



Princess Twilight Sparkle
and the Forgotten Books of Autumn
by G. M. Berrow





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and The
Forgotten Books
of Autumn

Written by G. M. Berrow



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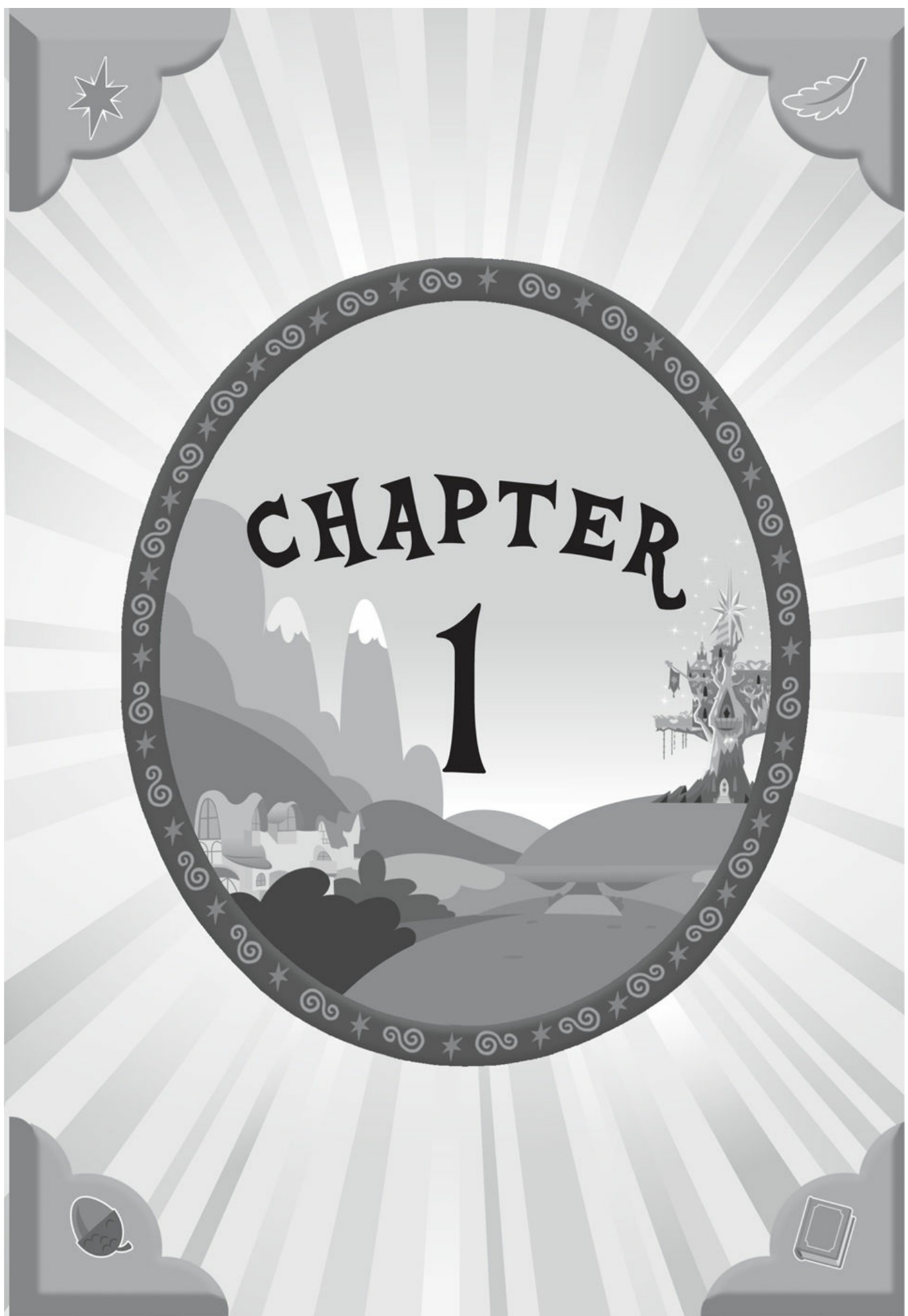
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For Kennedy Joon— wishing you a future filled with magical books



Once Upon a Book

The crimson leaf quietly let go of its branch, swaying back and forth on the gentle breeze all the way down to Princess Twilight Sparkle's muzzle. It tickled and the Alicorn pony could not hold it in. "Achoo!" Her sneeze was so loud that it rustled a few more leaves loose. The crispy confetti floated down in a beautiful ballet of rusty colors.

As Twilight continued her journey through the forest back to the Castle of Friendship, she inhaled the fresh air with a deep satisfaction. The princess had been so preoccupied lately that she'd barely noticed the season was just beginning to change. A sense of giddiness began to wash over Twilight Sparkle. Autumn was her favorite of all the seasons; it provided the perfect amount of blustery days when a pony could stay inside snuggled with a good book and not worry at all that she were wasting the sunshine.

All the way home, Twilight's head began to fill with visions of the coming season. She trotted through the forest and made a mental checklist of all the fun things she planned to do with her friends. Of course Twilight would go to the Ponyville Pumpkin Patch with Applejack, bake seasonal pies with Pinkie Pie, train for the Running of the Leaves race with Rainbow Dash, knit cozy scarves with Rarity, and help Fluttershy harvest and store corn to feed her chickens. Twilight didn't have any autumnal traditions with her new friend and student, Starlight Glimmer, yet. She would definitely have to fix that!

Perhaps they could perform a new spell together? The autumn was known throughout pony history to be a very special time for magic—some ancient wizards had even claimed that complicated spells attempted on the Autumnal Equine-nox were guaranteed to succeed. Twilight's mind was racing with possibilities as she riffled through her saddlebag. She procured a tattered tome with a purple cover and flipped it open, reading as she continued homeward.

"Ooof!" Twilight exclaimed as she tumbled to the ground. The books from her bag scattered across the dirt. Twilight lifted her head to see what or whom she'd collided with.

"Ouch," groaned Sweetie Belle as she peeled herself up from the ground one hoof at a time. "I'm really sorry, Twilight! I didn't see you there."

"It's all right, Sweetie." Twilight chuckled. She lifted the tattered purple book with her magic. "Clearly, I wasn't looking where I trotting, either! *Silverdust's Guide to Mystic Histories* is quite compelling." Twilight laughed and a little snort came out.

Sweetie Belle shifted from hoof to hoof. "Yeah, books, right?" She nodded her mane as her eyes began to dart around. "Love those things!"

Twilight raised a brow. Why was the filly acting so anxious? It had been a while since they'd seen each other. Twilight had chalked it up to Sweetie Belle's busy schedule helping other ponies with their cutie mark problems, but maybe there was something more to her odd behavior.

"How have you been, Sweetie Belle?" Twilight's purple eyes glistened as she smiled at the filly.

“It’s been such a long time!” The princess lifted her hoof to her chin and racked her mind. “In fact, I think the last time we crossed paths was last month, when you came to the castle to borrow that book on potion making...”

“Oh yeah!” Sweetie Belle forced a laugh. “*That!* I completely forgot! Silly me!”

“So how was it?” asked Twilight Sparkle. She took an eager step forward. Helping a pony with the perfect book recommendation was one of her simplest joys in life. “Did you manage to try to make any of the potions?”

“*Ummm...*” Sweetie Belle’s lip quivered. “I...I...”

Twilight frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“The truth is...*ummm...* I’ve been avoiding you because I ruined your book!” As Sweetie Belle blurted the confession, her tiny voice cracked. “I was making a potion and I leaned too far forward, and then it fell into the mix and I couldn’t save it!” The little pony hung her head in shame. “I’m really sorry, Twilight. I know it was rare and special to you.”

Even though she was a bit upset at the news, Twilight knew that there was only one thing to say. “Don’t worry,” Twilight Sparkle assured as she patted Sweetie on the shoulder. “I’m not mad. It’s just a book, after all.”

Sweetie Belle’s eyes grew wide. “Really?”

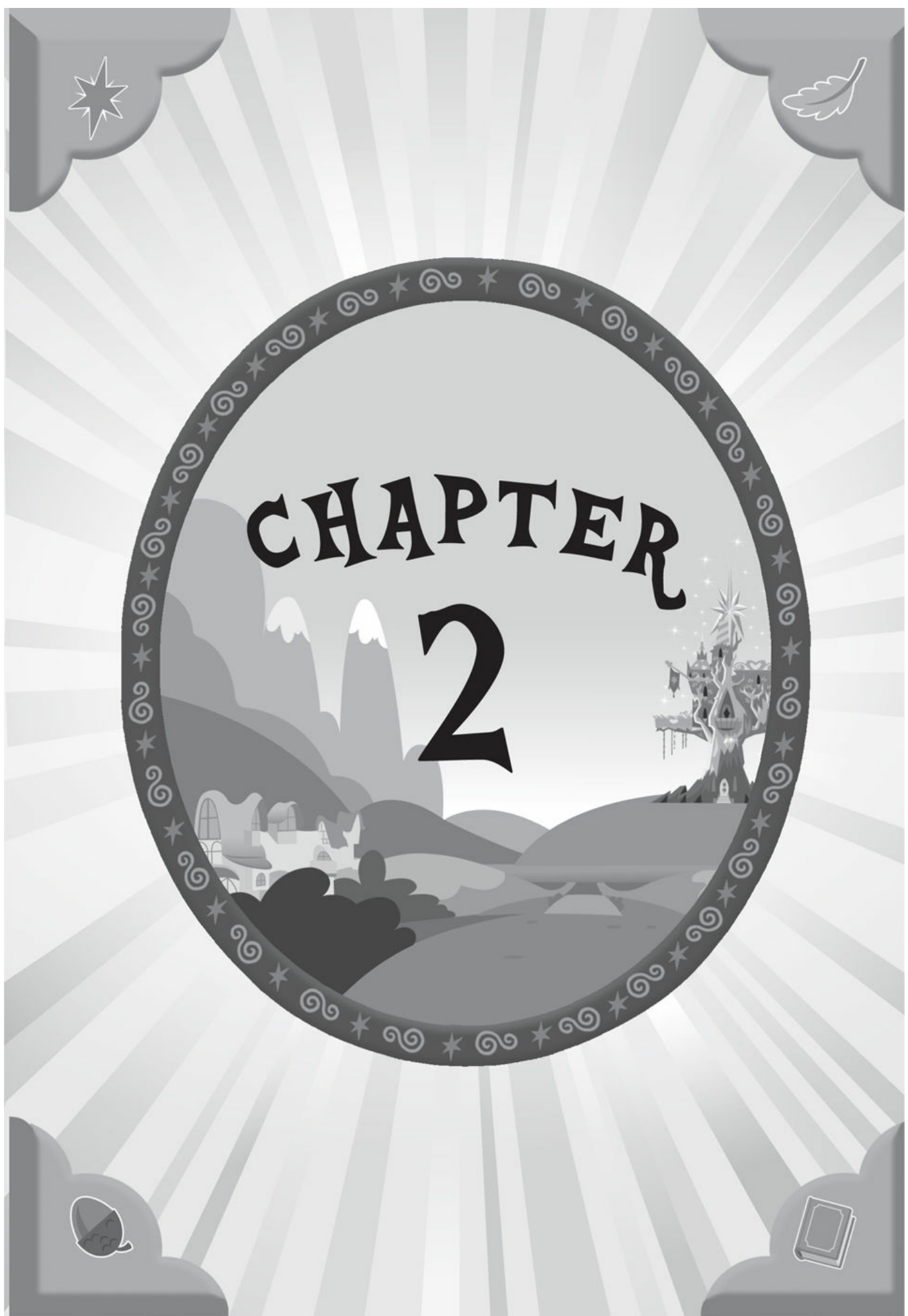
“You’re my friend,” Twilight insisted. “That matters much more to me.” She pulled Sweetie Belle into a warm hug. When the two ponies broke apart, Twilight cocked her head to the side. “But...do you still have the book?”

“The pages are water damaged and the ink is everywhere, but yes.” Sweetie Belle said with a sad nod. “Why?”

Twilight brightened. “I think I have a way to save it.”

The young filly breathed a sigh of relief. “How?”

“With the help of another book, of course!” Twilight giggled. “How else?”



CHAPTER 2

A Spine-Chilling Discovery

Princess Twilight Sparkle strode into the castle library with confidence. She prided herself on knowing the location of all the titles on the shelves. Somehow, each page tended to leave little imprints on both her heart and mind. It didn't matter if the topic in question was cooking carrots, magic spells, or even underwater basket weaving—if Twilight had read it, she remembered it. It was only natural that the solution she sought in rescuing the potion book might be found in one of her precious ancient tomes.

And she knew just the one that could help save the potion-making book.

"It's called *Primrose the Prescient's Protections and Prophecies*," Twilight called over her shoulder with a smile. "I don't suppose you've heard of it?"

"That would be a big 'no,'" Sweetie Belle replied as she trotted behind Twilight. She leaned her head back as her eyes scanned the rows upon rows of books. The young Unicorn silently marveled at how Twilight could find anything in this room at all.

"Well, it's a fantastic book of spells and predictions. If I recall correctly, Primrose designed a protection especially for the written word. It's incredibly advanced, but I've wanted to try it for ages. Now is the perfect time." Twilight stopped short. Sweetie Belle was looking in the other direction and bumped right into the princess—for the second time that day!

Sweetie Belle blushed red with embarrassment. "Rarity was right! I really am all hooves these days." She looked down at the library floor with a tiny sigh. Growing up was tough business sometimes.

But Twilight didn't mind the scuffle. She was much too focused on the task at hoof, squinting intensely at the tippity-top shelf. "There it is! Third from the left." Twilight Sparkle smiled as she summoned her magic. A glowing energy sparkled from her Unicorn horn. It surrounded the golden book, pulled it out, and delivered it gently to the two ponies below.

It wasn't long before Twilight Sparkle found what she was looking for within the yellowing pages. "The Shield of Wisdom..." she mumbled to herself, scanning the page. "Crucial for protecting knowledge one holds dear..." Huh. That means the books in Ponyville would definitely count!"

"Will it work? Can you fix the other book?" Sweetie Belle asked as her eyes filled with hope. She wanted this whole ordeal to be over so she could stop feeling so guilty about ruining Twilight's potion book.

"I think so." At first glance, the spell seemed complex, but Twilight was finally nearing a level of magical study that would allow for her to attempt it. Many recent hours logged practicing magic and teaching Starlight Glimmer about friendship had not only sharpened her teaching skills, but honed her ability to focus her magic in a new, exciting way.

"I'll just go over it a few times first." Twilight trotted over to the reading stand and propped the book open on it. Shafts of golden sunlight streamed in through the tall, arched window and illuminated

the words on the page.

Twilight slid her hoof down the page as she recited the spell in her mind, thinking of her intention. In order to perform a spell correctly, a pony couldn't just read it aloud and expect things to work instantaneously. The crux of magical skill that most ponies didn't understand was that it took time. A wizard must get to know and *own* their spells before expecting them to work.

