

Perils of the Past

By Somber



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Chapter 1

Ignition

“Why are we in the forest, again?” Sweetie Belle muttered as she warily followed Scootaloo and Apple Bloom deeper and deeper into the Everfree Forest. The young unicorn hunched lower to the ground to avoid the bare branches that seemed to reach at them like bony hands ready to pluck them like overripe apples. “Nothing good comes out of going into a dark and scary forest.”

Apple Bloom hopped atop a rotten log with a snort, “Oh come on Sweetie Belle. What if our cutie marks is ‘explorers?’ We could journey into the most deepest, most darkest darkest, most dangerest depths ever delved by ponykind!” She said as she could imagine herself standing on a rocky spire of stone, pith hat with goggles atop her head, and a compass firmly emblazoned on her flank. For a moment she assumed the pose, head thrust proudly forward... till she unbalanced and fell forward, hooves waving wildly in the air before landing in a heap on the other side of the log.

Scootaloo nimbly hopped over and tugged on Apple Bloom’s hoof to help her up. Then she looked up at the white unicorn as she climbed up after them, “Besides Sweetie Belle, it’s not like we’ve ever tried being explorers before. What could possibly go wrong?”

“Um, let’s see? Cockatrices.... Hydras...,” Sweetie Belle started to list as she trotted behind her friends.

“Yeah yeah...” Scootaloo said with an annoyed smile.

“Parasprites... Sea Serpents...”

Apple Bloom gave a sheepish smile, “Yeah, maybe, but...”

“Manticores... Dragons... Poison joke...” She continued as she trotted past her slightly less eager friends.

“Okay! We get it!” The pair shouted together at her.

“Well you *asked*,” Sweetie Belle replied simply, looking back at them and swishing her tail.

“Sheesh...” Scootaloo said as the two hurried up next to her, rolling her lavender eyes. Then she paused, squinted, and raised a wing to shade out the sun’s glare from her eyes. Something lay beyond the thick woods and tangled underbrush. “Hey! What’s that?” she asked, pointing with her hoof.

The three fillies pushed through the bushes to the edge of a large wall. It looked cracked and half covered in vines. “It’s some kind of wall.” Apple Bloom said, looking along its length. It went as far as they could see in the dense wood. Admittedly that wasn’t very far, but they’d never seen anything like this before. She looked up at the top with a curious cant of her head, “I wonder how long it’s been here.”

“I wonder what’s on the other side!” Scootaloo said with a grin. Whatever it was, she had no doubt that it simply had to have something to do with their Cutie Marks!

“I wonder why anyone would build a perfectly good wall all the way out here,” the unicorn said with a little frown, backing up a few steps.

“Oh stop being such a worry wart, Sweetie Belle.” Scootaloo said with a smile as she crouched at the base, and then leapt up with her wings buzzing in the air. Up! Up... closer... cloooooooserrrr... She almost made it halfway before her wings started to give out. Her hooves scrabbled at the side of the wall, showering her friends in a cascade of ivy leaves and tiny red Blooms. Then she fell and landed hard on her haunches with a loud ‘Ooomph!’

Sweetie Belle helped the pegasus to her feet while Apple Bloom looked at the base. Then she scratched away at the heaps of leaves to reveal a dark crack in the wall. “Hey, look at this, girls!” She shouted and stuck her head in the hole. “I think this leads all the way through!” Her voice was slightly muffled by the sound of the stone. Then the dead leaves gave way beneath her and she started to slide through with a little shriek!

“Apple Bloom!” Scootaloo shouted, leaping forward and biting her tail. It was for naught though as both of them disappeared into the hole in a cascade of dead leaves with a cry and a large cloud of dust.

Sweetie Belle stood there a moment and then walked to the hole slowly and looked in. "Does it go through?"

From the far side, Scootaloo groaned, "Yes, Sweetie Belle. It does." There was a skittering and clatter as the unicorn slid through as well with a fresh cloud of dust washing over the three ponies.

"Well, that's one way through a wall," Apple Bloom said, coughing at all the dust. Then she opened her eyes and her jaw dropped. "Woah..." Her friends also stopped coughing and looked as well. Sweetie gasped, covering her mouth with her hooves at the sight.

It wasn't just a wall. This was a ruined city! It stretched ten times further than Ponyville with great cracked buildings of strangely blackened stone. On a little mountain above them the three fillies could make out an actual castle! Sure, it was all falling apart, but that made it all the better! The three walked out into a court yard that had spots and patches of overgrown weeds and there were trees growing through some of the paving stones, but there was no doubt that ponies must have once lived here a long time ago!

"This..." said Scootaloo.

"Is..." added Sweetie Belle.

"So..." chimed in Apple Bloom.

"Cool!" the three cheered in unison.

The three set forth to exploring the ruin as best they were able. They found an overgrown park with crumbly pony statues and a large cracked fountain that still had a trickle of water pouring down on two unicorns. Somehow the trickle made it look like one of the two was crying. And there were blackened buildings that were all empty inside. Scootaloo noticed the black was actually soot. Sweetie Belle frowned at blackened stumps in neat rows. Still, it was Apple Bloom that noticed one of the flagstones had hoofprints in it!

"I wonder where all the people are. Seems like a perfectly good waste of a city." Sweetie Belle said with a frown as she surveyed the ruins.

"Something bad happened here," Apple Bloom said softly. "A fire..."

Scootaloo looked nervous, then feigned a snort and tried to sound a brave as she could, "Shyeah, right. Well whatever it was it happened a long time ago. There's nothing now that could bother us, right?" Her eyes looked from one to the other as she grinned, hoping for agreement.

Apple Bloom wasn't quite listening as she leaned forward and tapped at the flagstone with the hoof print. Suddenly there was a soft rumble as cracks spread across the street. Apple Bloom turned to run but suddenly the road fell in underneath her. She gave one yell as she fell into the deep shaft, barely missing old rotten timbers. Tattered spiderwebs ripped like silk as she fell through them. Suddenly she felt hooves grab her mane and her fall slowed as a loud buzzing filled the air. "I got you," Scootaloo shouted. Sweetie Belle clung to the pegasus's back, eyes clenched shut in fear.

They landed hard and in a heap once again. "Thanks Scootaloo," Apple Bloom said in a shaky voice.

"No problem." Scootaloo said in a pant, "But I think that's all I got."

It was so dim in the bottom of the shaft that they could barely see anything at all. Apple Bloom could see a big open room ahead of them. It was shaped like a big dome, with great big cracks in the floor and ceiling. Suddenly a faint glow emanated from behind her. She turned and there was Sweetie Belle. Her eyes were clenched as she concentrated, and then with a little poof a ball of light appeared at the tip of her horn. "Sweetie Belle! When did you learn how to do that?"

"Did it work?" the little unicorn asked nervously. She opened her eyes, looked at the ball with her own expression of amazement. "Oh! Wow, it actually worked! Twilight showed me... but I never got it to work before!" She said with a smile at the ball of light, forgetting they were stuck at the bottom of a hole. Then she turned to look at her flank, but there was no sign of a light bulb or lamp or anything. Oh well, for a unicorn, pulling off any magic was always great!

"Well, I'm glad you did." Scootaloo said in a nervous voice as she knocked a stone with her front hoof. It scattered across the cracked floor and disappeared into a crevasse. They looked over the edge, but not even Sweetie's little light could show the bottom. A few seconds later they heard a clack far below. "I don't think we're ever getting out if we fall down there."

"I'd just be glad to get out of down here." Apple Bloom said softly as the three ponies walked slowly through the huge domed room. Through the cracks and the soot they could see images of a black unicorn pegasus, the full moon with the dark silhouette of a unicorn cast upon it, and a pony that looked like they were on fire! All three girls gulped at the sight of that last one.

Then they looked ahead and all three girls screamed again. A horrible black monster stood before them, rearing with its hooves pawing the air. Apple Bloom was the first to notice it wasn't moving. "Girls..." she said, unheard over her friends' panic. "Girls." She tried again, louder. Her ears flopped flat before she snorted, and then shouted, "Girls!" They blinked at her in confusion. She trotted closer to the rock. "It's just a statue."

Both let out their breath and Scootaloo gave a nervous laugh, wiping sweat from her brow with her wing. "A statue. Of course it's just a statue. I knew that."

"It sure is an ugly statue," Sweetie Belle said skeptically as she walked carefully around it.

Apple Bloom certainly agreed, cocking her head with a little frown. It resembled a black misshapen hunk of rock carved roughly in the shape of a pony rearing up on its hind legs and pawing at the air with its front hooves. There were glittering diamond chains disappearing into the rock, as if trying to hold the statue in place. Still, as interesting as a creepy statue was, it wouldn't get them out of here. Fortunately, in the unicorn's wan light, the earth pony spotted an opening in the far side, and she said, "Hey look. Stairs going up!"

Sweetie Belle carefully navigated past the cracks to catch up with Apple Bloom, but Scootaloo gave the statue a sullen look. "Stupid rock," she snorted and kicked at the stone with her hind leg, cracking it. That brought a smile to her face; just like booting that scared right out of her head. But as she trotted towards her friends she heard it. Another soft crackle. And another. Slowly she glanced over her shoulder and saw her little chip was now starting to creep over the rock. "Oh no!"

Sudden the rock wasn't just breaking, it was moving! The whole statue started to stir its legs as pieces of stone flaked away. The diamond

chains clinked and jingled as more stone fell away and they saw dark hide beneath it. The rock around its head fell away, and two eyes of flame opened wide as a plume of flame shot from its mouth! It screamed as it shook itself, a mane of fire spreading along its back till its tail erupted in a crackling blaze.

“That’s a... pony?” Apple Bloom said as she backed closer towards the stairs.

The flaming pony slammed its front hooves down, its feet also igniting as it shook off the rest of the rock. There were still metal plates chained to its shoulders and it wore a helmet of pitted smoking steel; both started to glow red from the heat as its angry red eyes looked at the three fillies. Perhaps most disturbing of all was where a cutie mark should be there was a burning red cloud shaped like a mushroom. All three were petrified in fear as it jerked on the diamond chains binding its legs and neck. The chains flashed crimson in the flames, but held. Instead, the chains broke free of the crumbling walls.

Suddenly the cracked roof crumbled and stones began to fall, and still the girls were terrified of the monstrous pony and couldn’t move an inch. It wasn’t until it reared up once more and screamed at them, its hooves slamming into the ground with a little explosion, that they started to run across the uneven, shaking ground towards the exit. The monstrous pony pursued, screaming and flaming after them. A large rock fell right at Sweetie Belle, but the bucking burning pony accidentally knocked it aside with its shoulder; the metal plates sparking as they deflected the stone. The ground fell out from under Scootaloo, a massive pit opening below her as the floor started to collapse as well. At that moment though a diamond chain swung past her, and she gripped it for dear life as it tossed her over the yawning pit and on to the stairs.

Apple Bloom raced towards the exit, her friends yelling and encouraging her as the flaming pony trotted along behind her. Even its breath had snorts of flame! With a rumble the wall tore free and heavy, jagged stone fell in a wall between her and the way out! The burning pony raced up behind the filly, and she ducked just as the burning pony spun and bucked fit to make Applejack jealous! The flaming hooves hit the wall with a scream and an explosion that blew the rubble into smoking gravel. Then the pony looked down at Apple Bloom with its fiery red eyes. “Now run!” It screamed as it turned, crouching, as if about to pounce!

The creme colored pony turned and raced towards Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo as the burning pony followed, the room collapsing behind them. Always the flaming pony seemed right behind them as they ran up the zig zags. Finally they emerged in the ruin above and sprinted, gasping, for the exit. Behind them the pony emerged under the sun and stood there amid the stones. Suddenly it began to roar and kicked at the blackened walls with its burning hooves! Explosions filled the air as its burning tail flicked a ball of fire at a towel and engulfed it in flames. It would be been so cool if she hadn't imagined Sugarcube Corner burning just like that.

The three found the crack and scrambled up the slippery leaves and into the woods.

"What was that thing?" Sweetie Belle panted as she looked up at the thick pall of smoke rising from over the wall, along with renewed muffled explosions.

Scootaloo looked at her in scorn. "Uh, how about 'a monster?' Duh!"

Apple Bloom didn't join in as she stared at the smoke a moment longer. "I dunno," Apple Bloom said as she caught her breath. "Applejack said something like that about Zecora." She remembered Pinkie Pie's ridiculous song about the zebra putting curses on all of them.

"Uh, Apple Bloom, Zecora wasn't on fire!" Scootaloo countered, and Apple Belle had to admit that was a good point. Still, she didn't know... had the flaming pony been trying to save her and her friends, or just wanted to chase them some more before cooking and eating them?

"Let's get home and tell Twilight Sparkle! She's gotta have a book or something that should know for sure!" Apple Bloom said as they trotted for the trail that would take them home. Then Sweetie Belle stopped short.

"Wait! We're forgetting the most important thing!" Her friends looked at her blankly a moment, then all three turned and examined their flanks. Their very bare flanks.

"Awww..." the three said in unison.

* * * * *

It would have to be a cake, Pinkie Pie thought as she tapped her hooves together, staring in contemplation and trying to look every bit of a super smart genius person. A special cake. A cake Rainbow Dash would never suspect of being a prank. They'd graduated long past whoopee cushions and a dribble glass was simply too old hat to ever be truly funny for the next year or two. Now she had to devise something truly sensationally unexpected to unleash on her unsuspecting uni... wait, that alliteration wasn't going to work! "Dang it! That would have performed perfectly if that pugnatically perceptive pegasus pony were only a unicorn. Poo."

She hopped on her hooves with a sigh, but when she spotted the Cutie Mark Crusaders walking through Sugarcube Corner with heads hanging and tails dragging. Well, that would never do! She jumped right down besides them and asked, "Hey girls! What's shaking?"

They started, but then smiled. Well it was kinda a smile... the kinda smile you smiled when you didn't really want to smile but you thought you should smile even when smiling was the last thing you wanted to do. "Oh, hey Pinkie Pie," Apple Bloom said morosely, confirming Pinkie Pie's smile analysis.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Pinkie Pie asked with worried eyes, but kept her smile steady. A 'hey I know you're not really smiling cause you're happy but I really want you to be happy so I'll smile while you smile' smile. "How's the Cutie Mark quest coming along? Is that what's gotcha down?" She stood on her hind legs, about to launch into a song about never giving up, drawing in her breath.

"No, that's not it!" Apple Bloom said quickly, rising to cover Pinkie's mouth. Then the young tan filly backed away still looking upset. "We just got in a lot of trouble for going into the Everfree Forest... again."

Pinkie Pie winced. "Ooooh that's right. I remember Applejack saying something about that. I understand 'wrangling, hogtying, and trussed up like a turkey' was going to be involved with she caught you." Personally she didn't know why Applejack had been so worried, but then she'd never had a sister like Apple Bloom running into the forest for

‘adventure.’ “You know, I always wondered what would be the big deal with hogtying if they just wore clip-ons, you know?”

They tried to give her a smile, but all three resumed looking worried almost at once. Lots of people might think she was a scatter brain but... Oh! What if she used a candle connected to a firework inside the cake she’d give Rainbow Dash timed to explode just as it was blown out?! That’d be perfect! Then she blinked and remembered the three fillies before her and focused. There’d be a time for pranks later. “Well why don’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

The three young ponies looked at one another and took a breath in unison. A deluge of information flooded forth from the three young girls. Pinkie twisted her head this way and that, stuck her tongue out to the side, furrowed her brows, trying to assemble all the bits and pieces. It seemed to involve a ruin, a flaming monster pony, a lot of falling, an exploding cake, and being chased around. Wait, no cake. That was hers. “So you found a ruin, let loose a big fire monster pony thing, and got chased out?”

“Yeah,” Scootaloo confirmed as she fluttered her wings a little. “And then we thought... well... what if it came here?”

“Well actually we checked if we had our cutie marks first, but THEN we thought we should warn someone.” Sweetie Belle clarified.

“And we went in to tell Twilight Sparkle,” Apple Bloom said as she turned to look over towards the library but then hung her head, “But she told us flaming ponies didn’t exist.”

“Actually she asked us if it was a dragon, a phoenix, or a salamander... and then she told us flaming ponies didn’t exist.” Sweetie Belle said as she sat back down, rubbing her chin. “Though then she said that books written in gibberish didn’t exist either... and that books were numbered for a reason...”

“Oh!” Pinkie Pie grinned sheepishly. “That was me. I sorta pranked two books she was in the middle of studying. One with scribbled pages and the other I mixed up all the pages.” She shook her head sadly. “When it comes to reading, that pony has no sense of humor. Sheesh.”

Then she got a weird sensation in the back of her head. Not a twitch, nor a flop, nor an out of place snuffle or an itchy sensation between her shoulder blades. This was like a pressure at the base of her skull... a dull pressure that only came when something bad was about to happen. Then she looked at the three Cutie Mark crusaders and narrowed her gaze. "Wait! You said you warned Twilight Sparkle?"

"Um... yeah?" Scootaloo offered, shying away from the look on Pinkie Pie's face.

"And she just blew you off like you had no idea what you were talking about?"

"Uh-huh..." Apple Bloom nodded warily.

She sat as stiffly as Pinkie Pie ever got... well as stiff as she could without her hair uncurling... and said in a flat and disgusted voice, "Twilight Sparkle..." Then she marched straight towards the library with the three in tow. And with as much drama as she could muster, and given Pinkie's proclivities it was a wonder she didn't knock and run away with a trapped cupcake on the welcome mat, she threw open the door and pointed right at the purple unicorn, "Twilight Sparkle! How dare you?!"

Twilight, for her part sat in the middle of the library with a book binding before her, pages collected in near little piles to her sides, and a brush with glue floating in the air before her. Spike, her baby purple dragon, was doing his best to uncover some hidden secret in the pages of the joke book she'd scribbled on. The unicorn looked at her in even, and slightly terse confusion, "Excuse me?"

"Do you, like, have a problem with warnings or something? I mean, sure, you got to come here and try to warn everyone about Nightmare Moon escaping... but whenever anypony ever tries to warn you about something then you're all, 'Pshaw... can't happen, nope nope nope, no danger here!' The pink pony stalked closer towards her. "Do I need to remind you of the parasprites? How about Zecora warning you about the poison joke? Or maybe I need to twitch at you? Huh? Huh? Huh!?" She said, getting closer to Twilight Sparkle with each hun till they were muzzle to muzzle.

Twilight Sparkle leaned as far back as she could without falling over, sweat on her brow at the reminders that she did have a tendency to

dismiss other people's warnings till it was too late. She glanced over at the unhappy Cutie Mark Crusaders and sighed. "Okay Pinkie. I get your point."

"And another thing-" she started before she blinked in surprise. "You do?" She stepped back enough for Twilight Sparkle to get to her feet.

Twilight Sparkle looked at her books, and her horn glimmered as she pulled two red leather bound books with her magic, "Well, I asked them if it was any of the usual creatures in Flaming Fauna or the Combustible Codex..."

"Or something in Dragon's Digest..." Spike added as he tossed the prank book aside.

"...but there's not a flaming pony anywhere. They just don't exist." Twilight Sparkle concluded, looking over at the worried ponies as she set the books on a heap. "I believe you saw something, girls... but a monster flaming pony? There's just nothing in the books about that."

"Well have you ever thought that maybe it's something that's not in a book?" Pinkie Pie offered with a grin. "You know, most things books are written about were around before the book was written. It's not like there were dragons in books and one day, poof, the first dragon appeared going 'gwoosh, where's my gold and jewels, gwoosh hiss!'" She said as her mane tried to form dragon spines and she hissed in her best dragon imitation.

Spike rubbed his snout, "Actually dragons are more likely to fwoosh into being rather than poof. It's a dragon thing," he said, touching his chest in pride.

Twilight Sparkle frowned as she looked at all the books around her, clearly not comfortable with the idea that all of life's answers had to be in a book somewhere. "Still, a ruin... and a flaming pony with exploding hooves locked up beneath it? It just sounds too extraordinary."

"It's true!" Scootaloo said immediately.

"It was all on fire and screaming and everything!" Apple Bloom said, trying to add credibility through sheer willpower.

“Please believe us,” Sweetie Belle asked with her round lavender eyes.

Twilight Sparkle sighed, “After the time with the Cockatrice I was hoping to avoid having to go back into the Everfree Forest for a time.”

Pinkie Pie laughed, “Oh well you can go if you want, but I was thinking that maybe we know somepony that could go check a little... mmm... faster?” She said as she trotted to a window and pushed it open with her hoof. “Oooooohhhh Rainbow Dash!” She called out into the sky. She then paused and then her eyes went wide and one lid twitched. She dashed to the closet, dug out a metal bucket, and filled it as quickly as she could. She was just about to set it on top of the window when her eyes met the stern look of Twilight Sparkle and she let out a huff. “Oh, you’re no fun,” she pouted as she took the bucket down.

A few seconds later there was a polychromatic streak and the window was pushed open to admit the azure pony. “Never fear, Rainbow Dash is....” She blinked at the sight of the Pinkie Pie holding the pail of water and the worried Cutie Mark Crusaders, “...here? What’s going on?”

“The girls saw something strange in the Everfree Forest,” Twilight Sparkle said as she looked at the three, giving them a smile that they returned. It was the same kind of smile Pinkie Pie had given them herself. The girls’ smile was much more of a ‘we are really glad somepony is actually believing us enough to do something about it’ smile.

“Well duh. What isn’t strange in that place?” Rainbow Dash said with a huff, crossing her arms in front of her.

“Well it’s got them scared.” Twilight Sparkle looked at the blue Pegasus firmly, and then Rainbow Dash dropped some of her scorn. The girls being scared just came from being young. They were still scared though, and that was what mattered.

“So we were wondering if you could fly out over the forest and just keep an eye out for anything unusual.” Pinkie Pie offered with a grin, as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

“Like....?”

“Oh nothing. Strange rocks? A particularly odd color apple tree? Annnnnd... maybe a ruined city with a fire breathing monster pony running around shooting fireballs from its tail and zapping lightning with its eyes? Pzow! Pzow!” Pinkie Pie offered, her hooves mimicking the lightning as she zapped indiscriminate books before she glanced at the confused faces of the Cutie Mark Crusaders. “No?” Then she leaned over and whispered to the skeptical Rainbow Dash, “It only might have eye lighting. Stay alert.”

“Riggggght...” Rainbow Dash said as she leaned away from Pinkie Pie. She looked at Twilight Sparkle, who gave a smile and a nod. Rainbow Dash sighed and then nodded, “Okay! I’ll nip all the way across the Everfree Forest and back again. And I’ll do it all before sunset too! Okay?” She asked as she hopped on to the windowsill, looking back. The Cutie Mark Crusaders all looked much happier that somepony believed them enough to check. Finally with a swoosh of her rainbow colored tail she hopped back outside the window and was gone at once.

Pinkie Pie and the Cutie Mark Crusaders walked out of the library. “Come on, girls. Let’s go and see if we can get you three a cup cake eating cutie mark!” Pinkie Pie said as she hopped after the three, closing the door. Well, mostly closing it.

“Do you really think there might actually be a flaming pony monster out there in the woods?” Spike asked Twilight Sparkle as she used her magic to carefully move the disassembled book to a table, returning the brush to the glue pot.

“Who knows? But Pinkie Pie had a point... I didn’t like it when Princess Celestia seemed to ignore my warnings. I should have believed the girls a bit-”

Then Pinkie Pie shrieked from outside and Twilight Sparkle jumped to her hooves. She raced to the front door and jerked it open, “Pinkie Pie... what’s...” and then there was a splash as the bucket fell from the door and landed atop her horn, drenching her mane and soaking her hooves.

Pinkie Pie and the girls laughed, the pink pony grinning at her friend and sticking her front hooves out in front of her. “What?! I had a perfectly good bucket of water on hoof! I had to use it. There are rules to

these things, you know!” And with that they trotted off towards Sugarcube Corner, the three fillies laughing at the prank and talking about cupcakes and cutie marks and not about flaming monster ponies.

Twilight Sparkle took the bucket off her horn and smiled at her friend. “Yeah, there is, isn’t there?” Then she looked in the direction of the Everfree Forest in time to see the rainbow speck disappearing out of sight. “I just hope that this time the girls are actually wrong.”

* * * * *

“Gee, Rainbow Dash, why don’t you just fly over the Everfree Forest and go looking for a monster?” The blue Pegasus tried to imitate Pinkie Pie’s voice as she swooped amid the clouds over the green trees and over the various lakes and streams. “Ok look! There’s one.” She said sarcastically, pointing off in a random direction. “Oh no. That’s just a baskataur or whatever. See if you can find the *right* monster,” she said in her best Twilight Sparkle voice. “Ugh... why did I agree to this?”

She huffed as she blasted through one of the forest’s many odd clouds; the white vapor just getting her cold and wet rather than dispersing in a poof like real clouds did. She also knew why she was flying all the way out into the middle of no-where looking for who knew what: that scared look on the Cutie Mark Crusader’s faces. It was the same look she’d had in Cloudsdale at the best young flyers competition. Whether it was real or not, this ‘monster’ had spooked the fillies. If a flight out and back put them at ease then it’d be worth it.

