

Affection or Defection

Part One

Telofy

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“Let us talk about Lyra. You two are so close, and I hardly know her; what’s she like?”

“Oh... she often reminds me of you, actually. She reads a lot... but mostly old books on anthropology and human biology... I don’t mean to imply that you’d be interested in such things.” Her last sentence was almost obscured by a gentle breeze rustling the leaves of the Books and Branches Library.

“And she actually believes that stuff?” Twilight looked askance, but more from habit than from conviction, she noticed.

“I don’t know... I never asked...” Fluttershy’s voice trailed off. “Um, and she’s a great virtuoso...”

“On the lyre, I assume?”

“She plays a variety of instruments. The lyre, the crwth, the chang, the harp, the konghou, the cithara, the zither, and so many more. I don’t even know all their names. I should’ve asked...”

Twilight had an idea. “I have to wait for a cross-validation of my dynamic clustering algorithm to finish—perhaps we can meet her.”

“Now?” Fluttershy looked apologetic. “I’m afraid she’s unavailable today.”

“What’s she doing?”

A pegasus fluttered by awkwardly, losing letters and postcards, and flinging more at mailboxes.

Fluttershy couldn’t meet Twilight’s eyes. “Can’t say.”

“You mean you don’t know or you can’t tell me?”

Again, Fluttershy hesitated, her eyes clinging to one of the falling letters as a bunny to its last carrot. “Oh, sorry, Twilight... It’s not that I... I trust you fully, it’s just... I promised her never to tell anyone. Please understand. I’m sorry I even brought it up...”

Twilight looked pensive for a moment, and torn. “OK. I won’t pester you.” She quickly went to pick up the letter, so Fluttershy wouldn’t see the guilt in her eyes. “Oh! It’s for Pinkie.”

“That is all?”

A nod.

“Twilight, I rarely have to say this to you, but I am disappointed. As regards your interrogation technique, you— I wish I were outside Equestria, so I could put this more bluntly, but your expertise evidently lies elsewhere.

“You could’ve used torture, or a truth spell. In the opposite order obviously, lest you be unable to follow through on your threats.” A wink.

“She’s Fluttershy! I could never do that to her. She’s one of my closest friends.” The marble floor seemed to drain all warmth from Twilight’s hooves. It also kindled in her a new appreciation for the wooden floor of her own dwelling.

“Oh Twilight, I’m so sorry.” A gentle smile played around Celestia’s lips. “You have acquired all that experience in friendship, but I have failed to equip you with the tools you would require to put it into context and to see the broader picture. What you need to learn is some measure of ideological promiscuity.”

“Are you telling me I should put friendship aside if it doesn’t suit my ends?”

“That is very perspicacious of you. I would put it this way, however: There are inside of you many Twilights, among them the gentle Twilight of a glorious dawn at a picturesque lake on the countryside. There is also the Twilight of dusk in the Everfree Forest, where the rigid cold of a long winter suppresses all life. None of them is less you than any other. Just know when to switch the paradigm.”

Twilight hesitated. This pattern of reasoning was not new to her, but Celestia was applying it selectively and inconsistently. She made a decision she felt was long overdue. “I don’t wish to contradict you, and I acknowledge that the paradigm shifts you recommend can be enlightening, but to suggest that one align one’s paradigms with overarching goals is to tacitly imply a metaparadigm. Even if I thought in those terms, my paradigmatic selections within this metaparadigm would still be guided by its morality—not vice versa.”

Celestia’s gaze fixed on Twilight; her aspect with its perpetual smile suggested white chalcedony. “Oh, Twilight. Think of it this way: Life is like a canvas,” she took a few steps toward the parapet of the wide balcony overlooking the gardens of Canterlot, “and friendship is one of your finest, most elegant

sable-hair brushes.” In her sweetest voice she continued, “Sometimes, however, your endeavors will require a stiff and strong hog-bristle brush, and you have to put friendship back into the drawer.” Still dulcetly, “In fact, it is often necessary to rip the canvas to shreds or burn it to the ground and the easel with it, for beauty to emerge.

“Luckily—and you may not know this—I have another agent in Ponyville who is more adroit at selecting the right brush—the right personality—for the occasion, maybe even more so than I. Don’t worry about it. She will take care of Lyra and Fluttershy.”

When Twilight comprehended the sentence, Celestia had already taken to the skies.

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“Hey, Twilight!”

“Applejack, I’ve been looking for you.”

