words and the contact. That was a fair point. If he said he was reformed, and Celestia was vouching for him, then she owed him that chance. Even still, the tension wouldn't leave her body. If they didn't get this right, she'd be back in hot water, and Sunny too. "We need you to mess with Social Security's computer records. Can your magic affect machines here?"

Discord scoffed. "Oh please." He pointed the handle of his cane at her, and Sunset's phone began belting out an opera ballad.
Sunset fumbled with the machine, unable to make it stop no matter what she did. "Okay, okay," she conceded, wincing as the singer began an ear-splitting aria. "You can't blame me for asking!"

A tap of the cane, and the phone went silent. "It's not as hard as you would think, not for me," explained Discord with some smug satisfaction.

"That's exactly what I was hoping," said Sunny, her expression shifting into something serious, the face of a princess taking charge. "We're short on time, so let's get to the point." She handed Discord the forged card. "As Sunset told you, we need you to go the local Social Security office and add this number to their records before Mrs. Circinus arrives. As it stands, we have less than forty five minutes."

"Luna mentioned something about that woman," said Discord as he studied the card through an oversized monocle. "She gave a most unflattering description."

"Trust me," said Sunset flatly. "Whatever she said, I'm pretty sure it's accurate."

"Um, Mr. Discord," asked Fluttershy nervously. "Are you sure you won't get caught? I wouldn't want you to get in trouble too."

The man turned in the girl's direction, and to Sunset's surprise, his expression softened. "Don't worry about me, my dear," he offered reassuringly. "I've got quite a few tricks up my sleeve." An idea seemed to strike him, and he pointed to the shy girl's butterfly hair clip. "May I borrow that for a moment?"

With confusion and reluctance, Fluttershy slipped it free of her hair. Discord held it in one hand, gripping the cane handle in another. "Watch," he said gently. The cane gave off a glow, and Discord blew on the clip like a birthday candle. The plastic butterfly sprung to life, floating happily around it's owner's head and nuzzling her hair.

Fluttershy's face lit up in wonder, blue eyes sparkling as the little butterfly landed gracefully on her outstretched finger. "It's beautiful! It's almost like it's real." Her fingers traced its small plastic spine, and the creature only nudged closer to her in response. "Can I keep it this way?" she asked with barely controlled eagerness. "Um, I mean, until you're done here, if that's okay with you."

Discord just smiled. There was a warmth in his eyes that Sunset would have never imagined seeing in the infamous trickster. "Of course, my dear."

Turning back to the group, he clapped his gloved hands together. "Now, I do believe it is time for me to be off."

"Wait," interrupted Sunset as an idea formed in her head. "We're all coming with you."

Discord raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"She already wants the two of us there," the former unicorn explained, pointing at Sunny. "But if we all go, then everyone else can all act as lookouts in case she's early." Better to be safe than sorry in this case. Sunset turned to her friends. "How about it?"

"I'm game," said Applejack in agreement.

"Oh yeah, totally," added Rainbow.

"Yipee, we get to be lookouts!"
"Oh my, being a lookout sounds stressful... but I'll go."

"I'd be delighted, darling."

"It sounds like a good strategy to me. We can split up and station ourselves at all the incoming roads."

"I can try to smell her coming."

Sunny's expression brightened at the collective enthusiasm. "This looks like it's turning into quite the fieldtrip. But not a bad idea, wouldn't you say?"

"No, I suppose not," said Discord as he stroked his goatee, losing himself in a memory. "I don't think I've gone anywhere with a group like this since that time with Fluttershy and the Cutie Mark Crusaders."

Snapping back to attention, he twirled his cane. "Well then, since we're all in a hurry, let's go my way." He tapped his cane against the floor, and a swirling multicolored vortex appeared beneath it. It looked very much to Sunset like the one inside the mirror, but with more plaid.

"A wormhole," said Twilight in awe. "We're going through a wormhole?"

"I'd call it more of a rabbit hole myself," said Discord with a grin. "Now down we go. Geronimo!"
With a wild leap, he jumped into the hole.

As his shouts disappeared into the void, Sunset walked up next, eying the plaid and now polka-dotted vortex. With a deep breath, she jumped in after him.

The trip might have lacked the pain of transformation that the other portal had, but it was nonetheless strange. It felt like something was dancing across her insides as she bounced this way and that, accompanied by metallic dings. When it finally stopped, the portal made a loud belch, and Sunset felt her behind hit concrete. "Oww," she groaned.

There was another loud belch, accompanied by a series of screams and a thud, and suddenly the majority of her friends were thrown to the ground in a heap.

"Dagnabbit, not again!" cried Applejack. "This is turnin' into a bad habit."

"As the comedy aficionado," said Pinkie with some authority as she tried to pull herself from the bottom of the pile, "I'd say it's becoming a running gag."

"Can we just get untangled?!!" screamed Spike. "I can hardly breathe!"

When Fluttershy was thrown from the portal, a hand reached out to grab her. "There you go, my dear," said Discord, helping her to the ground gently. "I hope the trip wasn't too bumpy."

"Oh no," said the shy girl. "It was actually kind of fun."

"Can't say it was the same for me," muttered Sunset irritably. "If you could catch her, why didn't you do it for the rest of us?"

Discord chose not to answer, and before Sunset could ask again, Sunny came falling out of the portal with a yelp, right as the portal zipped itself shut. "You okay?" Sunset asked.

"I'm fine," reassured Sunny. She looked around. "Where are we, exactly?"
Sunset examined their surroundings. They appeared to be in a narrow, dirty-looking alley. The air around them was tinged with the smell of garbage, motor oil, and car exhaust. Behind them was a large, rusty dumpster filled with black bags. Further down the alley was a high chain link fence. Turning back around to face the alley entrance, she saw the Social Security office standing across the road. "We're right on target."

"Of course we are," said Discord. "I have a superb sense of navigation, I'll have you know."

Walking to the alley entrance, Sunset looked around. The alley entrance faced north, opening up on an intersection, the road diverging around the side of the Social Security office, separating it from the small dental office to the right. The alley itself was formed by the garage of a used car lot on her left, and a bank on her right. With the alley closed off, Circinus could arrive from any of those other directions, either driving in or on foot if she parked a distance away.

Sunset turned to the others, finally back on their feet. "We've got three directions to cover, and there are eight of us—"

"Nine!" corrected Spike.

"Sorry, sorry, nine. So we split into groups of three. Who's going with who?"

After a brief discussion, they broke into their groups. Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, and Applejack would go down the road to the west, Rarity, Sunny, and Fluttershy would head north, while Sunset, Twilight, and Spike would head east.

"Remember y'all," said Applejack, "if you spot her comin', send the rest of us a message."

"Right." Sunset turned to Discord, a thought popping into her head. "How are we going to tell you?"

"A very good question. But an easy fix." With a smile and a tap of his cane, eight phones began to glow. "There."

Twilight pulled out her phone. "It says 555-5555."

Discord smirked. "Appropriate, don't you think?" He turned to the rest of the group. "Not that you'll need it. This will be easy as pie." Whirling around, he sauntered off toward the office.

Sunset stared at his retreating back before she and everyone else broke off in their chosen directions. "I hope so," she muttered.

The Canterlot City branch of the Social Security Administration was like every other, with a plain, if well-kept exterior and a simply furnished interior. The spacious waiting room contained rows of basic plastic chairs that were already filled almost to capacity. A large TV sat against a wall running on a loop of various benefits available, speaking in multiple languages. Against a far wall was a computer, ready to help people get in queue to be seen.

A now much older looking Low Key strode inside, frowning as he took it all in. Everything was so ordinary. He shook his head in disapproval. If it were up to him, there would be chocolate milk, cotton candy, orange elephants doing the can-can on the ceiling, and maybe some mariachis.

Sadly, he knew no one was going to ask him for his decorating advice. Such was life.

"Please take a seat," said the burly security guard seated at the table by the door, sounding incredibly languid, perhaps by the blandness of the surroundings. Or perhaps it had something to do with his
bloodshot eyes. Lack of sleep didn't exactly stimulate the brain either.

"Of course, my good man," Discord said courteously. His eyes flickered over to the door that led to the inner office. Discord would need to cross the expanse of the room to get there. But even in his sleep-deprived state, the guard surely wouldn't allow Discord to just waltz in, or break dance in, for that matter. "Pardon me, but which way is the bathroom?"

The guard yawned, pouring some extremely dark coffee from a thermos into a waiting mug. He stretched out his arm to point at a nearby hallway. "That way."

"Thank you." Ignoring the curious stares of those he passed, Discord made his way down the hall before slipping into the vacant men's room. It too, was rather bland, but that didn't bother him as much as the rest of the place. Restrooms were the sorts of spaces where Discord avoided throwing too much magic around.

Toilet humor had never quite appealed to the draconequus all that much, and letting loose his chaotic magic in a place like this totally untempered (as opposed to five-thirty sevenths tempered) just had the potential to go from chaotic fun to disgusting and unsanitary.

"Time to create a shortcut," he said, tapping his cane against a wall. Where it made contact, a tiny door appeared, growing more and more until it was large enough to fit him. Grabbing the handle, Discord whistled, making his way into a swirling multicolored void.

Inside the inner office, another door swirled into existence, and Discord strolled through, the door vanishing behind him. He took a few steps, only to press himself against a wall as a woman passed down a perpendicular hallway.

"Let's see, what did I need him to get again?" she muttered as she scribbled on a notepad. "Eggs, milk, a box of cookies, some cereal..."

Discord shrunk down, blending into the wall like some kind of mutant chameleon. Carefully, he crept behind her like a shadow, keeping himself pressed against the wall. When he reached the end of the hall, the draconequus let out a horrified gasp.

The woman he'd been following turned around, eying the wall carefully.

"You okay?" asked one of her nearby coworkers.

"I'm fine," replied the woman. "Just thought I heard something."

As she walked away, Discord stared on in muted horror. The room was filled with cubicles, each occupied with an agent, many already in the middle of discussion on the phone or in person. Cubicles!

He shuddered. Cubicles always gave him the willies. So much repetition, so much blandness, day in, day out. An endless sea of white cubicles.

"Better not stay here too long. A place like this could give me bland-germs or something." He took a step, then stopped. "But first, I'd better check in with HQ." Poor Sunset must have been getting quite nervous at this point, and Fluttershy was always reminding him to work his sense of consideration.

The miniaturized man stuck a finger in his ear, pulling out a camouflaged phone booth and stepping inside. He twirled his finger against the square dial pad, making it turn like a rotary phone.

"Hello?" came Sunset's confused greeting.
"It's me, my dear," he replied.

"Why does my caller ID have the numbers printed backwards?"

"Just the nature of chaos magic, my little pony. Oh, but you're not a pony right now, are you?" He tapped his chin. "My little human, then? Hmm, doesn't sound quite right..."

"Why are you calling? Did you fix everything?"

"Not quite yet." He twirled his cane between his fingers. "I just wanted to let you know that I have indeed gotten inside. Don't worry my dear, your little problem is completely in the bag."

Sunny stretched her legs. Not too far down the road, she, Rarity, and Fluttershy had found a small outdoor cafe, the perfect place to sit and wait.

Currently, the two younger girls were getting drinks for themselves. The sun was out and shining, the warm rays kissing the parts of her skin not under the umbrella, and streets were relatively quiet. Were they not acting as scouts, she would have loved to stay here for a while, just enjoying the atmosphere.

It was funny, thinking of herself as a scout. With the power at her command, it was not usually a task she had to perform. Though she doubted the ponies that did this sort of work always had these kinds of pleasant conditions.

The bell on the cafe door jingled, and the two teens returned. "Are you sure you didn't want anything, Your Majesty?" asked Rarity as she set down her drink.

"Please, Rarity, call me Sunny. And no, thank you. This body doesn't require food." It wasn't like she could get anything either. She'd forgotten to refill her purse before they left. But Sunny didn't want Rarity wasting her own money either. "I'm just content to be in the sunshine."

Rarity gave a little frown, but nodded. "If you insist, Your... Sunny." Taking another sip, the teen checked her phone for incoming messages. "It looks like the others found places to wait as well," she said. "Applejack said they found a hardware store. She's picking up tools for her brother."

"All the better, I suppose," commented Sunny as a light breeze ruffled her hair. "If one has to be a lookout in plain sight, better not to stand out."

"I always try not to stand out too much," said Fluttershy, taking a sip of tea. "I don't like it when people stare at me." From inside her pocket, the plastic butterfly emerged, floating around before settling on her arm. The shy girl petted its head. "I really hope she doesn't come this way," she said. From its resting place, the butterfly flapped its wings nervously. "I hate it when she looks at me."

Glancing at the road, Rarity's eyes widened. "I'm afraid, darling, that you may have spoken too soon." She pointed at a black Porsche coming toward them. "I saw that car outside when Vice Principal Luna parked."

As if on cue, the car came to a stop, and Mrs. Circinus stepped out. Her eyes homed in on Sunny. "Miss Skies. How unexpected to find you here," she said with no amount of real surprise. "You're quite early for our appointment."

Sunny forced her body to relax. "I could say the same. I thought you had a delivery to deal with."

Circinus huffed in annoyance. "I put them in line." Her purple eyes tuned to spy the other teens.
Fluttershy hastily put the butterfly back in her pocket, slipping her own face behind her protective curtain of hair.

"I see you have company," said Circinus. "But where is your daughter?"

"She's down the road," explained Rarity quickly. "She and Twilight came with us and Twilight said there was this delightful bookstore she wanted to see, so Sunset went with her." Sunny glanced inquiringly at Rarity, and the fashionista simply slid a finger over her phone.

"Is that so?" asked Circinus. "Well, seeing as we're both here early, I suggest we go ahead and get this done. I assume you two," she looked at the teens, "have the money to pay for your drinks?"

"Y-Yes ma'am," said Fluttershy.

"Good. Then we can leave." She glanced back at Sunny. "We can pick up Sunset in my car."

Sunny glanced at the teens, before getting up and following the other woman to her car. As they drove away, she saw Rarity typing furiously on her phone.

Sunset leaned against the wall of Dog Ear's Rare and Antique Book Emporium, letting out a sigh of relief as she hung up with Discord. He was inside. Just a little bit longer, and the danger would pass.