She popped out the other side of the large feral cloud and immediately started to cough at the haze filling the air. Her rose eyes clenched as she fought for her breath and circled closer to the earth. “Oh would somepony tell me what the heck is going on?” She asked as her eyes started to tear up from the junk in the air. She found a oak she could perch on, since she wasn’t about to try standing on any of these clouds, and looked up at the spreading smog over head. It reminded her of when she and her friends had been forced to relocate a dragon.

There was more and more smoke in the air and she limited herself to hop from tree top to tree top, trying not to breathe too deeply and using her colorful rainbow tail to cut out some of the foul air. Below her saw animals fleeing as quickly as they were able. "For once I wish I had some of Fluttershy's talent." She muttered as she looked and fanned her wings to cut out some of the smog.

Then she saw the flames through the trees. It wasn't like a normal forest fire though; she'd seen a few of those. This was no crackling line of flame making its way across the summer dry forest. This was a single spear of fire making its way through the woods. From that point the fire fanned out like the biggest and most terrible pegasus wings ever. Worse, it came with a rush of hot air and smoke that blew her from her perch. Rainbow Dash struggled for elevation. Altitude. Get away!

Instead she fluttered into a heap on the ground, lungs burning as she coughed and retched. She could hear the crackle and the ominous noise like an unending inhalation. At least down here the smoke thinned enough that she could catch her breath without coughing. But as she straightened she heard something else. Steps. Foot steps that crackled like the flame. And then on a rise above her it appeared: the Cutie Mark Crusader's monster.

Its black hide was partially hidden by red glowing armor chained in place like the princess' guard pegasi. A mane of fire ended at a plumed tail that cracked and snaked back and forth behind it. The stones the fire pony stood upon were turning red from the flaming hooves. Embers spread from its simple presence as it looked down at Rainbow Dash from the promontory. It snorted ruby flame, and for an instance Rainbow Dash was reminded of Spike, minus the cute.

"So. You're the monster." Rainbow Dash did her best to sneer, but a glance upwards into the thick smoke made her gulp. She wouldn't last long breathing that mess. She grit her teeth, "So why are you burning up the place?"

It jumped from the rise and landed in front of Rainbow Dash with a small detonation, and Rainbow Dash leapt back as embers showered out and new tongues of flame started to chew on the surrounding trees. She landed on her back and rocked forward to sit up, looking at the fire pony with wide rose eyes. The monster's glowing red eyes looked at

her where she'd landed and it narrowed its gaze. "Princess?" it asked in a crackling mare's voice.

"Princess?" Rainbow Dash said as she took her feet and put a few more feet between her and the waves of heat coming off the fire pony. "I'm no princess." The fire pony just arched a burning brow that seemed to say 'no duh'. She slowly backed away step by step, trying to put some distance between her and the terrible heat coming from the fire pony. "You mean Princess Celestia?"

The name made the fire horse scream and slam its hooves into the slag, sending hot chunks flying. "Where?" The fire pony asked. The burning mushroom cloud cutie mark seemed to glow with its own terrible light. One of the rocks under its burning hoof started to bubble and melt.

Rainbow Dash's eyes watered from the smoke and glare coming from the fire pony. "Give me one good reason why I should tell you anything?"

It glared at her and then snapped its tail. A ball of flame arched over Rainbow Dash and struck an oak, the explosion instantly turning the tree to a torch.

Another gulp. "Okay... Good reason...." She glanced behind her at a gap in the underbrush. Then Rainbow Dash grimaced and yelled, "but I'm still not telling you anything!" And she turned and plunged into the woods as quick as she was able. A fireball exploded where she'd been sitting seconds earlier as the fire pony pursued.

She might be grounded for now, but she'd beaten Applejack in the Running of the Leaves... or she should have. In either case, the blue Pegasus put her experience to good use. The fire pony screamed and raced after her. It wasn't easy given that there was no trail and she had to plunge through the underbrush while the fire pony simply burned a path right through it. Still, her wings and mane tangled in leaves and grasses, she finally lost track of the blazing monster.

"Oh yeah... even flaming pony monsters can't catch the Rainbow Dash," she said as she walked with a wary eye out for any flame. Last thing she needed to do was getting caught in some brambles or run across another monster that hadn't the sense to take off. Still, she'd gotten

away once, so her ears perked up and she smiled in more confidence. "Now I just have to get out of here..."

Of course that was easier said than done. She might have had a good enough sense of direction to avoid going in circles, but she wasn't exactly sure how to get back to Ponyville. Every now and then she'd risk the smoke to jump up and see which direction the fire was travelling. It was certainly closer than she'd like, and by now had spread so that she couldn't guess which front was caused by the fire pony.

Then she stumbled upon a familiar trail. "Hey, this is how we get to Zecora's place. Sweet!" And she ran along it towards safety, before sliding to a stop and looking back in the direction of the fire... and Zecora's home. "Zecora's smart. She'll have gotten clear of the fire long ago." She said, trying to convince herself it was true. The zebra knew all about the Everfree Forest and could take care of herself, right?

"Ugggh..." she groaned before turning and reversing her course. "When I get back to Ponyville I'm getting my head examined!" She shouted, then broke into a fit of coughing. The smoke thickened and she heard that eerie breathing roar of the fire by the time she saw Zecora's tree. The door hung open and Rainbow Dash groaned, squinting through the haze as she masked herself with her tail. "I should have known she'd get clear..."

Then she saw one of the zebra's hooves sticking out of the door. "No..." she whispered, her eyes as she rushed in to see Zecora laying on the ground, unconscious. "Zecora! Zecora! Wake up!" She shouted as she shook the zebra. For the longest moment she was sure that... that... then the zebra stirred and coughed.

Zecora stirred and opened one turquoise eye, "Too... too much smoke. I fear we're gonna... choke..."

"Not today, we're not!" She said as she lifted the zebra over her shoulders and carefully positioned her between her wings. If the air'd been clear she could have flown both of them out in no time, but right now she felt lucky to be able to even carry her. As she started along the trail she didn't even want to look behind them to see how close the flames were. She tried to keep her mouth covered as she trotted along as quickly as possible.

Then she heard it. Footsteps and the crackle of flame. The underbrush besides her steamed, smoked, and burst into flame as the fire pony stepped through. It reared on its back legs, burning hooves pawing at the air, and brought them down in a detonation of ash and pebbles. "Okay..." Rainbow Dash said through clenched teeth as her wings tried to hold Zecora a little tighter. "Round two..."

This time though things were in the fire pony's favor. While the trail was easier to run along, the smoke, fatigue, and Zecora's weight slowed her down. It was like racing with an open oven. She sucked in each breath despite the smoke in the air to try and propel her a little faster. Her flank felt like it was on fire, but she didn't dare try to kick or fly and risk dropping the zebra. Not for anything... but she was about to lose this race. Then she spotted a large opening to the side of the trail and the dull reflection. "Okay then, Sparkie! Let's take this off road!" And she angled off, and leapt off the bank and into a shallow pond. The cooling water swirled around her shoulders and flanks as she kept Zecora's head above the water.

The fire pony tried to stop, but the bank crumbled away and its legs plunged into the water in a great hiss of steam. It screamed in pain and clambered out of the shallow pond. Suddenly it started bucking, leaping, kicking, and flicking fire from its tail and mane left and right. It raced around the pool, leaving a trail of spreading embers and a wall of fire in all directions. Neck deep in the pool they sucked in as much cool wet air as they could and stayed as close to the middle they could while the fire pony threw a veritable tantrum on shore.

Finally it stood back, panting and snorting plumes of flame, looking equally fatigued as it stared at Rainbow Dash with undisguised rage. It kicked at a tree next to it in sullen resignation. Then it straightened and turned, walking into the inferno and disappearing from sight. "I... I won. Yeah..." She said weakly as the waning adrenaline left her feeling like she would pass out as well.

The flapping of wings brought her back from the brink of unconsciousness and she struggled to raise one arm and wave it into the smoky sky as the fire crackled all around the pool. "Ditzy Doo, down there! I think I see her!" Then there was a pause, "No! Down Ditzy! Down!" From above appeared two pegasi with matching gray hides, one with a

brilliant purple mane and the other with a bright golden mane. Wet clothes covered their muzzles and goggles covered their eyes.

“Ditzy Doo. Flutter Doo. Boy am I glad to see you ponies.” Rainbow Dash said as she lifted Zecora enough for Flutter Doo to get a grip, the purple haired Pegasus lifting the Zebra clear with a great fluttering of her wings. Once Flutter carried her up and away Rainbow Dash tried to kick and flap her way into the air, but she was simply too tired. Ditzzy hovered above, looking down at her as she extended her tail, eyes looking both at her and off towards shore at the same time. “Don’t tell anyone about this...” she muttered.

Ditzy made an X with her hoof in front of her chest. Rainbow sighed, looking away, then bit the offered tail. Ditzzy groaned and flapped her gray wings furiously as she was lifted into the air and away from the pond. Ditzzy Doo moved besides her sister as they started back towards Ponyville. As grating as it was to be rescued, she was glad to be out of the fire and moving away from the smoke.

Then she glanced behind her back at the ring of fire surrounding the pond. There, standing on the edge, was the fire pony. It looked right at them through the haze. ‘Oh no...’ Rainbow Dash thought with a little sense of dread. Before her eyes she saw the point of fire start to crawl through the trees behind them... heading straight for Ponyville.

Chapter 2

Lost in the Smoke

The sun rose over Ponyville in a dull, ruddy haze that seemed to stain the normally bright and cheery buildings in tones of umber and sienna. The smoke from the Everfree Forest curled up the valley in a dark river, and Twilight Sparkle was reminded of a similar incident involving a dragon. “I wish we could solve this as easily as asking a dragon to nap somewhere else,” Twilight Sparkle said as she folded her front legs on the railing of her balcony. Even then, the smoke had left with the dragon. Even if they asked the fire pony to leave, the forest would still burn.

Below her the town was a knot of nervous and worried ponies who didn’t know what they should do while overhead the smoke slowly increased. She wished it was like a cloud, but this was just like layers of dirty silk stacked thicker and thicker with each passing hour. When Spike walked out on to the balcony besides her, she turned and looked over, asking, “Still no word from the Princess?”

“You’d be the first to know.” Spike replied as he joined her, looking down as well as some ponies were trying to load up a wagon with their belongings. “Well, technically you’d be the second to know. I mean, after me, that is.” His claws traced circles on the railing, clearly just as frustrated as she at the helpless sensation. Behind them in the library her friends argued about what to do.

She smacked the rail with her hoof, “Ugh... I’ve sent her three messages about the fire. The least she could do is say ‘Got your letter, Twilight. Hold tight a second while I decide what to do.’” The silence from her mentor unnerved Twilight almost as much as the smoke overhead. Twilight always knew Princess Celestia had some plan or idea, even if she didn’t share it. All Twilight Sparkle needed was direction and she’d be out to help as best she could.

When the Doo twins had brought Rainbow Dash and Zecora back to Ponyville, Twilight Sparkle had initially worried about her friends first. It’d taken most of the night for the pegasus to stop coughing enough to tell them about the encounter in the Everfree Forest. Now looking out at all the

worried ponies the problem suddenly felt so much bigger. Rainbow Dash had recovered enough to rejoin her friends in the library, but Zecora was still bed bound.

In the meantime, Twilight Sparkle had researched every text, myth, and legend about flaming ponies and come up with nothing. The only scrap she'd found was a tale centuries ago about a pony of fire burning a city of ponies, but the page had been torn in two. Some of her friends thought it was a monster that looked like a pony, others that it was a pony turned into a monster. And others had other problems...

"Ugh, this smoke is absolutely intolerable!" Rarity said as she fanned her hoof before her muzzle futilely. She pointed a hoof at where Rainbow Dash sat, still looking fatigued. The pony's beautiful tail had been singed away to a bare stub. "Why can't the pegasi just... I dunno... flap it all away like the other nasty clouds?"

Rainbow Dash snorted in disgust, pointing at the murky haze with a wing. "Uh, this is smoke, Rarity. Not clouds. And there's a whole lot of it up there. There's nothing to kick, and it's a little tough to fan it all away when you can't breathe." The cyan pegasus sighed, slumping a little and leaning back on her hooves to look out the window at the sickly orange skies. "I just hope Cloudsdale is above all that gunk. This monster's bad enough for Ponydale. I hate to think what else might be hurt by it."

Twilight Sparkle couldn't stop thinking about it. Zecora's home was gone, and much of the Everfree Forest was now aflame. Someponies had flown by and confirmed the fire was now heading straight towards Ponyville. She shook her head and asked again, "And you're sure it asked about the Princess?" Twilight Sparkle said as she trotted back into the library. "You're absolutely positive?"

Rainbow Dash fell back and laid flat with her hoof across her eyes. "Yes, Twilight. For the hundredth thousandth time it asked where Princess Celestia was." She moved her hoof to glare up at the purple unicorn in irritation. "It wasn't exactly much of a conversationalist. Lots of fire, smoke, and running. Not so much of the talking."

"That it could talk at all is what worries me." Twilight Sparkle said as she walked slowly down the stairs, looking at the row after row of books. She imagined them all on fire, burning in yellow walls of flame and thick

gouts of smoke. Not for the first time she thought of bundling them up and getting them back to Canterlot, but somehow that felt like admitting defeat. The Princess would know what to do. When she decided to get in touch, they'd devise a plan and get rid of this fire pony once and for all.

Applejack entered with Fluttershy, the former as grim as she got during a treenapping and the latter appearing every bit as frazzled as Rainbow Dash. Twilight Sparkle approached them, "How's Apple Bloom? Feeling any better?"

Applejack shook her head slowly with a sigh. Rarity walked up besides Applejack with an equally worried expression. "Is she still blaming herself too?" the white unicorn asked in a rare display of sympathy.

"Yup. Darn filly wouldn't even come out of her room when she heard the news."

Rarity sighed, looking in the direction of her shop, "Sweetie Belle was positively inconsolable." Then she snorted and stomped a hoof in irritation, "It's not as if the girls went out there planning to let this thing loose!"

Twilight Sparkle shook her head. "Ponies are scared. Once they found out it was the Cutie Mark Crusaders... well...someponies just want someone to blame."

"Any word from Princess Celestia yet?" Applejack asked with an annoyed frown.

"None," Twilight Sparkle replied quickly, seeing the worry in her friend's face. Applejack hung her head, and Twilight Sparkle looked at Fluttershy. Clearly the yellow pegasus hadn't slept all night. "How are you doing with the animals from the Everfree Forest?"

"Oh, it's simply terrible," she replied softly. "I'm trying to find enough space for them all, but there just isn't enough room in my house for them all. The bunnies alone take up my entire living room and the birdies are all horribly sick from all this smoke." She said, ears and wings drooping. "And there's always more needing a place to stay."

"Well I've got a barn that's not doing much right now. Why don't you send the overflow my way, Fluttershy?" Applejack offered with a smile, and received one in turn.

Suddenly the front door banged open and Pinkie Pie entered with an annoyed grunt. "Ugh, this whole monster thing is completely ruining my plans for Gummy's six and a half month birthday anniversary! It's not like he's going to turn a year and six and a half months old every day!"

"Uh, Pinkie? Kinda higher priorities here," Applejack said as she looked at her sternly.

Pinkie Pie stood firm for a moment, and then slumped a little as her smile turned into a frown. "I know, but it was the only idea I could think of for a party! I mean, I don't even want to think of an 'End of Ponyville' party."

Twilight Sparkle walked besides the pink pony and gave her a nudge. "I know, Pinkie. Thanks for trying through."

Then from the stairs to the balcony came a heavy belch and flash of green flame. Spike covered his stomach as the scroll of parchment drifted down. He caught it, purple eyes scanning the parchment. "To my most faithful student, I apologize for my delay in responding. I am very proud of you and your friends for discovering this threat to Equestria. However, I would like you to..." Spike trailed off a moment, his jaw dropping as he stared at the paper.

Twilight Sparkle looked at the baby dragon with a feeling like spiders in her mane. "To what, Spike?"

His voice was almost a whisper as he said in disbelief, "...to assist in the evacuation of Ponyville?!"

"What?" Rainbow Dash said as she rocked forward and hopped to her hooves. "That can't be right!"

Spike went on, "This creature represents a danger unlike any seen in a thousand years. I know you want to act, but you must trust me and leave for your safety to Canterlot. I ask this as your Princess and teacher. Sincerely, Princess Celestia."

Twilight Sparkle stood there in shock in the middle of the library. Why wouldn't the Princess tell her more? Why didn't she believe that she and her friends could protect Ponyville? She looked at all the books, her friends, then walked to the window and looked out at all the shops and

homes of all the ponies that lived here. A deep hollow lay inside her chest. "I guess..." she said softly, aware of her friends' eyes upon her, "I guess we have to do as she asks..." Oh but it felt so wrong!

There wasn't much in the way of argument. In the middle of summer there wasn't a storm cloud to be had. Without rain, the fire would spread. Even with rain, the monster would just keep burning things up as it went. As the girls left, Spike started to collect the most valuable books. "At least we've got time to pack up and get out of here. I wonder what's taking that monster so long?"

"I wonder that myself." She said as her horn glimmered and a map of Ponyville lifted from its case, swooshed before her, and unrolled. "Here's where the girls said the city was supposed to be. And here is Zecora's house." She said as she pointed with her hoof. "After that it's Fluttershy's house, then Apple Acres, the bridge, and then Ponyville." Letting her magic roll up the map she rubbed her chin. "If that monster is as fast as Rainbow Dash said then it should have been here hours ago, but it's just walking its way towards us."

"So? I mean it's a flaming pony that burns everything around it to a crisp. It's not like Ponyville is going anywhere." Spike pointed out as he put his hands on his hips. "Besides, remember what the Princess said. She doesn't want us involved."

Twilight Sparkle groaned. That was in a way the worst part. Did she think that Twilight Sparkle would botch it up? That she wasn't skilled enough in her magic? Why wouldn't she at least give her a chance? She hung her head a little. "Come on, Spike. Let's give the mayor the news."

* * *

There wasn't anyplace in Ponyville that Apple Bloom wanted to be in right now, so the Cutie Mark Crusader's tree house would do. She slumped against the rail, looking up at that ugly brown gray cloud coming from the west. Her fault. She could hear her cousins working furiously by the barn to save what they could. Her fault. Zecora so sick from the smoke she was still barely conscious. All her fault.

"Apple Bloom?" Came Scootaloo's voice from the bottom of the ramp. The brown pegasus drug her tail behind her as she looked at her friend. "Guess I wasn't the only one who wanted to get away."

“No scooter?”

“No... some stupid colts busted the handle cause... um... what we did...” She said as her ears drooped.

“Everypony hates us cause we let that monster out,” Apple Bloom said as she clenched her eyes shut.

Scootaloo joined her at the railing, crossing her her hooves and resting her chin atop them. “Yeah. Looks like it. I ran into Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon at Sugarcube Corner. ‘Leave it to the blank flanks to destroy Ponyville.’”

Apple Bloom sniffed and rubbed away her tears before they could betray her. From between the trees the two girls spotted a white pony approaching, and smiled a little for Sweetie Belle. Both had known it was only a matter of time before Sweetie Belle showed up. They were friends after all.

“Hey Belle.” Scootaloo called out. The little unicorn just sniffed and tried to smile as well as joined them. Then the act crumbled and she leaned against her friends and bawled her eyes out. Her friends joined suit as they held each other and vented the misery they’d built up over the last terrible hours.

No pony can cry forever though, and when the tears finally stopped Apple Bloom rubbed her snotty nose with her leg. “We... we can’t do this. We can’t just sit here! We caused this. We gotta fix it!”

Scootaloo leaned against Sweetie Belle. “What do you mean, Apple Bloom? How are we supposed to fix it?”

“I don’t rightly know.” The filly said as she rose on her hooves. “But we broke it. We gotta fix it! If we just sit here crying... well...” It would mean Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon were right.

Sweetie Belle stood as well, “But what can we do about a monster?”

“Yeah. It’s not like we can’t just ask it to leave!” Scootaloo said with a snort.

Apple Bloom frowned and looked at the pair. “Well why not?”

“You want to... to... ask the monster to leave?” Sweetie Belle asked in confusion.

“Apple Bloom, it’s a monster!”

“I don’t care!” She said and then stomped her little hoof in agitation. “Look, when my big sis took Bloomberg to Appleloosa, the ponyfolk there thought the buffalo were like some kinda monsters too! But they wasn’t, and they didn’t figure that out till they talked to em! So I reckon somepony ought ta at least try!”

The unicorn and pegasus looked at each other before they looked to their friend. “Well, all right then!” Scootaloo said as she jumped to her feet as well. “If we’re going to do this, then let’s do it!”

“Yeah. Let’s fine this monster and...” Sweetie Belle began just as sharply as her friends and then softened her tone as she finished, “Ask it really nicely to go away.”

* * *

The mayor wasn’t much easier to deal with, but she called everypony over to the town hall to give them the bad news. Worry and angry mutters filled the square, and Twilight Sparkle was glad to see that the Cutie Mark Crusaders were out of sight. The mayor tasked her to keep the evacuation orderly while she went around and calmed panicked nerves. Clipboard and checklist floating besides her she checked in on Rarity first.

The white unicorn tisked as she whisked bolts of cloth overhead, but she wasn’t packing them up. Instead her scissors snipped with precision and expertise to cut out panels of fabric. Twilight Sparkle watched in amazement as they were sown into elegant saddle packs, each decorated with flowers, a gem or two, or some tasteful embroidery.

“These are amazing, Rarity.” The fabric had to be some of her most expensive dress materials.

"What? These old things? Oh, hardly." She said with a dismissive wave and huffed, "I just thought it would be such a bother to carry all this all the way to Manehattan when it could be of some use here."

"Manehattan?"

Rarity nodded with a sigh as she stroked her hooves over the luxurious velvet once used to make Twilight Sparkle's dress, now turned to bags and sacks as she avoided looking at her friend. "I'm fairly sure I can get set up with some clientele right away. And really, I suppose it's time I took my craft to a more sophisticated market." She said proudly, hand on her chest. Then her smile slipped as she looked out the window. "Still, I'm going to miss the peace and charm of Ponyville. It was so conducive to my vision." Then she looked at Twilight Sparkle, "You're returning to Canterlot, aren't you?"

"Canterlot?" Twilight Sparkle blinked and frowned, "Well... I guess..."

Purple gems flew from a bag to sew along the edges as Rarity sighed, "Personally I'd just love to go, but it's so hard getting established there." She said as she completed an amethyst encrusted lavender saddlebag. "But I'm sure that I'll visit you whenever I can."

Rarity going to Manehattan? Spike and Twilight Sparkle returning to Canterlot? That dull sensation inside Twilight Sparkle's chest grew. "Well, I can see you've got your hooves full here."

While heading over the check on Pinkie Pie a cyan blur rocketed through the air right over Twilight Sparkle's head and crashed in a heap, knocking goggles and mask off of Rainbow Dash. The pegasus shook herself hard and sat up. "Oh, hey. Sorry about that." She stood and looked back at her truncated tail, "I'm a little front heavy."

"That's all right. Are you sure you should be flying in this smoke?"

"Nah, it's not that bad." She glanced in the direction of the Everfree Forest where the smoke was far thicker. "I'm just spreading the news for pegasi to get their butts back to Cloudsdale as soon as possible. They're going to be moving it away from all that smoke."

"They are?" That was one advantage of a city made of clouds, Twilight Sparkle thought. "But... what about you?"

“Buh... me? Well I... I mean...” She rubbed her rainbow colored mane and sighed, looking away. “I dunno. I guess I’ll go with them. Once my tail grows back I’ll have to practice to get my edge again. I can’t do that here if Ponyville... well... isn’t.”

“No, I guess you can’t.” Twilight Sparkle said sadly. Rainbow Dash didn’t look any happier either as she put her goggles and cloth mask back on and flew off to tell another pegasus her news.

Checking in with Mr. and Mrs. Cake was next on the list. They’d need enough supplies for everypony if they were going to leave all at once. In the bakery, she was amazed to see balloons, streamers, and Pinkie Pie in the corner dancing on the table. “It’s the ennnnnd of the world as we know it! And I feel fiiiiiiiine!” She sang into a lollipop as the ponies around her clapped their hooves in appreciation. Then Pinkie Pie spotted Twilight Sparkle and hopped off the table to rush to her friend. “Oh you made it! I’m so glad you made it!”

“Pinkie Pie, what is all this?” She said as she looked at the veritable cloud of balloons floating against the ceiling.

“Oh! Well, see, I had a whole lot of extra balloons and party crackers, so I thought I might as well use them for anypony needing a smile. I mean, sure, going away parties aren’t really all that fun, but it’s better than just going away.” She said with a smile, looking over her shoulder at the worried looking ponies saying their farewells.

“But what about you? Where are you going?”

“Me? Oh! Well, I guess I’ll go and see my folks for a bit. I mean there’s not a whole lot on a rock farm that’ll burn, you know?” She said with a snort and grin, “And I think my mom and dad might need a little refresher course on fun. It’ll be good for me too.” She added.