After whispering it a few times to get the rhythm of the words down, Twilight was beginning to feel that something was missing. The lilt of the stanzas and the flow of the language felt odd on her tongue.

"Hmmm..." Twilight Sparkle flipped to the next page. Her eyes landed on it and she couldn't suppress a dramatic gasp.

"Did it work, Twilight?" Sweetie Belle leaned over Twilight's shoulder for a closer look. "Is the knowledge of Ponyville protected now?"

"No, I'm afraid not." Twilight shook her head dejectedly. "The Shield of Wisdom must be completed on the Autumnal Equine-nox..."

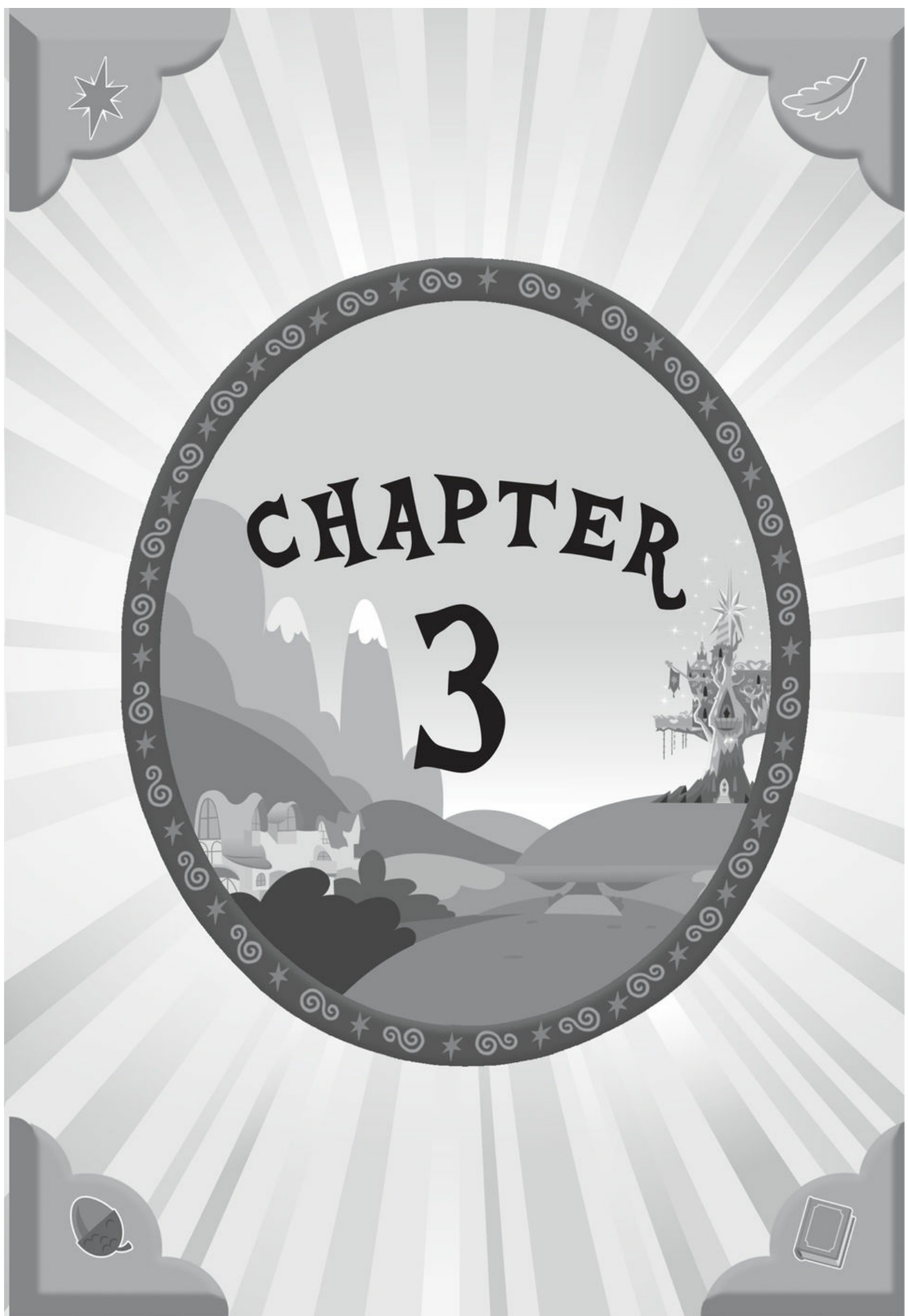
"But that's coming up soon, isn't it?" Sweetie Belle reasoned. She bit her lip and counted the days in her mind. "Right before the Running of the Leaves! We'll just do it then."

"Unfortunately, there's another hitch as well." Twilight pointed to the page. Ink had appeared all over it, obscuring most of the words! "Turns out that the one book that can help us save the others is also in need of rescue."

"Wow, that's pretty ironic," Sweetie Belle commented, eyeing the large ink stain. It seemed to pulse with a prismatic sheen. "What should we do now?"

"There's only one thing *to* do." Twilight closed the book and placed it in a nearby saddlebag. She looked out the window, beyond Ponyville to the rolling green hills in the distance. "I must find another copy of *Primrose's Protections and Prophecies*...before it's too late."

Sweetie Belle thought of the eerie quality to the ink stain. Maybe it was *already* too late.



Canterlot Bound

Spike normally loved flying. The little dragon dug his claws tightly into Twilight Sparkle's back as they soared toward Canterlot. He knew he should have enjoyed the fresh air brushing his scales, but he was anxious.

At least the Pegasi had given Equestria another gorgeous day. The sky was blue and cloudless, providing a clear view of the scenery below. The duo rose higher to clear a grove of tall trees, and Spike let out a whimper.

"Ouch!" Twilight shouted. "Be careful with your claws back there, Spike! We're almost there."

"Sorry, Twi." Spike took a deep breath and loosened his grip. "Maybe if you explained to me one more time exactly why we're in a rush to get to Canterlot, it would ease my mind a little!"

"We're going to search the Canterlot Library. They're bound to have another copy of Primrose's work! Then we can restore every single book back to its original state and protect them from future damage." In the distance, the hazy outline of Canterlot Castle was just coming into view. Twilight began to pick up speed.

"Okay, but I'm still not getting why a couple of books with ink stains is a crisis. You have so many other ones to choose from!"

"Because if we don't complete the spell on the Equine-nox, we'll have to wait a whole moon cycle before I can try it again! Nopony knows what sort of tragic accidents could befall my books before then!"

Spike shook his head and gave a little chuckle. "Whatever you say, Twilight."



When Twilight Sparkle was a filly, she'd attended Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. Her days had been filled with studying, punctuated by trips back and forth from the campus to the Royal Library (which had a much better selection than the one meant for students). Twilight knew the cobblestoned streets of Canterlot like the back of her hoof.

"This way, Spike!" Twilight called out, trotting ahead in the direction of the castle. "Hurry!" She ducked and wove her way through the gawking groups of capital residents who discussed in hushed whispers the potential reasons for the newest princess's surprise visit.

"I'm comin', I'm comin'..." Spike griped, rubbing his back in pain from the bumpy flight over. He gave a little bow and a wave to a group of Unicorn fillies that were wide-eyed at the sight of a small dragon. "Good afternoon! Nice to see ya!"

Spike expected Twilight and Princess Celestia to be deeply entrenched in conversation about

Primrose's Protections and Prophecies by the time he made it to the castle steps. But instead he found his best friend talking animatedly with a castle guard.

“What do you mean, there’s another crisis in Monacolt and Princess Celestia is gone? I thought Duchess Diamond Waves had everything under control at her academy now....” Twilight bit her lip in confusion. “When will Celestia be back?”

“The princess left for Monacolt this morning. That’s all I know, Highness.” The guard bowed and trotted back to his post. He did an elaborate dance of turning on his armored hooves in precise right angles until he finally stood back at attention. If it weren’t for a soft breeze rustling the plumes on his helmet, a pony might now take him for a statue.

“Hey, Spike—could you take a letter for me?” Twilight asked as she trotted back down the castle steps, her purple-and-pink tail flouncing out behind her. “Dear Princess Celestia, I am writing because—”

“Uh, are you *sure* you want to do that?” interrupted Spike.

Twilight stopped a few steps below him and spun around. There was a look of confusion on her face. “What do you mean?”

Spike shrugged and raised his eyebrows, rocking back and forth on his claws. “I dunno, maybe bothering Princess Celestia about a book while she’s across the sea dealing with another emergency might be sending the wrong message?” He ran down and joined Twilight, giving her a little pat on the back. “I totally will if you want me to, though!”

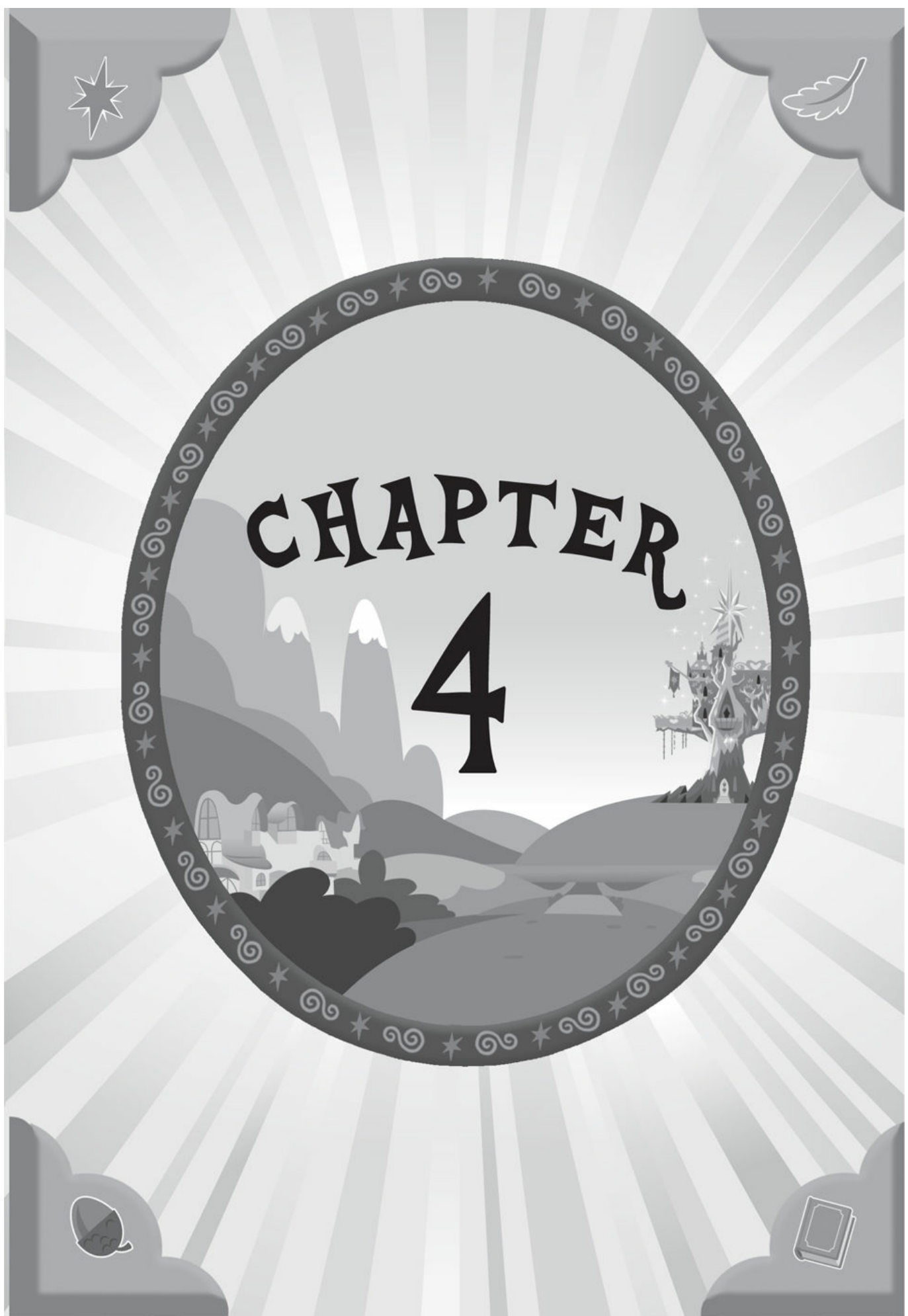
He was right. Twilight Sparkle had handled much worse on her own. She’d even battled the powerful villain Tirek when Celestia’s magic had been taken away! So even though the topic of books and the situation at hoof were things that Princess Twilight felt strongly about, she should probably keep this crisis to herself...at least until she attempted to find another copy of Primrose’s spells.

“Good call, Spike,” Twilight said with a nod. “Now, there’s a library full of books to search.” She couldn’t help but grin. “I hope you didn’t make any dinner reservations at the Tasty Treat—this could take all evening!”

“*Awww*. Me and my big mouth!” The dragon groaned in time with the growling of his tummy. He looked down and spoke to his stomach. “Guess you’ll just have to wait till our next trip to try those treats Rarity was raving about....”

“Sorry, Spike! Next time, we’ll come to Canterlot for some reason other than a crisis.” Twilight shot him a sympathetic look and reached inside her saddlebag. She located a packet of Emerald Munchies and tossed them at her pal. Spike’s eyes shone with delight as he tore open the package and popped a handful of the snack into his mouth.

“Okay, you win,” he mumbled through the crunching. He pointed his claw ahead. “To the books!”



By the Light of the Moondancer

The sight of the grand room of the library always made Twilight's heart skip a beat. As they entered through the golden doors, Twilight stopped for a brief moment and inhaled deeply. "Best smell ever!" she whispered excitedly. She reminded herself that she was not here to explore and read. Today's visit was for a very specific purpose.

Twilight and Spike made their way inside. In addition to the lovely scent of books, there were marble pillars that reached high to the second floor of the stacks. In the center, there was a gigantic round table perfect for literary discussions or academic debates. Or if ponies felt like studying on their own, they could sit at one of the tables on the perimeter. Each came equipped with a reading lamp and a comfortable chair.

Which was exactly where Moondancer, Twilight's old friend and fellow bookworm, was seated at this very moment! The yellow Unicorn wore her pink-and-purple mane up in a set of baubles so it didn't obstruct her view of the books. Her thick-framed glasses sat atop her muzzle, and she wore her signature cozy, slouchy sweater.

"Hey!" Spike pointed, drawing Twilight's attention to where the Unicorn was already ten books deep into a serious study session. "There's Moondancer! We can just ask her! She knows every book in this place, right?"

"If anypony does, it's her," Twilight agreed with a nod. "I should have guessed she'd be here...." The two old friends had recently reconnected and bonded over their mutual love of books and magic. Moondancer was just as in love with learning as Twilight Sparkle was.

"Oh, hello, Twilight. Spike." Moondancer nodded to them without even looking up from her book. "It's good to see you both again. What brings you two to Canterlot?"