"Everything okay?" asked Spike, small body pressed close to her ankles.

"Yeah. Discord's inside."

Spike turned his green eyes back to the road. "You know, your world is seriously weird. I mean, dragons, unicorns, and spirits of chaos?"

"I thought the same thing about this place when I got here. Still do sometimes." Sunset smirked. "And you do remember you're saying this as a talking dog, right?"

"Hey, that only happened because of magic from your world." The puppy shifted on his paws. "Though I guess talking isn't so bad. Wish I didn't have to keep quiet in front of most people though."

"Yeah, that must be a pain sometimes." She could imagine it being difficult, being forced to stay quiet when you could say so much. "Can't be helped, though. I don't think this world is ready for a real talking dog."

"Hey," said Spike. "Does Equestria have talking dogs?"

"No. Most dogs like you don't talk. Though there are Diamond Dogs. They're larger and more... human-like, I guess you could say. They're not very nice, though. Obsessed with finding gems."

At that moment, Twilight walked out of the store, a small bundle of books in hand. "How's it going?" she asked.

"Not bad. Discord's inside. Rarity and AJ sent texts about where they are." Sunset eyed the merchandise. "Find anything good?"

Twilight nodded. "This is a great place. I need to remember to come here more often." She lifted up a small paperback, an old detective novel judging by the magnifying glass on the cover. "I got something for my mom, too."
"How's she doing, anyway?" Twilight hadn't said too much regarding the plagiarism mess over the last couple weeks.

Twilight sighed. "Not so great. Mom's been staying away from the media."

"They've been pounding at the door sometimes," added Spike.

"Her lawyers are still trying to sort it all out. If it were a single claim, that would be one thing. But there were over half a dozen, and the plaintiffs have been hard to get ahold of."

"If that doesn't scream suspicious," said Sunset, crossing her leather-clad arms over her chest, "I don't know what does."

Twilight nodded. "I'm sure they're lying. But they're hard to pin down, and the media coverage has just added to the pressure. Mom won't tell me much directly, but I know that after it started, we got a lot of spam calls, and that some belonged to them. Things have gotten better, but every now and then, we still get calls demanding money. Spike told me Dad got a call like that a couple days ago. All I heard was Dad yelling."

She clutched the book tighter against her chest, as if its presence would soothe her. "Even if things have quieted down, Mom's still pretty shaken up."

"She's starting to do that frizzy hair thing Twilight does when she gets stressed," said Spike.

Sunset put a hand on her shoulder. "It'll get better, Twi. And if you need me to do anything, just ask."

Twilight smiled. "Thanks." She relaxed for a moment, leaning against the concrete exterior of the store, before her face turned thoughtful.

"What's the matter, Twi?" asked Sunset.

"It's nothing really," said the bespectacled girl. "It's just that... when we met Mrs. Circinus, I had this little nagging feeling like she was familiar."

"You mean you've met her before?" Sunset asked. The woman had certainly known about Twilight, but only by reputation, or so she said, anyway.

"No, I don't think so," admitted Twilight. "I don't think I'd forget her if I'd really met her before."

She shook her head, ponytail swinging to and fro. "It's probably just my imagination. I mean it's not like I've ever had the chance to meet an agent of Child Protective Services before."

"Or maybe she just reminds you of somebody else you've seen and you just can't place it," suggested Spike. "Happens to me with dogs in the park sometimes. Well, with smells anyway."

"That could be it," Sunset pondered. She'd had similar experiences herself, meeting certain people in this world who were vaguely familiar, but she could never place them. The fact that they could have reminded her of somepony from Equestria she'd seen or passed by just muddled things even more.

As she continued to ponder these thoughts, her phone buzzed. She pulled it out. "Rarity sent a text." Her eyes scanned the message, and she let out a curse. "Oh Tartarus, Circinus just got here, and she's coming over to pick me up."

Sunset's head snapped up to Twilight. "You need to call Discord and tell him to hurry and get that number in, and..." her brain stopped as an idea popped into her mind. She typed rapidly. "Pass him
this, too."

Twilight looked at her phone. "What's this?"

"The number on my forged card," Sunset explained. "Tell him to add that in the system if he has time. I don't want to risk my number being looked up." Putting her phone away, she turned in the direction Circinus would be coming from. "I'll go meet them part way. You call and tell him what's going on!"

Sunset ran off before Twilight could reply. It wasn't long before she met the black car. It stopped, the window rolling down to reveal Circinus's smug face. "Hello, Miss Shimmer. I hope you're ready to go."

Sunset locked eyes with her. "Yeah."

She could only hope that Discord could delay things somehow.

Discord's whole body vibrated as the call came in. Surprised, he pulled out his phone booth. "I told you I had it all in claw."

"It's me," said the voice Twilight. "We have a problem."

Discord grew increasingly sour as the human girl related the news. "Well, that's quite the problem," he said as he jotted down the number on a lime green notepad. "But don't worry your frantic little head, Twilight. I'll find a way to deal with it."

Hanging up, Discord scowled. An early bird, was she? This was going to be harder than he thought. Pulling a periscope from his pocket, he looked into it, the other end stretching to the waiting room outside. The two Equestrians were already here, being escorted by who he presumed was this Circinus woman. "Well that's just dandy, isn't it?"

He took just a moment to study the woman, the way she carried herself, the way she announced that she was here to see one of the agents before taking a seat. Discord decided he definitely didn't like her.

Not that he had reason to before, but there was a distinct lack of joy and restriction to her attitude that didn't appeal to him. Most definitely a control freak.

Still, this was bad. He needed a distraction, and fast. Something to keep whichever of these poor, boring, cubicle-shackled saps that woman wanted to see busy. Or better yet, something to keep all of them busy. Looking around, he searched for a potential source of chaos amongst the boredom.

His red eyes landed on one of the agents sitting in a cubicle at the back. He was an older man, wide in build with large, black-framed glasses, totally gray hair, a rather pasty complexion, and a pin on the collar of his button-down shirt in the shape of an atom symbol. He simply screamed the quiet, nerdy type. But more importantly, there was a distracted nature to the way he worked. Something was on his mind.

Discord smiled. Always beware the quiet ones.

With a tap of his cane, he popped out of existence, popping back in the chair in front of the man's desk. "Hello there," greeted Discord cheerily.

The man jumped in his seat. "H-Hello," he replied, taking a moment to straighten his tie. "W-When
"did you get here?"

"Oh, just now, my good sir." Discord held out his hand. "My name is Mr. Low Key. I believe we
had an appointment, Mr..." he eyed the nameplate on the man's desk, "Nuclear Family."

The bespectacled man looked confused. "Did we?"

"Would I be here if we didn't?"

"I suppose not," conceded Nuclear Family, still looking just a little bit confused. He shook his head.
"It must have slipped my mind. I'm so sorry."

"No problem at all," assured Discord, before his eyes caught something else. There on the desk was
a framed picture of a young woman in her twenties, with long brown hair adorned with a lily, and
blue eyes. And beside that was a little card that proclaimed in large letters "It's A Boy!"

"Oh my, is that your daughter?" he asked conversationally as he gestured to the photo. "She's quite
lovely."

The man, in turn, looked at the picture before giving one of the warmest, proudest smiles Discord
had ever seen. "That's my Waterlily. She had a baby a few days ago, a boy."

"You don't say. I never would've guessed," replied Discord, keeping his deadpan to a minimum.
"You must be so proud."

"I am," said the man, puffing out his chest a little. Then, his expression dimmed. "I wish I could
spend more time with them. But I've been so busy." He sighed, lifting his glasses to massage his
nose, and revealing the beginning of eye bags. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be going on."

"It's quite alright. I completely understand," soothed Discord. "A father deserves to be proud when
his daughter has a baby. Why, doesn't it just make you want to get up and celebrate?"

The man looked embarrassed. "I suppose so, yes."

Discord smiled. The fish was on the hook, now all he had to do was reel it in. "It's the sort of
occasion that puts a song in your heart, and you feel like you just have to let it out." He tapped his
cane lightly on the floor, and small tendrils of magic reached out to the unwitting man.

Not exactly the mental manipulation he'd used on Twilight and her friends oh so long ago. Just a
little something to loosen his inhibitions and make him more susceptible to suggestion. Fluttershy
would be proud of his restraint.

"Yes..." For a moment, Nuclear Family's face went blank. "I should celebrate. I... want to..." As if
struck by lightning, he shot to his feet. "I know just what I want to do!"

"Good man," complimented Discord, gesturing out to the aisle. "Go and do what you want."

With a nod of thanks, Nuclear Family marched out of his cubicle. His expression was grim, eyes
blazing with determination, giving him all the look of a zealous knight embarking on a holy quest.
Reaching the center of the aisle, in full view of the whole room, he planted his feet firmly on the tiled
floor.

"My grandson was just born last week!" he declared, shouting up at the ceiling. "So I'm going to
sing!" He took a deep breath, filling every inch of his lungs with air, and then...
"DAY-O!"

All activity came to a dead stop. Every eye turned to stare in disbelief at the man belting out the words at the top of his lungs. Some of the faces bore unspoken questions, questions no doubt related to sanity, or lack thereof, or the possibilities of a stroke. One coworker shook her head while muttering "He's finally snapped. I knew he was going to snap."

"DAY-O!" Nuclear Family sang again, undaunted as his voice carried loud and clear over the whole room. "Daylight come and me wanna go home. Day me say day me say day Me say day me say day-o."

For his part, the Lord of Chaos too, stood there dumbfounded. "The... Banana Boat Song?" He scratched his head. That wasn't exactly what Discord would've chosen for a celebratory musical number. "Why would he think of—" Discord shook his head. He had even more important chaos to wreak, and that song would buy him only a few minutes of extra time.

In which case, it seemed best for him to ensure no one would end the song prematurely. "Let's get everyone else in the mood, shall we?" More magic poured out from his cane, reaching out for every person in the room.

With a start, everyone, client or coworker, began to sway to the music, enraptured by the sound of the singer's voice and lost in the rhythm. As for Nuclear Family, the older man began to dance, swinging his arms and torso as he recounted the song of the tired banana boat worker before his captivated audience.

With any luck, they'd demand an encore or two. A brilliant bit of chaos if he said so himself, and he did. But there was yet more for him to accomplish, so for now, he had to leave the festivities.

A shame, really, because Discord had to admit, Nuclear Family had a truly amazing singing voice. He really should have taken a career on stage rather than one as an office worker.

Shrinking back down, Discord popped across the room, turning into another hall where there stood a door labeled "Server Room". Grinning wickedly, he slipped inside. The walls of machines beeped and blinked, processing tons of information every second. Restoring himself to his proper size, Discord walked up to one.

"Human technology really is quite fascinating." He ran a finger over the metal. "Such a simple, ordered machine at the base, but capable of so much creativity in the right claws." Funny how things like that worked out.

Tapping his cane against the machine, chaotic magic reached out, connecting with the system. A jolt went down his spine as he felt the current of the computer. "Ooh, that feels good. Now let's see, numbers, numbers... ah, here we go."

First was Sunny Skies. Magically connected to the machine as he was, it felt just like writing on a blank page, but far more interesting since his pen was electricity, and every stroke came with a delightful tingle.

Adding in the last flourish to Sunny's record, Discord moved onto Sunset. Now, what was that number of hers again? There were so many numbers in this thing, so many now swimming inside his head, like countless digital fish.

The bulk of them appeared random, but upon a closer look were actually formed on a pattern. How very disappointing. But then there were others, young, fresh ones that were truly the offspring of
randomness.

As Discord waded in the pool of truly random numbers and electric charges, a single string floated to the surface of his thoughts, catching his attention before it sank back into the machinery, transcribed by current. Had that been Sunset Shimmer's number he'd just added?

Quickly retrieving the number and checking it against his notepad, he shook his head. No, this number was definitely wrong. "Silly me," he admonished, guiding the circuits to correct the error. Filling his brain with all these random numbers and combinations was a bit too enjoyable. He'd almost put the wrong number in.

Having completed his mission, he disconnected himself from the machines and strode back outside, shrinking his body down once again to avoid being seen. Back with Nuclear Family's musical party, he was indeed doing an encore.

In fact, things were in full swing. The swaying and bobbing from before had erupted into wild dancing. Many had joined together to form a chorus for the song, while another woman was counting the stacks of bananas with the singer by typing on her keyboard, as if she were the tallyman, or tallywoman, in this case, from the song.

There were even a few couples dancing in the aisle like it was a ballroom, one an older man who seemed more like a client, and a young woman in a business skirt and jacket who was definitely an employee, both twirling around each other in frankly graceful movements considering the man's age.

The whole boring cubicle farm had been transformed into a joyous party. It made Discord feel especially proud and accomplished, bringing such chaos to a place as dull as this cubicle wasteland.

But just then, the door to the main office burst open, and Mrs. Circinus stormed in, Sunny, Sunset Shimmer, and the sleep-deprived guard following behind.

"What is the meaning of this?!" snapped the social worker as she beheld the sight before her. "I could hear that racket all the way from the waiting room! What do you think you're doing? Get back to work at once!"

"Ma'am," said the guard carefully. "I appreciate you getting me, but you really shouldn't barge in here ahead of me—"

"I am an agent of the federal government as much as these people are!" she yelled back, making the guard cow before her. "Except it seems I take my job much more seriously."

Like the crack of a whip, the shouted commands brought everyone to attention, and the chaotic spell was broken. Everyone returned to their seats red-faced and confused, but none more so than Nuclear Family, though there was just a hint of satisfaction as well.

The young woman who had been twirling in the aisles stopped dead, giving a sideways glance to her elderly dancing partner. He wiggled his eyebrows, and the woman turned the color of a beet, slinking away to her cubicle, while the man walked back to his with a little whistle.

Discord frowned. Circinus was a wet blanket too, it seemed, though with a deliciously chaotic temper he could almost smell, like traces of a sweet perfume. Well, if she liked spoiling his fun, then perhaps he'd stay to see her fun be spoiled. As they say, what goes around comes around.

He produced a small bag of popcorn. Time to watch the fireworks.
"What do you mean you found it?!" screeched Circinus, face turning pure crimson. The eyes of everyone else in the office turned in her direction, but quickly turned back when she shot them all a glare that would have been right at home on the face of a full grown dragon.