The two ponies stood at the gates of the SAA headquarters, slightly elevated, overlooking many of the acres of apple trees.

“Twist’s gone missin’. Have you heard?”

“Yes, but I wanted to talk to you about something in private. Can we go into your apple cellar?” Twilight ushered her in the direction of the barn.

“Sure. What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you when we’re alone.”

They descended the stair and Applejack lowered the trapdoor.

“Can anypony hear us?” Twilight asked.

“Not a filly in the whole wide world.”

“Celestia knows you’re leading a rebel cell.”

Silence.

“We ain’t got no leaders,” she said slowly, “But why would you tell me that?”

“Fluttershy and Lyra are in danger, and I want to join you.” She waited for Applejack to speak; when she didn’t, she continued, “Also, there’s something I need you to hide for me.”

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Pinkie opened her door a few inches and peeped out.

"I knew I'd find you here. The mailpony has lost this letter for you, Pinkie— Urgh, what's this awful stench?"

"I'm making cupcakes!"

"It smells more like vinegar."

"Oh yeah, that... That's vinegar!" Pinkie's smile embiggened.

"What are you... Can I come in?"

"Nnnope!" Pinkie giggled and crashed the door close. Similar noises continued inside, and Twilight had already turned to go, when the door was flung wide again.

"Come in," Pinkie beamed, "and leave the door open; I need to get that smell out. I'm having a guest later. And help yourself to a cupcake. Not that one! One of these! The letter, right, let's see... Yeah, whatevs. Can you help me bake more cupcakes?"

"Um, sure, but where's that vinegar reek coming from?"

"What vinegar?"

"φ"

"Oh, vinegar, shminegar! Here, take a cup of flour and add it to the mix. Now just take a little something sweet, not sour, and a bit of salt, just a pinch!"

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The teetering turrets of the stratocumulus castellanus wobbled when Dash's hooves struck its puffy promontory right next to another panting pegasus pony. "Wow, you look, um, 'bloody knackered,' as the Doctor would say."

"Who?" asked Wingkins, rubbing his wing muscles.

"Never mind. What's wrong? Preparing for the competition?"

"I don't prepare for competitions. Makes me all nervous. No, I'm practicing barrel rolls. My record's at twelve in a row."

"Twelve. Cute. I'm actually in the middle of my afternoon exercises, too. But say, a moment ago, I saw Twilight..."

"Who?"

"Friend o' mine. Anyway, she was carrying a couple books and lots of what looked like huge rolled-up maps. Got me thinking. Why isn't there a

pegasus race through all of Equestria, or even farther? That'd not only require amazing speed, but also extreme endurance, don't you think?"

Wingkins stopped his rubbing and looked at her. "'Even farther'? Have you ever been to a foreign country? I mean, not just flown over it to guide some birds, but actually landed, talked to the ponies there?"

"No, I guess... They say they're not intelligent there, not like us."

"Bullocks. I'll tell you something. When I started to be successful with my band and we were touring Equestria, I had an increasingly hard time taking school seriously. You know, I had just gotten my cutie mark then: It's a fucking guitar—not a book, not a pen, not a calculator, not a tea cozy. I guess I must've come off a tad rebellious at the time. Anyways, I was already a good flier, so when a teacher told us that old tale, how primitive and cruel and savage they are outside Equestria, and that—for heaven's sake—we should never land there, I was all like 'Let's do this!'"

Dash waited for him to continue. When the silence grew awkward, she asked lamely, "So what happened?"

"It's all lies, that's what happened. I didn't speak their language, but everypony I met was perfectly hospitable and kind. I say 'everypony,' but there were hardly any ponies among them, of course. You see how our language can bias our thoughts? Well, *that* got *me* thinking. I actually did some reading then. Poverty's rampant there, and a lot o' the rich ponies in Equestria do their darnest to keep it that way. You see, here you can't pay a pony a buck a day and expect them to work for you. There, for a buck, you can work them the nights as well. They have no choice."

"Hmm, when it's Equestrians who do that, why don't we know anything about it?"

"That's a good question. There's a subtle but sinister relationship between Canterlot and the press. This elderly pegasus's written a book about it... What's his name... He's kind o' famous, has written a lot o' books actually. Don't remember, something with *sky* I think. Anyways, he calls it *ungulfactoring consent*."