"Nothing good, I'm afraid...." Twilight used magic to place her book gently on top of Moondancer's current selection. "We were hoping you could help us find another copy of *this*."

The golden embossment on the cover shimmered in the light of the reading lamp.

"Can it be?" Moondancer cooed, covering her mouth with her hoof. "I've never seen a copy of *Primrose's Protections and Prophecies* in real life!" She touched the cover reverently. "I thought they'd all been ruined during Discord's rule. He did *not* like that one prophecy...but I digress!" She looked up at Twilight, eyes sparkling through her glasses. "How did you find one in perfect condition?"

"Actually..." Twilight bit her lip. "It's not in perfection condition...*anymore*." She flipped to the bookmarked page with the incomplete instructions for the Shield of Wisdom. Somehow, the inkblot looked even larger than before.

"A stain? This is the tragedy of all tragedies!" Moondancer cried out, garnering annoyed looks from the rest of the ponies in the library. She held up the book and brought her muzzle close to the page. She repeated the gesture three times.

“Hmmm...I wonder,” she whispered.

Moondancer closed her eyes and focused her magic, conjuring up a glowing stream of silver energy. The quick zap from her horn caused the ink to rise up. Twilight, Moondancer, and Spike all held their breaths as the black glob hovered above the page for a second, then fell unceremoniously back down again, obscuring the spell even more than it had before!

Moondancer blushed. “Well, I thought the Eradication Equation was worth a try at least.”

“Thanks,” Twilight replied with a defeated sigh. “But I know it needs something stronger. We *need* to perform the Shield of Wisdom before the Autumnal Equine-nox or...or...”

“Or what?” Moondancer stood up. She began to gather her books into her saddlebag. Twilight gestured at the multitude of titles surrounding the ponies at this very moment. Novels and memoirs, spell books and stories; they were all precious parts of the pony past and needed protection.

Twilight whispered into Moondancer’s ear, “Or all of this—the knowledge in Equestria—might be at risk of being lost!”

Suddenly it dawned on Moondancer. She’d only ever read about the magical affliction once before, but the look of the strange stain on Primrose’s book suggested it. “Do you really mean to suggest that the inkblot is—?”

“*Inknorance!*” Twilight breathed, eyes practically bulging out of her head. “The magical affliction that affects books and effectively erases knowledge by darkening their pages. I can’t believe I didn’t put it together before you opened the book. I’ve never actually seen it before, but I’ve read about it: a mysterious inkblot with a rainbow sheen. If we’re not careful, it could spread.”

“Like that?” Spike pointed his claw at Moondancer’s saddlebag. The book she’d been reading before, *A Practical Guide to Hoofball*, now had a darkening splotch on the cover as well.

“Oh no!” Twilight cried out. “It’s already too late!” Suddenly, it dawned on her. The timing of the appearance of the affliction was too coincidental. “You don’t suppose *I* was the one who started the Inknorance, do you?”

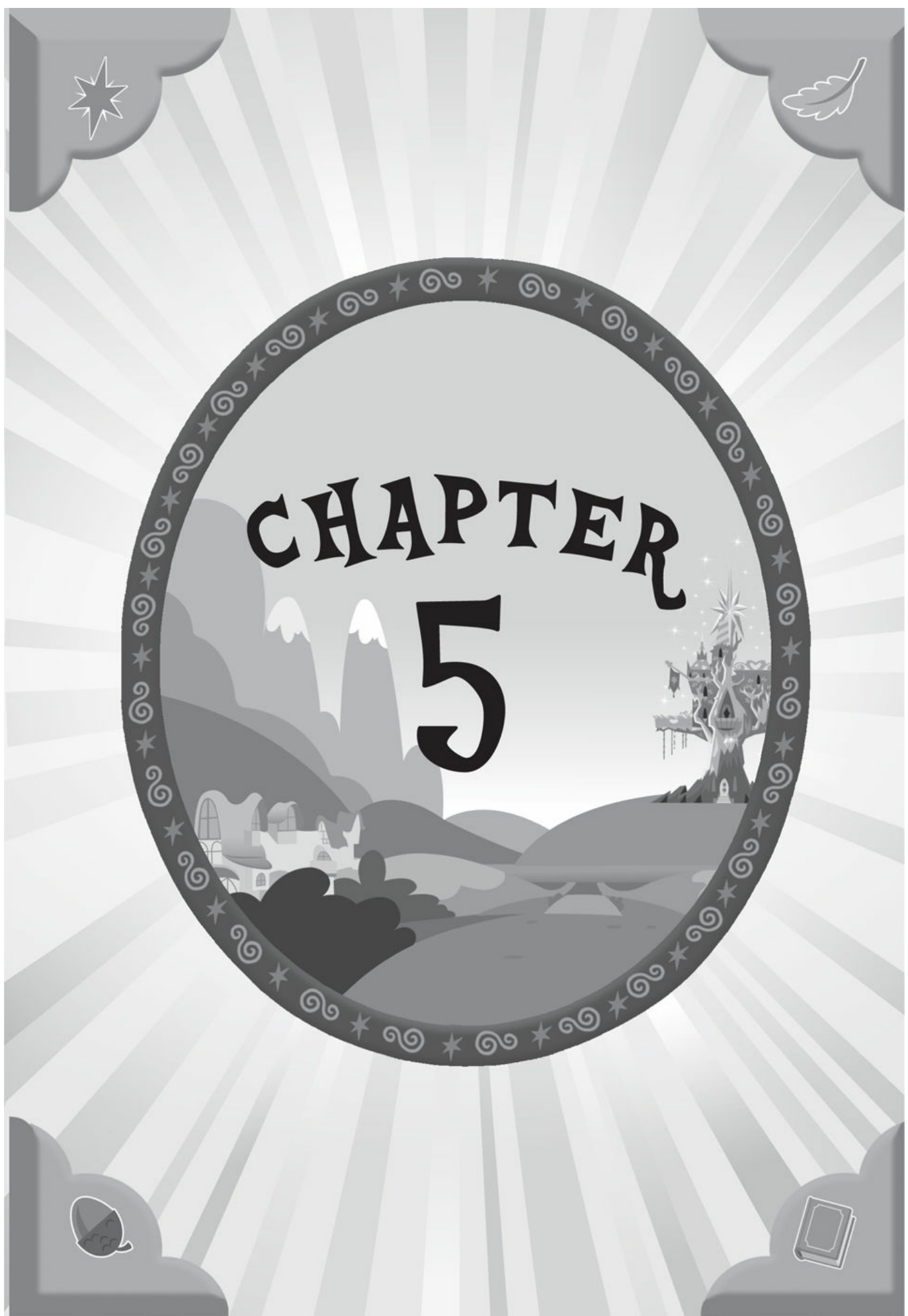
“Well, did you perform a partial spell?” Moondancer asked in concern. “We are awfully close to the Autumnal Equine-nox to leave any words of a powerful spell lingering in the air....”

“Oh dear.” Twilight shook her head and tried to suppress the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. “When I realized that I couldn’t perform the Shield of Wisdom until the Equine-nox itself, I *did* stop mid-spell. And that’s when the inkblot appeared...so I must have accidentally let it into Equestria!” Twilight let out a horrified shriek.

The other studious ponies in the room were now rapt with attention, staring at Twilight, Moondancer, and Spike. It was so quiet, a pony could hear a piece of hay drop. The trio suddenly became aware of the onlookers, and Moondancer pulled them outside into the bright sun.

“Normally, I wouldn’t halt my studies for anything,” Moondancer admitted, adjusting her glasses. “But this—this I can’t ignore. Come on!”

It appeared that Moondancer had a plan.



CHAPTER 5

Taking Notes

Rows upon rows of filing cabinets and shelves took up most of the back room of Moondancer's cottage. If Twilight didn't know better, she might have mistaken it for another, smaller branch of the Canterlot Library. Twilight and Spike took a seat at a small table in the center of the room. It was almost identical to the ones at the library. It was a wonder Moondancer ever left the space.

"There must be something in here that can put a stop to all of this." Moondancer flitted from drawer to drawer like a hummingbird in search of nectar. She used her magic to open three at once. "I just wish I knew what I was looking for. *Think*, Moondancer!"

As Twilight sat and watched, she tried to think as well. The realization that she had unknowingly brought the curse upon her beloved books hung heavy in her heart and muddled her memory. So Twilight Sparkle tried her best to relive the events in her mind, hoping there was a clue about the mysterious Inknot that she might have somehow missed.

She could see herself standing there, in the library. She'd checked out the spell, whispered the words, and then *BOOM!* The inkblot had spilled onto the page as if it were trying to speak the rest of the incantation for her. But where had the ink come from?

"Maybe the Inknot blots are being sucked from another book!" Twilight exclaimed. "Sometimes Inknot steals ideas and words from other pages...."

"But then we'd have empty pages nearby and we don't," Moondancer replied matter-of-factly as she kept whizzing around the room. "Are you sure that's even a true quality of Inknot?"

Twilight slumped down. "No, now that you mention it...I'm not sure it is. I think the guilt might be getting to the better of my memory. May I help with the search?" Twilight reached for a drawer and slid it open. A neat row of notebooks sat inside. Each spine was color coded and cross-referenced with symbols. Twilight's organized heart did a little flutter. "What is all of this?"

"They're my study notes," Moondancer explained. She lifted a notebook out, turned the page, and unrolled a scroll that had been secured inside. Loopy hoofwriting littered the page, punctuated by precise diagrams and drawings. "Every time I delve into a book, I must make notes so that I don't forget anything. Research must not be wasted."

"Just like we did in school..." Twilight marveled at all the careful work that had gone into the project. Ever since their school days, Moondancer had always been Twilight's kindred spirit. "Do you have anything on Primrose's Shield of Wisdom in here? Or at least something that will point us in the right direction?"

"Maybe." Moondancer bit her lip in concern. "Let's look over here in this section. There might something in my notes on Star Swirl's Seven Safeguards. Feel free to borrow anything that might help." As the two ponies scrambled to look, Spike found himself inexplicably drawn to the retro posters decorating the walls of the study.

Some were book covers of classic Shadow Spade mystery novels and Daring Do books, but one

looked like a map. Being a fan of the tabletop adventure game Oubliettes and Ogres, Spike could never resist checking out a well-drawn map. It was like exploring another world. Spike dragged a chair over, hopped onto the seat, and leaned in for a closer look.

It was just an old hoof-drawn map of Equestria sprinkled with cute, foal-like illustrations. Spike could make out all the expected regions, with Canterlot in the heart of the land and his hometown of Ponyville right down below. To the east was Vanhoover, and to the west sat the cities of Baltimore, Fillydelphia, and Manehattan. As usual, the Frozen North took up a large portion of the top sector, but *this* map had clearly been drawn before the Crystal Empire returned once they'd been freed from the rule of King Sombra.

Something else was different about this map. Drawn in below the western peak of Foal Mountain was a village that Spike had never seen nor heard of in all his years. It was called Bales, and the rooftops of the buildings all looked like open books facing downward. He scratched his chin and considered. If the map was accurate, it appeared to be quite close to Canterlot.

"Hey, Moondancer?" Spike turned around on the chair. He was met with the sight of Twilight and Moondancer frantically searching a giant stack of notebooks and pointing out excerpts to each other. "Who drew this map?"

"I did, back when I was a filly," Moondancer said without looking up. "I know, it's terrible, isn't it? The scale is all off. Was never much of an artist."

"I think it's wonderful!" Spike replied. "But...uh...what is this place called Bales? Sure looks like they might have a lot of books *there*."

"Bales?" Twilight rose, trotted over to the map, and inspected the drawing herself. "I've never heard of it, either."

"That's because it's nothing!" The Unicorn finally looked up, her cheeks flushing a shade of crimson. Twilight and Spike stared. Moondancer was clearly holding back. She took off her glasses and rubbed them on her sweater with a sigh.

"It doesn't exist. It's just a silly bedtime story that my father used to tell me—a myth about an entire town full of bookshops and libraries." Moondancer laughed and motioned with her hoof as if to wave away the notion. "Every book a pony could ever dream of is there, and everypony in town loves to read more than anything else. I used to fantasize about moving there when I grew up."

"I would, too..." Twilight breathed in awe, eyes glittering at the mention of such a mecca. She spun around to face Moondancer. "But what if it were true?"

"It's not." Moondancer rolled her eyes. "I think my father just made it up so I wouldn't feel so different. In my filly days, I never had too many friends, because my nose was always stuck in a book," she explained with a shrug. "That is, until I started attending Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns and I met *you*, Twilight."

"Sounds familiar," Twilight said with a knowing grin. The whole reason she'd been sent to Ponyville to learn about friendship in the first place was because she'd been too busy with her studies. "Oh well." Twilight sighed, glancing at the elaborate drawing of the imaginary place on the map. "Too bad that a book town doesn't exist. *They* might have had another copy of *Primrose's Protections*...or at least known what to do about that nasty case of Inknoirance that's spreading."