From her seat nearby, Sunset winced at the volume while also trying to keep the smirk from her lips. Thank you, Discord. Never thought I'd say that.

She could have done without the punch to the eardrums, though. It reminded her of the time Celestia demonstrated what the Royal Canterlot Voice was like.

The poor agent was a young man, probably late twenties or early thirties if Sunset had to guess, wearing a very new-looking suit and a loose tie, and a pin in the shape of a number two pencil. He was also cowering behind his desk like a scared rabbit. It seemed that despite being a government employee himself, the raw force of Circinus's personality had him firmly trapped under her thumb.

"T-That's what I said, ma'am." He pointed an unsteady finger at the screen. "Sunny Skies, resident of Canterlot City, date of birth July 26, 1981."

Circinus narrowed her eyes, and her next words came out like the deadly hiss of a venomous snake. "Explain yourself at once, Mr. Pencil Pusher. You checked twice before this and found nothing. Are you telling me you couldn't figure out how to search for a name in your own database?"

"I-I did search, and I did it correctly. I d-don't know what happened," said Pencil, slinking down in his seat like he desperately wanted to disappear. "Please don't yell at me again, ma'am. I'm just doing my job."

"Doing your job would mean you wouldn't have made a mistake twice, and it would have also meant contacting me within the original window you gave me instead of being late. And doing your job certainly wouldn't entail throwing a party with all the other employees during work hours," snapped Circinus, purple eyes flashing with barely contained fury.

She took a few deep, heavy breaths in order to relax, leaning back in her seat. "I have every mind to contact your superior and tell them just what kind of employee you are," she said, glaring icily at Pencil Pusher. "Perhaps they'll rethink their decision about hiring you."

"No, please!" begged the man, wringing his hands together. "I need this job! I swear, I did the same thing before that I did now! Please don't tell my supervisor!"

"I don't see why I shouldn't," said Circinus, completely unmoved by his emotional outburst. "An office hardly needs employees that are so incompetent that they can't properly look up one person in their database. You've only been employed for a month, but even you should have been able to accomplish that. Since you did not, give me one good reason why I shouldn't recommend you be fired immediately for what I've seen here today."

"How did you know that?" asked Pencil Pusher in surprise. "I didn't tell you—"

"Your scheduler," Circinus snapped with frustration, pointing at the little book on his desk as if it were obvious. "It's relatively new, and when you opened it last time we met, I saw that you had written a note to report to this office on a date one month ago. You also seem to do everything in your power to advertise that status other than using a neon sign. I presumed, however, that you could still use the database effectively. Now stop stalling and answer my question!"

"I-" the man stammered, unable to find any sort of explanation. "I don't..."

Sunset's mirth vanished. The poor guy didn't deserve to be this woman's verbal and emotional
punching bag, especially not for things they were responsible for. "He says he did the same thing. Besides, I told you it was probably a glitch." She turned to the frightened agent. "Right?" She let the question hang in the air, a lifeline of encouragement.

"Y-Yeah," he said, getting just a sliver of confidence back. "It must have been some sort of technical error." He straightened his shirt, rumpled by his earlier panic. "I can alert the maintenance people and have them look into it," he said, sounding every bit like a calm, composed professional.

His confidence vanished, however, when his eyes met Circinus's angry glare again. He sank back in his seat, seeming within an inch of shielding himself with his arms. "Don't hurt me," he muttered.

"There, there, Mr. Pencil Pusher," soothed Sunny, taking his hands gently in hers. "It's alright. We all know it wasn't really your fault. It was just a computer error, that's all." She smiled at him, the practiced smile of a graceful princess. "I would like to thank you for your assistance. I was quite worried when I heard my name wasn't showing up. I'm so glad you were able to find me in your records."

"I... thank you, ma'am," he said, smiling back at her as a blush rose on his cheeks. "I'm glad I could help you."

"And thank you," said Sunny, turning to Circinus. Her white, toothy grin practically sparkled in the fluorescent lighting, "for bringing this to my attention. I'd hate to have had this happen if I was doing something important."

Circinus scowled, fists tightening at her sides. "You're... welcome," she said, spitting out the last word like a rotten fruit.

"Mom, can we go now?" asked Sunset, feigning just a bit of impatience. "I have homework I need to do." Her cyan eyes glanced over at Circinus, who, despite her efforts to be calm, still looked ready to blow a blood vessel. "I mean, we're done here, right?"

"Yes, sweetheart," answered Sunny, looking down at her indulgently. "Yes we are." She let go of the agent's hands. "I'm sorry, but we need to go. My daughter has homework." She smiled. "She in the top of her class, you know."

"That's, uh, wonderful," said the man, pulling back his hands with a touch of disappointment.

Sunny turned to the social worker. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Circinus."

The woman glared darkly at the pair for a moment before finally managing to school her features, fixing them in a calm mask. "I'll... be in touch, Miss Skies," she said weakly. It seemed to Sunset that the woman's efforts at control had spent most of her energy.

"I don't see what for," answered Sunny as she slipped her hand around Sunset's. "But I'm sure if there are any issues, you'll let me know."

With that, Sunset followed her mentor out of the office, leaving the woman behind. The glare of the sun outside made the teenager squint. But when the spots disappeared from her vision, she was greeted by the sight of her friends, plus Discord, standing deep in the alley across the road.

"I take it y'all got her off your back?" asked Applejack, moving behind the dumpster to stay out of sight.

Sunset grinned. "Yup." She turned to Discord. "Thanks. That was definitely an interesting distraction."
Discord waved a hand. "Thank you, my dear. It was nothing. Though I will admit, the choice of music wasn't mine."

The fire-haired teen raised an eyebrow. "Wait, so you're saying they picked *The Banana Boat Song* all by themselves?"

Discord shrugged. "Only one of them. I just nudged the others so they'd follow along."

Sunset smiled teasingly. "So the master of surprise was surprised himself?"

"Well, it *does* happen every once in a while." Then, Discord's face scrunched up in thought. "But I get the feeling it was some kind of reference."

Applejack stretched her arms. "As great as it was to knock that snake in the grass down a peg, I have chores I need to get back to on the farm."

"I have some dresses that need sewing," said Rarity.

"Yeah," added Rainbow. "And I still need to change the bulb for Tank's heat lamp." The athlete turned to Discord. "Hey, could you drop me off at my place?"

"Ooh, could you drop me off too?" shouted Pinkie with a bounce. "I want to go through that super fun portal again."

"Oh wait," groaned Rainbow Dash softly. "I left my bag at Sunset's place. Could you take me there first?"

"I left some of my things there too," said Twilight.

"I left one of my bags there as well," said Rarity. "My second best hairbrush was in there."

Discord crossed his arms at the teens. "I'm not a taxi service, you know."

"Oh my, I left my things there too, and Angel will be waiting for his late afternoon snack. Discord," asked Fluttershy softly as the plastic butterfly hovered around her head. "Could you please take me back to Sunset's apartment too?"

Discord looked down at Fluttershy and her big, blue eyes and his resolve crumbled. "Oh, alright." With a tap of his cane, a portal opened in the alley again. "Come along everyone, in you go."

"Everybody try not to land on top of me this time!" said Spike as he hopped in, Twilight chasing after him.

Sunny went ahead of Sunset while the teen hung back, taking a moment to ponder Discord's reaction. He'd certainly broken down quickly. Not that it was easy resisting Fluttershy when she looked at you like that, but he seemed to have a strange soft spot for her shy friend. Did he know her Equestrian counterpart? Sunset made a mental note to send Princess Twilight a message tonight to ask.

"Aren't you going in?" asked the man, moving beside her and shaking the former unicorn from her thoughts.

"Yeah, just lost in thought. I... thanks, Discord. You were a real lifesaver."

Discord smiled wryly. "Well, I don't get to hear that too often. But you're quite welcome. Besides, it's not often Celestia asks *me* for favors. And personally, I find this dimension quite interesting. I..."
heard of this intriguing thing called the internet, and other things called memes. I may have to come visit more often.”

A small part of the teen filled with dread. Discord plus the internet could lead to trouble. Looks like I’ll have to add a warning to that message to Twilight.

As she pondered the possibility of Discord bringing potential internet nonsense back to Equestria, there was a flash of movement in the corner of her eye. Turning around, she spotted Mrs. Circinus almost stomping back to her car. Remembering how she’d torn into that poor agent, an idea formed in her head. "Hey, Discord, can you do one last thing?"

Sunset gestured for the man to lean down, and whispered in his ear, pointing at a particular car. When she finished, Discord looked down at her with a wide, mischievous grin.

"Ooh, I like the way you think!" he said, rubbing his hands together eagerly. Twirling his cane like a baton, he pointed it at the car just as Circinus was getting into the driver's seat.

Just as she turned the key to the ignition, there was a series of loud hissing noises as all four of the tires deflated, wailing as the rubber was magically punctured. At the same time, the hood of the car popped open like a spring, just as plumes of smoke billowed from the engine, and both the front and rear bumpers fell off.

"Reformed you may be," laughed Discord as he watched the proceedings, "but there's still a little evil streak in you."

The words made her shift uncomfortably. She liked to think she'd gotten away from her raging she-demon days. "I wouldn't call it evil. I just didn't like how she treated that guy."

"Oh don't worry so much," said Discord, poking her in the arm with a gloved finger. "Take it from me, without a little chaos, life would be boring." Stepping up to the portal, he twirled his cane around. "Now come along. I have teenagers to transport." Stepping into the portal, he disappeared.

Looking back across the street, Sunset saw Circinus standing by her car, screaming and cursing like a veteran sailor. She kicked a flattened tire, only for the hubcap to fall to the ground, followed by the other three.

Laughing, Sunset jumped into the portal.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about how long this one is. As I’ve mentioned before, normally I stay away from chapters this long, but I just couldn’t bring myself to split this one. I hope you all enjoyed it.

And also, can anyone tell me what the reference Discord was talking was? Go head, try.
Chapter 14: Overboard

Sunset Shimmer hummed a tune to herself as she walked down the corridor of the apartment complex. Her eyes were largely fixed on her phone, only glancing up every so often to check her surroundings. A video of a line of towers and structures firing down on miniature monsters dominated her screen.

Mobile games, like their kin, were something that Sunset had never given much attention or thought. But when Rainbow showed her a few after class today, she found herself interested. So it was that, after doing some searching of her own, Sunset found herself completely hooked on a playlist detailing some fancy tower defense game.

Walking down the hall, and thankfully not running into anything, Sunset stopped by her apartment door and turned her key in the lock. "I'm back!"

"Hello..." there was a deep inhaling of breath followed by an exhale, "Sunset. How was school?"

The anemic tone of Sunny's voice made the teenager pause, as did the realization that the apartment's thermostat had been turned way up.

Immediately, Sunset spotted her mentor. Her body was splayed across the sofa, wrapped in one of their extra blankets. One of her arms hung limp, barely peeking out from the blanket, while the other shielded the woman's eyes. Her necklace rested on the coffee table.

"It was fine. But are you okay?"

"It's nothing to be concerned about," said Sunny, rolling onto her side to stare at Sunset. "I, and by which I mean my actual body, is feeling quite tired and sore at the moment, and that sensation made itself known in the construct." She shivered under her blanket. "Not to mention very, very cold."

Sunset sat down on the sofa's armrest, right next to her mentor's head. "Did something bad happen?"

"On the contrary, Cadance and Shining Armor just had their first foal. Luna and I, along with Twilight and her friends, were naturally invited to the crystalling."

"A crystaling?" Sunset asked, mind ready to dig into that particular topic, before another question popped into her head. "Wait, if Cadance was the one that just had a baby, why are you so tired?"

Sunny gave a small smile, letting her other arm sink beneath the blanket. "There was some commotion prior to the ceremony which Luna and I had to handle. It's nothing for their human counterparts to worry about in the future," she amended quickly, noticing the unspoken question Sunset had been ready to ask. "It was something magic-related, so I doubt they'll have the same issues with their Flurry Heart."
Sunset hummed. That was good news, certainly, but it just made her even more curious to know what had actually happened. For the moment, she latched onto one particular detail. "Flurry Heart?"

The pink-haired woman offered a weak chuckle. "It, as they say, makes sense in context."

Groaning, she slowly pushed herself into an upright position. Sunny shivered as the blanket pooled to the floor, goose pimples forming across her skin. "I'd tell you more, but at the moment, I think a hot shower would be best. The sensation of the water may cross over into my proper body."

With all the speed of a tortoise, Sunny made her way to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. The sound of the shower faucet turning on came through the wood.

Kicking off her boots and removing her jacket, Sunset stretched, allowing herself to relax. Cadance had had a baby. From what she remembered of the pink alicorn, she'd make a natural parent, for sure. But still, curiosity gnawed at her brain. Glancing down, she spotted her backpack.

Well, since Princess Celestia is busy, why don't I ask somepony else?

Picking up her journal, she took out her pen and began writing.

Dear Twilight

How are things going over there? I just got back from school, and Sunny told me about Flurry Heart. She said there was some kind of problem, but she was so worn out and cold that she wouldn't give me any details before she went to take a hot shower. So what happened? Is everything okay over there? And what the hay is a crystaling?

Sunset Shimmer

For a moment, she sat there in silence, before the journal glowed, and a response began to magically appear on the page.

Dear Sunset

The construct is exhausted? I know Princess Celestia said it could share memories, but it's actually experiencing physiological feedback? That's so fascinating! I wonder how far that extends? Maybe I need to do some experiments. I could—

Sorry, I got distracted there, didn't I? No need to worry. Everything is perfectly fine now, though it was kind of scary for a while. To answer your questions, a crystaling is a special ceremony performed in the Crystal Empire (that's Cadance's kingdom, if you didn't know) to celebrate the birth of a new crystal pony.

As for the problem... Flurry Heart is an alicorn. Can you believe it? A baby alicorn! I certainly couldn't, and I saw it with my own eyes.

Unfortunately, this meant Flurry's magic was incredibly powerful. Think a normal foal's magical surges, then multiply that by fifty. By the time we got there, poor Cadance and Shining had been up for days, which would have been bad enough. But then Flurry accidentally shattered the Crystal Heart, and as a result, the weather of the Frozen North threatened to bury the capital.