“It will?”

“Sure. I mean there’s not a lot of fun farming rocks, so I’ll have to think of extra fun things to do. So when you visit, I’ll really be able to knock you off your hooves!” Pinkie grin took off most of the edge, but it was still sad to see her eyes. “Oh! Be sure to have a good bye brownie!” She said, turning away to pluck one off a tray and popped it into Twilight Sparkle’s

mouth. Chocolate... no pepper or garlic... so why was Pinkie Pie snickering?

She finished up with Mr. and Mrs. Cake and slipped out. The market place was a mess, with every wagon being loaded that could be used to haul away whatever people needed. It was a nice reminder to see Rarity's packs everywhere. Somehow it made everything even sadder.

When she reached Apple Acres, Twilight Sparkle was amazed to see every member of the Apple family hard at work. They were digging up the smaller, younger trees and carrying them over to carts. She's evacuating the trees, Twilight Sparkle thought with an amazed smile. Only Applejack could do that. The purple unicorn found the orange earth pony pulling three carts loaded with apples towards the gate, sweat dripping from her brow. "Hey Applejack," Twilight Sparkle called out. "Got a minute?"

A wall rose in the west of rolling gray smoke with ever moving orange flame. They could even see the flicker of flame here and there. The fire was still miles off, but those were far too few. "I reckon..." she drawled and then looked at Fluttershy oddly. "Twilight, why is your tongue as green as a sarsaparilla bottle?"

"Green?" Twilight Sparkle blinked in confusion, then groaned. "Pinkie Pie." They took looked at each other and then shared the thinnest of laughs, but it was still a laugh.

Applejack smiled sadly as she shrugged out of the sweaty harness. "Well, it'll leave a funny memory at least."

"I'm glad to see your family got here in time." Twilight Sparkle said as she looked over at all the work.

"Aw, shoot. Soon as they heard 'fire' and 'Ponyville' they came a runnin'. Trying to get out as much as we can before the fires do." She walked over to where the Apple family were loading carts with everything edible and precious. Got Seymore and Appleton and that there is Mighty Micah." She said, pointing at each transplanted tree one after the next. Applejack sighed, "Course we won't be able to get out the really old trees." She said as she walked towards the trees.

"You talk like they're a part of your family." Twilight Sparkle observed as she looked at the largest trees closest to the farm house.

"Sure are. I know most pegasus and unicorns don't quite reckon why we care so much, but these trees were here when I was a filly. And my parents and grandparents too." Applejack said as she put a hoof on a large, gnarled trunk, trying hard not to cry, "And until today, I always thought they'd still be here if I ever had a foal of my own. But I reckon if I do then the apple trees in Appleloosa will have to suffice."

"Appleloosa? That's where you're going?" That hard emptiness grew inside her.

"Yup. We'll take as many trees as we can and find some place nice for em. That fire might take Apple Acres, but it won't take them all." She sighed as she stood beneath an enormous tree almost as high as the barn. "This here's the oldest tree on the farm. Heck, in Ponyville, I reckon. Old Johnny. I'm the only one that can buck his apples. Been here almost a thousand years or so, since Ponyville was founded."

Twilight Sparkle frowned, "A thousand years..."

"Yeah, long time for an apple tree. Miracle he still produces at all." The orange pony cocked her head at the unicorn, leaning towards her. "Huh? You got an idea runnin' through that head of yours?"

"Maybe." She said as she rubbed her muzzle with her hoof. "Princess Celestia said that this was a threat the likes of which hadn't been seen for a thousand years. And I found a story about a city being burned that long ago. So what happened a thousand years ago?"

Applejack frowned as she scratched her ear awkwardly, "Um, I'm pretty sure I'm not the pony to talk to about academics, Twilight Sparkle. That's what we keep you around for."

"Yeah. It is," she said as she rose to her feet. "I think I need to check this out."

"Ain't you supposed to be evacuatin'?"

"Maybe. But maybe not." She said as she turned to run down the road, "I'm going to check on Fluttershy and make sure the animals get out too!" She called out over her shoulder as she raced towards the deepening gloom.

The road to Fluttershy's cottage was eerily quiet. The smoke overhead nearly blocked out the sun, and here and there little patches of smoke curled through the trees. For most of the run the only thing she heard was her hooves. Tiny flecks of ugly ash drifted down through the air like dirty snow. The air tasted salty and bitter and every now and then she'd start coughing if she breathed too deeply.

When she reached the cottage she saw a small army of animals being lined up in neat rows with the yellow pegasus fluttering overhead. "Now remember to stay with your partner all the way to Whitetail Wood. Be sure not to stop for grazing or napping." She said calmly to the agitated critters. She landed right besides Angel Bunny and Winona, Applejack's herding dog. "Angel, Winona, please make sure no one gets lost on the trip, okay?" Angel Bunny wiped a tear from his eye and then nodded and saluted before hopping to the lead while Winona took up the rear. Then the collection of animals started to move out.

"You're not going with them?" Twilight Sparkle asked in concern.

The pegasus coughed softly and shook her head. "Oh no. I can't do that."

"Oh. Then you're going to join Rainbow Dash in Cloudsdale."

"No, I can't do that either," she said as she led Twilight Sparkle to the cottage on the edge of the meadow. The wide crescent was filled with long grass and wild flowers; in the smoky twilight they were turned into grays and umber. This close the purple unicorn could hear the distant roar and snapping crackle. Inside the cottage were dozens, possibly hundreds, of injured animals. Bandaged, splinted, they lay on almost every space available.

Twilight Sparkle gasped, "Oh no! How are we going to get them out?"

"Oh, I think we'll be okay. The fire should go around the meadow and miss us, right?" She asked that soft, whisper voice that strained for hope.

"The fire might but what if the fire pony just trots right across the meadow and lights up the trees on this side too? Or if there's embers... or..." And then Twilight Sparkle was hushed when Fluttershy put a hoof on the unicorn's mouth to silence her.

"Twilight, I can't leave," she said in a note of finality that made Twilight stare in shock, "This is my home. This is their home. I can't just leave them." She said softly as she turned to face Twilight with that serene smile.

"We'll find something. Some carts. Some... anything! Some of the Apple family can come and... I don't know. Something!" Twilight Sparkle blurted as her brain failed her. Forget the fire, the evacuation, Princess Celestia's lack of confidence in her abilities or even the monster; this truly staggered her.

"Well, if that happens, then great," she said as she calmed a trembling fawn with her wing. But from her tone it was clear that she didn't expect it to happen. Not with the fire so close. The meadow would be their only protection. And if the fire pony crossed it...

"I'll send help!" Twilight Sparkle promised, taking her friend's hoof in her own and holding it a moment. She couldn't believe she was doing this; leaving her friend, now. She should... what? Fight? Try to invent a magic spell to make it rain? What could she do besides send somepony to get Fluttershy and the injured animals out?

"Thank you, Twilight Sparkle. Please, take care of yourself and Spike." She said with a note of finality as she turned and started to gently sing to the injured animals in her care.

Twilight turned, doing all she could not to burst into tears as she ran back along that silent road, her dear friend's song echoing in her ears. At Apple farms she tried to find Applejack, but she was pulling a load towards the town. She told Big Macintosh about Fluttershy, but the large red pony just looked at the wagons loaded with trees and apples and muttered about doing the best they could.

Twilight Sparkle raced towards town, trying not to think of how she'd left her friend behind. She tried to focus on the nagging mystery; it was the only think keeping her together. She knew about Nightmare Moon's attempt to take over Equestria and overthrow her sister. That had led to Princess Celestia using the Elements of Harmony to banish Nightmare Moon to the moon until recently, when she'd escaped only to be stopped by Twilight Sparkle and her friends. But what had really happened back then? How had Princess Luna become Nightmare Moon? She

simply had to know. As much as she wanted to race back to be with Fluttershy or help Pinkie Pie keep the worried ponies happy or save Applejack's precious trees, Twilight Sparkle needed to know.

In the village she spotted a sweaty and exhausted Applejack behind two carts, with two more being carried by her kin. "Applejack!" She said as she grabbed her friend's harness. "It's Fluttershy!"

"Fluttershy? What about Fluttershy?"

"She won't leave her cottage. There's lots of animals too sick to move, and she won't leave them. I dunno what she's thinking." She said as she looked back the way she'd come.

"Darn filly," Applejack said with a scowl before looking at Twilight, "Don't worry. I'll get these emptied out and get my family to help evacuate all her critters. And when we're back here I am goin ta give that pegasus a piece o my mind... erm, gently o coarse." Applejack then smiled and put her sweaty hoof on Twilight Sparkle's shoulder. "Now, what are you going to do?"

What was she going to do? What could she do, better than anyone. "I'm going to find an answer, Applejack. I'm going to find a way to stop this."

"Thatta girl. You hit the books. I'll hit the road." She said as she shrugged out of the harness and called out, "Get these wagons unloaded, lickety split!" Ponies scrambled to help her remove the fruity cargo.

Twilight Sparkle raced into the library and skidded into a pile of books, knocking them in a disorganized heap.... which fell into the next stack, and the next, and the next. "No! No!" She gasped and clenched her eyes closed to try and stop the tumble, but her attempts to stop the avalanche of texts was for naught. When the books stopped falling, Twilight found herself in a perfect circle of texts. Spike leaned against a half loaded crate and sighed, "You know, if you wanted them all on the floor I could have taken care of that."

"Quick, Spike. I need... I need..." She froze and then smacked the sides of her head with her hooves. "I don't know what I need!" She needed whatever book would have the answer, even if she didn't know

exactly what it was. Then a light went on in her head and she grinned.
“Pinkie Pie! I need Pinkie Pie!”

“Yesssss?” Pinkie Pie said from right behind her, making Twilight yelp and jump, landing on the ridge of books.

“Huh? Pinkie Pie?” she stammered.

“That’s me!”

“How’d you get here?” Spike asked as he looked from where she was standing to the door and back again.

“I was just bringing you two some of the left over treats.” She gestured to a set of Rarity’s saddle bags on her flank loaded with cakes,” Why? Did you think I just magically appeared at the moment it would freak you out? Cause that would be really cool!” She beamed as she held out the bag of sweets.

Twilight grabbed her shoulders, “Quick, Pinkie, I need a book!”

Pinkie blinked, looked at her skeptically, looked over at the books littering the floor, and then back at her. “Well, uh, it’s not like you’re short on em!”

“No, no, Pinkie! I need a specific book! A special book! On that will tell me what I need to know about Nightmare Moon and what happened in Equestria a thousand years ago. You got to help me find that book!” Twilight said, shaking her friend in a panic.

“Twi....iiii....iiii.....liiiii...” She tried to say when Twilight released her. Landing on the books she huffed. “Twilight Sparkle, you’re the librarian. Not me. I mean sure, I may have occasionally found whatever book you needed at a particular moment in time with freakish regularity, but it’s not like I can just pick up a book and...” She picked up one text in her mouth and finished around it, “ithll be tha ome shu wan!”

Twilight’s horn glowed and she pulled the book from her friend’s mouth. “Professor Zsnuz Zsnuz’s Unabridged History of Equestria! Perfect pick Pinkie!” She opened it, checked the table of contents, and then rapidly flipped through the pages. Behind her Pinkie perused books at random while Twilight focused on the text and read aloud.

“So it was that the pegasus unicorn Nightmare Moon waged her rebellion against Princess Celestia. Aided by powerful magic and her five lieutenants, the Nightmares brought all of Equestria to its knees.” Twilight Moon’s eyes went round as she looked at Spike. “Not ‘Nightmare’... ‘Nightmares’!”

“As in Nightmare Moon had help?”

“Yes!” Her eyes darted back and forth over the page. “They helped subjugate and conquer all the ponies of Equestria. Nightmare Screamer led an army of trolls and hobgoblins from outside the land to rule it. She was a pegasus who could fly so fast that she made the skies scream and explode with darkness.” She showed him the picture of the dark red and blue pegasus who wore a sneer on her face.

“Sounds pleasant.” Spike observed sarcastically.

“More pleasant than Nightmare Vicious.” Twilight said, wincing back from the next picture of another pegasus with dark green hide and sickly green mane and tail. A curled, thorny vine was her cutie mark, and Twilight tried to imagine that it was sap dripping from the thorns. “She was Nightmare Moon’s interrogator. Apparently she also liked to experiment and toy with other ponies.”

“I see the name ‘Nightmare’ is pretty fitting. She gives me the shivers.”

“Nightmare Whispers.” She blinked and turned the page, looked for more, then turned back.

“That’s it?” Spike asked with a small frown.

“That’s it. Just a name.” She frowned and looked at the next entry. “Nightmare Strife. A unicorn pony who manipulated her enemies into destroying each other.” The white unicorn with gentle eyes and a pale golden mane reminded her of Rarity. There was a golden apple for her cutie mark. “According to this author she was an unwitting pawn and completely innocent of any wrong doing.”

“I’ll say. There’s no way someone as beautiful as that could ever cause anypony problems.” Spike said with a dreamy smile at the picture.

“Easy loverboy,” She teased, and turned the page. A massive picture filled the entire page showing a burning city and in the center was a rearing black mare with a mane of flame, chains holding it in place. It wore a blackened helmet and armor. “Nightmare Fury.” Twilight Sparkle breathed. “Nightmare Moon’s champion. She fought Princess Celestia’s personal guard, and laid waste to any that challenged her.”

“That sounds like our fire pony.” Spike said, looking over her shoulder at the book. “Does it say how she was beaten?”

“According to this, Princess Celestia used the Elements of Harmony to banish Nightmare Moon to the moon. Then she was forced to bind each of the remaining five nightmares.” She scanned through the page and then swallowed hard, “It says that when Nightmare Moon was imprisoned, Nightmare Fury stormed through the capital city in a rage. They were able to subdue her by dropping her into a well, then chained her beneath the ruins of the city.” Then she frowned, “And... one of the Elements was lost?”

“Lost?” Pinkie Pie poked her head over Twilight’s other shoulder. “What, like... missing lost? Did they check under the sofa cushions?”

“It doesn’t say.” She flipped forward. “It doesn’t say anything about the others. Only that they were bound as well, but at a terrible price. Eventually they were all defeated and Equestria could finally rebuild.”

“Well, now that you know what our fire pony actually is, what are you going to do?” Spike asked in concern.

Twilight Sparkle walked up to the balcony and stepped out into the sooty afternoon sky. She could see the orange glow, like a terrible sunset gone wrong. It was too red and bloody and moved vaguely through the smoke that choked the air. Beneath her was Ponyville, with its shops and ponies and all her friends. Behind her was Canterlot and the place she was supposed to go to be safe.

Slowly she scowled at the flames. “We’re going to fight her.” Twilight Sparkle said firmly.

“Fight? But you were told to evacuate.” Spike said, waving his hands.

“And people should be evacuated. Anyone that wants to get out of Ponyville should head straight to Canterlot as fast as they can.” Twilight Sparkle said as she straightened, “But I’m not going to just give up on my home and lose all my friends.” She looked back at the baby Dragon with a smile, “I’m going to need you to finish packing here, just in case. Okay, Spike?” She asked, smiling, hoping he didn’t argue. She couldn’t stop thinking of Fluttershy all alone, refusing to leave. She didn’t want to think of Spike in harms way either.

“All right. And I’m going to write the Princess too. She needs to know,” Spike replied firmly. His price for staying behind. She nodded and he rushed to her, hugging her neck firmly. “Please, please, please be careful!”

“I will, Spike. Take care of those books, and that letter.” She said as she turned and rushed out, with a worried Pinkie Pie running after her. Outside, Twilight Sparkle saw the rest of her friends helping clear out the last of the apples from the four carts.

“Twilight! Applejack told us about Fluttershy-” Rarity began.

“Yeah. We need to take these carts back and get her out.” Twilight began, then looked at Golden Delicious and Red Delicious, the brown and light yellow colts covered in sweat from all their hard work. Even Applejack couldn’t manage four carts herself.

“Well then what are we waiting for?” Rarity said and without hesitation shrugged into one of the harnesses, trying not to shudder at the touch of another pony’s sweat.

“Rarity, what are you doing?” Applejack asked in bemusement.

“Why helping our friend, of course. Besides, I think we’re the only ones who haven’t exhausted ourselves preparing to evacuate.” The prim unicorn replied before she pressed her shoulders into the harness with a most unlady like grunting. The wagon rocked and then started to roll up and over the bridge leading towards Apple Acres and their friend.

“Yeah! Let’s do it!” Pinkie Pie said as she climbed in front of a wagon as well and followed. Applejack just gave a sweaty shake of her head and started after her friends.

As Rainbow Dash climbed in as well Twilight Sparkle stepped in front of her and shook her head. “Wha- Twilight, what are you doing? We got to get going!”

“We are!” She said as she looked at the other three wagons; Applejack plodding back as resolutely as ever, Rarity straining to follow suit, and Pinkie Pie somehow making progress with her ridiculous little hops in the harness. She looked back into Rainbow Dash’s eyes. “You’ve got to get us rain, Dash.”

“But I told you, it’s summer!”

“I know Dash. But I also know that if there’s anypony in all of Equestria who can find some rainclouds, it’s you. Please. We can’t stop these fires without rain.”

Rainbow Dash looked worried as their eyes remained locked together. Finally the cyan pegasus lowered her eyes, lipped pressed together and backed out of the harness. She took a breath and gave a strained grin. “You betcha! I’ll get some clouds here, even if I have to go all the way down to Phillydelphia to find em!” She reached out to hold Twilight Sparkle by her shoulders. “You girls take care of Fluttershy. Why she had to pick now of all times to grow a backbone...”

“We will.” Twilight Sparkle replied. Rainbow Dash backed away and crouched before she launched herself skyward. Twilight Sparkle watched her blue friend disappear into the smog overhead before she shouldered into the harness. Gritting her teeth the empty wagon rattled after her friends. “Hang on Fluttershy. We’re coming.”

* * *

Within her cottage, Fluttershy certainly would have disagreed about growing a spine. The darkness grew outside her windows with an ominous irregularity punctuated by orange and red glares that made the shadows leap and crawl across the walls. The normal crackle of a fireplace had magnified a thousand times outside her walls, and she had the unpleasant feeling of being a log in a stove that hadn’t quite caught.

The animals had worried, stirred, whimpered, and remained dutifully still despite their fear. She'd stuffed cloths wherever she could to keep out the smoke as her pink mane and lemon yellow wings tried to circulate the stuffy air as best she could.

A baby bunny with burned paws stirred on Fluttershy's couch, ears twitching and nose sniffing the air. Slowly the bunny limped towards the little door Fluttershy kept for her friends to leave her cottage. "Wait, come back little one." She said as she rose and opened the door to her cottage.

Fire. A wall of fire crackling over the far side of the meadow as the green leaves smoldered and combusted. So close, the smoke was actually carried up in glowing orange and yellow plumes like endlessly twisting trunks. Fire danced and twisted like terrible beasts gnawing at the woods her friends called home. Only the meadow kept the fire at bay as the green grass proved poor sustenance for the fires.

Fluttershy feared fire. Fire, more than anything. When she'd faced down a dragon, her friends assumed it was because of the dragon's size, fangs and claws, or its thunderous bellows. No. It was the fire the creature could create simply by wishing to. A fire that destroyed everything it touched; a fire that hurt hundreds of her animal friends and consumed thousands of their homes. It was all she could do not to run and hide inside her house and pretend like it was simply night falling. But she couldn't do that. Not anymore.

Because there, at the edge of the inferno, stood the fire pony. It looked right at her from across the wide meadow with its burning eyes. A flaming ember gaze met delicate blue for the longest and terrible moment, and then it started across.

Chapter 3

On a Wing and a Prayer

I'm trapped, Fluttershy thought as she stared at the wall of flame before her. It crackled, sparked, danced and writhed like a sea of monsters taunting her with their flickering tongues. Behind her lay her helpless friends, a far more impenetrable barrier. No matter the terror rising in her throat, she never thought of flight. Not now, when all those poor injured animals needed her here for them.

But I don't know what I can do.

And there, walking through the long wet grass, was the fire pony. Its mane of flame rose like a volcanic ridge while its burning tail made the grass smoke and hiss. It advanced with smoke and ash swirling around its legs like a low fog, red eyes peering through the slits in its helmet. The black metal shimmered dull cherry red around its shoulders and the plume that was its tail made the grass pop and snap.

Slowly Fluttershy took one step forward. Another. Another. Her blue eyes kept to the moist strands beneath her hooves. The world filled with crackling, snapping, roaring voices that screamed at her to run. Heat played off her forelock and shoulders, popping up beads of sweat that trickled along her hide. Every breath scratched at her throat from the heat coming from before her. Still she walked forward, knowing deep inside that the monster did the same.

The sound of steps crackling stems underhoof. The hiss of grass. The smell of steam. The clank of hot metal. The hot steam of a breath. Two hooves filled Fluttershy's vision, the smoke and steam curling around the flickering flames spilling from the tip, and she stopped. For the longest time they stood just so, facing each other. Not a word spoken by either.

Then the fire pony stepped to the left. Fluttershy matched it. It moved to the right; she did the same. For the longest minute it simply stood there and she raised her head to meet its gaze. Orange on yellow met blue on black. This was it! If she could somehow stare it down, force it back, then her friends would be safe. The monster met her stare for

stare, and for Fluttershy all the world fell away. Her eyes remained locked on the fire pony's embers. Let it work. Let it work. Let it work. "Go away, please," she breathed.

The fire pony paused for a moment. A look stirred in its burning gaze; one of almost contemplation. Fluttershy stared so hard she swore she could almost hear its thoughts whispering softly in that frozen moment. Then the eyes hardened to match her own, "Sorry, no," it said in an oddly soft, feminine voice, "Please step aside."

Fluttershy blinked, and the link was lost. "I... I can't," she said as she took a step back.

"Well then, we have a problem, don't we?" The fire pony said as she slowly leaned closer towards Fluttershy. The heat made the yellow pegasus sweat even more. "So... what should we do about this?"

Fluttershy swallowed, looking around as she thought furiously of some way to put it kindly. "Well, you could go away," she suggested, and then winced. *Hardly nice.* "I mean, some where else?" *Some place that doesn't burn.*

The flaming pony just shook her head, "I can't. I've waited a thousand years for revenge. I'm going to have it." Slowly it leaned towards her, ember eyes brightening as they stared into Fluttershy's blue gaze, "I'd rather not waste it on anypony that doesn't deserve it."

Fluttershy clenched her eyes closed, rump on the cool ground, determined not to budge. "I... I won't." For a few seconds nothing happened, then she blinked and saw the pony had stepped around her once more. Fluttershy jumped and flew around to land in front of her again. This time the flaming pony regarded her coolly. "I mean it. I won't let you pass." She drummed up every reminder she had of Twilight Sparkle telling her to be more assertive, but it was so hard as the flaming pony narrowed her eyes at Fluttershy. Then the fire pony took a breath and blew a little ball of fire that lit the tip of Fluttershy's pink mane on fire! She squealed, beating the fire out with her hooves as the fire pony stepped past her once again.

With the singed tip dangling in front of her eyes, Fluttershy saw the fire pony walking casually towards the trees surrounding her cottage and thought of all the poor animals trapped and hurting within. And it was all

this... this creature's fault! If she didn't do something to stop her they'd... they'd... "No. I won't let you hurt them anymore!" she declared as she rose to her feet.

"Not my problem," the fire pony said, turning to look at Fluttershy with an expression of smug superiority.

Her eyes widened just in time for Fluttershy's front hooves to clang loudly against that smoking helmet as the little pegasus flew past faster than she'd ever flown before. Fluttershy sucked in rapid breaths as she landed in front of the fire pony once more. Her hooves felt like she'd just kicked a stove and she winced, shaking her stinging front hooves. "Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!" She'd hit her! Hit somepony at all! "S- Sorry!"

The fire pony just sat there in the smoking grass, head bowed. For a moment Fluttershy wondered if maybe she'd hurt the pony. Then she slowly raised her head to look at Fluttershy with a baleful glare. "Fine, we'll do it your way..."

"My way? What do you-"

Suddenly the fire pony was on it's feet and leaped towards her, and the pegasus barely got clear as the fire pony's front hooves slammed into the ground where she'd stood with a small explosion. Fluttershy whirled just in time to duck two glowing red rear hooves kicking at her head. It was all Fluttershy could do to keep leaping and flapping back and avoiding being cooked! The fire pony's blazing tail snapped in the air with a whip snap and sent a spitting ball of fire right at Fluttershy! Her wings beat furiously, barely getting her out of the way as the ball of fire scorched her tail! Now she knew exactly how Rainbow Dash felt!

As quickly as it had started the pony stilled. She stood in the hissing, smouldering grass as steam and smoke curled along her ebony legs. "You're quicker than you look, Feathers. Be smart as well. Stay out of my way."

Feathers? Fluttershy shook her head hard as she panted for breath, soaked in sweat. "I won't!"

"You're not a fighter. You can't stop me."