"I may have found a temporary solution to that." Moondancer stood up and focused her magic at the infected copy of *A Practical Guide to Hoofball*. The glittering beam encased the book and froze it in midair, safe from touching any other tomes. "If I can perform this enchantment on the books in

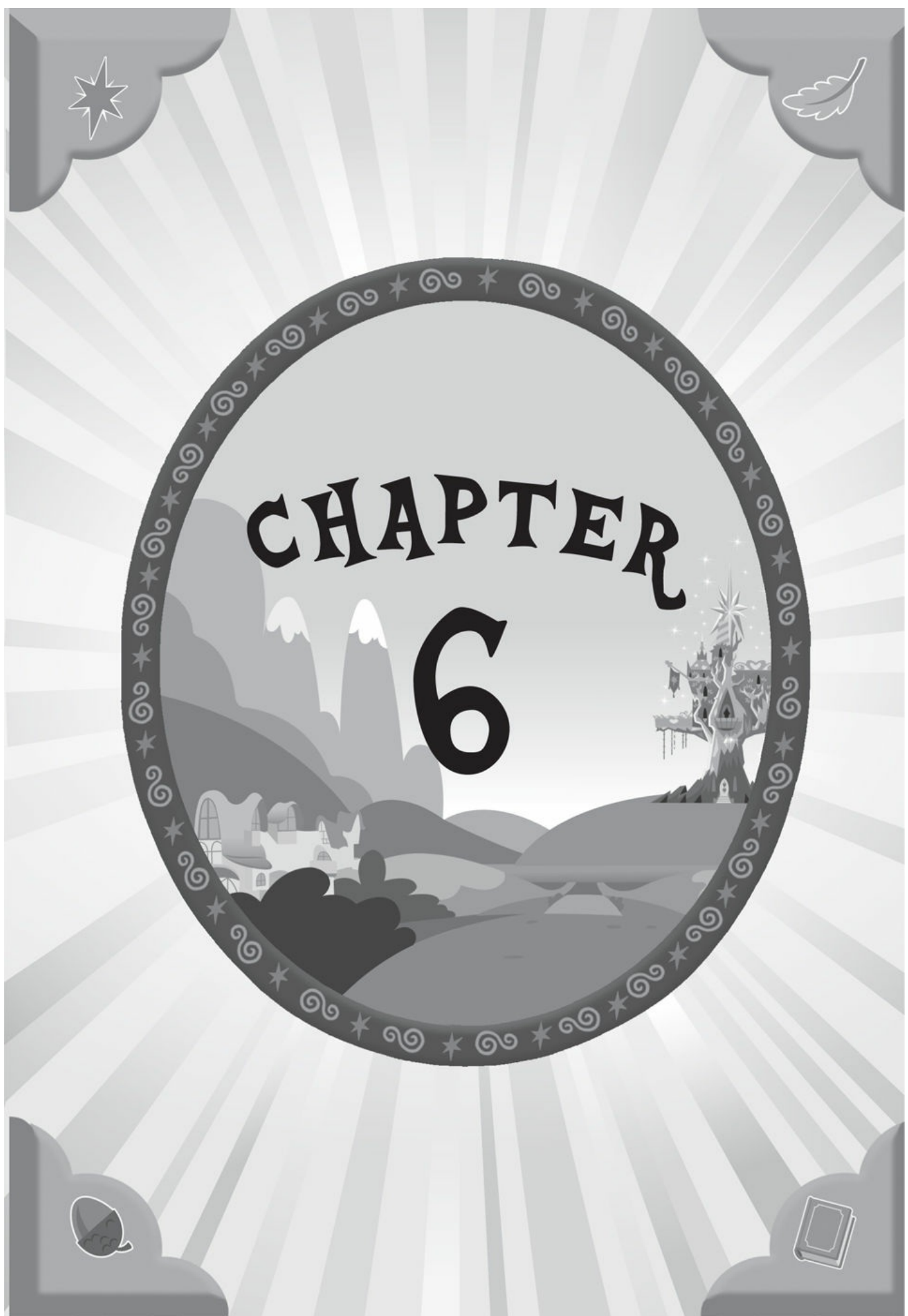
Canterlot Library, at least it buys us some more time.” Moondancer pushed up her glasses. “In the meantime, I guess I’m going to keep researching ways to cure the Inknorance. There might be another way.”

“Thank you, Moondancer. That is a great help.” Twilight nodded. “Maybe now we still have a chance of finding another copy of the book before the Equine-nox...somewhere in Equestria.”

“Where will you go?” Moondancer asked.

Twilight pointed to an area slightly south of Neighagra Falls on the map. “I think it’s time Spike and I paid a visit to the Mythica University library.”

As they strode toward the door, the ponies nodded at each other in a silent, solemn agreement. Whatever it took, they were going to save Equestria’s books.



CHAPTER 6

Spike the Sneaky

The pony and her dragon exited the capital city of Canterlot on hoof, letting the hustle and bustle of the crowded streets disappear behind them. Twilight had graciously decided to give the dragon a short break to eat a bit, but they'd have to take off soon if they wanted to make it to Mythica by nightfall.

They might as well not waste any time, though.

"Spike, could you please take a letter?" Twilight asked. "Actually, several letters. I want to let Starlight Glimmer know that she'll have to be in charge for a while longer back at the Castle of Friendship. Update Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, and Applejack on the situation. And write to Princess Luna. Tell her that Inknorance is spreading, but we will find a way to stop it. See if she knows where we might—"

"Can't right now. I'm busy reading!" Spike interrupted, a singsongy lilt to his delivery. His nose was buried in a tattered notebook. On the cover, in young Moondancer's loopy script, were the words *The Story of Bales*. "There's some super-interesting information in here...wow!"

Twilight was stunned. She stopped in her tracks. "What is that?"

"According to filly Moondancer, Bales was the first town to print books! And they used to hold the Magical Counsel meetings there thousands of moons ago...." He shoved the notebook in front of the princess's muzzle. "See for yourself!"

"Spike!" Twilight hissed, peeping over the top of the notebook. "Did you *steal* this from Moondancer?"

"No way," Spike replied with a smirk. "She said we could 'borrow anything that might help,' remember? We'll give it back to her when we're done."

Twilight Sparkle was annoyed, but Spike technically hadn't done anything wrong. Also, Moondancer had magically frozen and held on to Twilight's copy of *Primrose's Protections and Prophecies* for safekeeping. Books were meant to be shared—that was the whole point of Twilight's crusade to save them.

"Fair enough," Twilight agreed. "But Moondancer said this was all just a story made up by her father. Presumably this is just her version of the myth?"

"I dunno about that." Spike cocked his head to the side. "Some of this stuff seems pretty specific. Didn't Moondancer's dad work for the Canterlot Historical Society?"

"Yes...he did!" Twilight's eyes grew large. She looked at Spike in amazement. "How did you remember that?"

"Got a mind like a treasure chest with an unbreakable lock," Spike said, tapping his claw to his head. "Which reminds me: I seem to recall that you have another packet of Emerald Munchies in your saddlebag...."

While Spike rustled around in the bag for his snack, Twilight Sparkle scanned the page of the

notebook. She couldn't parse what she was seeing. Was it just some fillyhood fantasy fiction or actual fact? Her head told her it was the former. If Bales were a real place, surely Twilight would have heard something about it in all her years as a book lover and, more recently, as a member of Equestrian royalty. But something deep down, a gut instinct, told Twilight not to ignore this tall tale.

Twilight scrunched up her face. "So what are you suggesting, exactly?"

"I think we should try to find..." He struck a pose that emulated his Crystal Empire persona of "Spike the Brave and Glorious" and shouted, "The Lost City of Books!" He had stars in his eyes, alight with adventure.

"We aren't starring in a Daring Do book right now, Spike," Twilight chided, though a giggle escaped from her mouth. She was secretly charmed by his silly words. This whole situation had been making her so tense that it was refreshing to see some dragon making light of it.

Twilight became serious again. "We could be wasting precious time on a wild-goose chase. The only pony I know who can chase a wild goose is Applejack, and she's already off chasing them at the annual Apple Family Goose Chase right now!"

"Well, then look at it as one of Shining Armor's scavenger hunts." Spike flipped to a page and pointed at some drawings of supposed landmarks near Bales. "All we have to do is follow the clues."

When Twilight was a filly, her favorite part of her big brother's scavenger hunts had been the part at the end when she'd receive a book as a reward for following the clues correctly. Spike gave a smug grin. "And if I'm right...there will be a major book prize at the end. Like, a whole *town's* worth of books!"

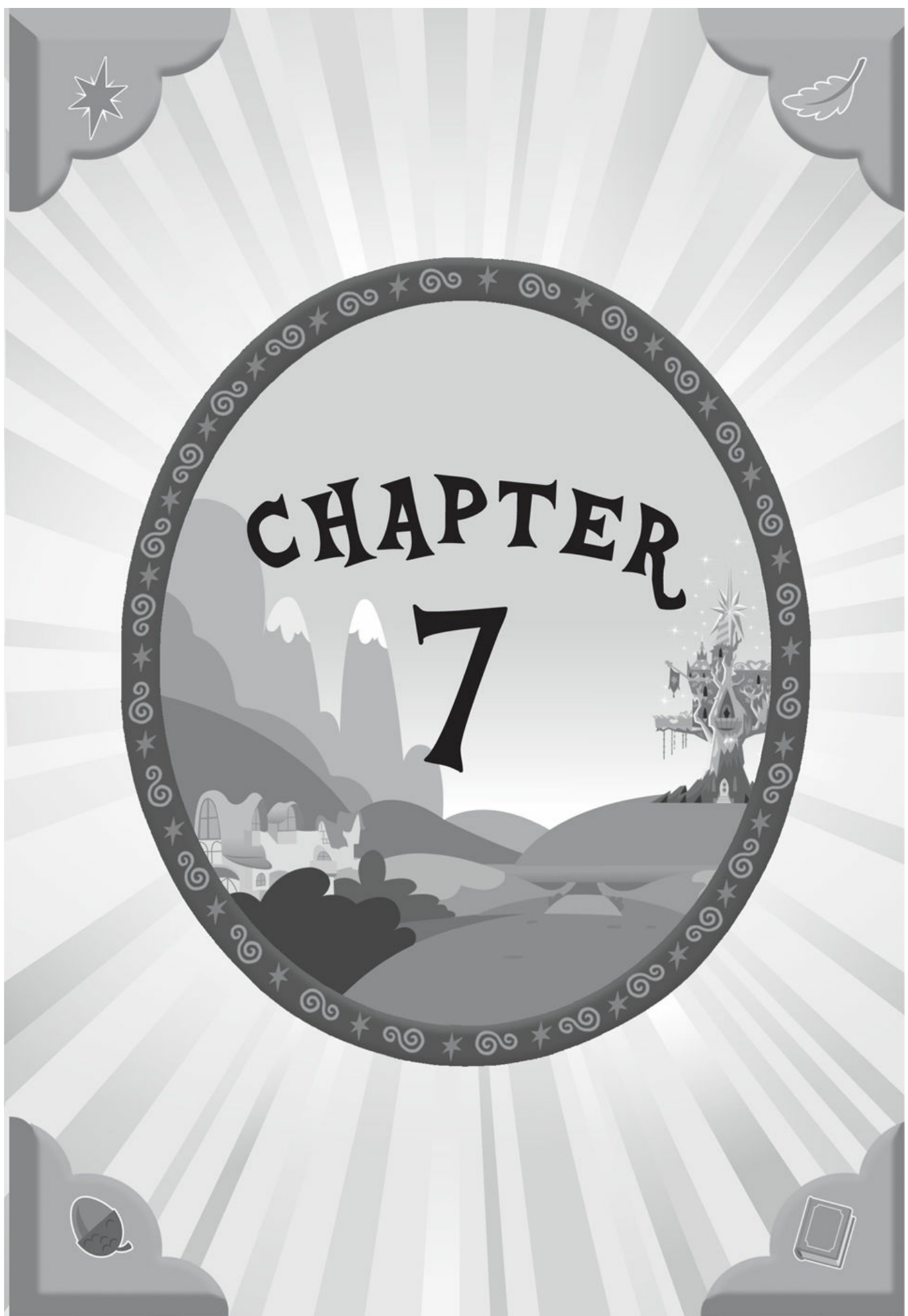
Twilight began to pace in a circle as she weighed the options: try to find a nonexistent town full of books or continue their quest for Primrose's spell up north? After trotting in three full revolutions, the princess stopped and looked off into the distance. Just through this patch of forest was the supposed location of Bales—the region of rolling green hills near the base of Foal Mountain. It wasn't far. And it was in the direction of Mythica....

"We have to save those books!" Twilight stood tall as a breeze blew through her purple mane. She narrowed her eyes. "So if somepony in Bales can help us, that's where we'll have to go."

"Hooray!" Spike smiled, triumphant. He rocked back on his heels, looking a bit sheepish. "I guess I can take down those letters to Ponyville now...."

If Twilight and Spike were venturing into unknown territory, it was best to let somepony know where they were going and explain the entire crisis.

Twilight just wished she had a more tangible course of action.



The Great Quill

The sun was beginning to hang low in the sky, shining through the trees in shafts of pretty light. Twilight Sparkle and Spike had been weaving aimlessly through the trees, trying to match the drawings from Moondancer's notebook to the surrounding terrain. The crispy fallen leaves under Twilight's hooves only served as a reminder that she was getting closer to the Equine-nox with each passing minute. After two hours of trekking and trudging, the pair was finally nearing the forest edge.

Twilight looked down at the page of the notebook, keeping her eyes on it as she trotted. "So we circled five times around the stone with the carving of a book—"

"The Rock of Pages," Spike corrected with a yawn. This had all seemed a lot more action-filled in his mind and was taking much longer than he'd anticipated. But it didn't matter if Spike was bored. Once they'd actually found the first landmark, Twilight had become committed to this task. There was no stopping her once that happened. Now she was determined to see it through to the end.

"And then we saw the creek with the waterfall...."

"The Cliff Hanger."

"Right." Twilight nodded. "So that means 'the Great Quill' should be right about..." Twilight pointed to the clearing up ahead. "There!" According to Moondancer's story, the town of Bales would be just past the landmark. It was a vague description.

"Is it a giant feather? Or a statue thing?" Spike wondered aloud. At least the other landmarks were things one might actually find in a forest. He trudged through the grass, breaking out into the open field ahead of Twilight.

The field was completely empty. Devoid of feathers or statues or villages filled with books. Nothing present but a few lonely, odd-looking trees.

Twilight's heart sank. They'd just wasted hours! It was time that could have been spent searching another library, or even sleeping, for that matter. Twilight was about to suggest to Spike that they head home to Ponyville to rest, when the little dragon went running at top speed toward one of the trees.

"What are you doing?" Twilight galloped after him.

Spike stared at the tree, leaning his head back to look at its feathery branches in awe. "I think this is it..." he whispered as he touched his claw to the trunk. He took a few steps back to get another glance to confirm his suspicion. The tree appeared exactly like a giant feather!

"Now I see it!" The princess gasped. "The Great Quill!"

Spike and Twilight exchanged a proud smile, and for a moment everything seemed that it had been worth it. But there was one tiny problem....Bales was still nowhere to be seen.

Twilight sat down in the grass, suddenly feeling quite exhausted.

Up in the sky was a sunset so brilliant, it was as if the Pegasi had painted it with orange, pink, and gold. Twilight's mind drifted to Princess Celestia, across the Celestial Sea in Monacolt as she worked to lower the sun, her magical power equivalent to an entire group of Unicorns. What would

she do if she were here right now?

“I guess we were wrong.” Spike plopped onto the grass next to Twilight, defeated. “Now what? Should we go home?”