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“And then I said, ‘Oatmeal, are you craz—’ Oh our cupcakes are done! ...and that means that it’s waaay-too-late-o’clock! Twilight, you have to go. Now! My guest might come any moment, should be here by now, actually. Go, go, go! Out, out, out!” said Pinkie through a wide smile.

“OK OK, Pinkie! I’ll be on my way.”

A ray of iridescence shot through the open door.

“Sorry if I’m a little late, Pinkie. I was doing my afternoon exercises and lost track of time,” Dash apologized, “Oh, hi, Twilight.”

Then a violent gust of wind followed her. Flour blew into Pinkie’s face, the elaborate cupcake toppings whirled and sang, the ceiling light swayed, and a large tapestry was pressed into an aperture where there should have been only wall.

“Whoo, I didn’t know they had a basement here!” Dash said, diving straight against the tapestry, vanishing. Twilight and Pinkie followed.

A staircase led down into complete darkness. Pinkie skipped into the void and flung a light switch. Proudly, “It’s my dungeon!”

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“Um, Your Royal Highness?”

“Yes?” Celestia turned to her claviger, who would have much preferred to talk to her back.

“Twilight was in your private library earlier. She looked like she had your permission. She had your permission, right, ma’am?” He receded a step.

Celestia’s eyes widened momentarily, but then grew frigid and piercing like icicles. “Say... While she was there with you, did you feel a floating sensation, immense relaxation, and something like a vague, untraceable happiness?”

“Sort o’, yeah...”

Where did she learn such dark magic?, Celestia wondered. “Did she take any books with her?”

“*Elements of Harmony Considered Harmful*, four old maps, and a few works on history and anthropology are missing, ma’am.”

“It’s all right. She had my permission. Always keep the door locked, even when you’re in. Now shoo!”

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Lyra looked intrigued. “So you’re also attracted to stallions?”

“Yup.” Fluttershy could talk with her about everything and enjoyed it.

“And what about animals, plants, and inanimate objects?”

“We are animals, silly.”

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Twilight was just speechless, while Rainbow, who scanned the room with her eyes trembling in their sockets, uttered a constant stream of “Whoa, whoa!” and “Ugh!” and “Fuck! What the... fuuuck!”

“Chillax, everypony!” said Pinkie undaunted, “It’s all fake! See?” She bounced past the line of severed unicorn horns that stretched across the room, dodged one of the bundles of mutilated pegasus wings suspended from the ceiling, and reached a wall hung with cutie marks on what looked like scraps of pony hide. After a few moments of search, she picked one off the wall and threw it at Dash—she flew up, so that it slapped the stair behind her. Twilight inspected it cautiously from afar, then picked it up. It showed a wand and pixie dust. Rainbow relaxed, “It’s just a rag with paint on it.”

“See, I set this all up just to make Celestia think I was the uber-torturer she sought and that she had a handle on me, so I could win her trust and infiltrate her ranks. Now you busted me, so I have to fess up. Besides, I heard you’re AJ’s pony now.”

“Word travels fast...”

Rainbow Dash, who was still too perplexed to be confused by that exchange, protested, “But the blood stains on the steel everywhere!”

“That’s what I needed the vinegar for.”

“You mean for making fake stains?” Twilight asked, “Typically, I think, vinegar is used to remove stains.”

“But Twilight, silly: To *remove* stains, there would first have to *be* stains! I thought that was obvious. Trust me, it’s really all just fake in here. Either that or pilfered from graves.”

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“Howdy, Lyra-Shy!” Applejack joined them on their park bench. “Hmm, you comfy, Lyra?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Sorry I’m a bit on edge. We’re shippin’ apples to Hoofington. In any case, there’s somethin’ I thought you should know,” she looked at Lyra, “and it kind o’ concerns you too, Fluttershy, bein’ the Element of Kindness and all.” She was torn between politeness and efficacy, but decided to give them a chance to respond—neither did. “Twilight’s just told me somethin’ interestin’ about the Elements, I mean, us. She’s defected, is one of us now—I hope. Let’s see if I still remember everythin’. Celestia always spins it like the Elements were some sort of tool she used as a last resort to maintain harmony when her sister went berserk. Now Twilight’s found an old letter that alleges that their significance goes way beyond that. It says that both sisters are bound to the Elements and that the Elements are in fact the source of their power. Lyra, have you heard of the Shadow Ponies?”

“Yeah... It’s an old pony tale among unicorns. My grandpa used to tell me that they were a group of powerful sorcerers who always stayed in the background and acted in secret, but really were the principle force in the founding of our country and the ones who raised the whole city of Canterlot from the rock.”