"I... I just hit you..." she said softly, feeling a shame blossom inside her. "Sorry, by the way..." Was it just her imagination or did the fire pony smile?

"Yeah, you did..." Then fire pony's tail cracked behind her. "Then hit me again." Fluttershy just stood there, her mouth dropped open as the fire pony leaned towards the sweating pegasus and pointed at her ebony nose with a hoof.

"W... w... what?" Fluttershy stammered, eyes round as her pupils contracted in shock.

"You heard me. Hit me. With everything you got."

Fluttershy just gaped at her. How'd she done it before? She tried to find that pit of anger inside her, but the more she thought the more scared she became. She screwed up her eyes, thought of her friends and animals, and imagined she was Rainbow Dash facing a dragon. She even tried to give a war cry to increase her force! "Kaiiiii...yah..." she whispered, her hoof coming up to make contact with the fire pony's face.

For a few seconds she was aware of the sharp warmth under her rear hoof before she looked behind at her enemy. Her foot rested gently on the end of her nose, and the fire pony arched one brow to look at her. "Nice try." The fire pony said and its eyes burst into flame, "My turn..."

She was too close to leap away, too overcome with fear and confusion to react in time as the fire pony snapped around and gave a double kick to Fluttershy's flank! The blast knocked her rolling across the grass and landing in a heap with two hoof shaped burns right above her cutie mark. Looking over to where she'd landed the firepony said in that soft, low voice. "Now stay down. You can't fight me. You can't stop me. You can't do anything."

Fluttershy clenched her eyes shut in pain, and worse, in acknowledgement that the monster was right. *I can't fight her. I can't stop her.*

* * *

I can't stop! Rainbow Dash thought as she pushed herself to wing her way through the smoky skies to find a cloud with the smallest drop of rain in it. The only problem was that this was the height of summer. The time of the year scheduled for the sunniest weather. This time of the year she'd normally be tasked with breaking up rainclouds rather than seeking them out.

She'd never known a fire this bad. Even dragon smoke was preferable to this prevalent smog that choked the skies in brown and gray haze. Her throat burned as she breathed through the cloth mask on her muzzle and eyes watered despite the goggles. But she couldn't stop. She'd promised Twilight Sparkle that she'd find some rain. Normally when there was a fire it was a pegasus' job to do just this, but there hadn't been a fire this big, this fast in a long time.

"Come on, Rainbow Dash! You're the fastest pegasus in all of Equestria! You can do this!" She syched herself up, pumping her hoof. A shadow flickered through the smoggy air behind her.

"There!" It sure was a puny bank of clouds off to the south, but Rainbow Dash would beat them till every drop of water came out. She beat her wings towards the dozen or so clouds, hoping she could squeeze them into something-

A thunderous crack snapped through the air and a black streak ripped past her as if she were standing still! The black streak flashed through the heart of the largest cloud, exploding it in a rumble of thunder and wild high pitched laughter.

"What the heck was that?!" Rainbow Dash looked around, but in the haze she'd lost whoever had just nailed the cloud, "And what do they think they're doing?!"

Rainbow Dash flew towards the next cloud, only to have another crack and black shadow streak through it! Again and again, Dash tried to race it to the next cloud, only to have the mysterious thundering shadow obliterate it time and time again. Rainbow Dash just fluttered in place in shock as it swooped through and exploded the last four almost simultaneously.

"Too slow," a girl said in Rainbow Dash's ear in a grating voice like bending metal. She turned in time to spot a blood red flank, a black

lightning bolt, and two crackling lightning wrapped hooves. With a blast of thunder, they slammed right into Rainbow Dash's face and knocked her from the sky. There was a horrible shrieking laugh followed by another cracking boom as the pony disappeared into the haze.

* * *

I can't stop her... Fluttershy thought to herself as she pushed herself to her hooves and ignored the pain blossoming from her rump. *But I can't give up either!* It hurt, but it was no different than the pain her injured animals felt. The pain helped focus her swirling fearful thoughts into the simple truth: if she gave up now her animal friends would... She couldn't bring herself to think it. She simply knew, and also knew she couldn't let it happen.

Her wings lifted her up and over the fire pony to land in her path once more. "How dare you?" She asked softly as her blue eyes glared up at the creature. "How dare you burn all my animal's homes, threaten my home, and hurt so many? You..." She saw the fire pony's eyes narrow to sullen slits. "...monster."

Suddenly the heat pouring off her black hide doubled and embers danced and sparked off her blazing mane. "So. A monster am I?" She advanced on Fluttershy, and the pegasus found herself backing off and blinking against the cinders snapping from around her hooves. The dark plates of metal chained to her frame now glowed a shimmering cherry red. "You want a real monster? Try a monster with vast magical powers, an army of loyal pegasus soldiers, and an entire kingdom under her hoof. A monster that would banish her kind and loving sister forever rather than share the slightest bit of power or acknowledgement! A monster that would seal you in stone for eons for daring to stand up to her tyranny!" She shouted, flames roaring out her mouth to rain down on the quivering pegasus. Still, Fluttershy refused to yield.

"If I am a monster, then that's what I had to be fight! Fighting is all I'm good for! It's all I've ever been good for. And it's what I'm going to keep doing until I burn that monster out of hiding or I'm destroyed. Now get out of my way!" And she reared up to bring her hooves down on Fluttershy.

Fluttershy didn't jump away this time. She rose up and pressed her hooves to the burning hooves of the fire pony. "No!" She screamed, eyes

clenched and tears running down her cheeks as she felt her hide start to blister. The firepony shoved her back, but she refused to stay down and let her pass.

“Move, Feathers!” Bellowed the fire pony, but Fluttershy charged forward, pressing her shoulder to the burning hot chest plate of the pony.

“I won’t! Please stop!” She said as she tried to push her back. Her legs trembled as she felt herself cooking against the fire pony’s armor. The fire pony took a step back, rearing up once more to bring her hooves down on Fluttershy’s head. The explosion knocked her into a heap on the grass.

“Damn it. What are you trying to do? You can’t fight me! Stay down and live!” she bellowed down at the shaking, injured pegasus.

“No... I won’t...” she said as she rose again, her body awash in pain. I can’t worry about pain now. I can’t. She stood on shaking knees. “Please... don’t go this way. Please.” She said as she shook.

“Don’t make me burn you.” The fire pony had a begging of her own as well.

“Please...” Fluttershy begged, clenching her eyes shut, spreading her wings as wide as she could. “Please. Please. Please.”

“I can’t!” She yelled and tried to shove forward. Fluttershy raised her hooves and pushed back, sitting down, pumping her wings as fast as she could as she felt the ends of her hooves on fire! The fire and pain sapped at her strength. I can’t stop. I can’t. I can’t. The heat and cinders ignited the tips of her wing feathers and started to crawl along her shoulders. Then there was one final heave that knocked her away from the fire pony and into a heap in the grass.

Fluttershy opened an eye, looking at her cottage. She could see the outlines of the helpless injured animals. *I’m sorry.* She wept as she laid there, her wings smouldering and body aching.

But there was no spreading crackle of flames. No creeping destruction licking at her home. Fluttershy slowly rolled over to look at the fire pony. She stood a little ways apart, eyes closed. “I’ve walked plenty of miles for my revenge. What’s a few more?”

“Thank you,” Fluttershy whispered.

“Don’t,” she replied. “I’m still going to Ponyville. If burning that won’t draw out my enemy, then I’ll just go from one place to the next till she faces me.” She started to walk away from the cottage, following the long crescent of the meadow in a slow trail of smoke and steam. “Take care, Feathers.”

Fluttershy’s strength finally gave out and she slowly collapsed on to the grass, darkness overtaking her.

* * *

Rainbow Dash had plenty of experience with skull impacts. She’d gone through more than one roof in the process of working out her newest tricks with the Wonderbolts. The kick to her head was certainly powerful, but it was more the surprise than the impact. Still, it took her several seconds to pull up and shake the tiny Pinkie Pie’s hopping around her head away and stop her fall. She scanned the smoky skies for her attacker.

“Of all the low down tricks...” Rainbow Dash said as she smacked one hoof into the other. Still, she didn’t know anypony with a black lightning cutie mark. Heck, that’d be rather cool if it hadn’t been on a complete jerk. “When I find her, I’ll show her who’s the slow one.”

Rainbow Dash wanted to track her down, but Twilight Sparkle needed rain and needed it now. It’d have to wait. Unfortunately between the summer season and that insane pegasus and all the smoke the only clouds she could make out was the distant splot of Cloudsdale far above her. Cloudsdale...

“Oh I’m so stupid!” She said as she smacked the side of her head with a hoof, then winced, “Ow...” She pumped her cyan wings, flying higher and higher. If she needed rain so badly she should just go to where they made the stuff! She bet that this moment the weather factories were cranking out big, soggy rainclouds that’d be perfect! “Hang on girls. Rain’s coming!”

Despite its altitude, Cloudsdale was still swathed in smoke. Thinner and more dilute, but there were still a lot of coughing and grounded pegasus around. However, as Rainbow Dash landed, something was definitely wrong. There wasn't a rain cloud to be seen! "What's going on? This place should be soaking wet right now!" She made her way up to the weather factories, not waiting to suit up as she burst through the door.

Something had happened. Busted machinery lay in the process of repair, rainbows splattered all over the walls, snow flakes being swept into heaps. She looked around and spotted a lavender pony wearing glasses with gray mane and raindrops on her flank. Rainy Days was the pony in charge of stormy weather production. "Rainy! Just the pony I needed to see! What the heck happened here?"

Rainy gave a miserable look, "There was an accident, Dash. Somepony dropped a whole pallet of thunder a few hours ago!"

"Was anypony hurt?" Thunder and lightning were dangerous by-products in manufacture of clouds and rainbows. Normally it was disposed of safely in thunder storms as far from towns as possible, but if there wasn't any clouds scheduled then it had to be stored.

"A few, but nothing serious. But look." She said as she pointed at the hall where the cloud machines sat broken and cracked. "It'll be weeks before we can start making clouds again! We'll be lucky to have production up and running for autumn showers." She said as she swept her limp gray tail.

"Forget about that! What about Ponyville? What about the fires?" Rainbow Dash asked as she waved her hooves at the morose pony.

"Oh. Well, you can just leave with us. I mean, weren't you going to do that anyway?" Rainbow Dash frowned at her honest question. She had been thinking of doing just that hours ago when the evacuation order arrived.

"Yeah. I was." She admitted, but felt ashamed that she had.

"And there's nothing we can do. We can't make new clouds, and we don't have any clouds on hand to turn into storm clouds." Rainy Days said sadly, drooping her head.

Rainbow Dash sighed as she looked down at her hoofs. Rainy Days was right of course, being an expert on that particular weather. To make rainclouds you made normal fluffy clouds and loaded them up with water. Cloudsdale had huge tanks of raindrops for just that purpose. If only they had some clouds they could use.

Then she looked at her hoof, brilliant rose eyes widening. "Rainy, we have clouds!" She said as she gripped the lavender Pegasus with a wide grin.

"Um, no Dash. We don't. I checked the inventory."

"Yes, Rainy. We do!" She said as she waved a hoof at the walls around them. "Cloudsdale!" Other pegasus listening in began to talk in concern.

"C- Cloudsdale?" Rainy Days stammered, staring in shock.

"Sure." She pointed at the water tanks at the end of halls. "We have the water. We can just put it into Cloudsdale till it rains." Rainbow Dash said with a grin, spreading her hooves wide at the ingeniousness of her plan.

"No. I don't think we'll be doing that." A pegasus stallion said from the doors. His fair ivory coat contrasted with his jet black mane. A sunburst spread along his flank as he approached both Rainbow Dash and Rainy Days. The head pegasus, mayor of Cloudsdale, Radiant looked at the assembled ponies with a stern look that sent them back to cleaning up the mess. Only then did he cast his gaze on Rainbow Dash. Despite herself she gave a gulp. "Rainbow Dash, is it? Winner of the Best Young Fliers Competition?"

"Yes sir?"

"Do you have any idea just what your plan would do to our home? Cloud formation 101, Miss Dash. You add water to clouds and what happens?" He asked as he inspected a crack in a rainbow storage basin.

"They get big and wet, I know."

"You know?" He replied, now looking sharply at her once more. "If you know then why would you propose such a thing? The clouds of

Cloudsdale are structural. If they swelled Cloudsdale itself would be imperiled.” He tapped an ivory hoof against the floor impatiently. “This is why we manufacture rain clouds. It’s why we don’t let Cloudsdale itself get saturated. And it is why we are not going to follow your ridiculous plan.”

Rainbow Dash blushed furiously as she looked away, feeling every eye on her. This was worse than being laughed at for crashing through the stadium wall during summer flight school! Then she looked at him with a scowl, “If we don’t then Ponyville could be destroyed! They’re right in the path of the fire! What do you think is going to happen?”

He turned away to examine some damaged cloud making equipment, “I imagine that the Earth Ponies will do what they’ve always done. Find somewhere else to live.” He then looked at her, “It’s not our problem, Miss Dash.”

Rainbow Dash’s eyes went wide at the dismissive tone. “Not our problem? How can you say that?”

“Simply. The business of the Earth Ponies and Unicorns are not our own. We have repairs to make and a home to relocate.”

“So you’re going to just... just... let Ponyville burn?” Rainbow Dash said as she leapt to her hooves. “If we can help them, we should! Or do you want everypony to think that we’re simply too high and mighty to bother?”

The expression on Radiant’s face fit Rainbow Dash’s accusation to a T. “Miss Dash, you forget yourself!” He retorted. “Pegasus must look after pegasus’ concerns.”

Rainbow Dash thought of Twilight, Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, and even Spike. All her friends trapped on the ground. “No, you forget that this is Equestria! Land of all ponies, earth, unicorns, and pegasus!” she turned to look at the crowd, wishing she had Twilight Sparkle’s words or Rarity’s grace. Heck, even one of Pinkie Pie’s songs would be better than her trying to convince a crowd of pegasus to risk their home for the homes of others. “They grow the food we eat! Make things we need! Why would anypony give a pegasus a rotten apple if we won’t lift a hoof for them?”

“We must look after our own, Miss Dash.” Radiant retorted. “The Princess gave orders to evacuate Ponyville and muster the pegasus guard.

There were no instructions for us to endanger Cloudsdale!" He declared, looking flustered that he was arguing at all with a juvenile. The other pegasus were now talking to each other, echoing Rainbow Dash's points with the head pegasus.

"If Cloudsdale were ever in trouble, my friends wouldn't hesitate to help, regardless of what the Princess ordered. No pony in Ponyville would."

"That may be but-" The head pegasus was clearly flustered now, looking at the smoke creeping in the windows.

"Not maybe. Is." She said as she hovered in the air before him. "Well, I promised my unicorn friend to find rain, not just to save Ponyville, but also to save Fluttershy. A pegasus that refuses to leave her friends in danger. And neither will I!"

"Rainbow Dash!" Called Rainy Days as she turned and flew away from the weather factory as fast as possible. How could they be so selfish? So willing to protect their own knowing that something else would be destroyed from their inaction?

I'm sorry, Twilight Sparkle. Rainbow Dash thought as tears of frustration ran down her cheeks. *I failed you.*

* * *

"You know... I think... a little... exercise... after this... is over... would be... good!" Twilight Sparkle gasped as she pulled the cart after her friends. This was a lot different than simply enjoying the Falling of the Leaves and not caring if she won or lost. Hours spent in a library were not conducive to a physique to pulling a wagon the miles back to Fluttershy's. Worse, this was a race against time. The banter kept the fear to a manageable level.

Rarity groaned ahead of her, "Just think of this as a workout. The tangential benefits should be good for both of us. After all, we were getting just a touch soft, weren't we?"

“Could be worse. Someponies don’t have magic to make the load lighter,” Applejack said sourly from in front of Rarity. The workhorse had been in a sour mood since they’d passed by Apple Acres to find no one had gone to help Fluttershy. Given that this was her third trip, Twilight Sparkle didn’t blame her for being a bit surly and gave a sheepish smile to Rarity.

“What I cannot possibly fathom is why she’s doing so well.” Rarity said as they looked way up the road past Applejack to the cart being drawn by Pinkie Pie. The pink pony was easily three cart lengths ahead of the rest.

“Well, I guess a lot of sugar will do that for a pony.” Twilight Sparkle offered as they pulled their carts to the crest of the low hill separating Apple Acres from the trees around Fluttershy’s cottage. It was like walking in a freakish twilight, the ash falling around them like snow as the setting sun looked like a bloody coin in the sky. The fires ahead of them gave a flickering glow that danced and splashed off the apple trees around them in harsh golden glares.

“Pinkie Pie, how come you barely busted a sweat this whole time?” Applejack asked sharply as they caught up with the pink pony.

Pinkie Pie blinked at Applejack then gestured to the cart she pulled, “What? This? Please!” She said with a snort as she started bouncing along down the hill. “Compared to rotating rocks all day, this is easy pease!”

“That’s it. Next Applebuckin, she’s getting drafted!”

“That’s silly, Applejack. I’m not a draft horse!”

But Twilight Sparkle wasn’t paying attention to their banter as she stared down the road. The wood smoldered and burned in explosive flares that silhouetted Fluttershy’s cottage. Ash lay in a dusting over everything like dirty snow and suddenly the meadow between her collage and the Everfree Forest seemed flimsy protection. Worse of all though was the glowing form of the pony, Nightmare Fury, walking in the long grass.

“Everypony, hurry!” She yelled as she closed her eyes and concentrated. She’d tried teleporting before, but it was tricky over long distances and painful if she tried to take things with her. Right now she

didn't care though. The guilt of leaving Fluttershy alone, the fear for her friend, exploded through her and in a flash both purple unicorn and wagon disappeared.

Both Twilight Sparkle and wagon arrived at the cottage; albeit upside down and on the empty chicken coop. Her horn and head throbbed, but she couldn't afford to pass out now. *Fluttershy needs my help! Where is she?* She teleported again out of the harness and swayed on her hooves. *Okay, no more of that.* Shaking it off, she rushed to the cottage, sure that the yellow pegasus would be within. "Fluttershy? Are you here?" Only dozens and dozens of fearful eyes greeted her. "She wouldn't just leave!"

Then she looked out at the fiery pony. Nightmare Fury. It was walking, leisurely, as if enjoying itself on an evening stroll with the soot and ash swirling about its hooves. But more importantly was its direction: decidedly going away from the cottage.

That's a wing.

The thought struck her as soon as she saw it sticking up like an odd shrub from the long ashen grass. "Fluttershy!" She screamed, running towards the smoky field to where Fluttershy lay on her side. Ash matted with sweat turned her dark, mottled gray with patches of yellow peeking through... and raw stretched of red. The sickly sweet smell of cooked meat. The sight of her friend lying so still. "No. No no no no..." She shook her gently with a hoof. "Please wake up, Fluttershy. Please!" She couldn't be... couldn't be...

Then Fluttershy coughed and looked up at Twilight Sparkle. "Twilight? You came back." Her voice was so weak, even for Fluttershy.

"I promised I would, didn't I?" Too late, Twilight Sparkle didn't add. If her friends had been here sooner she could have done something to prevent this.

"Are the animals okay?"

"They're fine. The girls will load them all up and get them to Ponyville."

"Oh. That's good." She said as she closed her eyes again. Only the slight shift of her wing sticking up in the air gave evidence for her breathing.

"Twilight!" cried Rarity as the others shrugged out of their harnesses and ran to meet her. They gasped in horror at the sight of their beaten friend.

"Oh no!"

"Is she... okay...?" asked Applejack, terrified of the alternative.

"She's fine. She's going to be fine." It was to convince herself as much as her friends. "Help me lift her, Rarity." The white unicorn nodded and their horns glowed in unison to lift Fluttershy in their magical grip.

"What about her?" Applejack asked as she looked at the departing form of the burning pony.

"No time for her now. We have to get Fluttershy and her animals out of here." Twilight Sparkle said as they carried the levitating Fluttershy to one of the carts. Pinkie Pie, so worried her hair was starting to uncurl, put some blankets in the bottom to cushion her injured friend. There wasn't any time to waste; the embers blown from the fire were starting to smolder around the cottage and more and more streamers of smoke were popping up around the building. Glaring at the cart atop the chicken coop, her horn flared and she flipped it upright.

"Wow. Didn't know you could flip around something that heavy like it was a toothpick." Applejack said with a look of concern. "You alright?"

"Fluttershy is burned. That... that thing out there burned her. Burned the Everfree Forest, Zecora, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy! She burned *Fluttershy*! No, I am not alright!" She shouted back at Applejack as tears ran down her cheeks. "I am sick of this. I want to go back to studying and not having my friends hurt!" She felt so angry that she wanted to explode just like the Nightmare ambling away from them!

Applejack pulled her into a hug, wrapping her hooves around her and draining her of the rage that billowed up inside her. It didn't take long, a few seconds, and she took a long and slow breath as she calmed herself. "Fluttershy'll be okay. Let's get these critters gone and hope Rainbow Dash can find-"

From overhead came a flapping of wings and Rainbow Dash fell in a heap besides the wagon. She coughed clouds of smoke, her mane and

coat streaked in black and gray soot. As the others evacuated the helpless animals, Twilight went to her choking friend, patting her on the back to help her breathe. Her eyes were bloodshot and tearing as she struggled to stand. "Did you find rain, Dash?" Twilight asked, but looking at the swirling black skies she knew the answer.

"No. There's no clouds up there. None at all. None we can use anyway." She said bitterly as she looked around. "Where's Fluttershy?" Twilight gestured to the wagon and she peeked in and gasped, "Oh no! No no no! Damn it!" She smacked the ashy ground with a hoof. "If only I'd been faster or... or convinced Radiant... or..." She said as she put her hooves to her head, eyes squeezed tight. Suddenly Twilight Sparkle knew exactly how Applejack had felt moments ago.

She put her hooves around her friend as the others finished unloading. "Don't worry about it, Dash. We'll find some way to stop the fire."

Rainbow Dash just took a shuttering breath. "That's just it. I thought of a way... but the ponies in Cloudsdale... they..." She sniffed, a drop falling to the ash before her. Then another.

The rain started in slow hot heavy drops that hissed when they struck a hot spot of ground. Slowly Rainbow Dash raised her face skyward, the dirty rain washing the ash and tears from her face even as it started to scrub the smoke from the skies. "They... did it... they actually did it!"

The other ponies looked upwards as well as the rain increased. The smoke swirled as if it fought with the onslaught falling through it. Through the haze, shapes became clearer. "Is that... Cloudsdale?!" Rarity gasped as the shapes of the clouds became more familiar, and oddly disturbing. They could see the Cloudsdale coliseum as a massive cylinder of growling black clouds. The Weatherworks distended out towards the Everfree Forest while other shops leaned towards Canterlot like great hollowed out gourds. Lightning flickered between the buildings big enough for giants, not ponies.

"Yes. It is," a voice said from above them. Radiant, the mayor of Cloudsdale, landed in the mud with a look of disgust and looked sternly at Rainbow Dash. "After your display in the Weatherworks, how could we not do as you suggested?" He glanced over at Fluttershy's form and his harsh

expression softened a moment. Then he looked back at Rainbow Dash. "And since, as you pointed out, Cloudsdale was the only cloud in the sky, we emptied the rain tanks and have been ferrying more water to it." He flicked the water off a wingtip. "Let it not be said pegasus do things by half-measures.

"You did this, because of what I said?" Rainbow Dash said as she stood.

"Mostly. I suspect Rainy Days and the other ponies in the Weatherworks would have done so anyway," he said as he looked up at the deformed Cloudsdale above him. Then he sighed and shook his head. "I have little care for land bound ponies, but I suppose we'll have to ask Mayor Mare for hospitality for a time."

"The more the merrier." Applejack said with a grin.

"I'd best take care of my people." He gave a long look at Fluttershy and used a wingtip to move her singed pink hair out of her face. "You take care of... your friend. I know she'd rather be with you." With that he leapt into the air, winging his way towards Apple Farm and Ponyville.

The fires around them were quickly tamed by the rainfall, but behind them the forest continued to roar and hiss spitefully. It was the sound of a pony screaming in shock out in the meadow that made Twilight Sparkle smile though. It wasn't victory, but it was something.

"Come on; let's get Fluttershy back to Ponyville." She said as she started pulling the cart along with her friends towards home.

* * *

In the depths of a burned out hollow, angry crimson eyes glared at the sight of Cloudsdale pouring down rain on to the fires. "Well, all knowing one, I bet you didn't see that coming?" Her stormy blue wings fluttered in irritation, "So much for your big fire." Her hooves sparked as she punched the wall, lightning sparking in a cascade that was extinguished in the spreading wetness.

Nightmare Screamer was never one for patience. A thousand years of exile had done nothing to improve her attitude. Her blue mane snapped as she shook her head, pacing back and forth.

"It was inevitable. Had Cloudsdale not acted, Celestia would have," the whisper in her ear made her whirl. Of course there was nothing there. There never was. "You weren't supposed to reveal yourself, Screamer," the voice chastised.