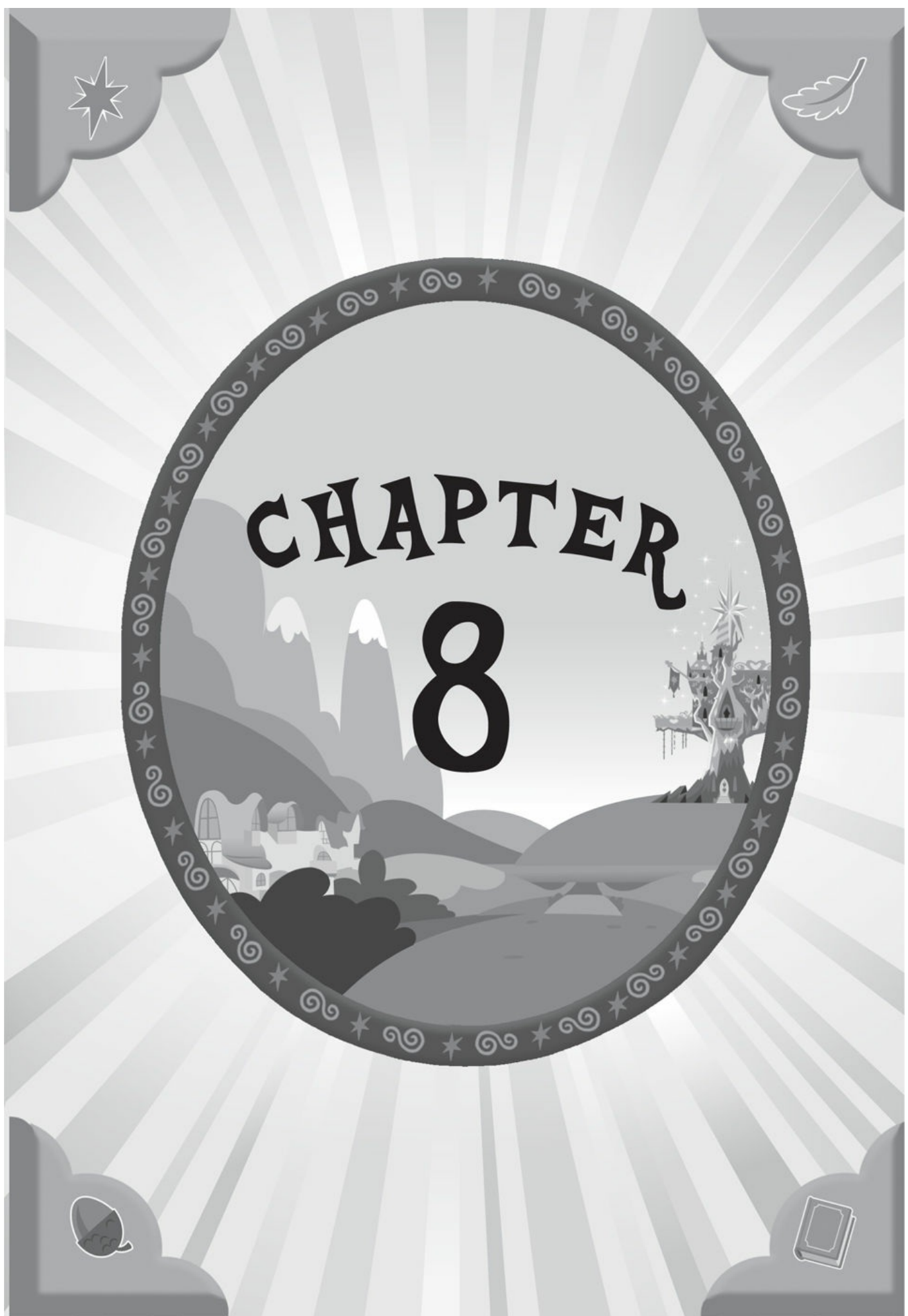
The other royal ponies, princesses Celestia, Luna, and Cadance, had always told Twilight Sparkle that the quality that made her stand out from other ponies the most was not her advanced magical abilities at all. It was Twilight’s intuitiveness—with friendships, with all kinds of creatures, and with tricky situations such as these—that set her apart.

Her intuition was telling her that it was worth one last try.

Twilight stood up and braced herself. The Alicorn pointed her horn at the empty field and summoned the most powerful revealing spell that she could imagine. Soon, the energy flowed through Twilight and surged out of her body through the tip of her horn. It billowed into a large, shimmering cloud of magic that swirled and danced about in the open air. Twilight closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the most beautiful village she’d ever seen had materialized!

Bales officially no longer belonged in the fiction section.

It was *real*.



CHAPTER 8

Hey, Bales!

The buildings in the town of Bales were of a peculiar style. Instead of a traditional thatched construction, the roofs appeared as giant, open books facing downward, just like on Moondancer's map. They sat in neat rows as if they were on massive shelves. Little signs painted on the storefronts advertised almost one product exclusively—books!

Twilight was so elated at the sight of it, she'd all but forgotten that the reason for her visit was an unhappy one.

"You're seeing this, too, right?" Twilight Sparkle called to her dragon companion. She trotted onto the main cobblestoned walk, looking in every direction hungrily as if it might disappear at any moment. She wanted to commit it to memory just in case. "I'm not just imagining this entire place?" Even the bright backdrop of the rolling green hills beneath Foal Mountain was breathtakingly beautiful.

"Nope, it's definitely real." Spike knocked his claw on the side of a cute store called Horsey Books to demonstrate that it was solid. He raised an eyebrow. How had a town just appeared out of thin air? "I guess you could call these *one-story* buildings!" Spike chuckled at his own joke.

"Look!" Twilight squealed as she reached inside a mailbox-style cabinet. "A mini free book exchange! How adorable."

As delighted as his nerdy companion was, Spike could not shake the feeling that something about this whole town just materializing was not right. Spike had seen brochures for Daring Do "adventucations," where actors played all the roles. Had they walked onto the set of a fake village?

"Isn't this exactly like that scene in *Daring Do and the Forbidden City of Clouds* where Daring finds the invisible city of Cirrostrata?" Spike questioned.

"Not really. We're not in the clouds....We're actually just east of Canterlot." Twilight began to make a stack of books on the ground. "In my personal utopia." She could not wipe the giddy expression plastered on her face.

"What was the name of that pony who made the whole city of Cirrostrata invisible in the first place? Comet-something?"

"Comet Tail the Starry-Eyed," Twilight corrected, frowning her brow. "Astronomer and sorcerer."

"Oh yeah! He was the guy who started that ancient counsel thing—"

"Spike, we really have much more important matters at hoof than discussing the incredible authorial talents of the great A. K. Yearling," Twilight urged. "Though there is no denying her brilliance." Twilight didn't want to offend any other Daring Do fans in the vicinity.

This was a book town, after all. She thought of all the like-minded ponies she might find here and felt even more excited.

Twilight Sparkle gathered her stack of books and lifted them with her magic, grunting under the

weight of her haul. Though it was difficult to maneuver with them hovering in front of her, she soldiered on. Even though the signs in the windows of the bookshops said OPEN, the streets were completely devoid of a pony populace.

“Hello?” Twilight Sparkle called out at the top of her lungs, craning her neck around to look for somepony to question. “Is anypony home?”

But the only sound was the clip-clopping of her hooves and click-clacking of Spike’s claws. They stopped. “*Shhhhhh...*” the slight breeze whispered. A creaky sign protruding from the nearest shop swung back and forth.

““Ancient Wisdom and Novel Notions...”” Twilight read, intrigued. It seemed like a good place to start. The door creaked as she pushed her way inside. Instantly, her muzzle met the distinct scent of dusty old books.

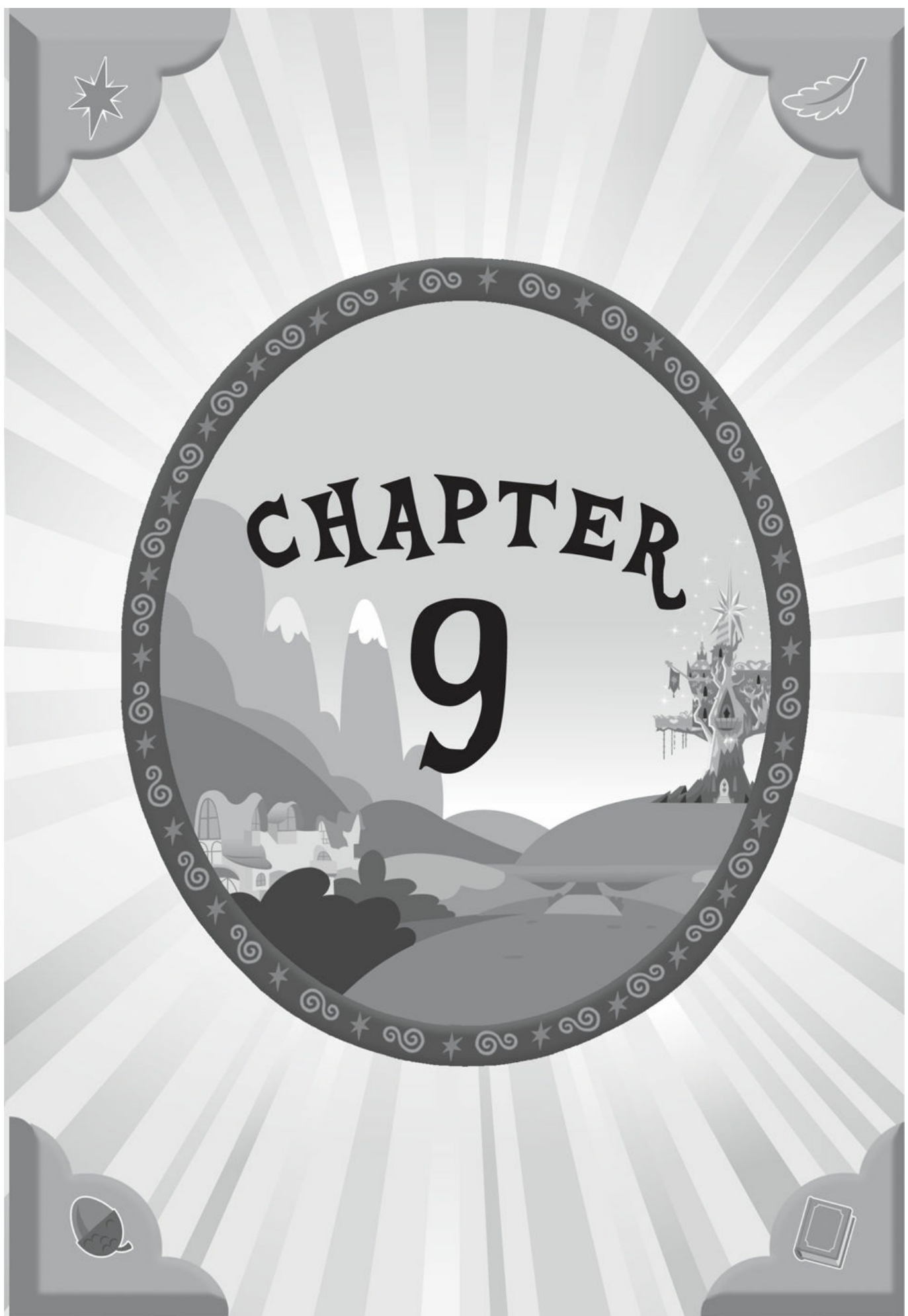
“Excuse me!” Spike broke the silence. He traipsed through the rows of shelves, shattering the reverent silence. “If anypony’s in here, we would very much like your help finding a...a book?”

“*Shhhhhhhhhh...*” The same windy whisper filled the room in response.

But they were inside, untouched by the wind. So what was that sound?

Suddenly, the books on the shelves began to shiver and shake! A chill ran down Twilight’s and Spike’s spines as they slowly backed toward the door, careful not to touch anything.

But before they could exit, a pair of eyes peeked out of the shadows and stared right back at them.



CHAPTER 9

Ancient Wisdom and Novel Notions

The princess winced as she braced herself for the sight of something ghastly. The books continued to rattle on the shelves, kicking up tiny clouds of dust at every level. The lamp flickered as it swung like a pendulum. And Spike held on to Twilight's hoof, shivering.

Then everything stopped.

When the dust finally settled on the hardwood floor, a sweet-looking pony with a violet mane and a golden coat stepped forward. She had a cutie mark of a book with a needle and thread. The look on the Unicorn's face suggested that she was just as shocked to see Twilight Sparkle and Spike as they were to see her! Her blue eyes grew wide with wonder as she hesitantly trotted closer.

"Hi there!" Twilight chirped, trying to shed the odd introduction and put on a sunny demeanor. "My name is Twilight Sparkle! I'm the Princess of Friendship and this here is my friend, Spike. We live in Ponyville!"

"We thought you were a ghost!" Spike exclaimed, wiping the sweat from his scaly brow in relief. "Ya really got us there."

"G-g-ghosts?" The pony shrank back in fear, lifting a hoof. "Y-y-you...?"

"No, *we're* not ghosts," Twilight corrected. "But we are from another part of Equestria."

"Y-y-you're...from *outside*?" She spoke so softly, it was difficult to make out her shaky words. The pony reminded Twilight of the first time she'd met Fluttershy. That pony was all whispers and squeaks.

"Don't worry, we mean no harm. We come as friends...friends from afar!"

Those were the magic words.

"Friends from afar?" The shy pony perked up. "I've read about those, but I didn't think they were real...." She shuffled her hooves nervously.

"You mean to say that you've never had a friend from somewhere other than Bales?" Spike asked with concern.

"N-n-no..." The pony shook her violet mane. "No pony wants to be our friends here. That's why they don't visit anymore. It's just us"—she gestured to the shelves of beautiful, ancient tomes with a heavy sigh—"and the books."

"And the books," Twilight echoed breathily. She felt as if she were staring at a freshly stocked buffet table at an Apple family reunion. All the princess wanted to do was dive headfirst into a mountain of them and read her way out. There had to be a copy of Primrose's book in one of these stores.

Twilight gave a warm smile to try to make the nervous pony more comfortable. "I didn't catch your name earlier...."

"Oh, s-s-sorry." The pony shook her head again. "It's been a long time since I've had to introduce myself to somepony new. I'm Saddle Stitch."

“Well, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Twilight Sparkle said warmly. “I’d love to meet the others, but first I was wondering if I might peruse your shop for a moment or two?” Before Saddle Stitch could reply, Twilight Sparkle trotted over to a shelf and began to help herself.

“Oh boy, she might be a while.” Spike stage-whispered to Saddle Stitch. “But as long as we’re waiting...I have a question, too.”

“Anything,” replied Saddle Stitch.

“Why were you making all the books shake like that before?” Spike crossed his claws over his chest and cocked his head to the side. “To scare us away?”

“Of course not!” Saddle Stitch replied, a slight blush to her cheeks. “That’s just how I dust them! Faster than the traditional way.” She sighed heavily. “Books gather a lot of dust around here.”

“Very interesting strategy...” Spike put his claw to his chin. He was always looking for new ways to keep the castle library nice and tidy. “Ya got anything else?”

Out of nowhere, a shriek echoed through the shop! Saddle Stitch and Spike rushed over in a panic to find Twilight standing frozen in the back aisle of the store. All the color was drained from her face. But there was nothing around except an open book floating in front of her, held up by her own magic. Still, Twilight looked unmistakably rattled.

“What happened?” Spike cried out, eyes darting around. *Now* he was beginning to think this place was haunted.

“Th-the b-book...” she stammered. It was the most horrific thing Twilight had ever witnessed. “As I read the words, the ink just...*disappeared* from the page.”

“Oh no,” Saddle Stitch cried. “It’s happening again!”

Twilight gulped. “What is?”

“It-it-it’s been so l-l-long since the books have been read that they’re giving up. The words have left and they’re not coming back.”