“Pretty much. I don’t know if they actually conjured up the whole royal city. That’s probably just a metaphor for what they really did, if that letter can be trusted. Now, what I’m about to tell you may sound like a lot o’ hooey, I reckon, but Twilight believes it. What the Shadow Ponies set out to do was to create the perfect Leviathan—the perfect ruler—for the budding kingdom. For this purpose, they created the Elements as a conduit to infuse the sisters with ‘the essence of a demon,’ as they called it. This ‘demon essence’ endows them with great magical powers and long life, but it always has to be funneled by the Elements. If one of the sisters moves outside the purview of the Elements, that is, disrupts harmony as they define it, her power diminishes.”

“Um,” Fluttershy made an effort to enter the conversation. “Is that perhaps what happened to Luna that allowed Celestia to banish her? Maybe Celestia never even told her sister about the nature of the Elements...”

“Possibly. Now, the central point of the letter is that the Shadow Ponies made a crucial mistake. Bear in mind that at that time the world was a much bigger place. Not literally, but in the sense that the earth ponies knew little of the unicorns and the pegasi were a nation of their own altogether. They spoke different languages, and hardly anypony knew that the other species even existed. Obviously, it was the rare pony who considered that there may be countries beyond Equestria. The Shadow Ponies didn’t, and they limited the scope of this harmony of their’s to Equestria. Outside Equestria it becomes meaningless, and Celestia can do whatever she wants.

“The letter is over a hundred years old, but the pony who wrote it already anticipated that the nations of the worlds would soon be much less separated than they were. Finally he even theorized that once it became viable, Celestia may find ways to exploit the immunity she enjoyed outside Equestria and warned that our great nation may become a scourge for much of the rest of the world.

“Then there was somethin’ about problems in describing the progress of processes. I don’t know. Twilight said it was all pretty hard to read.”

Lyra stopped swinging her hind legs. “Can we trust her?”

“I think so.”

“Can you ask her if Celestia knows of my recon work?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know yet. Well, I won’t bother you two lovebirds any longer. But I’ll be around in case... I don’t know. Just shout for me if anythin’s amiss.”

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The vinegar stench was still rather intense in the basement, so Twilight and Dash enjoyed being back upstairs. Pinkie cleaned the tables of empty boxes, bags, an old cupcake, and other trash, then took the freshly baked cupcakes from the oven. A few minutes later, they were eating.

“So you’re like a real badass secret agent, like those in film and fanfic?” Dash asked, nibbling on her first cupcake.

Twilight added, “Then this ‘rock farm’ you said you grew up on is probably a code for something?”

“Lol, yeah, I’ve received excellent training.”

“Oh, so that’s also why you go by an alias here!” Twilight smiled proudly, then removed from her third cupcake the sophisticated topping and let it hover in the air for a moment, where it tweeted joyfully.

“Nah, that’s just for fun. Oh, before I forget: Among the rebels, there is a certain fraction that wants to resort to black magic against Celestia if all else fails. Those folks are a danger to everypony. And now that you know that I’ve never actually been Celestia’s agent... You see why I’m in a bit of a pickle.” She fetched a stiletto from her mane and began to slowly dissect a cupcake. Several incisions later, she noticed her friends’ incomprehension. “Oh, isn’t it obvious? Since they are not clearly organized yet, no pony can know who may decide to join them. So you mustn’t let anypony—not even Applejack—know that you know that I’ve never, in fact, been with Canterlot, or they won’t

buy it when I put on my ‘reformed Celestian’ act to infiltrate them. Savvy?”

Dash spoke for both of them, “Wait, what?”

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Pegasi slept in their villas, which in turn shrouded the moon. Ponyville lay in complete darkness. Suddenly, a purple flash. More flashes of purple light emanated from the Books and Branches Library. The cellar door stood open. Another flash and Spike was awake. He followed the next flash to the entrance of the basement. Still groggy from sleep, he began to descend the stair.

“Twilight! For hessonite’s sake! What is that? What are you doing?”

“Oh no, Spike! I left the door unlocked, didn’t I?”

“It was open. What in devil’s name are you doing?”

“I ought to have locked the door. I’m sorry, Spike, it’s all my fault.” Her horn started to glow. “I hate it when I have to meddle with your memory, but you cannot have seen this. I’m so sorry.”

A bright yellow ray hit Spike.