Screamer sneered but with uncertainty in her eyes. "You told me to keep the clouds clear and wreck the Weatherworks. I did just that. Don't you tell me how to do my job!" She put a hoof to her chest in feigned injury. "Besides, that annoying foal thinks she's the fastest pegasus in Equestria! I simply had to correct her." Lightning crackled along her mane and snapped off her tail.

"Yes, yes. We all know you're the swiftest pony in *history*. And soon all of the world will know." The whispers hissed soothingly. "But unless you want to lose your powers to that damned unicorn, you'll keep to the plan."

"I'm not afraid of Princess Celestia." Screamer snorted.

"You should be," the whisper countered. "But she wasn't the unicorn I was speaking of."

Screamer blinked as she sat, annoyed at the smug tone that hid volumes. "You mean that horn head student of hers?"

"Yes. She has potential."

"Potential?" The way Whisper said the word put Screamer's teeth on edge. She'd once said the exact same thing of Screamer.

"Yes. Potential to rival Princess Celestia. Exceed it even."

"So what good is that to us?" Then Nightmare Screamer cackled. "Oh, I get it. You want to turn her?" Typical.

"Perhaps."

"You haven't changed. What about the Hot Head? And Luna?"

“Fury’s lost to us. If she’d just stayed locked up for a year or two more... ah well, if wishes were apples no one would go hungry. If she kills Celestia, wonderful. Till then she can be a distraction.” Nightmare Whispers said in a frustrated tone. It made Screamer chuckle inside as Whispers continued, “Regardless, I need you to move on to the next phase. And I need you to execute it exactly as I instructed you.”

Nightmare Screamer listened to the words. “You didn’t say anything about Luna.” She knew it would nettle Whispers. She loved annoying that one to no end. She’d annoy her to death, if she could.

“Let me worry about Luna. You do your job, Screamer.”

Screamer crouched and launched into the rainy skies with a thunderclap. Oh this was going to be fun! And when it was all done, it would be Screamer, not Whispers, calling the shots!

Chapter 4

Smolder

The Cloudsdale storm would be talked about for years to come as the home of Equestria's pegasus transformed from a white wonderland of delicately sculpted clouds and decorative rainbows into a grotesquely swollen thunderhead that scowled indolently at the land below it. Rain spattered and poured from its bulbous masses that had once been the homes of hundreds of Pegasus. Every now and then the clouds would shudder and boom in fitful reactions, walls bursting in great wild plumes of rain loaded clouds. Lightning flickered from the stress to the once beautiful buildings, but the pegasus of Cloudsdale were tireless in maintaining the rainstorm.

Below and to the south west, the fires of the Everfree Forest were reduced to sullen flames, then to smoking stretches of woodland. Dozens of smaller fires around Ponyville, kindled on windblown sparks from the blazing front, were slowly extinguished before they could spread. The rain also washed the smoke from the air and the ash from plants for dozens of miles around the community. As the sun set, Equestria plunged into a wet, drizzly, dour night.

But there's no sign of Nightmare Fury, Twilight Sparkle thought as she looked out at the rain. The panic of the day before had given way to a restless night, and no matter how tired she was, she couldn't find sleep. Her horn glowed, summoning the history book to her for what seemed the hundredth time.

Nightmare Fury, the destroyer of Old Canterlot, blazed in the picture before her. "You're reading that again?" Spike asked as he joined her. The Purple dragon looked at the image and shook his head, "You find some secret to defeating her?"

"No, Spike." She said as she leafed through the pages. "She destroyed a whole city trying to kill Princess Celestia a thousand years ago. It took a thousand pegasus, a hundred unicorns, and the princess to seal her away. There was so much devastation afterwards they had to abandon the city to the Everfree Forest." Twilight Sparkle scowled at the page. "So

how did Fluttershy get her to stop? She could have just exploded Fluttershy without breaking a step.”

Fluttershy was recovering in the bath house, converted into a hospital after the regular clinic was overwhelmed with smoked out ponies. Twilight just hoped she recovered in time to answer that question.

“Well maybe being locked underground for a thousand years sapped all her power. I mean, Nightmare Moon was supposed to be super powerful too, but she didn’t just blast the six of you into dust.” Spike pointed out as he hopped over to the fire and poured two mugs of cocoa.

“That might have been what it looked like, Spike, but Nightmare Moon was actually using a lot of her power maintaining eternal darkness and fighting off the Princess’ power. Tricks were all she could muster trying to prevent us from reaching the Elements of Friendship.” Twilight Sparkle flipped back to the start of the article. “Plus, I think she liked messing with us. Maybe it’s a part of the whole evil ‘nightmare’ thing.”

“Figures.” Spike said, taking a drink. “So, just do to her what you did to Nightmare Moon. Get your friends together and give her the magic zap.” He pointed one of the mugs, making zapping noises, before smiling and shrugging, “Presto, problem solved.” Twilight Sparkle smiled, magically taking the mug and taking a sip before sighing.

“Except that we haven’t been able to summon the Elements of Friendship, Spike. Think of it. We’ve faced dragons and hydras and no magical elements appeared to help us out. We always had to do it ourselves.” She said with a worried frown. “And the Princess expressly told me not to face her. She was scared, Spike.” That letter had been waiting for her when they’d returned. It’d commended her bravery, and then had virtually begged her to return to Canterlot till Fury was dealt with. It hadn’t sounded like any letter Twilight Sparkle received before. “I do not want to lose you like the others.’ What others?”

Spike shrugged and finished up his mug of cocoa. “Beats me. But being the ruler of Equestria, I guess a disaster like this would have anyone stressed.” He cocked his brow as he regarded Twilight Sparkle reading the book yet again. “And speaking of stress, you probably should get some sleep. There’s not going to be any fires tonight.” He said as he walked over to his own bed.

Twilight Sparkle sighed, listening to the hiss of rain and the distant rumble of thunder. She looked out the window. Where was Nightmare Fury now? What was she planning? And how could Twilight Sparkle stop her?

* * *

"I hate being stuck out in the rain, Scootaloo," Sweetie Belle said as a particularly wet drizzle poured down on the white unicorn's mane as plastered it to her coat.

"No one likes being stuck in the rain," the brown pegasus replied. "And who knew that it was going to rain like this in the middle of summer?" The saddle bags and cloaks did little to keep the rain off them as they futilely searched for the monster they'd unleashed.

The Cutie Mark Crusaders had ranged all over trying to find where the fire pony had gone. They'd wasted hours racing to hot spots only to discover the monster they'd set loose was only a smoldering log. Now it was night, and wet, and the girls were dangerously close to being lost. Not that they were afraid of the Everfree Forest or the fires, but it was a monster they were looking for.

Now it looked like all they were going to catch was a cold.

Apple Bloom looked around and spotted a cave on the edge of the wood. "Hey, we can wait in here till morning."

"And what then?" Sweetie Belle asked as they trotted towards the opening. There were scorched and smoking trees all around, but that was no surprise. After all it seemed like half the Everfree Forest was burned. "I mean, what are we gonna actually do if we find it?"

"Well. Apologize. Maybe we woke it up and it's grumpy or something. Then we ask it to leave. And... um..." The plan past that point frayed a little. "Maybe we can drive it off with Scootaloo's singing?"

"Very funny." Scootaloo said as she stepped into the damp cave and gave a hard shake.

"I thought so." Apple Bloom said before she and Sweetie Belle shook as well, drenching Scootaloo a second time. The pegasus gave a little snort, and retaliated, trying to drench the two again. Finally they collapsed in a laughing heap. It was nice to be out of the rain in a warm cave.

Wait. Warm?

Apple Bloom became aware of a light in the back of the cave. Slowly the flickering flames grew brighter and brighter as armor plates clanked and slowly shifted. Then a crackling orange glow filled the cave as a head lifted and burning eyes stares right at the three young ponies. A hot breath snorted a flame towards the three.

"Ahhh! Monster!" The three girls screamed and turned to scamper towards the exit. They got out into the pouring rain before Apple Bloom looked back and noticed the monster wasn't rampaging after them. Not that the Cutie Mark Crusaders had much experience with monsters, aside from a brush with a cockatrice, but Apple Bloom was pretty sure that most monsters wouldn't just lay back down in the cave; unless the fire pony was a particularly lazy monster. Slowly Apple Bloom turned around and returned to the mouth of the cave. She poked her head inside, followed by Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo.

The fire pony simply lay on the hard stone floor with a one smoking hoof under its head.

The three stepped into the cave once more, dripping all over the floor but none of them wanted to shake and irritate the fire pony. "Um, hello?"

Slowly it looked at them once again. For the longest moment it seemed to be considering the three before it said, "Come in out of the rain, girls. Anypony with sense wouldn't be out on a night like tonight." She had a soft crackling voice, or maybe it was just the flames rising from her red mane like a camp fire. As they stepped closer a small smile appeared, "Oh, I remember you. I'm glad to see you three are safe."

"You... ah... woah..." Apple Bloom and her friends just stared for a moment before stepping in out of the drizzle. "You're... nice..."

"Not really," She said as she slowly rose to look at the three. "But unless one of you is in disguise there's little point in getting worked up. Come closer. Warm up."

"That's okay. I think we're plenty warm over here." Scootaloo shifted nervously. Apple Bloom looked at her friends and then took a few steps closer. "Apple Bloom!" hissed Scootaloo in alarm.

"We came here to talk." Apple Bloom reminded her friends. The fiery pony arched a burning brow, looking intrigued. Apple Bloom cleared her throat. "We... um... we wanted to apologize. For whatever we did that made you so mad and stuff." She shot a sharp look at the pair.

Reluctantly they both stepped forward and bowed their heads. "We're sorry," they intoned in unison.

The smile disappeared, its hooves flaring as it frowned and looked away. The stone she'd pressed against smoked when she moved her hoof aside. "Your apology is accepted, but misplaced. You three have done me no wrong." She let out a long breath that crackled in a little flame. "I think introductions are in order. My name is Nightmare Fury."

"That's a... um... nice name..." Apple Bloom said with a shaky smile. Fury just shook her head a little. "Well I'm Apple Bloom. This is Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle." Apple Bloom gestured to each with a little toss of her head.

"A pleasure," Fury said calmly.

Scootaloo stepped closer, frowning in confusion. "Well, if you're not mad at us then what's with... well..." she nodded towards the Everfree Forest.

"It's complicated," Fury said simply. "And talking about it wouldn't do much good for either of us."

"You think we wouldn't understand?" Apple Bloom asked with a frown. Why did everypony insist on treating her like a baby?

"I hope you won't. But it's not something that I like talking about."

"Like we all like forest fires and our homes burned down." Scootaloo said sourly.

So much for talking her out of it. "Scootaloo!" Apple Bloom said sharply, glaring at her friend.

She pointed a brown wing at Fury, "Well it is her fault after all! All these fires and... and everything! And she won't even tell us why!"

Fury closed her eyes a moment, the heat raising just a touch. Then she looked at the trio and asked, "You three are good friends, aren't you?"

"The best!" Sweetie Belle said with a nod. "We're the Cutie Mark Crusaders!" At Fury's baffled expression Sweetie Belle elaborated on their mission of finding their Cutie Marks together.

Fury just nodded once. "I see some things never change," she said with a soft sigh. Then she looked at the three of them together and asked, "Apple Bloom, how would you feel if I burned Scootaloo?"

Apple Bloom's jaw dropped and all three of them backed away from Fury. "Why would you even ask that? That would be terrible!"

"Absolutely terrible. No argument. But that wasn't what I asked you. How would you feel?"

Apple Bloom looked at her friend. The brown Pegasus looked back, biting her lip as her wings twitched. Then Apple Bloom looked at Fury and said without hesitation. "I'd be really sad. Then I'd get really really mad!" She finished with a scowl.

"Why?" Fury cocked her head. Apple Bloom blinked in surprise. Wasn't that obvious?

"Cause she's my friend and you're all big and powerful and it wouldn't be right!" Apple Bloom retorted, angry to even have to think about something like that happening to her friend.

"And that's why I'm doing this."

"Huh?" All three said in unison.

Fury sighed softly, closing her eyes. "A long time ago I had a friend. A wonderful friend. Kind. Beautiful. Funny. But she had an older sister. A sister much more powerful than she, and much more popular. They had terrible fights. Then, at the end of it, her sister banished her far away forever and ever," Fury's mane started to spark and crackle and the stone under her hooves hissed and smoked. "I tried to fight her once, but I

couldn't beat her. I ended up trapped like you found me. But now I'm free, and I'm going to get even with her."

"And that involves burning down the Everfree Forest?" Sweetie Belle asked in horror.

"And Ponyville. Canterlot. Equestria. Whatever I have to till she faces me." Fury replied solemnly. "And I'll keep on burning things till I find something she cares about enough to fight me. Or I'm stopped for good."

"But that's... terrible! Those are somepony's homes. Even Zecora lives in the Everfree Forest!" Sweetie Belle said aghast.

"Yes. It is terrible." Fury hung her head slightly before sighing again and looking at the three. "I don't pretend that what I'm doing is right. It isn't. But I'm still going to do it. I have to."

Apple Bloom just stared at her in confusion a moment. "I don't get you. On one hoof you want this revenge but on the other you say it's bad. So why do it? Why not just... stop?"

"Because it's all that I have left," she flicked her tail over the flaming mushroom shaped cloud on her flank. "It's what I am. What I chose to become, if you can call it a choice." She lay back down on the floor of the cave. "Why don't you rest and dry off?"

But Apple Bloom looked at Fury in bafflement. When her sister had gone on about Zecora cursing ponies, Apple Bloom didn't think that it was that simple. She got the exact same feeling from Fury. "You don't want to burn down Ponyville?" she asked,

"Not particularly. But I will," she said with a firmness that chilled Apple Bloom. "I have to cross that river, and the only stone bridge is right at Ponyville. So even if I wanted to spare it, it'd probably burn just by me passing through."

But that wasn't the only thing she'd have to pass through! Apple Acres was on the way. "You'd go right through my home! Are you saying you'd burn my home too?!" She asked in horror. Fury just bowed her head and didn't answer. She would, Apple Bloom realized. She'd burn everything down for her revenge! "You can't!"

"I can. And I will, if I have to. I'm sorry, Apple Bloom."

The Cutie Mark Crusaders backed away from Fury who once more lay down on the stone facing away from them. "We have to go! I have to go now!" She had to get back to Applejack or Twilight Sparkle or... somepony! She couldn't stay here with this monster!

"You shouldn't. It's dark, and there's lots of-" but Apple Bloom wasn't listening any more. Fighting back the tears she raced into the night with her friends.

* * *

This is a legacy, Applejack thought as she looked at the farm. A legacy started by the first of the Apple family, Old Appleseed; The first pony to wander all over Equestria planting apple trees all over for anypony that needed a meal. Her ancestors had cultivated all kinds of apples over the generations and taken them far and wide across Equestria and beyond. They'd invented every apple dish she could think of that were worth thinking of. Applejack had tried leaving, but it was as much a part of her as her Cutie Mark.

"It ain't right," she said softly into the drizzle that rained down from the ruined Cloudsdale above. "Ain't right to leave it. Ain't right to not put up a fight for it." She walked out into the rain a little ways, feeling the mud slosh around her boots.

"Ayep," Echoed Big Macintosh besides her. None of the Apple Family slept tonight. Half the family sat out on the porch that surrounded the house, talking in low voices and eating some of Granny's pie. Too much on edge, no matter how tired everypony was. They wouldn't be able to pack out any more trees now thanks to the mud mucking up the yard. Hopefully tomorrow they'd get a few more out and then... then what? Watch Apple Acres burn?

"No!" Applejack smacked her hoof into the mud.

“Anope?” Big Macintosh asked in confusion. “What are you thinking, Applejack?”

“I’m thinking... I’m thinking that we shouldn’t be getting ready to run! I’m thinking that if that Fury wants to take Apple Acres, we make her work for it! And maybe, just maybe, we can drive her back into the Everfree Forest to whatever ruins she crawled out from.” Applejack said as she reached up and tugged her hat down over her eyes a little. “I’m saying we should at least try.”

Caramel and Golden Delicious perked up at once and grinned. Fritter gave a little cheer. The idea was catching on quickly. Big Macintosh clearly wasn’t convinced, “But the Princess said...”

“Apple Acres don’t belong to the Princess. It belongs to the Apple Family. It belongs to you and me, Mac. It belongs to everypony from Granny all the way to Apple Bloom!” Her sister and the other fillies were hiding out in their tree house after all the trouble started. She’d be sure to check in on her in the morning.

“What do you think, Granny Smith?” Big Macintosh asked the eldest of the Apple family.

The old lime colored mare scratched her chin with a hoof in a moment of contemplation, then jumped to her feet and screeched, “Let’s kick her keester clear cross Equestria! Yeehaw!” The rest of the Apple family rose as well, joining in the cheers.

Finally Big Macintosh sighed, “Well, we best get busy then. Rain won’t last past morning, I reckon, and we got a lot of work to do.”

* * *

It wasn’t supposed to be like this, Apple Bloom thought as they ran through the dark. They were supposed to find the monster and ask it nicely to go and it would and then nopony would be angry with the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Everything could go back to what it was before when

their biggest worry was figuring out whatever stunt would get them their marks next. Maybe they'd trick the monster somehow. Or something!

The steady drizzle and lingering smoke surrounded the three ponies like a veil. Away from the cave it was hard to tell which direction laid Apple Acres. Apple Bloom was still so upset that she didn't want to stop running to look around. "Apple Bloom! Wait!" She hesitated enough to see she'd almost left her friends behind and came to a stop. She was so glad it was raining so her friends couldn't see her tears.

"Apple Bloom, where are you going?" Scootaloo asked, and then sneezed.

"Home, while I still have a home." Apple Bloom shivered as well, the night wet and cold.

Sweetie Belle looked around the rainy scorched trees. "And is home this way?"

"I don't know, okay? I don't know!" She shouted and then hung her head. "When she started talking I was sure... I was so sure... we could talk her outta it. But she said she was gonna burn it! She's gonna burn everything!"

"And how does us running away stop that?" Scootaloo asked as she stepped in front of Apple Bloom. "So she's a monster. That doesn't mean we can't find out other stuff. Like how she got all burny and stuff."

"Yeah. And she doesn't want to burn stuff. She just wants to get even for her friend." Sweetie Belle said as she looked back the way they'd come. "If Diamond Tiara really hurt either of you, I'd think of some way to get even. It's just we're all caught up in the middle."

That was the most madding thing of all. What Fury wanted made sense. If she could just... not burn things... maybe they could do something? "So, if we can think of some way for her to get her revenge on this person then maybe we can save Ponyville?" Apple Bloom said as the idea opened a narrow window of hope.

"Maybe. But it'll be better than being stuck out here, lost." Scootaloo said as she tried to turn her wings into an umbrella... not quite reaching.

“Oh, I don’t think you three need to worry about that.” A male voice said from the shadows of two scorched trees. A goat popped his head out of the shadows and smiled warmly at the three fillies. “I say, how nice to see three delectable dames as yourselves on this horrid night,” he said as he looked down at them. The girls looked at each other, wondering what ‘delectable’ meant.

“Hello Mr. Goat. What are you doing out here?” Apple Bloom asked warily.

“Ah, it’s tragic. Our home was in the Everfree Forest; now burned to a crisp. We haven’t had a decent bite in days.” He said pitifully.

“Oh. Well if you need something to eat, we’ve got apple strudel, apple fritters, and even some of Granny Smith’s apple pie.” The ponies said as they stepped forward and Sweetie Belle nuzzled opened one of her backs to tug out a fritter.

“Oh that is so generous. Exactly as I expected,” the goat said warmly as his head rose up in the shadows, and something big moved in the darkness. “But my friends really require much meatier fare!” Suddenly there was a roar and two huge lion paws shot out and pinned Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo. A lion head appeared next to the goat’s head, laughing out loud. The girls gasped as they saw both heads attached to a leonine body.

“You let my friends go!” Apple Bloom shouted as she charged the closest paw pinning Scootaloo. Suddenly a green snake shot out from around the monster and curled itself around her middle and lifted her into the air. A dragon head cackled as it lifted her up above the chimera.

“Oh, this is simply too perfect! One for each of us.” The lion head chuckled.

The goat gave an ill little bleat, “Yeah, you can just have my share.” Then he looked at their packs and licked his lips. “Though I call dibs on any cakes they’re carrying.”

“Wuss,” taunted the dragon head.

“Hey, it’s not my fault. Honestly, I have no idea why I’m stuck with you two.” The goat head complained with a snort. “It’d make much more sense if I was a wolf or something, but noooo...”

Orange light then flickered from behind the three girls, and from the rainy darkness stepped Midnight Fury. The rain steamed and hissed off her coat and the black armor chained to her frame. Her teeth grit in pain as she narrowed her eyes at the Chimera. "Let them go."

The lion head snarled, "Back off, hot hooves. We caught these three, fair and square!"

"Bite makes right and all that," hissed the dragon head in agreement.

"Um, guys. Hate to point this out, but she's on *fire*," the goat pointed out, and then gave a shaky smile as the flames increased, despite the rain drizzling down on her. "Look, we can compromise. We eat two, you eat one. Sound fair?"

Fury's mane erupted in a flare running from the blackened helmet down her spine to her tail. A snap sent a fireball to an oak tree besides the chimera. The glowing sphere detonated and showered them with sparks as the tree burned brightly, hissing and steaming in the rain. "Release them now and you get to walk away. Sound fair?"

"Well, I can hardly disagree with that..." the dragon began as it uncoiled so that Apple Bloom stood on the shaky scaly neck. "Here... catch!" And the neck suddenly jerked like a snapped belt, launching Apple Bloom into the air. Suddenly free, the dragon head snapped forward, mouth spread wide as it sprayed a plume of greenish flame over Fury. Looking at the bonfire the dragon head cackled, "Well done... get it? Cause now she's-"

"You idiot," the goat muttered.

Covered in flame, two hooves rose up and slammed down atop the dragon's head with a muffled detonation that slammed its head into the mud. Fury looked up as Apple Bloom fell shrieking towards the ground and bit the dragon on the end on the nose. Draconic eyes, glazed in pain, went round in shock as Fury gave a heave backwards and yanked the entire chimera forward. The lion paws had to unpin the other two fillies to prevent itself from sprawling in the muck. Apple Bloom landed on the much softer back of the chimera, blinking in shock as her friends scrambled for safety.

“Hey, that shouldn’t be in your diet. Get off!” The goat said as it reared back and butted its horns against the mare’s armored shoulders. It succeeded in getting Fury to release the dragon head, but its own horns immediately started to smoke furiously. Sparks sprayed off the horns and the goat pulled back, yowling at its horns which were now afire. It looked left and right, then pushed its face into the muck with a sigh of relief.

“I don’t care how hot you are, meat! You’re lunch!” The lion roared, spreading its maw wide to chomp down on Fury. Freed of its pinned ponies, the chimera moved far faster than a creature of its bulk should. Fury ducked away, hooves turning up great steaming clods of mud as Fury’s mane fought against the constant wet attempting to quench her fire. Claws lashed out, sparking as the pony turned and let the claws screech along the blackened plates. Roaring in pain and frustration now, the lion redoubled its attacks.

Head covered in muck the goat muttered in a half daze. “I don’t know how I keep getting drug into this,” the goat complained. The lion scored a blow that knocked Fury skidding along the muddy ground. The chimera lowered its leonine body as it prepared to pounce when Apple Bloom grabbed it hard between its shoulders.

The presence of a pony on it suddenly registered to the lion, who stopped its attack and looked behind it at the tasty morsel riding it. “Hey! Get off! No free rides!” The great cat started to leap and spin as it tried to knock Apple Bloom loose.

Apple Bloom clung to the bucking chimera and had to admit that underneath the substantial fear of being eaten, it sure was fun! In fact, the sheer audacity allowed her fear to give way to laughter. She gripped its fur in one hoof and gave a little cheer. “Yeah! Yeee haw!” She kicked hard with her back hooves as her other hoof waved over her head. “Giddy up!”

Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo stared in amazement and cheered, “Yeah! Go Apple Bloom! Ride em! Whoo hoo!”

The goat looked indignantly back at the young pony riding it and groaned, “Oh now that is simply wrong.”

“Not for long!” hissed the dragon head, coming to its senses. Its long serpentine neck curled as its head came around, “First course!” It opened its maw wide.

Unfortunately six pairs of eyes had left Fury for far too long.

The burning pony launched herself up on to the back of the chimera, its yellow fur stinking as it burnt under hoof. The dragon’s eyes went wide as it saw the reared hindquarters of the flaming pony and then both rear hooves kicked the dragon head in an exploding ring of sparks that rained down upon them.

“Ah! Hot! Hot! Hot!” yelled the goat head; the lion head simply roared in agreement as it started to roll.

“Let go!” Fury shouted at Apple Bloom and swept a hot forelimb to knock her free as the Chimera rolled on to its back. The pale olive pony fell free, rolled and came to a halt next to her friends. For a horrified moment they wondered if Fury was done for as the chimera ground its back into the turf. Then the chimera yowled as four flaming hooves slowly lifted it. Lying on her back beneath it, Fury grit her teeth, “Enough!” And with that all four legs kicked at once and launched the chimera as a hissing, roaring, bleating projectile through the air and into some broken brush.