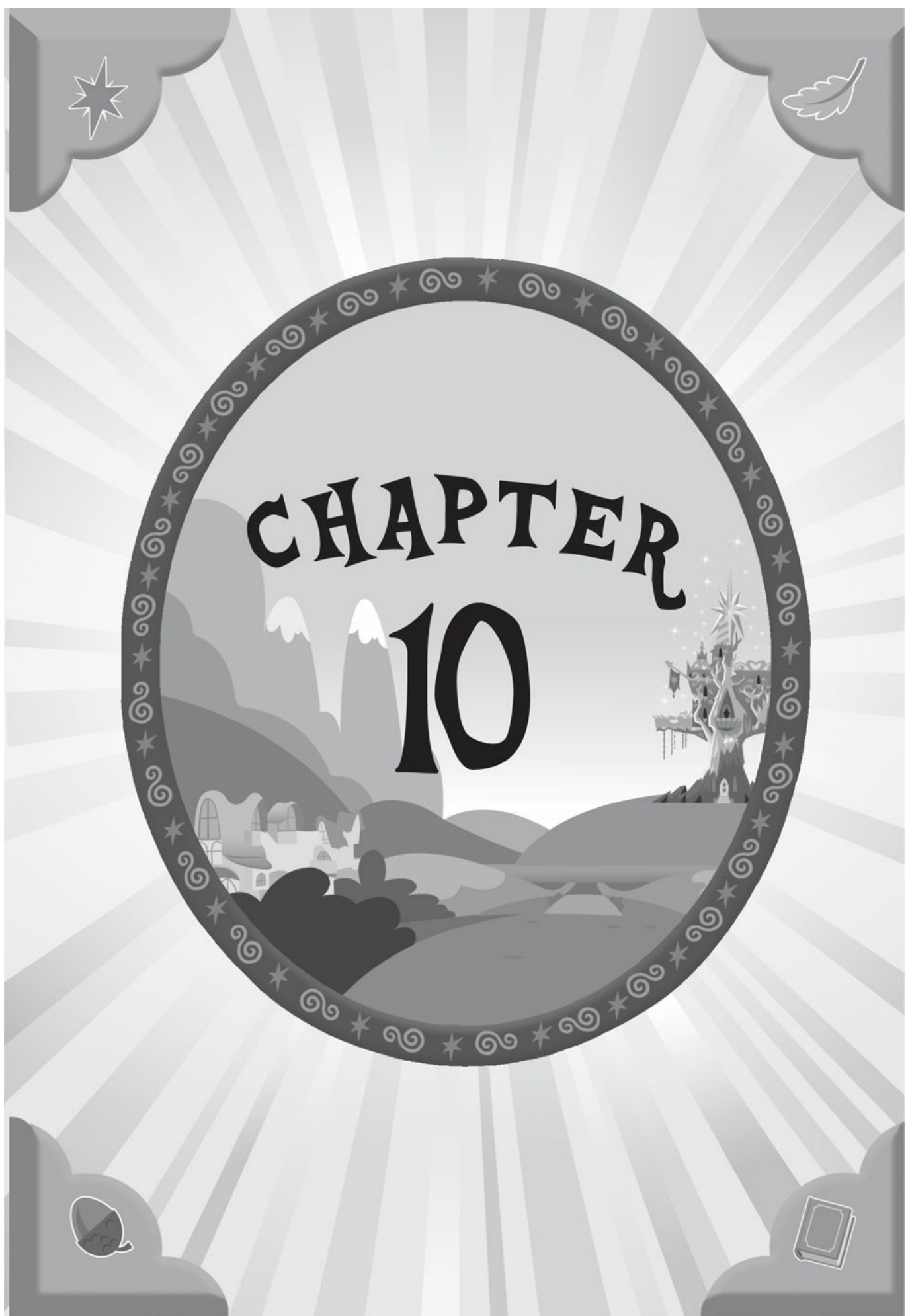
“Empty pages...” Spike breathed, eyes wide. “Twilight! Didn’t you say back at Moondancer’s house that the ink from the Inknorance—”

“Had been sucked from another book!” Twilight interrupted as the realization hit her. “Yes, of course! Saddle Stitch...*your* words are being pulled into *our* books!”

Saddle Stitch brightened. “So you can fix it?”

“I don’t know...I—I...” Twilight stammered. Unless she found Primrose’s book, Twilight had no way of stopping the horrible drain of knowledge.

There were no words for how heartbroken Twilight Sparkle felt.



CHAPTER 10

By the Books

After the initial shock of losing priceless knowledge had passed, Twilight and Spike accepted Saddle Stitch's offer to stay at her cottage for the night. They were exhausted, and Twilight knew that if she had any hope of solving this terrible problem, she would need to have her brain working at maximum capacity. Still, she didn't sleep well knowing books out there could still be losing their words just to blacken the pages of even more books out in Equestria.

The next morning, while Saddle Stitch busied herself cooking breakfast in the kitchen of the quaint house, Twilight and Spike sipped tea in the lounge and tried to make sense of everything. It was still a mystery how Bales had remained hidden all these years, and why nopony from the town had ever tried to venture out and explore.

"It just doesn't add up," Twilight whispered to Spike, who was luxuriating on the squashy tan sofa. "There's clearly some sort of magic barrier surrounding the town, making it invisible to outsiders...but why? Do the Bales ponies even know about it? More important, *who* would put it there?"

"Magic barrier?" A tall, skinny stallion with a tawny coat and a curly blue mane came trotting into the room. He wore a pair of silver-framed reading glasses, and his cutie mark looked like a paper airplane. "That's a bit far-fetched, don't you think?"

"Not at all," Twilight replied. "I was only able to find Bales with a strong revealing spell, and it was right in front of my nose! I've never attempted that kind of invisibility spell, but I know that it can be done by a very powerful wizard." A lesson from her school days came flooding back to her. Back during Star Swirl the Bearded's early days of experimentation, it was a popular trend in the magical community for wizards to safeguard their houses through invisibility spells.

"Oh perfect!" Saddle Stitch interrupted. She carried a tray of apple pastries with her magic and placed them on a low wooden table. "You've met Paperbuck! He's kind of the town librarian, since he knows every single book in town. What was the name of the one you're looking for, Twilight?"

"*Primrose's Protections and Prophecies*, First Edition," Twilight recited. "By Primrose—"

"The Prescient," Paperbuck finished with a smirk. He grabbed an apple pastry and popped it into his mouth.

"You know it?" Twilight's eyes lit up.

"We may have to dig around," he said. His brown eyes looked quite serious. "But I never forget a book."

"That makes two of us." The princess cracked a smile. Twilight was eager to get started on combing through the town's extensive collection of books, but one thing was still nagging at her. "If you didn't know about magic, why wouldn't anypony visit Bales? I had never heard of it and I've read practically every book in the kingdom!"

Twilight noticed Paperbuck give his friend a secret look. Saddle Stitch seemed as if she were

bursting to share her version of the story. Twilight took the reins. “Saddle Stitch, why don’t *you* tell us?”

“O-o-okay?” The Unicorn bit her lip, glancing around the room. She avoided Paperbuck’s eyes as she mustered the courage.

“Once upon a time, many moons ago, Bales was a bustling book town! Ponies from all over filled our streets with their smiles, thirst for knowledge, and dedication to written adventures.

“One day, a mysterious wizard came to town. He started reading every book he could get his hooves on. He stayed for days, staring at stars, scribbling on scrolls, and keeping to himself. The ponies didn’t like him very much, because he wasn’t very friendly. Every time he saw a pony holding a book the wrong way or bending down one of the pages as a bookmark, he would yell at them!

“Finally, a few ponies were fed up. They asked him to leave town. Of course, he didn’t take that very well at all. Before he left, he mumbled a curse upon Bales.” Saddle Stitch stood up dramatically and looked off into the distance. “A curse that nopony would want to come visit our town or be our friends ever again!”

“What was the wizard’s name?” Twilight asked. Saddle Stitch shrugged.

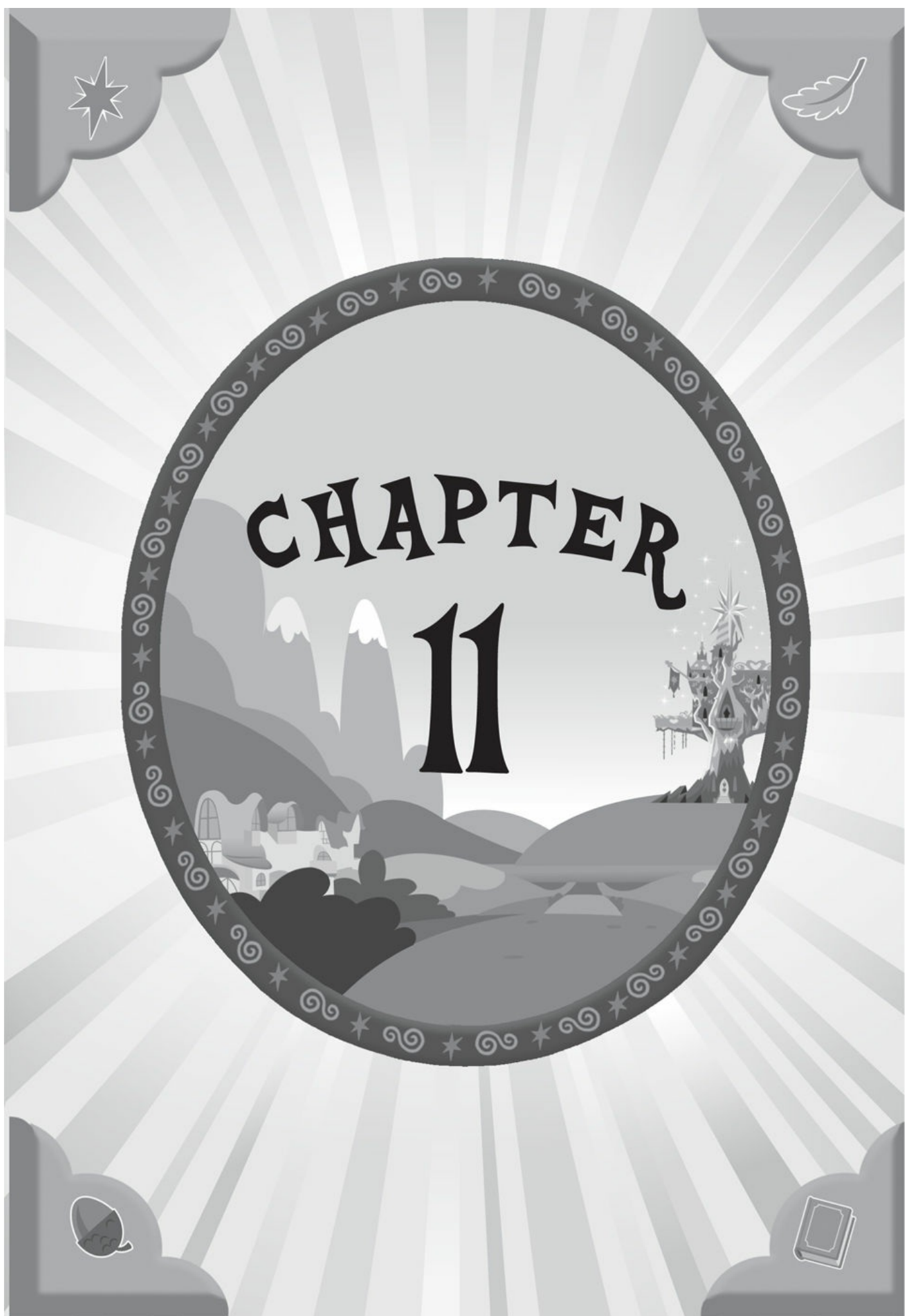
Twilight knew all the major founding wizards of ancient Equestria. A revenge curse didn’t sound like something any of them would cast. They might have been unconventional, but they weren’t cruel.

Paperbuck patted Saddle Stitch on the back. “That was a pretty story, but it’s just a myth. The real reason why nopony visits our town is actually quite simple. The ponies of Bales are too shy. We like to keep to ourselves and read our books. That’s why nopony wants to be friends with us. And we don’t ever leave because...well...nopony likes us, so why go?” Paperbuck shrugged. “Better to stay where there are ponies who understand you.”

“Well, we like you ponies. Right, Twilight?” Spike said through slurps of his tea.

Twilight nodded. “Of course! And I’m sure tons of other ponies across Equestria would as well! They just don’t know you’re here.”

It seemed that there was more than just a book crisis on their hooves. This was an undeniable, unmistakable *friendship* problem as well! Luckily, the princess had quite the range of experience on the topic. One might even say she was the expert.



CHAPTER 11

Little Shop of Ponies

Each fall day in Bales seemed to be more beautiful than the last. The foliage painted itself into new patterns as green leaves turned to fiery reds and ripe yellows, making the jewel-toned hues of the book rooftops look even more vibrant.

“Don’t you just love this time of year?” Paperbuck remarked as he held the door of the café open for Twilight.

“It’s delightful,” replied Twilight. Her voice carried a hint of sadness. As days passed with not much to show for her efforts, the princess was beginning to think she’d steered this mission in the wrong direction.

Twilight tried not to think of the fast-approaching deadline of the Autumnal Equine-nox. They’d spent almost the entire time searching through shop after shop, scanning the shelves for the one golden book that held all the answers.

Everything hinged on that special spell. The Shield of Wisdom could save the disappearing books here in Bales as well as the ones infected back in Canterlot. Twilight didn’t want to see any more books get ruined or knowledge go to waste.

So Twilight and her new pals kept scouring day after day, sifting through the multitude of old books. They were careful not to read any of them, just in case the words might disappear again.

Every time Twilight or Spike came across some new faces, the strangers would scurry behind a building or a bookshelf. Then they would peek out from behind it, carefully watching Twilight, Saddle Stitch, Paperbuck, and Spike while they went about their business. No introductions and not even a single friendly “Hello.” Maybe Paperbuck hadn’t been exaggerating how shy everypony was, after all.



“Good morning, Fly Leaf! Hello there, Dewey!” Twilight Sparkle chirped as she and Saddle Stitch entered a bookshop called Relics of the Pasture.

“Do you ponies have any potion-making books here?” Twilight asked, even though she had no interest in potions at the moment. She was just trying to engage the shy ponies in *anything*.

But the two shopkeeper mares said nothing in return. They just watched the princess curiously from their perch at the front desk.

“That’s okay, I’ll just take a peek myself.” Maybe she would try again later.

Saddle Stitch slumped. “Oh, Twilight, I feel so awful that we finally have a customer—and new friend—in town, and none of us can find the book she’s looking for!” The Unicorn trotted over to a

section in the corner and leaned down, scanning the titles.

“It’s not your fault,” Twilight Sparkle replied. “But I do just want to find it so that I can help save Equestria’s books.”

“Don’t worry. If Paperbuck says he’s seen what you seek, it’s here...somewhere. He never forgets a book.”

“He keeps saying that.” Twilight sighed. “I just wish he remembered where he saw it!” Where was that stallion, anyway?

Over in the corner of the shop, the golden spine of a book caught Twilight’s eye. She dove toward it as if it were a glimmering treasure trapped in the Temples of Tehuti. She held her breath as she gently inched the spine out with her magic.