But thanks to some help from Starlight's old friend Sunburst, we were able to repair the Crystal Heart (and moderate Flurry's magic to something manageable), so everything went back to normal. Sunny's reaction is probably due to Princess Celestia and Princess Luna holding back the blizzard.
I still can't believe I'm an aunt now. It's all so hard to take in. And Flurry is so ADORABLE, Sunset! I'm going to have to send you pictures when I can. Which reminds me, I didn't actually take any. How could I forget? I'm going to have to add "pack camera" to my checklist.

And get a new camera. Spike's reminding me that my last one got ruined during an experiment.

Oh, Pinkie's back at the dessert cart. I'd better go get something before she cleans it out again. I'll have to write you more later.

Your Friend, Princess Twilight Sparkle

Sunset closed the journal, chuckling a little at Pinkie Pie's antics. That's Pinkie, alright.

A baby alicorn. Before she'd left Equestria all those years ago, she would've been enraged by that sort of thing, of a pony that had simply been born with the wings she'd been convinced she deserved. Even now, there was a tiny voice in the very back of her head, muttering darkly.

Sunset squelched that thought back where it belonged. It was stupid to hate a pony just for being born that way. Besides, by that logic, she'd have to hate both Princess Celestia and Princess Luna too. They'd been alicorns from day one.

Her brain paused, stretching that the thought out further. How had Princess Celestia and Luna been born? Did they even have parents? She vaguely remembered Celestia muttering something that sounded like "mother" once, but beyond that, Celestia never really said much.

Sunset's descent into the mental quicksand that was the origins of the princesses and all the philosophical implications therein was stopped by a buzzing from her phone. Looking at the screen, she saw an incoming text from the human Twilight Sparkle.

Twilight: Sunset, help! Spike accidentally got mud on my agenda. What was today's chemistry homework?

Sunset pulled out her own agenda, flipping through the pages until she found today's date.

Sunset: Problems 22-27, 30-38, and 40-42.

The response came within five seconds. Had Twilight even read the message?

Twilight: Thank you.

Sunset was about to type a simple "welcome", but stayed her hand. Why not share the news?

Sunset: Welcome. Hey, you'll never guess what Princess Twilight just messaged me about.

Sunset smiled as she continued to type away.

Sunny released a contented sigh as she exited the bathroom, a wave of steam trailing behind her. She ran a brush through her hair, dampness still clinging to the pink strands as she smoothed them into place. A chuckle drew her attention to the sofa, and she saw Sunset staring down at her phone. "Something amusing?"

Sunset looked up in surprise. "I was just texting Twilight. I already messaged Princess Twilight before she called, so I was telling her about Flurry Heart." She laughed again. "She didn't want too many details; spoilers, you know? But the idea of it has her almost as excited as Princess Twilight."
She regarded Sunny for a moment. "How are you? Feeling better?"

"Much, thank you," answered Sunny. Noticing her blouse was crooked, she grabbed her necklace, and with a flash of golden light, the brush was working on its own as she fixed the buttons. "It was just what I needed." It had also probably been the hottest shower she'd ever taken in a very long time, almost scalding. But it had been well worth it to fight off the horrible chill and aching muscles.

"And what about the real you?" asked Sunset, averting her eyes to avoid any potentially awkward views.

"Much the same, I'm happy to report." Even now, tapping into the flow of memories from her proper body, she knew the sensation of heat on skin had managed to travel back across the dimensions, reciprocated by a feeling of relief.

With one final stroke, the brush flew off and returned to the bathroom. Fixing the last button, Sunny grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs. It occurred to me while I was showering that I still need to give the landlady the deposit. I'll be back shortly."

Walking out into the hallway, Sunny made her way to the elevator, wondering if the landlady, Cozy Hearth, had made any cookies. When she and Sunset had met the woman the first time, Cozy had mentioned how she liked baking cookies, and would be more than happy to share them with her tenants if they visited.

As she walked into the lobby of the building, Sunny's eyes drifted to the window, and saw something, or rather, someone, she'd not been expecting. There, out at the front of the building, was Mrs. Circinus, her gaze fixed to the ground, while her fingers were splotched with dirt.

Now what could she be doing here? I thought she was done for after yesterday. Deciding it best to find out sooner rather than later, Sunny headed for the door. "Hello there, Mrs. Circinus."

The indigo-haired woman jumped, whirling around to see Sunny standing before her. She cleared her throat, seeming just a trifle awkward at having been caught doing whatever she was doing. "Hello, Miss Skies."

Sunny offered her a polite smile. "Were you looking for something?"

A look of irritation crossed the woman's face. "Yes. I was searching for my car keys."

"Oh?" asked Sunny, doing her best to suppress her amusement. "You seemed to have them yesterday when we ran into each other."

"Those were my spares," explained Circinus, irritation growing. "I... lost my keys when I came here yesterday, and I don't like the thought of even one copy sitting around for someone else to pick up."

Well, at least that explained what she was doing out here. Still, Sunny felt the need for a bit of verbal sparring. "I see. For a moment I thought you had another problem to work out with me."

The social worker gave her a sharp look. "Did I detect a hint of irritation? I'm merely doing my job."

"On no, not at all. But you did seem quite convinced that I was a fake." She regarded the woman for a moment, noticing how her purple eyes had darkened with suspicion and anger. "In fact, I get the
distinct feeling that you still don't believe it."

Circinus sniffed sharply. "As I said before, I've learned to trust my intuition, almost as much as I trust facts. You will forgive me, Miss Skies, if despite it all, something in me still has doubts."

"I suppose that's your own problem, then," said Sunny with a carefree shrug of her shoulders. "I've done everything I can to convince you." She locked eyes with the other woman. "Though I would like to point out that if you continue visiting, and more importantly, insisting I'm a fake without just cause, it could be considered a form of harassment."

The indigo-haired woman went rigid, anger rising on her sharp features, before being quickly hidden by an icy mask. Sunny had hit a nerve. "Is that meant to be a threat?"

"Only a warning. I don't think that sort of thing would go over well with your superiors, nor your attempt to streamline the adoption process."

"If you're thinking you can threaten me, Miss Skies, I should inform you that I'm quite well respected in my department, thank you."

Respected, or feared? Sunny could easily see more of the latter and less of the former.

"And as far as my actions are concerned, it seemed a convenient and suitable match. Your daughter would have had opportunities and resources opened up for her, and the security of a bright future."

"From what Sunset told me, it seemed like it would've been lacking in love. That hardly seems a worthwhile trade."

"Those who possess talents and potential and fail to use them are the true wastes of society," replied Circinus. The words almost sounded like a mantra, spoken with the conviction of a zealot, and all the chill of an arctic gale.

She offered Sunny a polite smile. "But I assure you, Miss Shimmer's impressions were quite mistaken. I only had the most benign of intentions."

Sunny donned her own mask of politeness. "I'm sure. But even still, if this were to be reported to your superiors, it could even make its way to court."

For a moment, there was silence. "Miss Skies," said Circinus coolly, "if you aren't Sunset Shimmer's mother—"

"I am."

"A hypothetical, then. If you were, in fact, actually a fake, though I do not know how at the moment, but if you were, then court would be a risk for you too, wouldn't it?" She took a few threatening steps forward. "The thing with forgeries is that, while you can fool some experts, you can never fool them all. Eventually, one will uncover the deception. And a court of law is a difficult place to hide in. So many potential background checks that could unearth even the slightest inaccuracy or flaw."

Centuries of practice allowed Sunny to keep her face neutral. "So what you're saying is that a court case could be detrimental to both of us, is that correct? Hypothetically speaking, of course."

Circinus nodded. "Hypothetically."

"Then I suppose, in this hypothetical situation, it would depend on who would take those risks, now wouldn't it?" She held the other woman's gaze for several seconds. Then she offered a smile. "But of
course, I'm not a fake, so there wouldn't be any real risks for me."

"Of course you're not," grumbled the other woman.

Still smiling, Sunny turned her attention to the bushes. "Ah, now what's this?" Bending down, she picked up a set of silver keys and offered them to Circinus. "Are these the ones you lost?"

"... Yes, they are." She snatched the keys away, offering a stiff thank-you before turning around and walking towards a dark green car parked only a few feet away.

Sunny raised an eyebrow. That certainly wasn't the vehicle she'd used the day before. Did she have another? From what she'd gathered of this world, most humans only owned one.

Circinus glared at the vehicle with disgust as she took out a different set of keys to unlock it. As she did, Sunny called to her. "Good day, Mrs. Circinus!"

The indigo-haired woman's head snapped in Sunny's direction, and a split second glare was replaced once again by an icy look. "Good day. Miss Skies."

As the woman drove off, Sunny walked back inside, her mood lifted even higher from the encounter. Walking down the hall, she made her way to Cozy Hearth's office, located adjacent to her own apartment.

Knocking on the door, Sunny heard a muffled response, and headed inside.

The office interior would strike one as odd, in the sense that it was less of an office and more like a living room. There were couches and tables for guests, as well as several personal photographs on the wall. The smell of cinnamon permeated the air, both from an air freshener plugged into an outlet, and from lingering smells creeping in from under the connecting door to Cozy's apartment.

In fact, the only thing that indicated it was an office other than the plate on the door, was the small desk in the middle of the room and a pair of wooden file drawers at the back.

It was, Sunny felt, an interior to match its owner. Cozy Hearth was a somewhat petite woman, standing an inch below the average, and on the heavier side, with peach-colored skin, lively light brown eyes that were only barely touched by the wrinkles of middle age, and blonde hair cut short in a wedge style.

The most recognizable thing about Cozy, however, was her white apron, emblazoned with the image of a russet kitten curled up against a roaring fireplace. She'd been wearing it during that first meeting, and had openly admitted her great sentimental attachment for the garment, and how she wore it as often as one would wear a favorite pair of shoes.

The swivel chair behind the desk was turned around, a small crown of blonde poking its way over the top. It might have been her imagination, but it looked a little different. "Mrs. Hearth, it's Sunny Skies. I brought the deposit you asked for."

There was no response. "Mrs. Hearth?"

The chair turned around, and Sunny came face-to-face not with Cozy Hearth, but with a much younger, paler girl, with wavy blonde hair and blue eyes. She gave a bright smile. "Like, hi!"

"Hello," replied Sunny slowly. Was this a relative? She didn't look like one. "I'm Sunny Skies. Where is Mrs. Hearth?"
The girl bounced a little in the swivel chair, seeming to test the softness of the cushions. "She's, like, not here."

"Is she going to be back soon? My daughter and I are new tenants here, and I brought the deposit by for her."

"She'll be back, like, never," replied the girl. She twirled a lock of hair around her finger before her an idea seemed to strike her. "Hey... did you say Sunny Skies?"

"Um, yes. Yes I did. But what do you mean she'll never be back?"

The young woman wasn't paying any attention to her. Instead, she'd grabbed a book and was flipping through the pages. "I, like, knew it! You're the one with Little Ruby!"

Sunny blinked. "Who?"

The blonde was typing away on her phone, another idea bubbling in her head. "Wouldn't Ruby be back by now? Like, what time do schools get out?" After a few moments of silence, she stopped typing, her eyes lighting up. "Ooh! I bet she is. I bet she's here right now!" Hopping to her feet, she bolted past Sunny out of the office, heading straight for the elevator.

At a loss for what to make of the situation, and with her only seeming lead to the location of Cozy Hearth literally getting away, Sunny did the only thing she could think of. She chased after the girl.

Sunset had been in the middle of watching another game on YourVids when she heard the commotion outside the door, a mix of energized footsteps and protests. It was just enough of a warning that she didn't jump when the door swung open and smacked against the wall.

"Ruby?! Are you here??"

Sunset froze, dropping her phone. Oh, you've got to be kidding me. She looked up. Pearl Luxury was indeed standing in her living room. I was having such a good day, too.

"Young lady, would you please slow down and listen to me?" huffed Sunny as she entered, trying to catch her breath. Her usually calm demeanor was starting to break. "This is my apartment and—"

"There you are! Ruby. I was, like, hoping you were here." Pearl looked around. "Wow, this place is so basic. How do you like, live here?"

Her eyes landed on Sunset's jacket draped over the sofa arm. "You're still wearing this thing? No way!" Grabbing it, she flung it out into the hallway. "I told you, you really shouldn't be going for the biker chick look."

"Hey!" screamed Sunset, shooting to her feet.

Having failed to get Pearl's attention, Sunny slipped away to retrieve the mistreated garment. The minute she left, however, Pearl's heeled foot shot backwards, shutting the door on her as if she were the unwanted visitor rather than Pearl. If the heiress cared about her rude behavior at all, or Sunny's very pinched expression as she let herself back in, it wasn't visible.

"What are you even doing here, Pearl?" demanded the teen. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sunny's eyes widen just a fraction. "How'd you even find out my address? We just moved."

"That's, like, easy," replied Pearl. "I looked up your MyStable page."
"It's private," Sunset fired back, feeling a small ache pulse through her skull.

"Yeah, but your friends' aren't." Pearl did something on her phone before holding up the screen. It showed Pinkie's MyStable page, and a very recent post declaring how she was helping Sunset move. She'd even mentioned the street the complex was on.

*Note to self: Talk to Pinkie Pie about privacy settings.* The ache pulsed again, but she ignored it.

"Well, now that you're here, you can leave." She was most definitely not in the mood to deal with Pearl again, especially if she didn't have to.

Giving the older girl a light shove, she pushed her toward the doorway. Cyan eyes glanced over to Sunny, silently asking the woman to open the door. Sunny caught the message, grabbing the handle in preparation to eject this intrusion into their lives.

Pearl dug her heels into the carpet, pushing back with equal force. "But Ruby, I wanted to talk to you!"

"My name's not Ruby, and we've got nothing to talk about," replied Sunset quickly as she increased her efforts, putting her legs fully into it as she fought back against Pearl's deceptive amount of strength. The sooner this nonsense was over, the better. "My mom's back, so you'll have to go looking for a sister somewhere else. Now get out of my apartment."

Still the blonde resisted, refusing to give an inch. "You mean *my* apartment. I, like, own the building now."

Sunset's feet slipped out from under her. She swung her arms in the air, just managing to keep her balance. "W-WHAT?!" she sputtered.