Fury rose to her feet, her skin no longer black. It now appeared almost a dull cherry red. Steam rose from her armor like wings streaming back in the darkness. It approached the fallen Chimera. The dragon and lion heads appeared unconscious, but the goat looked at her blearily and said, “Okay. You win. Good eating.” Fury said nothing as she stood there, crackling and swishing her burning tail. The goat’s eyes widened in fear, “What... what do you want? You win! Now... now just go...”

“No,” was all she said. The girls’ eyes went round as Fury stood before the fallen monster, teeth gritted as the flames burnt brighter and brighter. Her mane was now golden yellow, snapping behind her. The water around her hooves boiled from the contact. There wasn’t even rain falling on her now as the terrific heat radiated outwards and set the ground around her to steaming. Smoking! Flames began to crackle along the trees. The goat head cried out in pain.

“Stop!” Apple Bloom shouted, running as close as she dared. Her friends called after her to come back, but she couldn’t. The air around Fury was so hot she felt herself dry almost immediately. Standing besides the chimera she spread her hooves wide. “You... you don’t have to burn him! You don’t!”

Fury said nothing. The sparks coming off her lashing tail ignited the wet brush behind her with ease as the yellow white tail snapped and swished. Her eyes glared down at the goat head, which covered itself with leonine paws and trembled. Then she reared up, front hooves burning like the sun, eyes narrowed in hate.

“He’s not a part of your revenge!” Apple Bloom screamed, and Fury hesitated. The young pony looked at her with round eyes and asked, “Is he?”

“No.” Nightmare Fury hesitated a moment longer and then let out her breath in a hiss, “He’s not.” She stepped back on all four once more. Slowly she walked away to a large, nearby oak. Letting out a scream gave another mighty rear kick. The flash and explosion split the trunk in to. Again and again she smashed the tree to burning kindling. The chimera and cutie mark crusaders stared in shock as the yellow glow lessened and the nightmare’s mane returned to crackling red flame.

“Okay, going now,” muttered the goat. The dragon head gave a sneaky look, creeping up on Sweetie Belle from behind. His jaws opened, then froze and he saw the goat glaring at him. “We. Are. Going!” Each word was accompanied by a butt from the goat’s scorched horns. The chimera groaned as it got to its feet and crawled back into the Everfree Forest.

“What happened?” muttered the lion weakly.

“We’re going vegetarian, that’s what happened,” the goat said crossly. “It’s safer.”

The four watched the chimera depart and at once rain doused the smoldering fires, steam pouring off Fury like a shroud and raised her head to look down at the three. For a moment Apple Bloom was sure she was going to get a lecture but Fury only said softly, “As I was saying, it’s not safe out here. There are lots of other monsters leaving the Everfree Forest

tonight. You'd be better off waiting with me till morning." And with that it turned and started to walk back towards the cave.

Apple Bloom looked at her friends and then frowned. "What do you think, girls?"

"Well, she could have just let us get eaten, so I guess we might as well," Scootaloo said skeptically.

Sweetie Belle looked over at her friend with a smile and kept her voice low, "But you did it Apple Bloom."

"Did what?"

"You stopped her," Sweetie Belle said simply.

Apple Bloom stopped in her tracks. She had, hadn't she? And if she stopped her once maybe she could do so again. With that thought warm in her heart, she caught up with her friends.

* * *

The spa had been converted into a relief shelter for dozens of ponies ranging from smoked out pegasus, ponies exhausted from the frantic evacuation of young and elderly, and ponies injured in incidental accidents in the mess. Rarity hated to admit it, but the bath house being used to help sick and injured ponies was oddly fitting. She'd always seen it as a refuge and a place to regenerate one's nerves. She simply hoped it would continue to do so after this nightmare business was dealt with.

Lotus and Aloe spotted her and gestured her closer. Even if this was outside their usual fare the blue and pink ponies were doing their best to keep everypony calm. "She is in the massage room," they said softly in their odd accents. Rarity thanked them both and the pair returned to helping Nurse Redheart.

Unlike Earth Ponies and Pegasus, Unicorns craved society. They created more than just magic with their horns; they created the culture of Equestria itself. It wasn't enough to simply make dresses; Rarity tried to improve the lot of ponydom as a whole with her creations. That it paid the bills was a simple beneficial step. That Earth Ponies and Pegasus both benefited from the efforts of unicorns was another bonus. Thus the whole nature of the Nightmare terrified her. It was something that unraveled civilization simply by being. That, more than any fear of harm to her shop, is what worried her.

Fluttershy had been given a room to herself away from the large open space where most ponies were gathered for care. Pushing the door open she entered slowly; it felt like she was intruding. Still, with all her friends busy, Rarity had elected herself to watch over Fluttershy till she recovered. Fluttershy lay on her side beneath a blanket with bandages covering half her body. If Nurse Tenderheart hadn't assured them that Fluttershy would recover... well, her friend didn't need to see her fall apart. She had to keep herself together. She simply had to.

Slowly Fluttershy opened one soft blue eye and looked up at her friend. She smiled slightly, "Oh, hello, Rarity." She spoke so simply, as if she wasn't lying there injured at all.

Walking around the massage couch, Rarity looked at her friend's scorched pink hair. "You know, I'd hoped we'd have better circumstances for our weekly beauty treatment."

Fluttershy started to move, then gave a little cry and lay back once again, breathing hard. "Fluttershy! Don't... you can't move just now." That carefully cultured knot of civility began to unravel.

"It's okay, Rarity." Fluttershy said softly, giving her another gentle smile. "Did Twilight Sparkle take care of my friends?"

"Yes. I understand Couches and Quills was willing to house them for now. At least until they can be sent to Whitetail Woods," Rarity said in a tight voice. How like Fluttershy to ask about the animals she'd been burnt to protect. "And what about you, Fluttershy? How are you feeling?"

"Me? Oh. I'm... fine." Fluttershy said as she looked away.

“Would you like a softer pillow?” Rarity knew exactly what she needed-

“No, my pillow is fine.”

“Oh,” Rarity thought harder, “A better blanket?”

“No, thank you.”

“I could fix your coiffure!” She offered, feeling that tension growing inside her that made her start to twitch.

“That’s okay,” she declined, shaking her head.

I am going to help her feel better, no matter what! Rarity was about to suggest a fruit tray when the door opened again. Rarity looked over, expecting Pinkie Pie with some baked treats. The sight of the stately pegasus entering made her jaw drop. Any unicorn reading ‘Whos hooves’ like Rarity did could have identified the head Pegasus of Cloudsdale. His aristocratic bearing practically screamed a lineage going back generations. He’d once been a Wonderbolt for years before retiring to administer Cloudsdale.

His dark eyes lingered a moment on Rarity, and she felt the urge to leave. “Good evening, sir Radiant.”

“It’s closer to morning now,” he said curtly before walking around to stand before Fluttershy. The lemon pegasus glanced up at him and then quickly looked away. “Hello, Fluttershy.” Rarity’s mouth hung open in amazement. He’d come to see her?

“Hello, sir,” she said so softly that Rarity wasn’t even sure that she’d heard her speak.

“How are you feeling?” He could have been addressing the wall for all the attention he gave Fluttershy.

“I’m fine, sir.”

“Good. That’s good. And your… pets?”

“They’re fine too, sir.”

“Good. That’s also good.”

Rarity stared from one to the other. Each looked at some object rather than each other. The awkward silence stretched on for almost a minute. Finally Radiant coughed and said formally, “Well I’d best get back to work.” He turned away from her. “I’m glad we had this talk.”

“Yes, sir,” Fluttershy said as she closed her eyes. Radiant stepped towards the door and Rarity felt her curls tighten. She didn’t know what that was about, but clearly Fluttershy looked absolutely miserable.

“Sir!” Rarity began, but was silenced by the look from the Pegasus. It was a look that was not going to suffer scolding from a unicorn a third his age. “I... just wanted to thank you for your assistance with the fire.” She said gracefully, smiling as sweetly as she could manage. That hard look didn’t soften in the slightest as he stared down at her. Sudden Rarity wanted to be anywhere but here.

“You’re her friend?” he asked bluntly. The stern look suggested that Rarity had done something warranting disciplinary action.

“Y...yes, sir. I am. Rarity.”

“I know; you are that show off from the Young Flyers Competition.” Rarity’s smile curdled and she fought desperately to maintain it. “Take care of her.” He said simply, glancing back to where Fluttershy lay as if asleep. Rarity could only nod before he strode out of the room once again.

“What was that all about?” Rarity looked back at Fluttershy, and pressed her lips together. There was a place and a time for such questions. She smiled and returned to her friend’s side, “Now, how about we get your mane in some order? Or there were some lovely pastries I could...” Rarity’s words faded as she saw the steady silent tears running down her friend’s cheeks. She didn’t understand the why, but she knew what Fluttershy needed. Rarity didn’t hesitate a second as she walked to her and carefully hugged her injured friend and held her as she wept.

I will help her feel better, no matter what.

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Apple Bloom awoke to the hazy predawn glow coming over the horizon. It wasn't unusual for her to get up this early when Applejack and Big Macintosh tended to chores. She'd often rouse herself and cook breakfast along with Granny Smith. She sat up, wrapped up in her Cutie Mark Crusader cloak and saw Fury sitting at the mouth of the cave. Apple Bloom saw the quiet look on her face. The young filly had never seen anypony looking so... lonely.

She looked at Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle still snoring away and quietly approached. Fury just looked back at her with a smoldering red eye and then back out. She was staring at Canterlot, Apple Bloom realized. Apple Acres and Ponyville lay right in her path. "Um, good morning, Fury."

"Good Morning, Apple Bloom," Fury replied softly, but her tone echoed the filly's. There was little good in this coming morning.

Apple Bloom nudged open the flaps on her saddle bags and took out one of Granny Smith's pies. It was a little smooshed after their tussle with the chimera, but still more or less sound. She broke it into two pieces, taking a large bite out of one and swallowing with relish, and offered one half to the Nightmare. "Want some?"

The Nightmare paused and then carefully took it in her hooves. Immediately the golden crust blackened and the filling began to bubble, hiss, blacken, and char. Fury looked at the smoking mess with a soft sigh and then began to eat the burnt meal. Apple Bloom just watched in shock and she choked down the burned meal with the same resoluteness she did with everything else. "It's good..." Fury said softly, though the insincerity was obvious even to Apple Bloom.

The awkwardness extended for a few minutes as they ate, before Apple Bloom wiped away her crumbs and looked at that burning mushroom cloud on Fury's ebony flank. "How'd you get that cutie mark?" It might have been a stupid question, but it was all she could think to ask.

Nightmare Fury glanced back at herself and then finished off the last of the pie. "I chose it when I changed my cutie mark."

Apple Bloom's eyes widened. "You... picked it? But Twilight Sparkle said nopony could make a cutie mark appear! She even tried to magic one and it just faded."

“Your Twilight Sparkle’s right. There is no normal magic that can affect a cutie mark. That’s because a cutie mark is a reflection of your truest self. It’s a label that says who you are.”

“Really? But Miss Cherilee said it shows our talents.”

The nightmare shook her head. “It’s more than just talent. It’s... you. A symbol that represents you and all that you are. And once that’s decided, it never changes.” The black pony looked back at her own cutie mark before she said in a low, regretful voice, “When we became Nightmares we forced our cutie marks to change. Forced ourselves to change.”

“I don’t get it. Why would changing a cutie mark be so bad?”

Fury sighed and tapped her hoof on the stones. “Things are as nature intends. There’s a natural way to the world, and a natural way to get your cutie marks. When you get it, it’s a perfect symbol for who you are. Trying to change a cutie mark is a mistake. It’s... preferring a lie over the truth. It’s wrong.”

“But you did it anyway?”

“For power. For the ability to hurt my enemy and take my revenge,” she looked at Apple Bloom with the saddest smile. “There’s a natural magic in all ponies, from Unicorns able to do tricks to a Pegasus’ flight to an Earth pony’s gift for caring for nature. It’s a good magic. But by changing our cutie marks to our own selfish ends, we gained terrible magical power.”

Apple Bloom cocked her head, “You sound like you don’t want it.”

Nightmare Fury closed her burning eyes for a long moment and then looked at her hooves. “I have the power to burn my enemies. To destroy at will... to destroy even by accident. I can destroy things simply by standing in place if I’m not careful.” She brought her hoof down in a tiny miniature explosion that looked cute, but reminded Apple Bloom of an exploded oak tree. “And I will use this power to get my revenge, or be destroyed trying.” Then she closed her eyes and sighed softly, “But I would have liked to have tasted that pie.”

Apple Bloom's ears drooped. "You're still going to burn Ponyville?"

"I have to draw my enemy out to face me. She hasn't shown herself yet, so clearly burning a forest isn't enough."

"Well," Apple Bloom thought furiously. "What if... what if we find this enemy of yours? We could give her your challenge and you could settle things away from Ponyville."

Nightmare Fury was silent for a long time, looking at the horizon. "If you want to find Princess Celestia and give her my challenge, so be it."

"Princess... Princess Celestia?!" Gasp'd Apple Bloom in horror. "That's your enemy?" Her raised voice roused her two friends. "How could you hate Princess Celestia? She's the kindest, most wonderful-"

"Don't!" Shouted Fury as she rose to her hooves, her mane flaring and snapping. Apple Bloom jumped back, but her saddlebags ignited to the sweet stench of burning pastries. All three stared in fear as Fury drew herself up and took a deep breath. "Don't tell me how much you love her. Of course you love her. Everypony does! But you don't know what she did to me. What she did to Luna! I don't care how much sweetness and light and love you feel for her, I will burn her to ash and dust or lay waste to everything she holds dear! Do you understand me?" She roared, and the stone under her hooves started to bubble and smoke from the bluish flames flickering amid the yellow fire.

Their terrified expressions were answer enough. Fury let out a long, slow breath as the heat cooled and she stepped outside. "Come on. I'll see you home at least." She didn't add what would follow shortly thereafter. One by one the Cutie Mark Crusaders filed out, their heads low to match their spirits. "And Apple Bloom, I'm sorry that I couldn't be... nice... for you."

The morning sun rose on a soggy, wet Ponyville. The haze of smoke had largely cleared, but the stink remained. Muddy ash choked the rivers and lakes around the community, and the sudden widespread downpour had the Equestria river running high along its banks. Overhead, Cloudsdale had returned to its white colors now that it had exhausted its

rain. The pegasus town now resembled an overstretched mishmash of itself; a cottony copy now stretched and tugged in random directions. It leaked rainbows in a dozen incomplete arcs.

Together the four walked in silence. In the early morning light they could see the apple orchards clearly now. Acre upon acre of apple trees as far as a pony could see. Behind them was the broad brown ribbon of the Equestria River and the rooftops of Ponyville.

Then Nightmare Fury came up short and the fillies snapped out of their funk to gape in amazement. Along the edge of Apple Acres a muddy trench had been dug out, the earth stacked in an embankment running as far as they could see. Crates and slates line the top in an impromptu battlement and as they stood gaping in amazement the thunder of dozens of ponies echoed in the air. One head, then another, then another popped into view over the edge. Big Macintosh wore a metal bucket atop his head; Granny Smith sported a pegasus aviator's cap.

And there in the middle was Applejack wearing a battered up football helmet in her toughest duds. "This here is Apple Acres and ya'll ain't welcome! You want ta get to Ponyville, you'll have to go through us!" The rest of the Apple family took up her words with cheers.

For the longest moment nothing happened. And then Fury lips curled slowly upwards; not in sadness but in anticipation. She spread her flaming hooves wide and lowered her head to charge, "Gladly!"

Chapter 5

Roast Apples

The defense of Apple Acres had taken the entire Apple clan to arrange in the cold and rainy hours before dawn. The plan had changed from 'run' to 'fight' and strange energy seemed to seize the colts and mares of the family as they'd roused to push through the night without hesitation or rest. Even Granny Smith leapt to the occasion, which was something of a marvel in and of itself with her hip. Applejack might not have known the first thing about the kind of fighting they'd have to do, but Braeburn and her cousins arranged the defense of Appleloosa against rampaging buffalo.

A similar defense had been arranged here and threw a few new ideas into the plan. Big Macintosh and the other colts took the snow ploughs out and carved a moat clear around the farm. The wet, muddy berm, now topped with every soaked crate and spare board they could put their hooves on, rose above the sludge filled ditch. Applejack doubted even a Nightmare's fires would burn covered in that muck. Other surprises were rigged as they readied to fight. Everypony who could find a blanket or quilt soaked it through before tying it on.

"We're as ready as we're gonna get!" Applejack said as she hopped on to the muddy berm and pointed south towards the line of gray smoke and steam. "This here is where we're gonna make our stand and show this critter that it might cook up the Everfree Forest, but Apple Acres is a whole other barrel of Apples! Everypony get in their places." She scanned the crowd. "Apple Fritter! Did you find Apple Bloom and her friends?"

The pale yellow pony shook her head once, chewing the end of her green mane nervously. Applejack stomped her hoof. "Tarnation! I swear I'm gonna hogtie that filly next chance I get!"

"Applejack!" Shouted Twilight Sparkle from the direction of Ponyville. She ran up quick, panting for breath. She stopped and stared at them in shock. "What are you doing? The Mayor needs everypony on the other side of the river now! There's reinforcements from Canterlot arriving soon and-"

“Nothing doing, Twilight Sparkle.” Applejack cut in with a sharp sweep of her fetlock and then stamped firmly. “This is our land and our fight. No pony’s gonna make us leave it without a tussel!” The entire Apple family gave a resounding cheer.

Twilight pointed a hoof towards Fluttershy’s cottage roof to the west, “But... Applejack! You saw what she did to Fluttershy!”

“Darn right I did, thanks for reminding me.” She snorted, looking at the distant black figure approaching. “I owe her a good couple o’ swift kicks for Fluttershy!”

“Ugh, why are you being so stubborn?” Twilight Sparkle asked with a groan.

Applejack looked worried, even hurt, and slid down the berm to stand before her friend, gazing into her eyes. “This ain’t about being stubborn, Twilight. This is about doing what’s right. Running with our tails tucked to let all this burn? Ya know that ain’t right.” She put her hoof on the purple unicorn’s shoulder. “Ya gotta understand, Twilight. Not a one of us could forgive ourselves if we didn’t fight for all this. We gotta.”

Twilight Sparkle grit her teeth to suppress a little scream. “They’re just-“ but the rest of the sentence died in her throat as she saw the look in every pony’s eye. *Just Trees*, she’d almost said. Just like Ponyville was just houses and Cloudsdale was just clouds. She could have kicked herself. Every pony looked ready to fight for the farm as devotedly as if they were fighting for each other. Maybe she couldn’t understand it, but she could respect it. “Are you sure you want to stick to this?”

“Ya gotta ask?” Applejack replied with an easy grin, but worry was mirrored in both their faces. Another of her friends putting themselves in harm’s way! Of course Applejack was right, and that made it even more aggravating.

“Fine. Fine! But I am going to fight alongside you!” Twilight said firmly.

“Nothing doing, Twilight.” The purple unicorn’s left eye started to twitch, feeling as though she verged on throttling her dear friend and saving Ponyville the trouble. Applejack looked towards the Crusader’s tree house. “Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle are missing. Ya gotta find them. Make sure they get to Ponyville safe and sound.”

For the longest moment Applejack was certain that Twilight Sparkle was going to argue. She seemed to be building fit to burst! Then she let out her breath in a huff. "Okay. But soon as I find them and they're safe, I'm coming back to help you! Do you hear me?" She said as she shook Applejack with far more vigor than a bookworm should have managed.

"There she is!" yelled Red Delicious, pointing out over the low ridge.

Applejack climbed back atop the berm and straighten Old Uncle Applecore's football helmet. Glaring out at Nightmare Fury she stomped her hoof firmly. "This here is Apple Acres and ya'll ain't welcome! You want ta get to Ponyville, you'll have to go through us!" The rest of the Apple family took up her words with cheers.

For the longest moment the Nightmare simple stood there with her head lowered. Then she spread her front hooves wide and seemed to bow to Applejack, "Gladly." Applejack stiffened as Fury rose, "But first, I need you to take something off my hooves." She stepped aside to reveal the three cutie mark crusaders.

Applejack staggered a moment like she'd just been applebucked, "Buh? Apple Bloom! Wha- why, how? Urrrrghhhh!" The bafflement gave way to exasperation, stamping her hooves before pointing at her sister. "Apple Bloom, you get away from her this second! You're grounded till yer Granny Smith's age, you hear me?"

Twilight Sparkle watched in amazement as Fury turned to say something to the girls. All three looked upset, but not scared. They were right next to the most dangerous monster in all of Equestria, weren't they? The girls nodded vigorously to whatever she said and trotted to the ditch. Big Macintosh bit a plank and easily swung it over as an impromptu bridge. All three carefully walked across it and slid down the berm.

Applejack was so frazzled that she thought she might lose it; and she couldn't do that. Not now. "Twilight Sparkle, get them outta here!"

"I wanna stay! Please sis!" Apple Bloom protested.

The little orange pegasus looked at her friend. "Apple Bloom, you promised!" The rose maned filly winced. Applejack would have given a bucket of sugarcubes to know what Scootaloo was talking about.

"I know but--"

Applejack looked at Fury. Why wasn't she charging? Flinging fire? It was almost like she was waiting for something. Applejack looked down at her little sister and slid down next to her. "You listen here, little appleseed. You gotta go. You and your friends. Twilight will see you back to Ponyville." She brushed Applebloom's hair out of her eyes with a soft smile, "But I need to know you're safe, Apple Bloom. So you're going with Twilight Sparkle, even if I gotta hogtie ya. Ya hear?"

Apple Bloom looked miserable and bit her lip, "But... it's my home too!"

"Apple Bloom, we promised," Sweetie Belle said quietly, glancing towards the berm.

"It is. But we can't fight for it if we're afraid for you. Please Apple Bloom." Applejack said as she looked down at her sister, trying to send her all the love she could to convince her that she had to do this.

Apple Bloom started to cry, but gave a jerky nod. Applejack nuzzled her forehead. "That's a good filly." She looked at Twilight Sparkle, "Get em outta here!"

"Right. Come on, girls." Twilight Sparkle made sure that Apple Bloom went ahead of her. She wouldn't risk her running off. "Soon as they're safe I'm coming back. And I'm bringing help! I promise!"

Applejack just smiled, knowing how much it killed Apple Bloom and Twilight Sparkle to go. She never cared more for either of them more than at that moment. She nodded once. "Right. Let's do this." She scaled the berm and looked at Fury. All the certainty she'd felt earlier was jumbled up now and she didn't know how she was supposed to feel right now. Burning eyes looked up at her as the pony sat in a circle of smoldering grass. "I ain't gonna ask ya ta leave."

Fury nodded. "And I won't ask you to surrender."

Respect. That was the disturbing expression Applejack saw in Fury's eyes. Whatever she was, she didn't look at them as if they were nothing. No mocking or taunting. She treated Applejack as a worthy opponent. "Thank you. For taking care of Apple Bloom," she blurted. Why had she just said that? She didn't want to thank her; didn't want to owe her anything.

Fury nodded her head again. She clenched her eyes closed a moment, teeth gritted as if in pain. Suddenly there was a little explosion of fire searing a circular patch of grass. The ground around her combusted as Fury looked up at Applejack, "Ready?"

It was now or never. "Launch!" She shouted as she looked over her shoulder at two large see-saws they'd constructed in the night and erected as soon as Fury had been spotted. Two colts leapt from the tops of trees on to the raised platforms. There was a heavy, wooden 'whump' as the far arms swung up and launched a fusillade of freshly baked goods high into the air.

Nightmare Fury, the terror of Equestria, the bane of old Canterlot, stood there in amazed confusion and was painted from head to hoof in gooey apple pie. "Ha ha, take that!" Cackled Granny Smith in glee!

Then Fury's blazing eyes opened like doors on a stove. The pie filling and crust immediately smoked and blackened, falling off her in a dark shower. She shook once and grinned. "My turn!" The flaming tail whirled behind her and began to lob balls of flame along the parapet before her. The wood and dirt deflected most of the flame, but burning bits tumbled down the far side. Ponies with buckets of moist dirt and water immediately doused them before they could spread.

Then she suddenly stopped and set her hooves. "Here she comes," Applejack warned. Fury raced down a little ways and turned to charge the ditch. She cleared it, landing with her blazing hooves digging into the moist dirt. "Now, Big Macintosh! Now!"

Big Macintosh rose at the top of the berm directly above Nightmare Fury. He set his front hooves against a crate lid and began to push the top of the berm down on her in a growing cascade of wet dirt and mud. Fritter tossed a wooden bucket of water up at Applejack, and the

orange pony caught it in her mouth, moving to where Big Macintosh relentlessly pushed Fury towards the water below.

Applejack let the water fly and it struck along her crackling red mane, extinguishing it in a huge ball of steam! Fury clenched her eyes closed, screaming in pain as her ebony coat hissed and sizzled. Her back hooves slipped into the muck, making it bubble furiously around her legs. Applejack tossed the bucket back to Apple Fritter and called to her brother, "One more good push!"