“*Argh!* Another copy of *Canterlot: A History*? That’s six now!” Twilight groaned. “*Where is Primrose’s Protections?*” She plopped down next to a discount box on the floor and began to sort through it.

It was going to be another long day. It really was too bad that her summoning charms had no effect here in Bales—probably due to that same magical barrier that stopped her from finding the town in the first place.

Suddenly, a bell chimed. It was Spike, bursting through the door of the shop. He rushed over, still out of breath and coughing. A little flame came out of his mouth and he quickly stamped it out before anything caught fire.

“It’s *him!*” Spike exclaimed. “He’s had it all along! I just saw him with it...He looked all sneaky, like he was looking for a place to hide it.”

“Slow down,” Twilight said. Her head was spinning. “*Who has what?*”

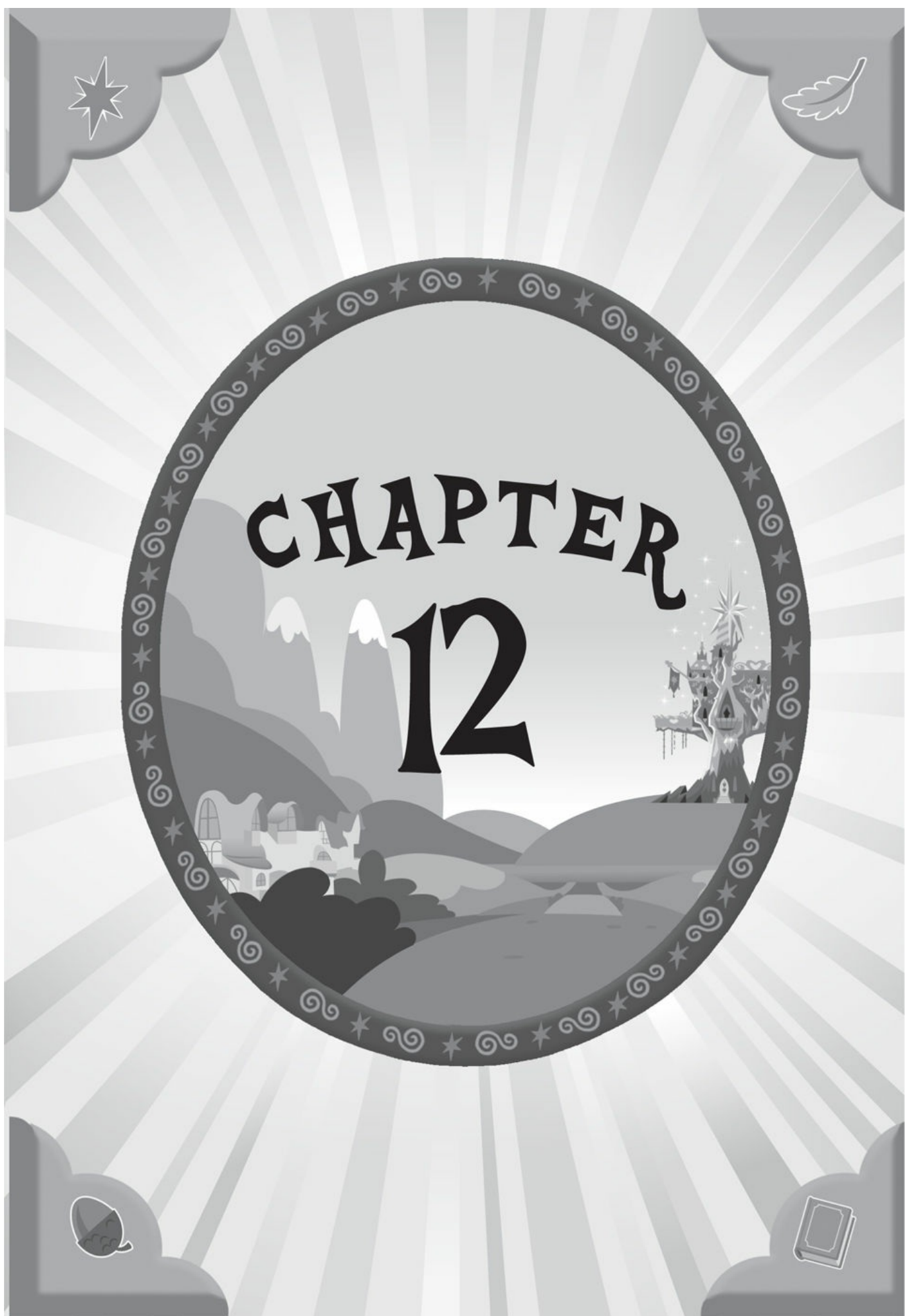
Spike leaned in close, whispering so as not to let Fly Leaf and Dewey in on his scandalous discovery. “Paperbuck has a copy of *Primrose’s Protections and Prophecies!*”

“Are you sure?” Saddle Stitch looked shocked. “I don’t think Paperbuck would do that...”

“We’ll just have to ask him!” Twilight headed toward the door. “Where did he go?”

“I saw him in the center of town—by the old library.” Spike pointed. “Hurry!”

Twilight Sparkle felt her pulse quicken. The Equine-nox was two days away. She didn’t have time to think about the implications of Paperbuck’s actions or why he had been hiding the book from her. All the princess knew was that she needed to find it and perform that spell! Before it was too late.



CHAPTER 12

The Table of Contents

Twilight entered the library hesitantly. Every chair, desk, and squashy sofa was unoccupied, and the place was completely silent. Saddle Stitch explained nopony visited the library anymore because it was where the town of Bales had decided to keep all the books with empty pages. They were hopeful that the words would return somehow, but until then, it was like a book graveyard.

It was eerie, and Twilight didn't like it one bit.

But Paperbuck came here often to study in the reading room. "Paperbuck!" Twilight yelled as she trotted around, peeking into the other rooms and around the end of each aisle of shelves. "Paperbuck, are you there? I'm your friend. I just want to talk to you!" Twilight whimpered. "Please?"

The princess collapsed onto a sofa in a heap of defeat.

She knew she should probably go look somewhere else. There weren't many places he could be: the café, his house, or maybe even Saddle Stitch's shop. Given Paperbuck's feelings on leaving Bales, Twilight Sparkle was pretty sure the stallion hadn't skipped town. Paperbuck didn't even think it was possible to leave.

But it felt hopeless.

Until...she heard voices! Twilight's ears perked up. Ponies were somewhere in this building, and they sounded like they were having an argument. Twilight followed the shouts. They were coming from the reading room. She crept down the hallway, careful not to make a peep.

A shard of light shot across the floor. Twilight traced it with her eyes. It was leading to a crack in the wall between two bookshelves! The wall was ajar, like it had been pushed forward, books and all.

"A false door?" Twilight whispered to herself. "Found ya, Paperbuck." She hung back for a moment and listened.

"We should let her see the book," a crusty old mare grumbled. "She is an Alicorn, so her magic may be powerful enough to bring them back!"

"I agree with Dust Jacket," said a stallion. "Let the mare try. This has gone on long enough. Her magic led her to us for a reason."

"No, no, no!" Paperbuck pleaded. "You ponies don't understand! What if something terrible happens? The last time a wizard tried to help us, all he did was curse us instead." There was a desperate edge to his voice. "We've learned to live without any new friends. It's safer this way. We're doing just fine on our own here in Bales!"

"No, we're not, dear boy," the stallion replied. "We need ponies to read our books and share in the knowledge we've tried to protect these many years." The old stallion sounded sad. "Hoofnote, Hard Back, and I all agree. Stop hiding the book. Go and find the princess and—"

"I'm right here." Twilight stepped into the light, revealing her presence to the room. "And I just heard everything."

The ponies looked astounded. They sat around a massive circular meeting table. It reminded Twilight of the one in the Castle of Friendship back home in Ponyville. Each member even sat on their own special wooden throne, just like she and her friends did.

Twilight met Paperbuck's eyes and he blushed red with shame. Twilight could see the object of her desire, the book she'd been searching for, in his hooves.

"What is this place?" she asked. "A town council?"

"We're the Table of Contents," said the old mare named Dust Jacket. "We are the ponies who decide what will make everypony in Bales happy."

Hoofnote stood up. "But since you heard our conversation, I'm assuming we don't need to tell you that we've been discontented for a while now."

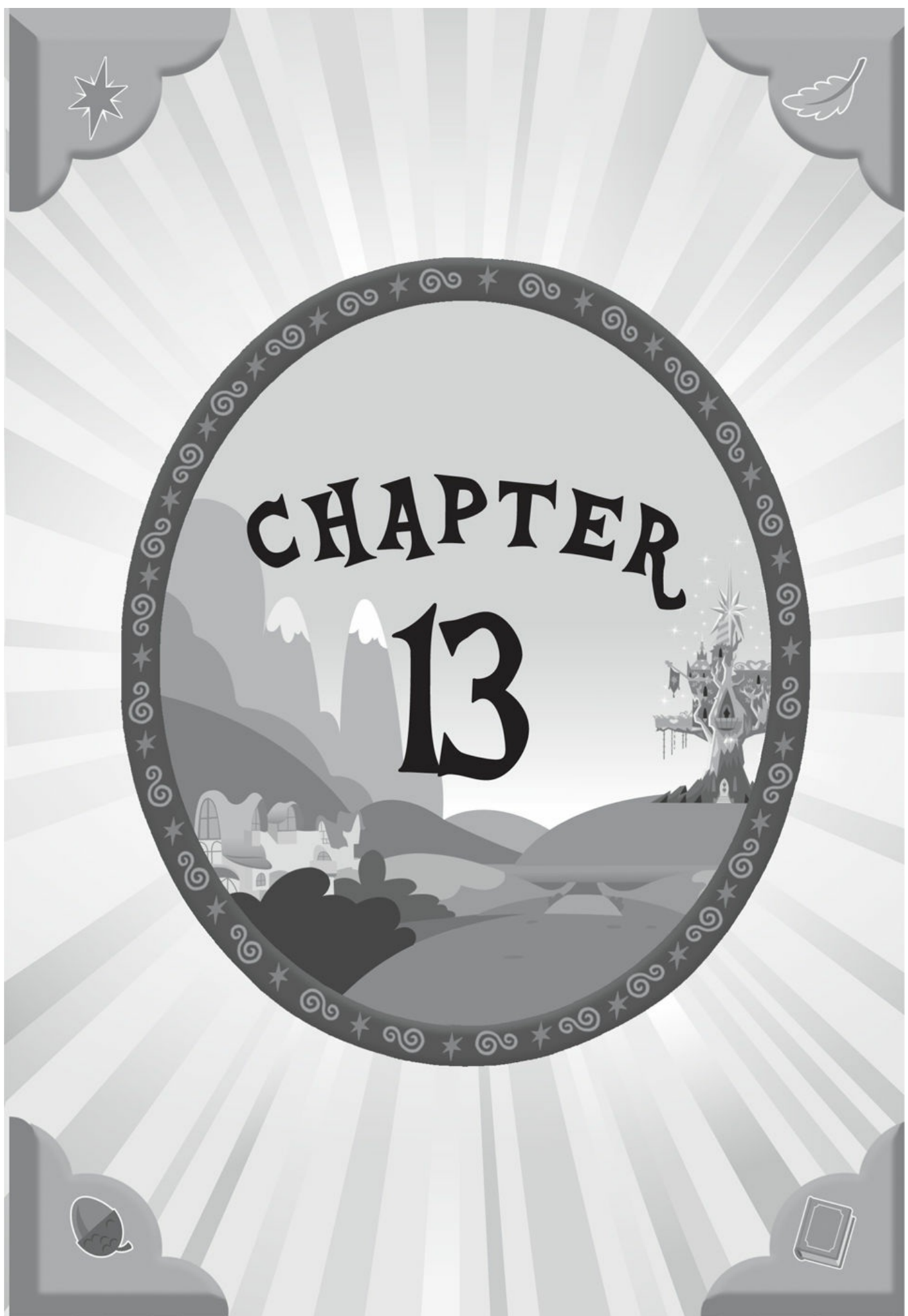
"I'm hoping I can change that." Twilight reached her hoof out to Paperbuck and gave him a reassuring smile. "May I see?"

The stallion looked to the Table of Contents. Each of them nodded. Paperbuck took a deep breath, reluctantly trotted over, and placed the long-sought-after book on the table in front of the princess. "I'm sorry, Princess. I guess I was just scared."

A flood of relief washed over Twilight Sparkle as she touched the book. The search was over. "I understand, Paperbuck. But sometimes we have to read between the lines. I never intended to do anything to hurt the ponies of Bales. All I want to do is help."

When Twilight Sparkle finally cracked the cover open, she saw something she never expected. The pages were not only filled with the beautiful spells of Primrose the Prescient...they were annotated by none other than one of the most powerful ancient wizards of the past. Twilight's eyes scanned the scratchy writing and the familiar style of the observations. She knew this pony...

"Comet Tail the Starry-Eyed was the wizard from the story?" Twilight gasped. "This changes everything!"



CHAPTER 13

The Autumnal Equine-nox

And all those years ago, the great wizard Comet Tail cast the spell not to *curse* the town of Bales... but to protect it! He was a kind pony, and he was only trying to save the precious books from carelessness,” Twilight Sparkle explained. Hoofnote, Dust Jacket, and Hard Back all stood up front with the princess as she faced the small crowd of ponies.

A wave of hushed whispers passed over them.

“But Comet Tail was impatient and decided to perform the Shield of Wisdom on the *Spring* Equine-nox instead. There were different magical currents than in the autumn, and the spell was much too strong. Comet Tail must have accidentally created an invisibubble around Bales! It must have worked on him, too, because he never realized his mistake or thought about Bales again.”

“An invisibubble?” Saddle Stitch asked, looking to the sky. She didn’t see any bubbles. “What do you mean?”

“It means nopony in Equestria could see the town from any direction,” Spike explained. “Twilight and I were only able to find it through a powerful spell that she created.”

“So that’s why nopony has visited us!” Fly Leaf called out. “Whoa.”

“Exactly,” Twilight said proudly. “With your permission, I’d like to try the spell again tomorrow. On the Autumnal Equine-nox. It’s the true time when the spell should be attempted.” Twilight Sparkle looked into the faces of the scared, shy ponies. “I promise you—I value books and friendship more than anything! If I can help you ponies with either of them, it would mean the world to me. If I’m successful with the spell, the books of Bales will be restored and you’ll be back on the map again.”

The ponies erupted into more whispers. Twilight couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or not. She bit her lip and exchanged a look with Paperbuck. It had been his idea to share the true story of Comet Tail with the town. Paperbuck shrugged and smoothed down his curly blue mane. He seemed just as nervous of their reaction.

“So what do you say, ponies?” Spike asked with a huge grin. He put his claws up in the air. “Are you ready to meet Equestria?”

A painfully long moment passed when they just stared at the princess, blinking. Everypony was too shy to be the one to speak up. But then, like soft ocean waves, the hushing began.