"You own the building?" asked Sunny in shock, hand falling away from the door handle.

Pearl nodded her head, looking earnestly at Sunset. "I, like, wanted to talk to you."

Sunset stared incredulously at the blonde. "You bought the whole building... just to talk to me?"

"I thought you might still be all mad at me and wouldn't, like, want to talk to me after I messed up the date of our trip," explained Pearl, cheeks coloring in embarrassment. "But then I had this totally awesome idea! You, like, have to talk to the landlady, so I asked Momma. She said I needed business experience anyway, so she had her lawyers make an offer."

Sunset groaned, the ache in her skull pulsing even harder now. *This is just going from bad to worse.* And though she hated to admit it, Pearl was right. For the tenants of an apartment building, it was impossible to avoid talking to the landlord. One way or another, you had to interact with them.

"What happened to Cozy Hearth?" asked Sunny with obvious concern. "And why didn't she say anything about this?"

Both were pertinent questions, and Sunset felt her own concern rising as well. Even from their bare minimal interactions, Mrs. Hearth's kindness and consideration toward others had stood out like a beacon in the night. Not only that, but she'd said quite clearly that when something changed in the building, she took it upon herself to tell every tenant personally, rather than relying on an informal letter or notice.

So why hadn't she said anything over the last few days? She should have come by to tell them, maybe even offer a goodbye, before moving out.
"Oh. She, like, said something about going to visit her kids," replied Pearl, offering a soured glance at Sunny. "She, like, wanted to tell everybody here, but I told her not to. I, like, wanted to surprise you." Pearl smiled brightly at Sunset. "Are you surprised?"

"Yeah. Definitely surprised,” she replied flatly.

"Like, I'm still totally sorry I messed up the dates on the Paris trip," continued the heiress. "But I'm ready to make up for it! I got a whole bunch of decorators to help with your room, and then we can go to New York! Wouldn't that be totally awesome? It's not, like, Paris, but it'll be something to start with until Momma gets the paperwork and stuff done, and we can go to Paris for real."

"Pearl, you can't a—"

"And like, you should know, Momma's Paris trip got canceled. The business thing didn't go through or some stuff, which was super disappointing," apologized the blonde, giving Sunset a very serious look.

Then, like the flip of a switch, she was hopping up and down on her feet in almost jubilant excitement, clapping her hands together. "But I talked to Momma, and she says she trust me to go to Paris by myself, so once you move in and stuff, we can totally go there, just the two of us! Come on, let's get all your stuff! I'll drive you back to our house."

Pearl's hand grasped Sunset's wrist, and suddenly, the momentum was reversed, Pearl dragging her deeper into the apartment. "I can't lend you any of my clothes, I'm, like, too tall. It's totally better for you to get your own stuff. But don't worry, I'll help you with everything! Is this your room over here?"

Now, it was Sunset's turn to dig in her heels. "Would you knock it off?!“ she demanded.

Pearl let go, turning to Sunset in surprise. "Like, what is it?"

"I'm not going with you, that's what!” snapped Sunset. "I'm not your sister. Can't you understand that? Besides, you said you're the landlady. So how can you drive out of town?"

Pearl waved a hand. "I can have somebody else fill in. Besides, I told Momma I'd come back and, like, run it myself for a while if she let me do this. Now come on, Ruby, I know you're mad, but stop messing around."

Sunset wrenched her hand free from Pearl's grip. "How am I messing around? I'm telling you no."

The blonde frowned, placing her hands on her hips. "Like, seriously, Ruby. You can quit the prank now."

"What prank?" asked Sunset incredulously. What in Equestria was she going on about now?

"Like, the one where she showed up," clarified Pearl, pointing over to Sunny. "I was really mad at first, and super sad, but then I realized, like, you were just getting back at me for messing up those dates."

The former unicorn felt her jaw slacken. Pearl honestly thought that she'd faked having a parent because Pearl wasn't taking her to Paris when she said she would? "Pearl, this is really my mom."

"That was totally mean, by the way!" Pearl scolded, not hearing a word. "It was really, really mean!" Her soured expression lightened. "But I'm your big sister, so I'll, like, forgive you. I would have been super mad too, so I can be mag... mag..." Her brow furrowed. "What was that word? Mag..."
"I believe you're thinking of magnanimous," suggested Sunny.

Pearl glanced Sunny's way, seeming ready to respond, when a guitar riff tore through the air. Sunset's phone, still sitting on the sofa, flashed with Rainbow's picture.

"You're still hanging out with them?" asked Pearl in shock. "You, like, really shouldn't. I heard they were totally rotten, and if you're, like, having problems with being unpopular, they're so not going to help. I mean, country bumpkins could be fun, but not, like, all the time, and that one with the glasses probably isn't popular either."

Sunset's hands tightened into fists, muscles contracting harder with each insult. "Pearl, I don't care what you think. Now will you please be quiet and listen?"

For all the good it did, Pearl's ears may as well have been plugged with wax. "Being friends with a wannabe designer is so tacky, it, like, screams unpopular. And rainbow hair is so... yuck. I, like, just don't get it."

"And that girl with the pink hair? I mean the other one, the, like, not-curly one. She's really pretty. Has she ever, like, tried modeling? I wouldn't let her. She seemed like a big crybaby, and my friend High Heel says crybabies make the worst models."

Pearl smiled brightly. "I should totally introduce you to my friends. They know popular. Diamond Facet is so much fun. But, like, no boys." She gave the teen a pat on the head, which Sunset found more than a little patronizing. "You're too young to be hanging around the boys I know."

The heiress paused in thought. "Have you even had a boyfriend? Like, probably not if you're so unpopular."

As Sunset growled in frustration, Sunny took that moment to step in, placing a gentle hand on Pearl's shoulder. "Miss Luxury, I think there's been some confusion on your part." Her voice was composed, soothing, like a drink of ice water on a summer day. "Why don't we sit down and talk this over?"

Blonde curls narrowly avoided whipping Sunny in the face as Pearl turned to glare at her. "You stay out of this," she said coldly, shrugging off Sunny's hand. "I'm talking to her, not you. So you, like, be quiet."

"Hey!" yelled Sunset. "Don't talk to her like that!"

"Come on, Ruby," said Pearl, her own cheeks turning red in anger, "just quit it. This isn't funny anymore! I know you're pranking me, so, like, give it up. I'm totally sorry. Isn't that enough?"

"Just how dense are you?!" Sunset screamed. "I already told you, I'm not pranking you!"

"Yes you are, yes you are!" Pearl answered back, matching Sunset's volume. "It's not funny! Stop it!"

The two continued to yell back and forth, Sunset continuing to deny Pearl's ludicrous suggestions. Her heart pounded in her ears as she continued to yell, soreness stabbing at her throat as the two increased in volume.

Finally, Sunny stepped between the two, pushing them apart. "Sunset, please try to calm down," she said calmly. "Screaming like this won't help, and I'd rather not draw in the neighbors."

Glancing up to meet her mentor's eyes, Sunset took a few cleansing breaths. The anger flooding her
body was starting to ebb. "Sorry," she muttered.

Sunny then turned to Pearl, giving the blonde one of her most gentle and diplomatic smiles. "Miss Luxury, this isn't a prank. Now please, why don't we sit down and calmly talk this over? I have some tea if you'd like it."

But Pearl's anger wasn't soothed. If anything, it just seemed to grow. "You know what I want? I want you to go away! Did Ruby's friends hire you or something? Whatever they paid you, I'll double it." She took a checkbook out of her purse. "I'll triple it! Like, whatever you want!"

The pink-haired woman shot Pearl an icy stare. "I'm afraid I'm not for sale," she said firmly, crossing her arms over her chest.

Pearl, however, still refused to give in. "Okay, fine. You, like, want to go to Hawaii? You can live there! You can live there all the time!"

Sunny's anger turned to pity. "This isn't some prank being played on you," she repeated. "I think the sooner you accept that, the sooner we can work all of this out."

Blue eyes turned dangerously narrow. "Then I'll get rid of you the other way!" she declared. Her hand whipped out. "I want the rent right now, and I'm, like, raising it."

"You can't do that," said Sunny.

"I own the building!" cried Pearl with a heavy stomp of her foot. "What I say goes, and I say the rent is triple now! So either you pay me right now or I kick you out."

Sunset's anger roared back to life. "And what if we just move again?" she hissed.

Pearl whipped around to glare at her. "Then maybe I'll buy the next building, and the one after that, and the one after that! You want to prank me, Ruby? Well, like, fine! I can pull pranks too. I can do lots of things, and I won't stop until you give it up!"

Amber knuckles turned bone white. This was the absolute last straw. "You're gone, now. Rushing past Pearl, she threw the door open. "OUT!"

"You can't kick me out," protested Pearl. "I own the building."

"Don't care," snapped Sunset. "I'm not going to be your sister. I don't even want to be your sister. I wouldn't be your sister if you paid me!"

"But why?" whined Pearl. "I'd be a great big sister. After all, I'm such a great role model." She puffed out her chest. "Like, who wouldn't want to be like me?"

"You, a great role model?" scoffed Sunset. "I don't think the Airhead Heiress could be anyone's role model, let alone a good one."

"A-Airhead?" gasped Pearl, recoiling like she'd been struck. "Like, how could you make up a awful name?"

"I didn't," said Sunset. "Everybody else did. What, never bothered to look yourself up before? The tabloids love to call you that." She reached for her phone, typing away the words "Pearl Luxury" and "Airhead Heiress" into a search engine, scanning the results before thrusting the screen at Pearl. "Here."
Bit by bit, Sunset moved the screen down, picking out more and more pages, creating a stream of sharp, scathing comments related to the Luxury heir, anything and everything to take her down a peg or two.

Pearl's eyes grew ever wider with each passing entry. "I..."

"This is what people really think of you," said Sunset. "That's how they see you." She pulled the phone away, locking eyes to give the older girl a dark and furious glare. "And that's how I see you, too."

"B-But," Pearl began to say, "But I just—"

Sunset threw up a hand to stop her. "NO! You're going to listen for once! Get this through your head. I'm not pranking you, I don't want to be your sister, and I doubt anyone ever would. I've had it up to here with you! You don't listen, you treat her," she pointed to Sunny, "like trash, you insult all of my friends again, and then when both of us tell you that you're deluding yourself, you try to bribe and coerce us into doing what you want."

Sunset stepped closer, forcing Pearl to move backwards in response, until the blonde's back was pressed into the doorframe. "You're nothing more than a spoiled brat! A stupid spoiled brat who wouldn't even pass high school because her tutors edited her classes, probably because they knew she couldn't pass!"

"I don't care what you do, I don't care what you want, but I'm not going anywhere with you. Now stop bothering us and go away!"

For several moments, there was silence. Pearl stood there, eyes as wide as saucers, her normal energy and extroversion gone, save for the bobbing of her throat. Her knees buckled, and then the rest of her seemed to sag.

"I-I..." she croaked, "I-I'll g-go." With a dash, she was gone, closing the door firmly behind her.

Sunset dropped down onto the sofa arm, chest heaving. Her hand reached up to massage her temples, trying to force away the stabbing pain in her head. "What's wrong with her?"

Looking over at her mentor, she saw the woman staring at her with distinct unease. "What?"

"Sunset," the woman began slowly. "Don't you think you were a bit harsh?"

"She wouldn't stop." Sunset crossed her arms over her chest. "Besides, it's not like she didn't need a dose of reality."

"There are times," said Sunny, clearing her throat, "where the best things to do aren't always the nicest." The woman licked her lips. "But I was watching her face, Sunset. It looked like you hurt her quite badly."

"I—" Sunset began, only to close her mouth, and think about everything she'd just said and done, how she'd torn into Pearl, how she'd all but declared an undying hatred for her, and the look on Pearl's face as she'd left.

That image brought up another, more distant memory, of the Friendship Games, and how she'd torn into Twilight in a similar fashion. And with that, a wave of guilt washed over her.

Cursing under her breath, she grabbed her jacket. "I'll go find her."
Pearl Luxury left the apartment as fast as her feet could carry her, thoughts consumed by only two things, the basic desire to get away, and all of those horrible words.

*The Airhead Heiress? U'd get more power out of a potato battery than u would out of her brain.*

*LOL. That gurl has her picture in the dictionary for "dumb blonde".*

*Nah, dude, she's listed under jus plain "dumb".*

*S she's a brat, end of story. Y are we even waisting time talking about her? Theres way more important things to talk about anyway, like the weather.*

*I got a glimpse of her in person once. I don't think I've ever seen a shallower girl in my life. Puddles are deeper than her.*

*If that's what money does to you, I'd rather be poor.*

The comments had gone on like that, on and on and on, growing even worse than that. Countless people saying the same thing. That she was shallow, spoiled, and stupid, that she wasn't even worth talking about, wasn't worth anything. Constant insults, constant mockery.

It couldn't be... was that what people thought of her? Was that how they really saw her? Did they all actually hate her? Was she just the subject of jokes? Was that all she was?

Her car was parked in the garage. She didn't feel much like driving, but it was the fastest exit away from here.

As she entered the garage, she spotted a group of people engaged in animated conversation, right in the path of where her car was. The prospect of going by them, of being recognized, and therefore potentially mocked even more, was too much to bear, forcing her to turn away to the street. Anywhere was fine, as long as she got out of here. Anywhere but here.

Before she knew it, Pearl had entered a small green space near the complex, surrounded on all sides by buildings and roads. Her designer shoes clicked against the concrete walkway as she wandered blindly through the small park, before finally stopping to sit on a bench resting in front of a crystal blue lake.

Pearl stared out at the shimmering water, watching it ebb and flow against the shore. It all seemed so peaceful, so pretty, and yet, the serenity of her surroundings couldn't take away from her mood.

She pulled her arms tightly around her body. How had everything gone so wrong today? "I..." she gave a loud sniff, "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Pearl was jolted from her reverie by a harsh, loud voice coming from behind her.

"What are you doing here?"

Sunset scowled, more at herself than anything in particular. Despite the relatively short gap of time between when Pearl had left and when Sunset had followed, the heiress had made quite a bit of distance.