"Ayup," was all he said as he braced himself to finish the job. Powerful legs churned forward as the berm slowly slid down towards the ditch. A foot or two more and-

Fury exploded. Yellow fire erupted all along her back and the wave of heat was so intense that Applejack felt it through her waterlogged work clothes. A pillar of steam rose as the plank Big Mac pressed immediately ignited. He grunted anyway, shoving against the crackling wood as Fury dug into the wet bank.

No, not wet, Applejack realized. The heat she put out was baking the embankment, turning it firm enough to push against. "Buckets! More Buckets!" AppleJack stood on one side, Braeburn the other, tossing water as fast as ponies below could toss it to her in a bucket brigade. Hang on, Big Macintosh! Push her back! But the strongest of the Apple family was forced to give way as the wood under his hooves blackened and tongues of fire licked at his legs.

Something had to give. The plank volunteered. It snapped around his hooves as a burning hot cascade of roasted earth and crackling wood tumbled down upon him. The soaked mattress they'd wrapped around him hissed as Fury cleared the berm and leapt off into the orchard. Within seconds the apple trees were smoking and licks of fire were spreading everywhere.

"Fire crews! Get working!" Applejack shouted as she charged Fury. Mares and colts with buckets and shovels braved the terrible heat pouring off Fury to toss dirt and water on anything aflame. Fury might have made it past their first line of defense, but it wasn't their last! *Now if we can just avoid being cooked...*

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Twilight Sparkle trotted as fast as she could without leaving the Cutie Mark Crusaders behind. She contemplated teleporting straight to her library, but could she afford the fatigue and disorientation it caused? Taking one passenger was hard enough, but three? She could be out of commission for hours. Twilight glanced at the trio, "What were you three trying to do?"

"We were trying to stop her," Scootaloo said sullenly. Twilight Sparkle blinked in shock and then smiled. "So everypony would stop hating us for letting her out."

Sweetie Belle sighed, "But she's... weird."

"She's a monster, Sweetie Belle. A Nightmare." Twilight Sparkle said softly.

"No, she isn't." Said Apple Bloom sharply.

"What?"

Apple Bloom didn't look up from the dirt as she walked besides Twilight Sparkle. "She's not a monster. I mean she is, but she isn't."

"You're confused..." Twilight Sparkle began, but received a sullen look from the filly. "She's very dangerous..."

Scootaloo looked back over her shoulder at the scorched lines in the Everfree Forest that still smoked despite the rain, "Yeah, we kinda saw that."

"What we mean is that she's not like some monster running around destroying because she likes it. She doesn't." Sweetie Belle said as she looked up at Twilight Sparkle.

"What... what did she tell you back there? You mentioned a promise?" Twilight Sparkle asked, a little bit afraid of what the answer might be.

The Cutie Mark Crusaders glanced at each other, “She made us promise to get somewhere safe,” Apple Bloom muttered softly. “She said she was sorry she had to burn Apple Acres and Ponyville, but that she didn’t want to burn us too.” Apple Bloom bit her lip, “She said... she said I wasn’t chicken fer getting ta safety.” The filly rubbed away her tears before they could get far. Twilight Sparkle slowed a little as her brain mulled over the possibilities. They’d simply assumed from the outset that Fury was maliciously out to burn Equestria.

“What if she has a reason for doing all this?” Twilight Sparkle asked herself more than the girls.

“She does. She told us why.” Apple Bloom was so depressed she missed Twilight’s shocked expression for a second.

“She... told you?”

The three nodded. Scootaloo glanced behind them. “She said that Princess Celestia did something real bad to somepony that was her friend a long time ago. Hurt her real bad. So Fury wants to fight the Princess.”

“She’s going to burn up all of Equestria till she does or she’s stopped.” Sweetie Belle finished solemnly.

“Fight the Princess?” Twilight Sparkle marveled at the audacity. Absurd... and yet it made a horrible kind of sense. Eventually the Princess would have to appear to stop her. “Did you learn anything else about her?”

They looked a little less unhappy now that they had something to contribute. Sweetie Belle cocked her head and looked up at Twilight Sparkle, “She gets hot when she gets mad.”

“She’s got fire coming out her mane and hooves, Sweetie Belle.” Scootaloo said sullenly.

“No. I mean she gets hotter.” She looked at her friends. “Remember when we tried to say how Princess Celestia is good? She went all fwoosh! She got so hot her hooves melted the rock she was standing on. I saw.”

Her power increases with rage. Suddenly Twilight Sparkle didn't think the Princess fighting Fury was absurd any more. "If Fury blames the Princess and they fought..." If just talking about the Princess made her strong enough to melt stone... how hot could she become? "She really could burn all of Ponyville. All of Equestria." The lack of Princess Celestia's presence since this began suddenly made a lot more sense. Fury wasn't just a monster, she was a walking bomb. With the Princess as the trigger! If Fury thought Princess Celestia was at Ponyville instead of Canterlot, would she have spared Fluttershy and the girls?

"But she doesn't want to," Apple Bloom said immediately. "She's just... mad. And hurt. And upset." Apple Bloom hung her head again. "And I know just how she feels."

Twilight Sparkle looked at her and gave a little nudge and a smile. "Cheer up, Apple Bloom. If there's anypony that can handle herself in a fight, it's Applejack." Apple Bloom clearly wasn't convinced. Twilight Sparkle could use some convincing herself.

And if there's anypony with a chance of stopping Nightmare Fury, it's not the Princess. Not unless she wants all of Equestria to go up in a ball of smoke. If there was anypony who had a chance of taking Fury down it was her friends and Twilight Sparkle. When they reached the bridge to Ponyville, the Mayor was speaking with head pegasus Radiant and a pegasus captain of a dozen white flanked royal guards. Beneath the stone bridge, the Equestria river roared; its waters dark and nearly at its banks from last night's storm.

"Twilight Sparkle! You found the Cutie Mark Crusaders! Thank goodness." The mayor looked exhausted as she gestured to the pegasus besides her, "This is Captain Goodlight." Then the Mayor looked around, "Where is the Apple family? They're the last ones to be evacuated." The mayor looked over Twilight's shoulder as if expecting to see the fifty or so ponies trotting after her.

"They aren't coming. They're staying to fight for Apple Acres."

"Idiots." Snorted the pegasus guard captain. "They can't possibly mount a decent defense against a creature like that." Both the mayor and everypony in earshot looked shocked at the insult.

Twilight Sparkle's ears stood straight up. "Captain, they might be farmers but they're fighting for their home. Isn't that what we all should be doing?"

"Leave fighting to the fighters, ma'am." The guard captain said with a dismissive snort. "When the rest of our troops are formed up we'll show this Nightmare what a real fight looks like." He said in disdain as he walked back to where the pony soldiers stood at attention. They certainly looked impressive. Focused. Clean and confident in their polished armor. Maybe they could do it.

"Pffft. A bunch of puffed up ponies don't stand a chance against Fury," Scootaloo said, receiving looks from the rest. "What?"

"What about the rest of Ponyville? Are they going to help?" Twilight Sparkle asked as she looked around. There weren't many folks in sight, but the town hadn't been completely evacuated yet.

The Mayor looked at Goodlight and gave a little snort. "I know what you said about protecting our home, but Captain Goodlight overrode me. The Equestria Guard will fight the Nightmare, not us." She sighed, pushing her glasses up her muzzle. "There's several ponies still around. Your friends, the Cakes, Nurse Trueheart... not all of us have fled." There was a note of pride in her voice at that.

Twilight looked at the guards in their shiny new armor and lowered her voice, "Mayor, how much fighting do the Equestria Guard actually do?" Until recently, Equestria really didn't have many problems that weren't resolved by her majesty.

The Mayor didn't look confident at all as she shook her head. "I don't know, Miss Sparkle, and that's not a good sign." She looked back as Captain Goodlight looked back towards them sharply and a half dozen pegasus and unicorns marched up to surround Twilight Sparkle.

"What... Captain! What do you think you are doing?" The mayor protested.

"Hey, let me go! I have to get back to Apple Acres! I need to help Applejack!" Twilight Sparkle cried as the unicorns' horns glowed and summoned magic chains to bind her hooves.

“Hey! Let get go!” Apple Bloom charged Captain Goodlight and gave his leg a swift kick. His wings snapped once and knocked all three Cutie Mark Crusaders to the ground.

“You’re Twilight Sparkle?” He asked coldly as he stared into her eyes.

“Y...yes?”

“By the authority of the Princess of Equestria, you are under arrest.” He glared down at the three fillies. “The young as well for assaulting a member of the Equestrian Guard,” he added with a disdainful snort. One of the unicorns gave Twilight’s rump a sharp jab. When she tried a spell, the manacles gave her a zap that disrupted the magic! She could only look back at the smoke rising up over Apple Acres.

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Could sure use Twilight Sparkle about now! “Keep her moving! Don’t let her get set!” Applejack shouted as another tree began to crackle above the flaming pony. A sickly sweet smell rose above the smoke; roasted Apples. “Keep firing!” Red Delicious and Golden Delicious kicked a rapid fire barrage of apples against the black Nightmare. They burst in wet pops of steam and flaring apple juice, but each hit still hurt and prevented Fury from setting herself and tossing around fire. Granny Smith, Apple Tart, and Apple Fritter rained pies and pastries down in a steady avalanche of edible goods. No pony could aim well be pie in their eyes! “Braeburn! Haul her out of there!”

“You got it, cuzz! Yeee haw!” He cheered as he whirled a lasso overhead. “This here is a special trick straight from Appleloosa! Git along little pony!” He said as he expertly flicked the loop over Fury’s head. It would have been perfect if the rope hadn’t flashed to ash. Braeburn blinked stupidly at the end of his rope and grinned sheepishly, “Sorry, cuzz.”

“Forget that, you idjit! Look-“ But Braeburn paid attention to the wrong thing and Fury tagged him with a devastating rear kick that

knocked him sliding across the dirt, struggling for breath. “-out...” Applejack finished. Braeburn would bounce back, but she wasn’t sure about Apple Acres. “Get on those fires, Apples!” Anypony not fighting Fury assaulted the licking flames with shovelfuls of dirt, buckets of water, or wet blankets. Applejack couldn’t see how much was on fire; she couldn’t bear to think of it now.

They needed some way to lead her. Every minute under the trees was simply an opportunity for more fire. Braeburn’s lasso was a fine idea; she just needed a stouter lasso! Running to a heap of supplies she grabbed what she needed, hooked it into a loop, and raced back to the fight with her teeth clenched. *Now this is a rope trick*, she thought furiously as she jerked her head around and let the loop of chain fly. It settled around Fury’s neck and with a yank went tight. “Gotcha!”

Fury reared as the chain went taut and Applejack was nearly yanked right off her hooves! Big Macintosh found his own length of chain and tossed a second loop after the first. Getting to his hooves, Braeburn saw their plan and sent a third loop of chain flying. Digging in their hooves, the three started to drag her back towards the berm and the ditch. Sweat poured off Applejack, mixing with the hot water soaked into her clothes, as she struggled with the Nightmare. “Git! Off! Our! Farm!” She said through clenched teeth.

Fury faced away from them, hooves churning in the ground as she pulled opposite the three. Burning chunks of earth rained down on all three as the metal started to shimmer and glow red. She could feel the heat growing on her teeth.

“Applejack! Let go!” Shouted Red Delicious from the side.

Applejack could barely see with smoking clods raining down on the three of them. That’s crazy giving up talk! She pulled hard, feeling Fury start to slide after them. They had this! Then, with a resounding ‘ping’, the chains snapped and red hot links shot out in all directions away from Fury. The whiplash carried the chain straight back and crashed against the football helmet she wore and knocked her muzzle into the dirt. *If I’d been wearing my hat, that would have taken off my head!*

Freed of the chains and with a good build up of momentum, Fury broke away from the engagement. A trail of flames marked her

passage, licking at the green leaves and red apples as she raced between the trees towards Ponyville. Nothing could stop her now... and then the ground gave way as a canvas tarp stretched over a pit split at the first touch of her burning hooves. She could only jump and crash into the far lip of the hole. Cold water splashed beneath her, bringing a cry of pain as she fought clear of the hole. With a heave, Fury stood on the far back, looking back at the water.

“Yi yi yi yi!” A filly cried as Gala and Fuji swung down on a log stretched between two trees. Old Benedict had passed away years ago, but his sturdy trunk still served Apple Acres. The green and red twin mares riding the swinging log whooped as Fury stood right in the path of the trunk. This was it! The knockout blow!

Her teeth grit as Fury set herself. A flare erupted all around her as the trunk struck a glowing shoulder plate head on. The arc of flame touched the solid heartwood of the old apple tree and the massive log’s middle combusted and crumpled. The ends not even slowing, they swung up and out wildly. Gala and Fuji cried out in alarm as they were flung from the ends of Benedict and flew up into the air. They plummeted into the pit with a cry and a splash.

“Nice try,” Fury retorted, gasping for air as she looked back at the pit. “But fire beats wood.”

She looked forward in time to receive a faceful of snow plough.

Big Macintosh dug in with his usual solemn tenacity, hooves chewing up the turf as the broad blade pushed her back towards the edge of the pit. Fury punched her rear hooves into the ground, her front hooves blazing and snapping against the metal blade. It glowed softly around her hooves as Big Macintosh locked with Fury on the edge of the pit. Heat radiated in waves over the edge, but Big Macintosh simply lowered his head and kept up the pressure. Fury grit her teeth, eyes dripping fire as her tail snapped and lobbed fireballs that splashed ineffectively off the roof of the plough.

Fury lost one inch. Then two. Then three. Slowly and inevitably Big Macintosh drove her towards the water filled pit.

The metal slowly began to give way under her hooves as Fury stared into his eyes. “Push me in,” Fury gasped, “and they’ll boil.”

Big Macintosh's verdant eyes went wide, his step faltered for just a moment.

With a roar, Fury shoved the snow plough to the left and leapt to the right, sending the glowing blade into a trunk. Setting her front hooves, her rear hooves came up in a thunderous kick that lifted the side of the snow plough and flipped it over onto its roof, leaving Big Macintosh tangled in the harness.

"That should take care of you," Fury muttered, turning forward again towards her revenge.

Two leather boots filled her vision. The kick knocked her rolling away. "And that should take care of you!" Applejack panted, feeling her boots steaming around her feet. She stared at Fury thinking furiously, *please be taken care of!*

Fury then shook her shimmering helmet and glared back at Applejack. "Why is everypony trying to hit me when I'm not looking?" She rose to her hooves and gave a brisk shake.

"Ain't rules in fightin'!" Applejack retorted. "Just win!"

"Oh, so you agree with me." Fury said as she darted forward, drew short so Applejack's follow up kick went high, and leapt underneath Applejack. Her coveralls crackled and steamed as Fury gave a great heave and launched Applejack into the trunk of a tree. Apples cascaded down over the orange pony. One rolled to the Nightmare and she pressed her hoof against the top. "Anything to win," she said as the apple's skin blackened and split, issuing steam and boiling apple juice. "No matter whom you have to burn."

Applejack rose, smarting from the toss as she stared back at Fury. Was she just like Fury then, willing to do anything to defeat her enemy? "If that's what you think, why'd you save Gala and Fuji?"

Fury just shrugged, "Saving them was saving me. If the big pony believed in winning at any cost then I'd be beaten, and they'd be...." Her hoof came down on the apple, smashing it into a burning puddle.

Applejack swallowed hard.

"It's a fun idea... unrestrained combat. Isn't it?" Fury said as she scraped the smoking residue of her hoof, looking back at Applejack evenly. "Never fight to win at all costs. Not unless winning really matters." Fury said in her low, crackling voice, "Some prices you don't recover from."

Applejack shook her head hard, backing away as Fury stalked forward. "Why in tarnation are ya gabberin like this? Just fight!" Fury suddenly jerked, blue fire lancing from her body in all directions as she shook. The look on her face was agony. For a few seconds she looked ready to die. Then she grit her teeth, breathing deep, till the flares disappeared. She panted and gasped for breath a moment before looking at her opponent.

"We *are* fighting, Applejack." She replied, and gave a quick foreleg kick. When Applejack jumped aside, the workhorse landed just in time to have her legs knocked out from under her by a sweeping maneuver. "Fighting is more than kicks and bites." As Applejack rose she tried another applebuck kick, but Fury dodged to the side and brought her burning fore hooves down on Applejack's flank with a crack. "Fighting is in the mind, body, and heart. You only have to beat one to win." She once more whirled, her burning tail flashing over the battered football helmet she wore. Old Uncle Applecore saved Applejack's face from being cooked off. "Nightmare Moon taught me that. I thought it fit to share that with you," She said in a parting tone as she turned and started to trot away.

"Nightmare Moon..." Applejack sputtered as she rose on shaky hooves, " Nightmare Moon was a bad apple that deserved getting kicked clear outta Equestria!" Fury froze in place, facing away from Applejack. "Princess Celestia was right ta banish her! Good riddance!"

"Nice attack," Fury replied softly. Then she whirled, rearing up, and brought her hooves slamming straight down. The ground beneath them exploded, but a line of explosions roared one after the other straight towards Applejack.

"Aw horseapples..." she groaned and turned, jumping aside at the last minute as the line of explosions roared past her and blew a tree to splinters. She looked back at Nightmare Fury, rearing once again. I can't buck something blowing up, but I can keep away if I can get her out in the open! She turned and fled down a line through the orchard. This time, Fury pursued.

* * *

The Everfree Forest? More like Everfree Graveyard. Black, gray, and brown streaks cut around scattered patches of forest that withstood the fires as Nightmare Screamer flew overhead. Smoke rose from hundreds of hotspots. Fury sure knew how to make a mess. “Honestly, I can’t remember why we bothered using her in the first place. She was always a loose cannon.”

Nightmare Whisper laughed softly in her ear. “Force and passion are always useful. Particularly when coupled and stripped of sense. Now keep your eyes open. It should be somewhere beneath you.”

Indeed, Screamer could see the trail cutting through the burned trees and mud. The glint of glass met her eye and she dove, pulled short, and stuck the landing. Of course there was nopony around to see; that certainly soured her mood. The tree had once been hollowed out into a home, but the top half had snapped off and fallen back, creating a blackened ring filled with pulpy ash. Colored glass streaked the sides and lay in oddly colorful plotches around the ruined home. Blackened masks leered out of the debris. “Creepy. How did you even know it’s here?”

“The occupant was kind enough to tell me all about it in passing. It’s amazing how much some ponies will talk when they’re lonely. I’m sure you can relate.” Nightmare Screamer grit her teeth, wishing for the millionth time she could kick a voice. Hard. “You’d best hope you can find it. I’d hate to send you all the way to her homeland. That’d be quite a flight, even for you.” Nightmare Whispers said.

“Maybe I could, but what makes you think I’d come back?!” Nightmare Screamer snapped.

That smug sureness didn’t waver, “The same reason why you’re there now. You *always* come back, Screamer. Now do be a good girl and stop sulking. It’ll be in a pouch or jar in the root cellar. She wouldn’t keep it where something could happen to it.” Nightmare Screamer kicked the debris aside as she searched, imagining each ugly lump to be

Whisper's face. Underneath the overturned cauldron she discovered the trap door.

The root cellar reeked of smoke, but the piles of herbs and roots were intact. Dozens of jars lay in carefully ordered rows. "Now what? I can't tell one weed from another. This is a dirt pony thing."

"It won't be obvious. Look for something hidden."

"Right." Screamer didn't care for slow and subtle when she could get stuff done now. She smirked as she set herself and let the power flow through her. Her storm blue mane and tail crackled and snapped with yellow bolts. Lightning lanced out from her, pulverizing the shelves as lightning crackled and popped over every inch of the root cellar.

A crackling length of lightning touched the wall behind a shelf and popped a small hole. Screamer cut the light show, panting and aching. It hurt, oh pony did it hurt, but using her power was just so cool! "Voila." She said as she widened the hole with her hoof. Within were a few clay pots, a pouch, and a few carefully sealed rolls of parchment.

"Yes, Fury would be proud." Then there was a pause. "Yes. Yes! Oh I could kiss her filthy striped hide for this treasure." Screamer gave a shutter and shook her head as Nightmare Whispers grew excited. "There! That leather pouch. That's it! And that's not all," another soft laugh in her ears. "Why Zecora, what are you doing holding on to *these* herbs? Oh yes, quite delicious! Take that second jar to the left."

"Why, what is it?" Screamer stared at the strange purple leaves with little gemstone sparkles.

"A *very* special herb, cultivated by earth ponies centuries ago, to... heh... deal with magical pests." Whispers evidently found it quite amusing, "I thought it extinct long ago. I can only wonder where she found some."

"Who knows how dirt ponies find their weeds?" Screamer snorted, "Oh, well any grief I can give horn heads is something I can handle." She picked it up with her mouth and tucked it under a wing.

"Good. Destroy the rest. I have things to deal with here."

Screamer hesitated, never really sure when Whispers was 'gone'. "I think I'll just keep these for myself..." She commented, ears twitching. "Geeze, Nightmare Whispers is such an annoying, whiny, coward of a pony..." Another pause and she smirked, looking in the hidden space. "So these are valuable but you want me to destroy them? Then I guess it can't hurt to hold on to them. Just in case." She took the other three jars and tucked them under her wings as well. The she backed away and aimed a thunderous rear kick that pulverized the alcove. Once outside, she found some smoldering bits of wood and kicked them down into the cellar. It wasn't long before the herbs began to crackle and burn quite nicely.

"Just you wait, Whispers. When I find everything that you're hiding, you'll be running errands for me." Screamer promised to herself as she transferred the jars and pouch to her tail and flew away into the unmonitored sky.

* * *

"Granny Smith always warned me my yap would get me in trouble! Didn't think it'd be with a pony on fire!" Applejack shouted as she glanced behind her at Fury. The pursing pony trailed flames like blazing pegasus wings as she raced along a row parallel to Applejack's. Every second Fury pulled closer and closer, her eyes solid panes of yellow flame under red glowing armor. Applejack just clenched her eyes shut. *Faster! Faster! More speed! Imagine its Rainbow Dash at the Running of the Leaves.*

She peeked to her left and stared right into Fury's crackling eye as they raced neck and neck. Looks like she's picked how she's gonna try and beat me. Fury's tail lashed, lobbing flame that licked at Applejacks boots and tail.

Suddenly they reached the end of the row and the two ponies launched into the air side by side. The moment seemed to extend as they arched downwards into the vegetable garden in front of the barn. Hooves touched earth and Fury slammed sideways into Applejack. The contact was brief before Applejack staggered, but the orange pony felt the heat

through her almost dry coveralls. Rolling through cabbages and carrots, Applejack came to rest in a heap and gave her head a vigorous shake.

Fury raced past, circling around for a charge. Applejack looked around frantically, and then spotted a full rain barrel besides the barn. If she made it through this, she'd kiss Rainbow Dash! She raced to the barrel and pulled it forward, drenching herself. As the water fanned out behind her, Fury leapt aside and launched another barrage of flame from her flaming tail. "Time ta get dirty!" Applejack shouted, lunging forward and ducking underneath Fury. She lifted with her back and then bucked Fury over her haunches and into the muddy puddle. "That's for the Everfree Forest!" And Applejack launched herself on Fury's back, rolling her in the muck in a terrific hiss of steam. "And that's for Fluttershy!"

A hoof covered in steaming mud shot up, nearly taking the helmet off her head, but Applejack found herself grinning. Now this was a fight she could get into! Wrestling, backyard style! Without her flames, Applejack had a chance to finish this once and for all! Applejack got her rolled over and went for the pin! Big Macintosh and the other Apples were coming out of trees with more buckets of water. If they could just keep her from getting away...

Then Fury kicked up with all four hooves at once, heaving Applejack off of her. Coated in muck, she reared up and brought her front hooves down on the helmet. There might not have been an explosion, but the force cracked the old helmet and sent the yard spinning around Applejack. She recovered in time to spot a second leap by fury and with a cry Applejack bucked Fury clear through the wall of the barn!

"Ha! Ain't so hot without your fire, are ya?" Applejack yelled into the hole. Then she frowned as she heard the growing sound of hooves. With a tremendous crash, Fury rammed the side of the barn and sent half of it collapsing on Applejack. The orange pony pulled herself free with a groan, "That's the first time I've been hit by the side of a barn..." She mumbled as she staggered. Fury moved in, positioning herself for another kick.

But the Apple family had other plans. Yelling, whooping, and hollering they tackled Fury en masse. Some had the sense to try and soak her, but in a chaotic melee they simply mobbed her and each other in their eagerness to finish the fight once and for all. When Applejack pulled her

head together she stared at the enormous heap of ponies in the middle of a mud puddle and busted out laughing. Her cousins followed suit.

Then Braeburn, at the base of the heap, suddenly yelped. "Ah... hot... hot hot hot hot... Tarnation! My apples are burnin!" The mass gave a great surge and ponies went tumbling away in all directions. Standing in the middle of the ring of equine was Fury. The mud baked into clay, cracked and crumbled and let sullen red light gleam out.