“Shhhhhhhh...” hushed a pink mare with a cutie mark of a green worm in the front row. She smiled at Twilight. “Shhhhhh...”

“Shhhhhhhh...” The stallion next to her joined in.

“Shhhhhhhh...” whispered the ponies of the Table of Contents, closing their eyes.

Soon, all the ponies were making the sound. “Shhhhhhhh...Shhhhhhhh...shhhhhh...” It was the quietest, most serene applause Twilight had ever heard. And she took it as permission to proceed.



The day stretched itself awake as first light shone onto Foal Mountain, through the trees, over the rolling hills, and onto the crunchy fallen leaves in the town square of Bales. The dawn was breaking across Equestria, which meant that it was time for the Autumnal Equine-nox. Just three minutes to go.

Saddle Stitch, Paperbuck, Spike, and dozens of others were already lined up, facing the sunrise. They each held a blank book in their hooves (and claws) in anticipation.

Princess Twilight stepped forward from the group, carrying *Primrose's Protections and Prophecies*. She placed the book on the stand in front of her.

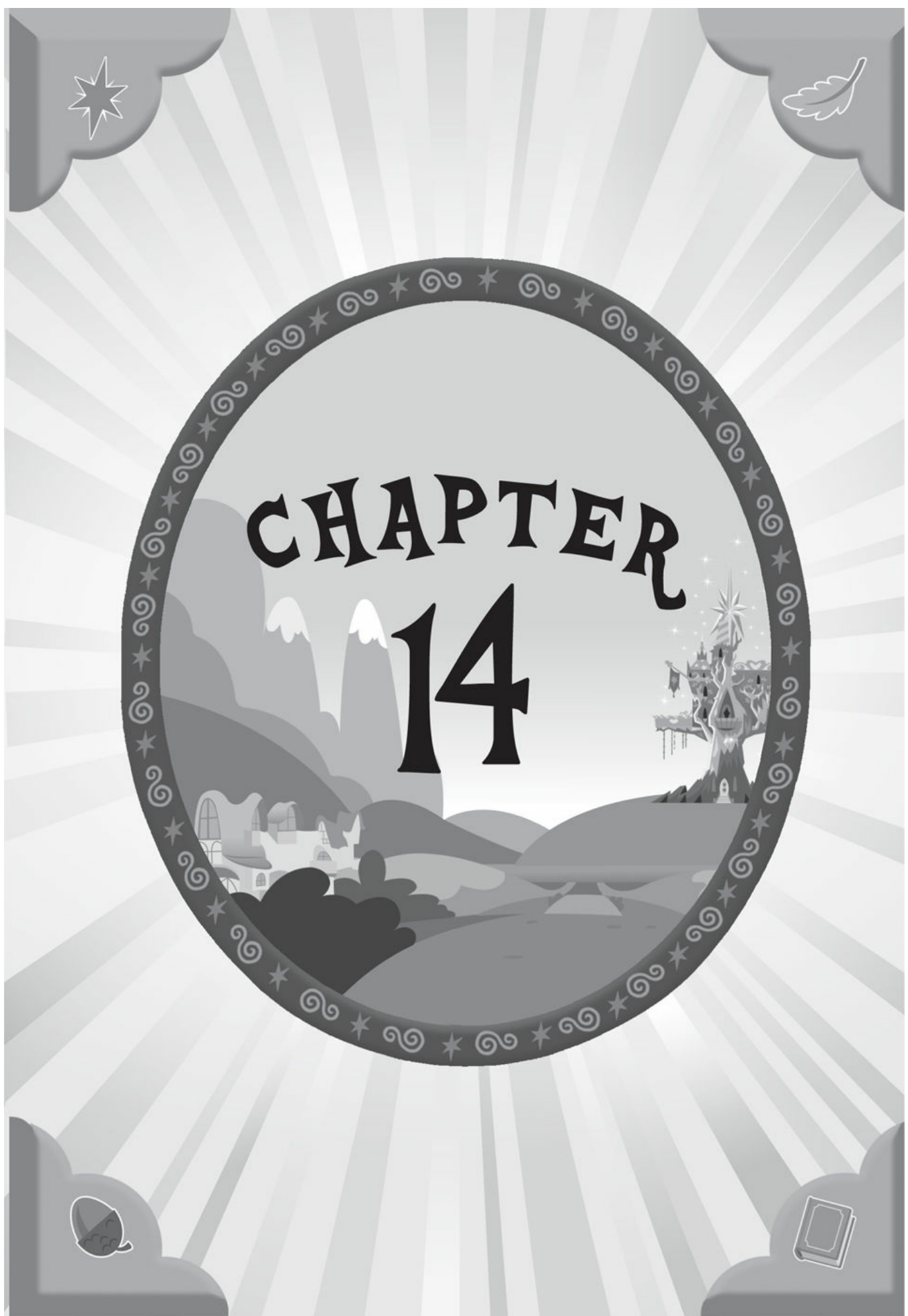
Imaginary butterflies flitted around inside Twilight's stomach. Every hair in her mane stood on end with nerves. What if she failed? She would have to wait an entire moon cycle to try again. The books in Bales might have completely disappeared and the books in Canterlot might be completely covered in ink by then!

Twilight pushed away the thought. She took a deep breath and tried to center herself as she softly spoke the spell. "Wisdom of wizards, knowledge of herds! We use these forces to shield our words. Restore forgotten, reveal true facts...the Shield of Wisdom will now bring it all back!"

A bright, rainbow-burst of magical energy grew from the bottoms of Twilight's hooves. It danced up her body in sparkling swirls and curls, circling around her and then shooting out through her horn! The blast reached to the sky. Everypony craned their necks back to watch as it reached the top of the invisibubble. Just like a pin popping a balloon, the dome shattered.

Droplets of golden light rained down onto the ponies and the open pages of the books. The lost words began to reappear. The ponies cheered with excitement and elation at the miracle unfolding before them.

Princess Twilight Sparkle had done it! She'd saved the books.



CHAPTER
14

The Map

A few hours later, after the ponies had brought every blank book out to the square to be revived, Spike noticed that Twilight was the only pony without a smile on her face. “What’s wrong, Twilight? You did it! Aren’t you happy?”

As overjoyed as Twilight Sparkle was about having saved the priceless works of literature in Bales, she was still concerned about whether the spell had been powerful enough to reach Moondancer in Canterlot. The books infected with Inknorance were equally at risk of being lost forever.

“Spike, I need your help with a letter!” Twilight shouted as she trotted through the crowd of revelers holding their books high in the air in victory. It was the loudest the town had been since Twilight and Spike had arrived. Even Fly Leaf and Dewey were cheering. “Ask Moondancer if the Inknorance is gone. If she doesn’t write back right away, I must go to her—”

“Hey, Twilight!” a voice interrupted. “I’m right over here!”

Twilight whipped around. And sure enough, as the crowd parted, Twilight Sparkle saw the ponies she needed to see—her best friends! The seven of them: Pinkie Pie, Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Starlight Glimmer, and Moondancer were all standing there with huge smiles on their faces.

“Surprise!” they shouted, laughing.

“How did you find Bales?” Twilight Sparkle rushed over and embraced them in a group hug. “Wow!”

“So, Moondancer came to see us at the castle with a cart full of books,” Rainbow Dash explained. “It was so weird—they’d all turned black or something.”

“That’s right.” Moondancer nodded. “I had isolated the Inknorance, but I wanted to see if Starlight Glimmer could help. You mentioned she was a natural with magic....”

“Aw, you said that, Twi?” Starlight nudged Twilight with a smile. “Shucks.”

“Anyway,” Rarity continued, gesturing with her perfectly hooficured white hoof. “Out of nowhere, this gorgeous blast of magic came shooting through the windows!”

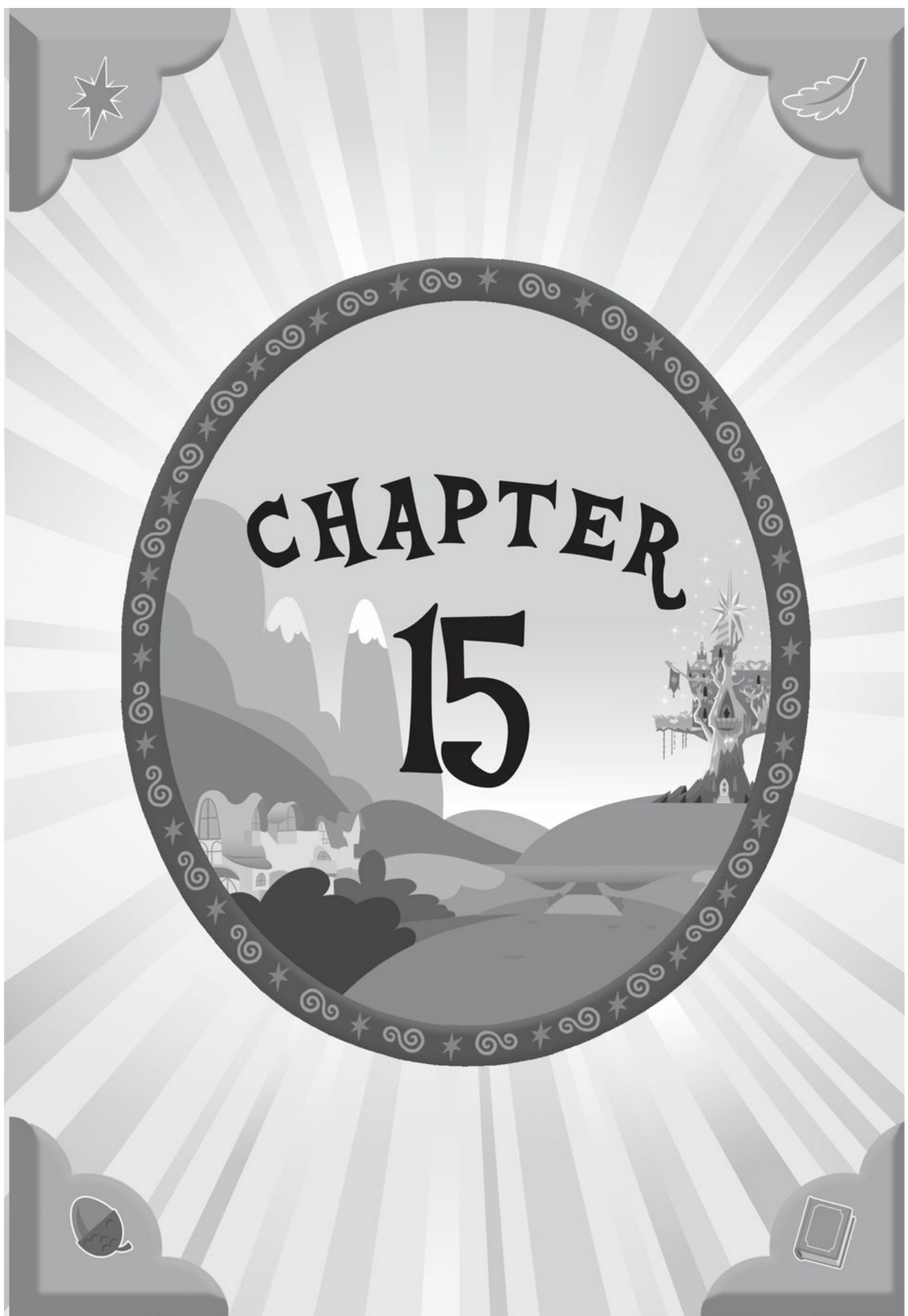
“It cured all of Moondancer’s books,” Applejack added. “Wiped the gunk clean away.”

“So then the map started going all *craaaaaazy*!” Pinkie Pie’s fuchsia mane bounced around as she spoke. “It just flickered and then *BOOM!* A whole town that we never even knew existed was right there!” She giggled. “Totally wackadoodle-doo!”

The Ponyville gang had no idea, but they had garnered quite the crowd of onlookers. As the jovial group trotted through the town, the timid locals watched the outsiders with fascination, jumping out of their way and ducking inside shops. They’d never seen an outsider before the past week...and now there were eight new ponies and a dragon in town! The townspies were all wondering the same thing: Was the Curse of Comet Tail officially broken?

“Come on, girls!” Twilight Sparkle gestured her hoof and led her friends down the street. “We’ve got new friends to make and a book festival to put on!”

With the books safe and her friends by her side, Twilight knew that things were on track. Now the princess could really teach the shy residents of Bales just how wonderful friendship could be in Equestria.



CHAPTER 15

Bales Fall Friendship Book Festival

Book-loving ponies from every corner of Equestria spilled out of the tiny bookshops and crowded the streets with energy and laughter. Friends helped each other peruse the titles, choosing stories for one another from the beautiful traveling library carts that Applejack had built, parked outside of each shop. Bales had never looked so alive!

“Butter my flank and call me a biscuit!” Applejack looked around at the activity with pride. The brim of her brown cowpony hat flapped in the fresh fall breeze. “I really wasn’t sure we could pull this all together in time, but y’all were right.”

The friends all laughed and nodded in agreement.

“These book ponies sure know how to party!” Pinkie Pie marveled. “Wooo-hoo! Book party!” She threw her hooves in the air and squealed in approval. She turned to Twilight. “I thought you said they were shy!”

“They just weren’t used to other ponies yet. But thanks to Fluttershy’s confidence workshop, I think they’re feeling open to a lot more.” Twilight smiled. “Isn’t that right?”

“Oh yes.” Fluttershy nodded with a proud smile. Her pink mane fell over her eye. “They’ll be ready to take those book carts out on the roads across Equestria in no time.”

“Twilight!” Saddle Stitch and Paperbuck came trotting up to them. “Have you chosen anything yet?”

The ponies of Bales were so incredibly grateful for Twilight’s discovery and dedication to helping them that they wanted to thank her. The Table of Contents had agreed to grant her special permission to take any books that she wanted home with her. The princess was spoiled for choice!

“You know...” Twilight admitted to her new pals. “I’ve decided not to take any books.”

Paperbuck raised his eyebrows in concern. Saddle Stitch shifted back and forth on her hooves.

“Even though it is an incredibly tempting offer—you have no *idea* how tempting!—I have a better one....” Twilight smirked. She held her hoof out to the ponies. “Every time I want a new book, I think I’ll come back and visit you.”

Twilight pointed to Moondancer, who was laughing as she explained something from a book to a group of Bales ponies. They hung on her every word. “So will Moondancer.”

“Really?” Saddle Stitch’s eyes were wide.

“Of course!” Twilight Sparkle winked, bursting with love and pride. “We’re friends, right?”

“Right!” Paperbuck and Saddle Stitch laughed in unison. They held up their hooves in a cheer. “To friends from afar!”

After moons of isolation, the ponies in Bales would finally have the chance to meet *multitudes* of new ponies from afar. And in return, the beautiful collection of books full of ancient knowledge and intrigue would expand new hearts and minds instead of collecting dust on a shelf.

It was better than any story Twilight had ever read. And it was real.

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