Cozy Hearth's office had proven to be empty, so Sunset had gone to the parking garage. If Pearl was really eager to leave, she might have made a dash for her car.
Of course, that possibility was troubling on two levels. One, because if Pearl had already driven off, it would make it almost impossible to find her, and two, if Pearl was really as upset as she'd looked, the thought of her driving anywhere in that state seemed like an accident waiting to happen.

It hadn't taken much effort to find Pearl's car, even without knowing what it looked like. Parked in a reserved space, the highly expensive-looking sports car, with its shiny white paint job and a license plate which read "GPL-582", stood out like a signal fire among the rows of cheaper, more middle class vehicles.

On the bright side, it meant Pearl wasn't endangering herself by being behind a wheel. On the other, it meant that Sunset had no idea where she'd actually gone.

"Great, now what?" Turning in a circle, she looked around for all the possible exits. There were quite a few ways Pearl could have left the building, and no visible clues for any of them. Spotting a young couple walking inside, she ran up to them. "Hey, did either of you see a girl come by here a few minutes ago? Pale skin, blue eyes, long blonde hair?"

"I don't think so," said the young woman. Her boyfriend echoed her sentiment with a silent shake of his head.

Sunset frowned, turning to leave. "Thanks anyway."

"Wait... I think I did, actually." The woman placed a thoughtful finger to her chin. "It was only for a second. She seemed kind of upset."

"You know which way she went?"

The woman pointed to her right. "That way, I think."

"Thanks!" With a burst of energy, Sunset took off running out of the garage, moving across the street and into the small park. The path was empty, which was a good thing, because the further she went, the closer together the trees grew.

As she walked along, Sunset allowed her mind to wander away from her main goal. Why did Pearl go this way? She didn't live in Canterlot City, so it was less likely that she had some kind of refuge to go to, especially in this neighborhood.

Her pondering was cut short when the breeze glided across her skin, carrying with it sounds from the path ahead.

"That was all your fault!" said a distinctly male voice, absolutely overflowing with anger. "You arranged that, didn't you?! You and your stupid friends. You did something to the food, you brought that inspector there! It was all because of you!"

"N-No!" came a shaky denial, and Sunset instantly recognized it as coming from the missing heiress. "I never, like, did anything to you, I swear!"

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There was a loud snort. "Don't lie, blondie, you're too stupid to pull it off. Three days after I met you, that happens. No way that's coincidence."

Whatever this was, it sounded personal, and was rapidly becoming ugly. Unsure of what exactly she'd be walking in on, and not wanting to simply walk in on it, period, Sunset slowed down and went off the path, approaching through the bushes so as not to disturb the argument that was unfolding.
"Do you have any idea what that did?" continued the male voice. "My dad is buried in lawsuits! He had to sell our new house. My car got repossessed. And then I had to go live with my uncle and get a job at a burger joint!" The last words were practically spat out. "I finally had everything, and now it's all gone, all because of you. And now you're going to pay."

"Hey!"

"Shut up!"

There was a thud, and a cry of pain from Pearl, and Sunset knew she couldn't wait any longer. Moving quickly along the path, she found herself face to face with Pearl and the man she'd been arguing with. "Okay, what's going on here?"

He was a young man, tan in complexion, with short red hair which sat messily atop his head, and which matched the look of flushed anger across his face. He was as tall as Pearl was, with a build that, while not overtly brawny like Bulk Biceps, was at least decently muscled, if his exposed forearms were any indication.

He was dressed rather poorly, with jeans that had several obvious threadbare spots, a T-shirt sporting the name of a rock band Sunset couldn't make out on account of the raw number of stains, and heavily scuffed sneakers. Clutched tightly in his hands was Pearl's purse, the main compartment wide open.

Pearl herself was sitting on the ground, hand placed on her shin. The minute Sunset arrived, her eyes shot wide open, staring at her horrified shock.

"Go away," said the young man, waving a hand dismissively, as if shooing a fly. "This is none of your business."

Sunset crossed her arms over her chest. "Kind of hard to ignore when you're so loud I could hear you down the path."

He scowled at her. "If you want to know, this little bimbo," he kicked dirt in Pearl's direction, "owes me a lot of money. I'm just collecting."

"Really? Because it looks more like you're mugging her to me." She directed her attention to Pearl, who immediately flinched. "Is that what he's doing?"

"I... I..."

"Shut up!" commanded her attacker, kicking more dirt in her direction before rummaging through her bag. "Stupid electronic money, where's the good stuff—hey, what's this?"

He pulled a single object from the purse, a small pink pearl, glittering in the afternoon sun.

Pearl's reaction was immediate, jumping to her feet like a gunshot. "LET THAT GO!" she cried wildly, leaping for the object, only for the man to avoid her. She crashed to the ground with a thud, dirt and mud splattering across her front.

"You don't get to touch that!" Pearl cried again, twisting around to try and get to her feet. "Give it back, give it back, give it back!"

The young man kicked an even larger pile of dirt at her. "I told you to shut up!"

Amber hands tightened into fists. Quickly weighing her options, Sunset pulled out her phone and
began typing.

The young man looked up at her, irritation mounting. "What do you think you're doing? I thought I told you to beat it."

"I'm sending a text," she answered casually, fingers not slowing down as she pressed the keys. "My friend's brother is a cop. One message to her, and he'll be on his way here in no time flat." She looked up from her screen, locking Pearl's attacker with a challenging glare. "So unless you want a police officer on your sorry tail, you'll get out of here right now."

The young man took a small step backwards, eyes darting around for a split second before he returned her glare. "Y-You're bluffing."

She gave him a smirk. "No, I'm not." She pressed a few more buttons. "Oh, look. Now all I have to do is press send." She held the phone up like a deadly weapon, finger hanging precariously over the button. "What's it gonna be?"

A tiny bead of sweat trailing down from the side of his head, the young man looked between her, the loot in his hand, and Pearl. Face twisting in a grimace, he shot Pearl a hateful look. "This thing reminds me too much of you anyway. Probably just as worthless too."

With one lightning fast motion, he pulled back his arm and flung the little gem into the center of the lake, where it quickly sank beneath the shimmering blue water.

Pearl released a strangled scream. "No!"

"Hey!" cried Sunset in protest, but Pearl's attacker was already running off. Seeing him disappear into the distance, she turned her attention back to Pearl.

Her body was crumpled down into the dirt, eyes transfixed on the lake. She didn't react as Sunset approached. "Hey, are you alright?" Sunset asked, placing a hand on Pearl's shoulder. "I'm sorry you lost that pearl. I didn't think he'd toss it like that."

"... Lost?" The word slipped from her mouth as a hollow whisper, "No... no, no, NO!"

Like the firing of a cannon, Pearl was on her feet, barreling toward the lake before diving headlong into it.

Sunset stood dumbfounded. What had gotten into her? Deciding it was best to pull her out of there before she somehow hurt herself, Sunset set her phone and jacket aside and dove in after Pearl.

She spotted the blonde slicing through the water, diving down to the bottom of the lake, frantically grabbing at clumps of dirt, rock, and plants, shoving aside the former and practically tearing out the latter. When she didn't find what she was searching for, she swam to another part of the lake, then another, still desperately searching.

Grabbing Pearl's arm, Sunset hauled her to the surface. "What's gotten into you?" she demanded, blowing away a sopping lock of red hair. "I know they're valuable, but it's one little pearl in this whole lake. For all you know, a fish could have swallowed it."

Pearl trembled with fear, her already wild eyes growing even more terrified, and she shoved Sunset away. "I have to find it!" Taking a large gulp of air, Pearl dove back down.

Groaning in frustration, Sunset followed her back down into the water. Pearl had returned to her search, seeming even more desperate than before, clawing at the lake bed in search of her missing
Twice more, Sunset tried to pull the blonde back up, but Pearl shook her off. Sunset went up for air each time, but Pearl didn't.

She must have been hurting for air by now, so why wasn't she coming up? Was she really going to risk drowning over a silly pearl she could probably get dozens of?

Submerging herself once again, Sunset was ready to make one final effort to get the heiress to stop, or at least take a breath of fresh air before she hurt herself, when Pearl grabbed onto something in the soil, something that glimmered the faintest pink in the distorted light of the sun. Pearl rose for air, and Sunset followed.

Unsurprisingly, Pearl's breaths were ragged as she finally surfaced. "You could have drowned!" reprimanded Sunset. "Is that thing really worth—"

Sunset's question fell dead when she saw Pearl's face. The heiress wasn't listening to her. Instead, her attention was on the pearl, hugging it tightly against her chest like a stuffed toy. The water on her face was mixed with streams of salty tears.

"Don't leave me," she said quietly, words pouring forth like her tears, without thought or control. "Please, don't leave me."

Sunset Shimmer went quiet as she floated there in the water. Finally, she put a gentle hand on Pearl's shoulder.

"Come on," she told her gently. "Let's get out of here."

It wasn't long before the two returned to Sunset's apartment.

Sunny had looked ready to unleash a barrage of questions upon their return, but then seemed to think the better of it. Instead, she brewed some hot tea before deciding to take a walk outside, leaving the two in complete solitude.

Sunset sat on the sofa, having switched into a pair of pajamas, her clothes now spinning in the washer. Pearl's had gone in first, being far more stained, and Sunset had already moved them to the dryer. A teapot sat on the coffee table at her feet, still letting out small wisps of steam, along with two cups, one half-full, and one still waiting to be filled.

Turning her head, Sunset regarded Pearl, perched on the other end of the sofa. She was wrapped in Sunny's bathrobe, the quickest thing for her to change into that was also around her size. Ever since the lake, Pearl's demeanor had gone through a drastic change.

Despite her extreme talkativeness before, Pearl hadn't uttered a single word on the way back to the apartment. She remained silent when Sunset handed her some towels to dry off with, when they offered to put her clothes in the wash, even when Sunny had directed the two girls to the sofa and offered them tea. Pearl met every question with a nod or shake of the head, if that.

Her designer clothes had been completely soaked through, not to mention heavily stained with dirt and mud. Her makeup, what was left of it, was splotched across her face, and her eyes were puffy from tears. Dampness still clung to her once-styled hair, which was twisted into curly tangles.

Yet, the fashionable heiress didn't seem to care at all for these things. She just sat there, transfixed by the tiny pink sphere still held firmly in her palm. Sunset Shimmer might as well have been alone for all the difference it would make.
"You okay?" asked Sunset, breaking the frankly uncomfortable silence. "Who was that guy?"

"His name's Wine Cork," muttered Pearl. "I met him at one of High Heel's parties. I didn't like him. He wouldn't stop hitting on me and my friends, so I told him to buzz off, and then High kicked him out."

Sunset raised an eyebrow. He ran in Pearl's social circles? He didn't look like the type with money to burn. Just the opposite, actually. "Was that why he was mugging you? Rejection?"

"He thought I caused his dad's restaurant to go down," answered the blonde softly. "He thought I made all those people sick."

A memory of a news article flashed in Sunset's mind, a story from several months ago. There had been a scandal involving a chain of very popular restaurants when a case of food poisoning had broken out. Twenty people had gotten sick, including several of the restaurant's primary investors, who had been present to celebrate the first successful year. To compound matters, a health inspector had been present.

Sunset leaned into the sofa cushions, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm guessing you didn't?"

Pearl turned her head, locking eyes with Sunset and giving her one of the most honest expressions the teenager had ever seen. "No! I, like, wouldn't even know how to do something like that. I didn't."

She let out a small sniffle. "Why wouldn't he believe me?"

Sunset picked up her cup, taking a sip. "Sounds like he was stuck in denial and looking for someone to blame." The irony of who she was saying this to wasn't lost on Sunset, but she figured it wasn't the time to point that out.

"Yeah..." Pearl shivered. "Cold."

Sunset pointed at the pink sphere on the table. "What's so special about that, anyway?" she asked, voicing the question that had been nagging at the back of her mind since Pearl's sudden swim.

Blue eyes moved back down, and somberness took Pearl over once again. "The day I was born," Pearl explained, "Daddy, like, went for a walk on the beach. We lived in a beach house then, and Daddy liked to go for walks in the early morning. While he was there, he saw this oyster sticking out of the sand." She smiled warmly down at the object. "He found that inside. Daddy told me some pearls come out all kinds of weird shapes, but it looked just like that. Daddy said I was just like it, tiny and beautiful and already perfect in every way, so he named me Gleaming Pearl. He said it must have been a good luck charm, and told me I could hold onto it when I got old enough, that it was my pearl."

Pearl shook her head. "But it's Daddy's."

She exchanged the cup for the gemstone, rolling it between her fingers. "I'd, like, kept it in a special
box. I hadn't taken it out in years. But I brought it with me today because..." a look of shame crossed her face as she turned to Sunset. "I, like, thought you were mad at me, and I thought maybe it would bring me good luck trying to get you to forgive me."

There was a pained longing woven through Pearl's words as she spoke about the little object, and it made Sunset all the more curious. "What was he like?"

"Daddy?" Pearl closed her eyes for a moment. "Daddy was the best. He loved the water. When I was little, he'd, like, take me sailing with him on his boat. It wasn't big or super fancy, but it wasn't little either. It was, like, really nice."

She smiled. "When we'd come back, Daddy would take me to this place on the pier and buy me a really big bowl of ice cream. It was so good. And there was this one time that I..."

"You what?"

"I..." Pearl stopped, recollection dawning on her face as a memory seemed to unfold itself. "I wanted the ice cream first. I begged and begged, but Daddy said no."

"He actually said no?" asked Sunset in surprise. Considering how spoiled she was, Sunset hadn't expected either of Pearl's parents to refuse their daughter anything.

"Yeah. Daddy was like that. I still really wanted it though, so I snuck over and got some anyway. But after we set sail, I threw up all over the deck."

"I'm not too surprised, if you had a stomach full of ice cream," commented Sunset as she picked up her cup and took another sip.

Pearl's white cheeks flushed pink. "That's what Daddy said, too. He, like, looked so disappointed, but then," Pearl paused again, her eyes widening a fraction as the memory continued to unfurl. "He hugged me, and told me that's why he said no, and he still got me ice cream after we came back."

The corners of her lips turned upwards in a smile. "It was a really good day."

For a moment, the blonde sat there, staring into space. "I'd forgotten all about it," she said in astonishment. "And... I loved sailing. The air smelled so good, and the waves were fun, and the birdies were, like, so cute."

The pitch of her voice rose in excitement. "And... and Daddy would hold me in his lap as he steered the ship! I even had this cute little sailor dress to wear and Daddy called me his first mate! And the fish! I threw bread crumbs over the side of the boat and the fish would come up to eat them, all kinds of pretty fish!"

Pearl frowned, the sudden joy of her lost memories diminishing. "I haven't been sailing since Daddy didn't come home." Her face scrunched up, as if she didn't believe her own words. "How did I, like, forget all that?"

To Sunset, the girl next to her seemed totally different, like the lake water had washed away a layer of superficiality and had left behind someone else. Someone who was just as surprised by it all as Sunset was, and only grew more surprised with every little moment she unearthed. "Sounds to me like you had a lot of good memories."

Pearl nodded. "Uh huh. I... I miss Daddy. I miss him a lot. I'd totally forgotten how much." She took a sip from her teacup. "Things weren't the same after he died. Momma was a lot busier, so I didn't see her too much, and she started giving me lots of gifts. Momma always liked to give me presents, Daddy too, but not as much as Momma."
"After Daddy was gone, it was like my birthday and Christmas put together. She gave me whatever I wanted." She stopped again, her brow furrowing as she came upon yet another revelation. "I think that's when she put away all of Daddy's pictures too," she added sadly.

*Sounds pretty empty.* Sunset would hardly have thought it possible, but she actually felt sorry for the girl.

Pearl rolled the little gem in her hands again. "I almost lost this forever." Her grip tightened around it, like she was afraid of letting it slip away into oblivion again. More than a simple lump of calcium carbonate, it was a storehouse of precious memories, and a beacon of a lost parent's love.

In a way, Sunset was jealous. Of all of her parents' things that had been recovered after their death, none had that same level of significance for her. There had been a few of her toys, yes, but none had such a powerful emotional attachment as that.

Pearl turned to Sunset. "Why'd you, like, come after me? Why'd you help me?"

The teen winced. "I, uh..." For a moment, she was at a loss for words. In the rush of trying to find Pearl, and then in dealing with Wine Cork, she hadn't really put any thought into what she was actually going to say. "I wanted to apologize. I said a lot of things I shouldn't have."

Pearl blinked, staring at Sunset like she had three heads. "You're... sorry?"

Sunset nodded. "Yeah, I am. Look, Pearl, you were—"

"I wasn't listening to you," finished Pearl somberly. "I was totally acting like Wine Cork."

"Yeah, you were." Sunset didn't think Pearl would make that leap all by herself. But then, today seemed to be a day of realization for Pearl, didn't it?

The blonde squirmed. "No wonder you were so angry at me."

There was a small thump as Sunset placed her cup on the table. "Look, I know you were excited about it, but a sister isn't a toy, and neither am I. I'm not a dress-up doll. I'm a person, with feelings and wants. And you can't treat people like that. And you definitely can't treat people the way you were today when things don't work out."

White cheeks flushed deeper with shame. "I'm sorry."

"And I'm sorry for blowing up at you. I was cruel, and I shouldn't have been."

"You're way too nice," remarked Pearl, right before giving another frown. "But everybody still hates me."

"If it helps," offered Sunset, "I've been there. I wasn't always a good person, and nobody liked me either. Some people still don't, but I managed to turn things around."

Pearl blinked. Her frown turned thoughtful. "How'd you do that?"

"I made an effort to change. It was hard, *really* hard, sometimes. But my friends stuck by me, and eventually, people started to come around." Of course, popular opinion had also been swayed by stopping the Sirens, but she couldn't exactly say that.

Pearl mulled over Sunset's words for a moment, before her eyes glided over to the end table next to the sofa, landing on the framed photo. "Ooh, he's really cute," she said, voice brightening as she took
hold of the photo. "Is he your boyfriend?"

"Actually, that's my dad."

"... Oh." Pearl glanced awkwardly between the photo and Sunset as she set it down. "Hey, like, where is your daddy, anyway?"

"Uh, he's gone," answered Sunset, sticking to the fabricated backstory. "He died before I was born."

Pearl's eyes widened in shock, new tears pricking the corners. "You mean you don't have any memories of him at all? That's... that's, like, awful!" In one fluid motion, Pearl wrapped her arms around Sunset, drawing her into a hug.

It wasn't the painfully tight hug from their first meeting. It was loose, gentle, genuinely comforting. "I'm so sorry," said Pearl, her voice choking a little. "I, like, can't imagine what it's like not to have any memories."

"It's okay," Sunset assured, feeling the slightest sting of guilt over lying to Pearl over something so personal to the other girl. "I've still got my mom."

From another part of the apartment, a musical ring broke the moment. "That's the dryer with your clothes," explained Sunset. "You want to change?"

Pearl broke the hug, giving a nod of her head. "Totally." Placing her precious gem securely inside her purse, she walked over to reclaim her clothing before moving to the bathroom.

She reemerged several minutes later, Sunny's robe in hand. Her smeared makeup had been totally removed, and her hair had been largely detangled.

As she walked back to the living room, Sunset noticed the large, if faded, stains that still clung to the Pearl's top and the legs of her jeans. "Sorry those didn't come out all the way."

Pearl looked down, scowling at the markings, before brushing it off with the wave of a hand. "It's, like, fine. Our housekeeper is an expert at getting out stains. And besides," she laughed, "I have extras of these."

The heiress tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "I did some thinking while I was changing, and I decided I'm going to give this place back to, um... Cozy Heart?"

"Cozy Hearth," Sunset corrected, unable to hide the surprise on her face. "You're really giving it back? What about your mom wanting you to have business experience?"

"I'm, like, not ready for that," explained Pearl. "I only bought this place to talk to you, and you've been really nice, but it'd be too awkward now."

Sunset blinked. That was surprisingly sensible. "So what are you going to do now?"

"I dunno," replied Pearl, taking that same lock of hair and twisting it around her finger. "Hey, um... Sunset? Do you really think my tutors thought I couldn't pass my classes?"

"It's... possible," Sunset said wincing. That had been one of the crueler things she'd thrown out in her tirade.

"I just thought it was easy," admitted Pearl, looking more than a bit ashamed of herself. "They said there was some stuff you didn't really need to learn, and I believed them." Her chin dipped to touch
her chest. "Maybe they were right, and I really \textit{am} stupid."

"Hey," Sunset interrupted, "just because you're bad at some things don't mean you're stupid. If it makes you feel better, you could try to take a GED."

Pearl blinked owlishly at her. "A what?"

"It's a test for all the subjects you're supposed to cover in high school," explained Sunset. "They give it out for people that either didn't finish high school or don't meet the requirements. If you pass, it's the same as getting a diploma."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Sunset assured. "You'd have to study for it, though."

Lips pursed themselves together as Pearl stood there for a moment in silent thought. "I'll do it," she declared. "I, like, need to do it." Looking back at Sunset, she smiled. "Thank you for being so nice to me," she said, punctuating it with another soft hug.

Sunset felt an easy smile spread on her face in turn. "You're welcome."

There came a gentle knock at the door, followed by the turning of a knob. "Hello? I'm back." Sunny Skies paused in the doorway when she spotted the two girls. "I see you two are getting along."

Breaking the hug, Pearl walked over to Sunny. "Like, um, Mrs. Skies," began the heiress, shuffling one of her shoes against the floor awkwardly. "I, um. I'm sorry for how I treated you. It was wrong."

Surprise took over Sunny's face, her eyes flicking over curiously to Sunset for a moment. The teen just nodded her head in confirmation.

The woman gave a gentle smile. "Well then... apology accepted. Would you like to stay a while longer?"

"No, thank you." Pearl adjusted the purse strap on her shoulder. "I should, like, be going home now. I've got to talk to Momma." She looked back at Sunset. "Maybe we'll, like, see each other again some time."

And like that, she was gone, walking down the same hall she'd fled only a while earlier. Sunny closed the door, turning to smile at Sunset. "It seems to me that things went quite well while I was out."

Sunset returned the smile. "Surprisingly, yeah." Hearing the ring of the washing machine, she opened it up and placed her clothes in the dryer. "Pearl's going to be giving Cozy Hearth back the building, just so you know."

"Oh really?" Sunny grabbed a cup from a cupboard and poured herself some tea, before resting on the sofa. "Did you convince her to do that?"

"Nope. She decided it herself," answered Sunset as she joined her mentor. "Thought it would be too awkward."

"I must say, you seem to have had quite the effect on her."

"Yeah, me and the guy that she ran into. Long story," she amended, seeing Sunny's curious stare. "But it all knocked some sense into her, and made her remember things she'd forgotten."
At that, Sunny chuckled. "It's funny that you mention remembering. While I was walking around the building, I remembered that I've actually met Pearl Luxury before, in Equestria."

"Seriously?" For a moment, the teen tried to imagine Pearl as a pony, substituting hands for hooves and warping the mouth into a muzzle before pondering other features.

"She's a pegasus," said the woman, reading into her student's puzzled expression. Holding out her necklace, there was a flash of golden light, and there, floating above the amethyst, was the transparent image of a young mare, a tall, pure white pegasus with a bright, energized face framed by Pearl's golden beach waves, and bright blue eyes.

"I met her at a social function a few years ago," continued Sunny. "This was after you'd left. She's still the heir of a rather large shipping business up in the northeast. As I recall, she was less spoiled and superficial, but about as energetic, moving from pony to pony before her parents called her over to speak with me."

"Huh." Sunset let the mental image sink in, before grasping onto one particular piece of information. "Hold up, parents, plural? Her dad's still alive over there?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow. "You mean he passed away here?"

"Yeah. Pearl said he got stung by jellyfish."

"Hmm... Ah, now I remember," declared Sunny. "Her father did mention a rather harrowing experience involving jellyfish, but he'd managed to fly away before they stung him."

Sunset Shimmer sunk deeper into the sofa cushions, just as her mind sank deeper in thought, "He flew away," she muttered.

Wings. Simple wings. Though she didn't know the exact circumstances behind the death of Pearl's father, from this knowledge alone, it was quite possible that a single set of additional limbs had made all the difference across the dimensions. A difference in limbs, a difference in species, and one soul continued to live and breathe, while the other was gone and buried, leaving his family behind.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" interrupted Sunny, echoing Sunset's own thoughtfulness. "The differences one finds across the mirror."

"To say the least," agreed Sunset solemnly. "Hey, what's Pearl's special talent, anyway?" she asked, trying to shake off the raw weight of the idea.

Sunny placed a finger on her chin. "As I recall, it was... making others shine, and making them feel like they were the most important pony in the room."

"That sounds like Rarity," said Sunset, recalling the things Princess Twilight had shared about her friends' counterparts.

"I suppose it does." Wrapping an arm around her student, Sunny gave her a gentle hug. "I'm proud of you, Sunset. You helped somepony turn their life around."

"Thanks." She blushed, pulling herself closer. There was something about being in close contact with Princess Celestia, even this extension of her, that never seemed to get old. Letting her eyes wander, she saw the time on a nearby clock, and her mood was spoiled by practical thoughts.

"I should get to my homework," she grumbled, reluctantly breaking the hug. Her chemistry teacher just had to assign extra, very tedious problems today.
"Don't let me stop you," said Sunny, getting up to reheat her tea, and looking disappointed herself, but hiding it much better.

Sunset walked toward her room, stopping when her cell phone rang. Picking it up, she saw Rainbow's name flash across the screen. "Hey Rainbow," she greeted. "Yeah, sorry about that. Believe it or not, I had a run-in with Pearl."

She pulled the phone away to avoid the auditory punch to her eardrum. "Rainbow, calm down. It's fine. You don't need to come running. I actually got her to go away. Yeah, really. I'll tell you and the girls about it later. Uh-huh. Yeah."

Opening the door to her room with her free hand, she smiled. "Trust me, Rainbow, everything's going to be just fine."

Pearl's heels clicked along the concrete of the parking garage as she headed for her car, a newfound energy in her step. Passing by an old station wagon that she decided was a very pretty shade of green, she took out her phone, and dialed a number she knew by heart.

"Momma? I'm okay. I know you've got a meeting soon. But... Momma, about that apartment building I asked you about, I, like, don't want to run it anymore. I'm not ready for it. I want to give it back."

She stopped. "No, Momma, like, let her keep the money." Memories of Cozy Hearth rose to the forefront of her mind, how she'd welcomed Pearl with an offer of tea and freshly baked cookies, really nice cookies at that, her hesitance to leave the building, and the sting of guilt followed. "She could use it for, like, her grandkids or something."

Picking up the pace again, she found her car, and grabbed her keys with her free hand. "Momma, when you're done with your meeting, are you coming home? I really need to talk to you about something. Please?"

Pulling the door open, she slipped into the driver's seat, setting her purse beside her. "Thanks, Momma." As she clicked her seatbelt into place, an idea came to mind, and she opened her purse again, hand reaching out to grab her father's precious pearl.

"Momma, there's something else. I..." Fingertips traced their way along the smooth, pink surface. A smile crept onto her face. "I want to go sailing."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed the chapter. I'm sorry for how long it's been.

A long while back, when I posted chapter 4, I got some critiques on FIMfiction regarding Pearl as a character. At the time, I wasn't sure if I was going to do anything about that or if I really needed to, but I gave it some thought and bounced some ideas around. As time went on, this particular idea started to really appeal to me, and eventually I decided to go with it. I hope the result worked out.

That's the thing with me: I do read the comments I get, even the critiques. Now that doesn't mean I do what every critique or criticism says I should do, that would be silly.
Sometimes, there may be something I can't change, or I may have other plans in mind, or perhaps I simply don't agree with you.

However, I do consider them all. It may take me a while, but eventually, I DO sit down, read through EVERY comment, even the critical ones, and give them time and thought. This is how I get better, and if I didn't at least consider what people had to say, no matter how uncomfortable it may be to read, I'd start making stupid mistakes.

If you enjoyed the story, feel free to leave a comment or favorite the story.
Chapter 15: Mysteries on the Horizon

"And then she just calls the whole thing off!" Astrolabe Circinus seethed in her seat, slamming a white-knuckled fist down on the table.

Abacus Cinch took a sip of her glass of water. She glanced around the room, eyes trailing over the chalk sign displaying the various lunch specials of the day, at the paintings on the wall, at tables covered in white cloth and booths like their own. The room was filled with the chatter of customers and the rattling of dishes as busboys and busgirls ran in and out of the kitchen. Their own booth was at the back, allowing for very few others to see them.

To her relief, none of the other patrons had been attracted by Astrolabe's outburst. The only one staring, in fact, was a lone waitress.

The girl stepped forward cautiously, keeping closer to Abacus than Astrolabe. "Um, are you ladies ready to order?"

"Not quite yet," replied Abacus, shooing the girl away with a wave of her hand. She turned to her sister, expression flat as her pink eyes bored into Astrolabe over the edge of her glasses. "You're losing your temper again," she chided. "I didn't invite you to lunch and pick a private booth so you could draw unwanted attention."

"Excessive told me that Pearl is no longer interested in having a sister," continued the younger Cinch slowly, lowering her voice, but unwilling to end her rant. She nursed her glass of water, allowing the ice to clink together, before taking a very long sip. "Do you know what that little waste is doing instead? She's going sailing! She actually wants to steer a boat."

"Mmm, I suppose you're right. But you haven't heard the most laughable thing," insisted Astrolabe. "Pearl is actually planning to get a GED."

Abacus's eyebrows shot up. "You're kidding."

"Unfortunately, no."

The elder Cinch could only shake her head, unable to believe how ludicrous the world could be. "What a waste of time and resources. The girl's an intellectual vacuum. Someone like her would never be able to pass." Not without cheating, at any rate. Or, rather, having someone help her cheat.
Pearl was far too dim to successfully cheat all on her own.

Astrolabe nodded in agreement. "I don't know what got into her, but it's probably the most foolish thing she's ever done. And worst of all, it's caused me a great deal of trouble." She sighed, and Abacus saw her sister's body sag. She actually looked... defeated. Abacus couldn't remember the last time she'd ever seen her that way.

"I'm not sure what course of action to take," said Astrolabe. "With Excessive no longer interested, I have very little solid ground to stand on."

"No, you really don't." It wasn't a jab as much a statement of fact.

Astrolabe scrutinized her. "You seem rather unperturbed by this turn of events, Abacus. I thought you wanted to get back at these girls. Don't tell me things have turned around at Crystal Prep."

Abacus Cinch froze for a moment. "They have not," she replied with irritation. Dean Cadance's popularity was continuing to soar, hers continued to plummet, and the students were more and more unruly. Their track team had actually been proud of getting second place at the regional meet.

She took another sip of water, relishing the cold chill of the liquid as it ran down her throat. "I do still plan to get back at them," she said with an air of almost complete serenity.

Her sister leaned in closer. "You have a plan?"

Abacus nodded. "Indeed, I do. I'll tell you while we're eating." She waved over the waitress.

"When is this plan of yours going to start?" asked Astrolabe as she picked up the menu.

Abacus ran through a set of timetables in her head, and smiled. "Very soon."

It was the lunch period, and seven very special girls were gathered at their usual table, with their usual assortments of food.

"Hi girls," said Sunset as she slid onto the plastic seat.

"Hey, Sunset," greeted Applejack, popping open a bottle of fizzy apple cider.

"Ugh," said Rainbow. Her head dropped onto the table, cushioned by her arms. "I hate moles."

Six pairs of eyes stared at her. "Wow," said Pinkie Pie. "That was random."

Sunset raised an eyebrow. This from the reigning champion of random? "I think moles are cute," muttered Fluttershy.

"I think they're interesting animals," said Twilight. "But we've never really had any in our yard, so I don't have any actual experience in dealing with them."

"Moles can be attractive sometimes," said Rarity, preoccupied by adjusting one of the decorations on her bag. "One of the other employees has a mole on her cheek that works rather well for her."

"Hold on," interrupted Applejack in confusion. "I thought we were talkin' about the animal."

"Ooh, or were we talking about spies?" gasped Pinkie. Her head darted left and right, and then she dashed over to a neighboring table, going up to Lyra and Bon-Bon, and squinting suspiciously at the
latter. "Hmmm..." She pulled back. "Nope, no spies here."

"I wasn't talking about any of those things," groaned Rainbow Dash. "I had a pop quiz in chemistry."

"Oh!" Twilight smiled in realization. "You meant that kind of mole."

"I couldn't remember that stupid constant," moaned Rainbow. "Who can remember such a weird num—"

"Avocado's constant," Sunset replied. "It's six—"

"—Point zero-two-two times ten to the twenty-third power," finished Twilight. "Actually, I've read that there are plans to revise the mole's technical definition, but that hasn't gone through yet."

"Really?" asked Sunset.

"Oh yes," said Twilight with a nod, "along with other SI-based units of measurement."

"Showoffs," complained Rainbow, burying her face even deeper into her arms.

With a bit of laughter, consoling, and offers of help, the seven of them soon transitioned into general chatter as they dug into their lunches, what they planned to do after class, when each of them could get together, some harmless gossip, so on and so forth.

The conversation was interrupted about ten minutes in when they heard a buzzing sound. Instinctively, the girls all reached for their phones. "It's mine," said Rarity, pulling her phone from her purse. She looked at the screen, blinking in puzzlement. "What would Mother be calling me about at this time of day?"

"Maybe she needs you to pick up some groceries?" suggested Twilight.

"You could be right." Rarity pressed the button and held the phone up to her ear. "Hello?"

Sunset watched as, in the course of a minute, Rarity's eyes went as wide as saucers, and her complexion turned pale. Of course, the fashionista had always been pale, but now she was practically translucent.

Applejack was the first to speak. "What's wrong, sugarcube?"

Rarity hung up the phone, turning slowly to face them. "M-My..." she stuttered, unable to find the words.

"What happened?" Sunset asked, placing a concerned hand on her friend's shoulder. "Rarity, what's wrong?"

Rarity stared into Sunset's eyes. Her next words were shaky and frightened. "My father... he's been arrested."

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_Equestria, a few days ago..._

Bottom Bit wandered through the alley, kicking a half-crushed can as he went. The pegasus scratched at his chin, hoof meeting his scruffy teal beard, matched by an equally scruffy mane and tail that had seen better days. In fact, all of him had seen better days.
It didn't used to be like. Once, he'd been an assistant bank manager. He'd eaten at good restaurants, had a nice house, a shiny gold watch, and was liked by his employers. He'd been looking at a promotion, and one of the secretaries had even fancied him, giggling and blushing at him whenever they'd talked. His life had been looking up.

But then he'd spilled ink all over some documents belonging to the bank president. His attempt to fix it just resulted in his wings blowing the pages into the office fireplace, reducing everything to ash, and him being fired on the spot.

He'd tried to find other work at the numerous other banks in the city, but a newly-formed reputation as a klutz preceded him everywhere he went. A perpetual optimist, he'd held out hope that he'd find work. But as the days turned into weeks, and the bills piled up, he'd been forced to sell possession after possession to get by.

Then about two months ago, the bank, his bank, foreclosed on his home. His colleagues all abandoned him. Even the secretary abandoned him. So here he was, fending for himself among the homeless ponies, the lost and forgotten in this place of lights and opportunity.

Not entirely forgotten, he reminded himself. His hoof moved down to the scarf wrapped around his neck. It was thick and warm, and decorated with brightly colored birds. A pony had given it to him a few weeks ago.

Coco Pommel, that was her name. She was always so kind, volunteering at the shelters, giving away food and old clothing. One day, when she'd given away all of the latter and he came in complaining of cold, she'd given him her scarf. Her own scarf. Something she'd sewed herself, something that was hers and hers alone, and she'd given it to him just like that. Bottom Bit had almost burst into tears right then and there.

His stomach growled, sounding not unlike a great lion. He hadn't eaten anything for a few days. A voice in the back of his mind told him he could sell the scarf for a decent meal, or a couple of meals, but Bottom Bit rejected that thought. He couldn't sell it, not for anything. He was going to give it back to Coco one of these days, when things were better. Yes, "when", not "if".

Still feeling the pangs of extreme hunger, the pegasus searched through the nearby trash cans for anything halfway decent looking. It was surprising, what some ponies threw away. His initial search yielded nothing, and he tried another can, finally finding a not-too-bad-looking carrot.

He munched on it eagerly, savoring what taste it had. But it didn't even begin to satisfy the hole he felt in his stomach. "I'm starving," he moaned.

It was then that he heard a shuffling at the other end of the alley. Bottom Bit tensed, fearing danger. Not everypony on these streets was so benign.

A mint green stallion rounded the corner. "Who's there?" came a gruff voice, words raspy and thick with sleep, but no less threatening. "If ya come ta fight, I'll take you all on!"

He was much older than Bottom Bit, his mane a pure white, laying in tangles around his shoulders and half submerging his ears. It was his face, however, that made Bottom Bit gasp. It was wizened, etched with lines and wrinkles, like great canyons in his skin. And the mouth, the mouth was twisted by a horrible looking scar, making the stallion look like he had a constant scowl. His left eye too, bore a scar, a pale horizontal slash that stopped at the bridge of his nose, while and the eye itself was a milky white.

"I'm not here to fight," declared Bottom Bit, fully intimidated by the sight of this hardened pony. "I
promise. I... I just wanted to find some food."

The unicorn turned to face him, his one eye narrowing as he trotted in Bottom Bit's direction. Or at least he tried to. He walked with a pronounced limp, dragging his right hind leg uselessly along the ground, which only made Bottom Bit wince.

As he drew closer, Bottom Bit had to stop himself from holding his breath. The other stallion wore a dark brown coat heavy with stains, and which reeked of Bottom didn't know what. Not that Bottom had grounds to complain, since his own hygiene wasn't much better.

The unicorn stopped before him, silently staring with that one raspberry eye. Bottom Bit held up his hooves.

"I-I don't want to fight," he repeated. "Please, don't hurt me."

The unicorn blinked, and then, to the pegasus's surprise, he burst out laughing. "You think I'm going to hurt ya?" He smiled, but the scar on his mouth made it look more like a grimace. "Don't worry. Some of the other ponies in these parts, they don't play so nice, and I have to show them what's what. But you're not one of 'em." The unicorn peered closely at him. His one good raspberry eye had a sharpness to it that belied the pony's age. "What's yer name, young fella?"

"Bottom Bit," replied the pegasus politely. "Who are you?" He'd become familiar with several of the homeless ponies that tended to frequent this neighborhood, but he didn't recognize this one.

"They call me Old Trotter," said the unicorn. "Yer wondering about my scars, aren't ya? Got them fighting a Bug Bear, I did." He puffed out his chest. "Fought the blasted thing to the end. I won, but it got a few good licks on me."

Bottom Bit opened his mouth to speak, but he was interrupted by another terrible growl. He clutched his belly.

Old Trotter laughed again, then broke in a wheezing cough. "I'm alright," he said, waving off Bottom Bit's concern. "My lungs just act up sometimes." He patted the other pony on the back. "Ain't nothing to be ashamed of. We're all hungry out here."

"I'd rather be ashamed than hungry," replied Bottom Bit, still clutching his aching belly. "I think I'm going to collapse soon if I don't get something."

Old Trotter frowned at him, his twisted mouth dropping as much as it could. Suddenly, his eyes narrow, peering over Bottom Bit's shoulder at the street signs beyond the alley. "Hey now, I know this place." He clapped a hoof on Bottom Bit's shoulder. "I think we're both in luck."

Bottom Bit looked on in confusion as the old stallion began to search the alley, checking every inch of the wall. "What do you mean?" he asked finally.

The unicorn moved a pile of garbage. "My buddies told me that last winter, they made a little shelter around here. Filled it up with food they'd filched and all sorts of other stuff. Saved their flanks, they told me. They've moved on from this part of town, but they told me that if I needed it, they left all sorts of stuff in there to use and eat."

Bottom Bit frowned in disbelief. He certainly didn't see any shelters. Just piles of garbage. And if Old Trotter meant the buildings around them, those were sealed up tight. "You're sure?"

"Trust me, young fella. Ah, here we go!" He smiled, waving a hoof dramatically as he pointed at a wooden board set against the wall. With a burst of magic, he shoved it aside to reveal a door set into
the brick. A side entrance.

Bottom Bit raced up to it, trying the door, but found it firmly locked. "It won't open," he said, crestfallen.

Old Trotter's brow furrowed, then he slapped his forehead. "I'm getting soft. Hold on." He pawed at the bricks with a hoof until one came loose, and the unicorn pulled out a key. "They said they'd hidden it."

With a click, the door was unlocked, revealing the dark interior. Staring at it, Bottom Bit felt a sudden wave of apprehension. "Is this really okay? You said the stuff your friends had was stolen." With all the trouble he'd gotten into already, the last thing he wanted was to break the law.

Old Trotter just laughed. "Don't worry so much, young fella. Yer hungry, ain't ya? Go on." The pony gave him a light shove. "We can both eat and warm up in here."

The pegasus took a calming breath. The old timer was right. He was worrying too much. If there was food in here, he needed to take it before he starved to death, and the building would be a good place to sleep, besides. With a confident spring in his step, he walked inside. Old Trotter followed, closing the door behind them.

Bottom Bit would never walk out.

Chapter End Notes

Original Author’s Note: No, this story is not dead. I’m so sorry it took me so long to get this done. I had basically it done a couple weeks ago, but I delayed it because I wanted to get to some back-editing given to me by my pre-reader… last year. See my blog posts on fimfiction for more details there, but needless to say, it was, and will still be, a LOT of work. @___@

And before any of your chemistry-inclined readers say anything, YES, I know it’s Avogadro’s constant. I changed it to “Avocado” because the EqG universe is filled with punny names.

New Author’s Note 06/19/19: For those that read the story on this format, you’re probably wondering what happened to this chapter, which was up a couple of months ago before going down after a couple days, why the story title, changed, where a few scenes are, why there’s a new scene at the end of chapter 11, etc.

Chapter 15 didn’t go over especially well when I posted it, so I chose to withdraw it while I worked out some story structure problems, because I want this story to be the best that it can be. This is my solution, changing it into books. The scenes that have been removed from chapters 11, 13, and the original 15 are not permanently gone. Instead, they will be shuffled into book 2, which I will put up either tomorrow or Saturday.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!