"Enough!" Fury shouted and reared. White fire blazed to life, and she slammed her hooves down with an enormous explosion that send Applejack's kin flying, along with a good part of the vegetable garden. Fire seemed to spray off her again in a dazzling flares and arcs as she slammed her hooves again and again in a complete rampage! One shockwave blasted away the remainder of the barn. Another sent the windmill aloft like a rocket towards Ponyville.

Applejack stared at the fire at the heart of the destruction and narrowed her eyes. "You said it." She raced over and yelled as loud as she could over the explosions, "Hey Hot Head! Me and my friends are personal friends o the Princess!"

Fury paused to fix Applejack with her baleful gaze and stomped, sending an even larger blastwave ripping along the ground. Applejack jumped aside at the last minute, letting the explosion blast out the supports holding up the Apple Acres water tower. With a great crack, the massive container tilted and crashed to earth, sweeping everything before it in a deluge of water.

When the flood abated, it had pushed Fury all the way to the entry gate of the farm. Applejack trotted through the muck towards the prone shape under the arch. The blazing mane was gone, and in its place was a mane of red, orange, and yellow. Coughing water, Fury looked at her with normal bright red pony eyes. "You and your friends... you know Princess Celestia? Personally?"

"That's what I said. Shoot, my friend Twilight Sparkle's the Princess' favorite magic student. Corresponds every night it seems." Applejack frowned as she saw Fury rise to her hooves. "Awww, can't ya figger out when yer beat?"

Fury just closed her eyes as she smiled, "I'm quite bad at that, I admit." She didn't look beat at all. In fact, she looked poised to do something.

"Well let me help you-" but as Applejack went for the finishing blow Fury darted to the side and spun, delivering her own applebuck upside the orange pony's head. Applejack staggered back, but Fury didn't relent. Kicks. Bites. Shoves and slams. Fury built one attack upon the next. Applejack tried to protect her head and received kicks to the gut. She covered her middle, and was hit from the side. Again and again she tried to lunge and wrestle Fury to the ground again, but the black nightmare refused to let her close.

And with each blow, the Nightmare grew warmer and warmer. Applejack tried to set herself up for a kick, but Fury swept her hooves out from under her. Finally Fury reared her back legs up and landed both hooves against Applejack's side. Something inside her resisted and then snapped. Pain erupted all along her side and it was all she could do to keep from screaming.

Stepping away from a battered Applejack, Fury closed her eyes and with a soft fwoosh, relit herself. The water covering her hide dried almost immediately. "How'd you..." Applejack muttered as her body ached and threatened to give out. The pain in her side was so intense that she doubted she could so much as manage a nudge. "How'd you do that? You was beat..."

"I fight, Applejack. I fought for years. It's all that I'm good for." Fury replied as she looked down at Applejack, breathing hard as her body shimmered in the heat. "It'd take a lot more water than that to take me out."

"Fight ain't over." Applejack said as she drew in her breath. The spear of pain disagreed.

"Ours is," Fury replied simply. "And congratulations, you won."

"I... what?" Applejack shook her aching head again. "Don't mess with me!"

"Look." Fury pointed with her hoof, and Applejack hesitated before glancing behind her. The barn was a blazing heap of timber. Half the windows of the farm house were smashed and there were holes in the

roof. The windmill and water tower were both gone and there was a muddy pond where the vegetable garden once stood. And the trees...

The trees stood. Row upon row of greenery decorated with their red, gold, and green bounty. Here and there she could see smoke and blackened limbs, but the apple trees of apple acres stood proudly around the family that had fought for it.

"That is what you were fighting for, wasn't it?" Fury asked softly as her flames crackled solemnly.

Applejack couldn't speak; she simply nodded. The sight so beautiful it brought tears to her emerald eyes.

"Nice job," Fury said as she turned towards Ponyville.

The wonderful feeling vanished like a popped balloon. "Wait!" She said as she limped after Fury. "I can't let you go to Ponyville."

Fury stopped and just looked at her with an annoyed expression before shook her head. "You're Apple Bloom's sister, aren't you?"

"Buh... huh?" Now Applejack was completely befuddled. "Yeah, I am. Applejack. Why'd you ask?"

"I see where she gets it. She kept trying to stop me too." Fury took a deep breath and then looked evenly at her, "I'll tell you the same thing I told her. I have a grudge to settle with the Princess. If I have to burn down Ponyville, so be it. So long as it draws out Princess Celestia." She looked evenly at Applejack, "But, if your friend... this Twilight Sparkle... wants to face me in her place then so be it. Maybe she can stop me once and for all." Her eyes suddenly blazed with flame as she stomped one hoof. "And maybe, if I kill another of the Princess' favorites, she'll face me."

Applejack's jaw dropped. "You... I..." But Fury suddenly hugged herself and her mouth went wide. Flames started to pour from the blue white flaming mushroom cloud that was her Cutie Mark.

"Otherwise I'll burn Ponyville to ash right here and now!" She suddenly screamed, a swirling bonfire now completely engulfing Fury. "I

am sick and tired of waiting! I am tired of holding back! I want to burn! Burn everyone and everything! I want my revenge and I want it now! Nightmare Moon deserves no less! The Princess deserves no less!" She reared in the flame, and for a moment Applejack had an image of those hooves dropping and an explosion a thousand times greater than any before burning her, Apple Acres, and Ponyville to ash.

The flaming corona died and Fury sat in a bubbling pool of molten rock, hugging herself, teeth gritted in agony. Fury seemed to be glowing with a terrible internal fire as her cutie mark blazed. She took a few shallow breaths as she shook. "This has to end." Fury gasped, eyes clenched tight. Shaking, she opened one eye to look at her in pain, "You have till noon. She faces me before the bridge."

"I'll... I'll tell her," Applejack said. What else could she say to a pony in obvious agony before her?

Applejack limped a few feet away. "Applejack," the nightmare called from behind her. She looked back at Fury. That same expression she'd worn at the start of their fight. "I enjoyed our battle. You're a heck of a fighter."

Applejack's legs ached, her eye was swollen, work duds a ruin, and her entire body felt as if it'd been drug clear to Appleloosa and back. Still she smiled and nodded, "Yeah. You too."

* * *

"It's a mistake. That's what it is. A mistake," Twilight Sparkle said in a high strung voice as she paced back and forth with as much haste as the manacles allowed. "Princess Celestia probably told that idiotic Captain Notbright to protect me and somehow he thought she meant arrest me. That's it. Gotta be."

Spike just sat along with the Cutie Mark Crusaders in matching chains. Sweetie Belle seemed to be trying to conjure a light, let out an 'ow' with a wince, and repeated. Scootaloo did her best to try and chew through magic manacles. Apple Bloom just sulked. Spike breathed flame on one

scroll and watched it burn normally before tossing it into the fireplace. No messages that way. "Unless you can magic a message to the Princess, it's no use Twilight. So could you sit down?" Spike asked.

"Sit down? Sit down! Spike, right this minute Apple Acres could-" Spike reached out and grabbed Twilight Sparkle by the muzzle. The purple dragon glared into her eyes a moment then looked over at Apple Bloom. The filly gave them one long look and sighed softly, looking away. Twilight's head drooped as Spike released her, "Right. Right. Sit down and wait. Good idea."

Just then the door to the library opened, admitting a stern aged unicorn. Her sides were a soft sky blue with a darker midnight blue mane, her eyes hard like sapphires. On her flank were two crossed wands trailing sparkles. She walked slowly into the library with a haughty look of contempt that included everything and everypony inside it. "I am Lady Dignity, Chancellor to Princess Celestia."

The unicorn oozed so much protocol that Twilight stood and cleared her throat. "And I-"

"Yes, I know who you are: Princess Celestia's most *faithful* student. Twilight Sparkle. The protégé. And an incalculable, shameful worry for your mentor!" she said in perfectly clipped tones. Twilight Sparkle felt as if her stomach had fallen out.

"Woah... ah... oof... AH!" came a cry from behind Dignity. The unicorn stared ahead with a suffering look as an earth pony staggered in with a stack of books on her back. Her body and mane were an odd milky white that had a strange translucency. Much of her body was covered in a white dress. Watery blue eyes blinked in confusion through thick glasses as she stared around in approval. "Oh very nice. You know, Dignity, the libraries of Canterlot really lack this level of charm."

"Honesty, dear," Dignity said primly, "I am administering a reprimand!"

"You had her arrested just to be lectured by *you*? I thought the Princess banned torture," the odd white mare said as she shrugged the heavy books off. Scootaloo snorted, drawing both their gazes. Honesty took one look at the three and their chains and then arched a brow at Dignity. "Really? Chaining young, Dignity?"

The blue unicorn's cheeks flushed, "That was not in my instructions." As everypony looked on the unicorn gave a toss of her mane, "Fine. In the interests of expediency," Dignity swung her horn and the chains on the girls and spike vanished in a flash. "Twilight Sparkle, the Princess asked you be detained so she could speak with you personally."

Twilight Sparkle gasped, "No! If Fury learns she's here she could explode!"

Dignity groaned softly, looking at her as if she were a dunce, "We are quite aware of that. Thank you. However, it is not Princess Celestia that wished to address you."

Another pony stepped in the library. She looked a little older than Twilight recalled, with her dark purple flank and softly lighter blue mane. The moon rose on her flank like it did every night in the sky. Princess Luna shuffled back and forth on her hooves and gave a scared ghost of a smile, "Um... Hello Twilight Sparkle. I wanted to talk to you about helping my friend."

Chapter 6

Tinder

Princess Luna stood awkwardly in the door way of the library. It was the first time since Nightmare Moon's power had been broken that Twilight Sparkle had gotten a good look at the grayish purple Pegasus Unicorn princess. Her teal eyes looked past the mane falling across her eyes with a soft, haunted look. She wore a decorate harness inscribed with a crescent and glittering with countless stars. She shuffled back and forth on her delicate hooves as she avoided looking Twilight Sparkle in the eye. "I need your help to save Nightmare Fury. Please help me save my friend."

"Princess, I'm flattered you ask, but I wouldn't know the first place to start."

"Do to her what you did to me. Use your elements of harmony and make her right again." Luna asked softly, her soft teal eyes looking over the purple Unicorn. Luna lowered her horn to the chains holding Twilight prisoner and with a flash the chains disappeared.

"Princess. I... I can't. My friends and I have been in Ponyville for months now and we've never been able to summon the magic. I've tried spells and working together, but it just doesn't happen. I'm sorry." Twilight Sparkle said softly, tail and ears drooping.

"You might be surprised, Twilight Sparkle." Honesty said as the albino pony cracked open a book and carefully blew away the dust. "You may still be able to harness the power of the elements, but only with an understanding of who and what you face." She gave Twilight and Luna a gentle smile, coughing momentarily. "And fortunately, this plays to your strength, Miss Sparkle. Tell me, where did ponies come from?"

"Ponies? You mean the very first ponies?" Twilight Sparkle blinked. "There are so many stories. There's the Pegasus myth that ponies came from storm clouds. Oh, or the Unicorn story about ponies coming here from some magical world. Or that pony scientist in Manehattan who said Earth ponies evolved from shaggy cave ponies, and Unicorns and Pegasus are off shoots."

"All interesting stories. But tell me, have you heard the story of the World Tree?" Honesty said softly as she opened the book to a drawing of a massive tree looming over three smaller ones.

"The World Tree?" Twilight Sparkle said in fascination. "No, I haven't."

"It's the oldest myth for our origins. It was old even when the Princesses were born." Honesty said as she coughed and turned the pages. "Long long ago, the world was dry and lifeless, but the world wished to be full of life and wonder. From the Earth sprouted the World Tree. From it came our rain and water. Our grass and trees. All manner of beasts and creatures. And in time it shed three seeds that grew into the Tree of Power, the Tree of Wisdom, and the Tree of Love."

"Fascinating," Twilight Sparkle said as she looked at the image of the three trees. "But what does that have to do with Nightmare Fury?"

"You will see," Honesty said softly, earning soft scoff from Lady Dignity. Honesty's milky eyes turned towards the three Cutie Mark Crusaders and asked softly, "But tell me, girls, from their names, which tree do you think sounds best?"

"Uh, power!" Scootaloo said with a sudden grin. "With power you can do anything!"

"Wisdom," Sweetie Belle said simply, looking at Scootaloo with a smirk, "Power's useless if you don't know what to do with it."

"Nuh-uh."

"Yeah-huh!"

Applebloom opened her mouth once, glancing in the direction of apple Acres. "Love," she said softly. Her friends looked at her and put their hooves around Apple Bloom's shoulders.

"There? See? Even today ponies know which of the three trees they came from. The Pegasus were born from the Tree of Power, giving them strength, grace, endurance, and flight. The Unicorns came from the Tree of Wisdom, possessing the knowledge and ability to do real magic and to create wonders. The Earth ponies were born of Love, and it is from that

love that the deep affinity for land and nature was born. And for a time the world knew joy and harmony. The World Tree thrived and magic spread through the world.”

“Bet something bad happens,” Scootaloo said, and then the orange Pegasus caught Twilight’s scowl, “What? That’s how these stories always go.”

“Indeed, something bad did happen. We may never know the source, but a great evil was born in the shade of the world tree. An evil so powerful that the World Tree was broken and destroyed. Discord was created, and its elements were rage, hatred, treachery, callousness, and lies.” Honesty voice dropped, and for a moment the lights in the library dimmed and the air grew oddly colder. Pony kind was scattered far and wide, and terrible new monsters rampaged.”

“Elements of Discord,” Twilight Sparkle muttered to herself. “Counterparts to the Elements of Harmony?”

Honesty nodded once. “Yes, though some may say the Elements of Harmony are counterparts to the Elements of Discord. With the breaking of the World Tree the world went wild. The sun rose at different times of the day, the moon emerging when it wished or blocking out the sun. The constellations crawled across the sky. Storms roared where and how they wished and forests grew dark and tangled. Whether due to the elements, or simply being driven out into the wild world, pony turned against pony.”

“What? No way! Ponies fighting each other?” Spike gasped.

“Oh yes,” said Dignity primly, drawing all eyes. “The Unicorn bastions of Corona, Truespire, and Purity were beset for centuries by Pegasus raiders and Earth pony thieves and scavengers. Our mastery of magic kept us safe for the most part, but there are many histories about our ancient homes being riven by terrific hurricanes or starved with drought.” She stamped her hoof sharply. “For ages on end, the Unicorn Queens fought to keep the Pegasus at bay and the Earth Ponies bound.”

“Bound? You mean as slaves? You kept Earth ponies as slaves?!” Apple Bloom gasped.

"Of course. You don't expect that they would waste their magic growing *food*, did you?" Dignity replied coolly. "Sadly the old kingdoms fell one by one from within and without."

Only Dignity seemed to think that was a terrible thing. Harmony coughed softly, "There are countless stories of Unicorn atrocity against the Pegasus; and stories of Pegasus against Earth ponies. It was a brutal time, and at the worst of it the Pegasus King and Unicorn Queen pledged war upon each other."

Harmony then smiled softly, "But then, something unexpected happened. The son of the Pegasus King, Prince Valor, stumbled across the daughter of the Unicorn Queen, Princess Virtue. And contrary to... well... everything... they fell in love."

Dignity harrumphed softly. Luna looked incredibly sad. Scootaloo rolled her eyes with an impatient snort.

"They fell in love?" Twilight Sparkle asked, just a touch skeptical. "Just like that?"

Honesty looked at her with a curious smile. "You don't believe in love, Miss Sparkle?"

"Well, it does seem a bit... um... convenient." Twilight Sparkle said with a blush as she tapped her hooves together.

"Never underestimate love. It builds up what is destroyed. It tears down that which could otherwise not be broken. It violates sense and logic and all reason; a force of nature every bit as powerful as magic and storm." Harmony said softly, staring at Twilight through her thick glasses. "It may also be that years of constant struggle had blunted the old hatreds. Regardless, they did the unthinkable in their love, they defied their parents and called for an end to the fighting. Together they established a city for all ponies. Canterlot."

Twilight Sparkle looked out the window towards the city perched on the side of the mountain, but then frowned. "Canterlot... that was the city the girls found in the Everfree Forest, wasn't it?"

"Clever girl. And it was where you found the Elements of Harmony when you faced Nightmare Moon." Twilight glanced at Luna, but the purple

gray filly appeared lost in thought as Honesty continued, "Prince Valor and Princess Virtue made their home, and saw their followers swell in number. First by the dozens, then by the hundreds, ponies of all sorts came. But all that was nothing compared to the miracle that happened next. From their love and union was born a pony with the magic of a Unicorn, the wings of a Pegasus, and the great love of the Earth ponies. Princess Celestia. And some years later..." Honesty's pale eyes turned towards Luna, how shuffled nervously.

"No way!" gasped the girls.

Spike crossed his arms, "I saw that one coming."

"Princess?" Twilight Sparkle said softly as she stepped closer to Luna, marveling. She'd always known that the Princesses were special, but she'd never realized until now what they represented. Unity. Love. Harmony.

"They were... very kind." Luna murmured softly, closing her eyes as she turned away.

"What happened to Canterlot then?"

Harmony sighed. Dignity suddenly tapped her hoof firmly and pointed her horn at the Cutie Mark Crusaders. "That's quite enough for the moment," she said sharply as she looked at the three young ponies. "Come with me girls."

"Huh? What's going on?" Apple Bloom said as they rose to their feet.

Dignity looked down at the three, stifling their questions with a strict glare before looking over at Twilight Sparkle. "I understand this library has been furnished as a residence. We will avail ourselves of your kitchen." And with no further comment let the girls from the room.

Once they'd left, Honesty said matter of factly, "The Pegasus King and Unicorn Queen were not pleased by what their wayward children had done. Their numbers and followers dwindling daily, they rallied their most rabid and loyal followers and attacked Canterlot together. And in the fighting, Prince Valor and Princess Virtue were slain." Twilight saw Luna flinch at the word.

“They killed their own children?” Twilight Whispered in horror. Honesty wiped away a tear as Luna stood as still as stone.

Harmony nodded once, “Yes. They did. But the end of that terrible battle broke both their reigns. No pony would follow a leader so cruel ever again. The princesses were elevated to the rulers of Canterlot, though not uncontested.”

Harmony smiled at Luna’s back. “For a time, it was wonderful. Despite countless bickering aristoponies, no pony truly wanted to go back to the dark times. The Princesses possessed new and wondrous abilities. For the first time, the sun rose and set at the same time every day. The moon filled the sky only in its absence. The stars ended their wandering and new delights filled the heavens. But more than that were the wonders the ponies did for themselves. Pegasus ponies drove away the worst of the weather, and brought rain when needed. Earth ponies grew food enough for all without whip or enchantment. Unicorns used their magic to create things needed by all. It’s a miracle that persists to this day.”

“And then...?” Twilight Sparkle asked softly. Harmony just looked at the young princess, as did Dignity and then all the rest.

Luna slowly walked to a patch of sunlight that poured through around window, her teal eyes gazing at the sun as her light blue mane shifted about her shoulders in that invisible gaze. “It was such a silly argument...” she said softly, her horn glowing in the light.

* * *

Applejack was definitely not feeling up for a run to Ponyville, but with Fury shimmering at the head of the shallow valley behind her the orange workhorse managed a brisk trot. She passed between the iron light posts flanking both ends of the stone span and skidded to a halt. Filling Ponyville in row and squares were the brilliantly armored Equestrian Guard. More than Applejack had ever seen, even at the grand Galloping Gala. Pegasus and Unicorns and Earth Ponies all arranged in their gleaming rectangular formations. “Shoot, I reckon they brought gosh darned guard in Equestria,”

she said softly as she cleared the bridge. Slowly the guard began to cross, forming up along the river.

“Pssst!” Applejack looked around. “Psssssst!” Applejack frowned as she looked at the doors and windows. Suddenly it sounded again right in her ear, “PSsssssssssssst!” Applejack glanced up at a lone cloud a foot overhead just barely large enough to conceal a Rainbow Dashed sized pony.

“That’s got to be the worst disguise I’ve ever seen, Dash,” Applejack said flatly.

Rainbow Dash stuck her head out, drew her hoof across her lips, and then the cloud raced around the corner behind Sugarcube Corner. Applejack signed and followed, but started when she saw all her friends together. The sight of Fluttershy up and about, despite the bandages covering her, brought a relieved smile. “What are ya’ll doin? I got to talk to Twilight lickity split.”

“She’s been arrested,” Rarity said solemnly.

“What?! What in land sakes for?”

“Dunno, but the Equestrian Guard have taken over Ponyville and evacuated everyone.” Rainbow Dash said sourly. “We snuck back in, hoping to find a way to bust out Twilight Sparkle. She’s being held in the library.”

“This is ridiculous!” Applejack said as she stomped her hoof, then winced at the stab of pain in her side. “I spoke with this Fury critter. She said if Twilight or the Princess doesn’t face her at noon she’s going to blow right through the town and be on her sweet way to Canterlot.”

Rarity peeked around the corner, “I think the Equestrian Guard might have a thing or two to say about that!”

“Rarity, you ain’t met Nightmare Fury. The only thing she’ll say to em is ‘Boom’ and ‘Fwoosh’.” Applejack said sourly.

“You survived. I’m sure the Equestrian Guard will handle themselves. All six divisions are here. That’s over six hundred ponies.” She looked at them in their shining armor and sighed, fluttering her eyes.

“Regardless, we gotta spring Twilight!” Rainbow Dash said. “It’s totally bogus she’s being locked up! She’s tried to do everything she could to help Ponyville since this whole thing started.”

“You’re right,” Applejack said as she slowly smiled. “Here’s what we’re gonna do...”

* * *

“It’s not fair,” Luna shouted at her sister, pointing at the sun through the window. “Why do you have to make the day longer just because it’s summer, Celestia?” The great hall of Canterlot, with its huge round table, was strewn with books, scrolls and papers of all kinds. There was a never ending stream of ponies waiting to meet with the princess. “We’re both Princesses. It should be half and half!”

Celestia didn’t look up from her scrolls as she magically animated three pens to scribble out three different notes. “We’re not discussing this now, Luna. The Earth Ponies need more sunlight now to get enough crops grown for winter. You can have longer nights then.”

“Sure, when it’s cold! No pony wants to be outside when there’s snow on the ground. And with nights this short, every pony is going to be asleep!”

Celestia’s lips set even more firmly as she scowled at the papers. “I have bigger concerns than your bruised ego. I have Unicorns filing complaints against Pegasus, Earth ponies accusing Unicorns of not paying for goods, and Pegasus threatening to rain on the Unicorn residences... and only them.” Her purple eyes looked hard at her sister. “I’m sorry you don’t like it, Luna, but I am up to my horn here.”

“Mother would have listened...” Luna muttered softly.

Celestia rose and slammed both her hooves on the table, sending inkwells rolling across her scrolls. “Mother and father are not here anymore. I am. And if this country is going to be more than just a dream then it will have to be lead!” Their eyes met across the great round table,

divided in black and gold, equal and balanced. Tears started to collect at the corner of Luna's eyes, and for a moment Celestia softened. "Luna..."

"Princess Celestia?" A young pale pony said from the doorway. Wrapped in a simple white cotton dress and hood her pale blue eyes blinked at the pair. "Lord Huffington simply insists on a meeting this moment. I told him you were busy but..." she blinked behind her glasses, looking from Celestia to Luna, "Oh my, is everything all right?"

Whatever Celestia was to say was lost. "Yes, Honesty. Thank you. Please show in Lord Huffington. Let's get this over with."

"You don't care!" Luna yelled across the table! "You don't care about me or mother or father or anything except being in charge!"

"Princess Luna!" Honesty exclaimed in shock. But Luna turned and ran from the room, sobbing.

Twilight Sparkle stared up at the illusion hovering in the middle of the library. It wavered and then disappeared. "That's what turned you into Nightmare Moon? A silly argument over how long the day was in summer?"

"No," Luna said softly, "It wasn't just that. But it was the first time I thought Celestia didn't love me." Luna looked at Twilight with an ashamed little smile. "I know it seems terribly selfish now, but I was just a filly and I wanted desperately to feel like some pony... any pony... in Equestria loved me."

Twilight Sparkle chewed her lip. Her own parents were a distant, but steady reminder that no matter what happened there'd be two ponies who cared about her. What would she be like if she'd lost both of them at the same age? Would she have been at the Summer Solstice Festival and seen real magic for the first time? Twilight glanced over at Honesty. "You were there too?" It seemed incredible.

"The princesses are not the only ponies blessed with longevity." Honesty said with a humble little smile. "You see, I was to become one of the Princess' Elements of Harmony."

"You?" Twilight Sparkle gasped, and then thought about it again. "Wait, and your name? Kinda obvious which Element you were."

“The bearer of many an unhappy truth,” Honesty said with a sad little smile. “Fortunately I’ve been blessed to help Celestia in one fashion or another. Keeping her books and records orderly is quite fulfilling for me at this age.”

“What about the other Elements? Who was Celestia’s Loyalty, Laughter, Kindness, and Generosity? What...” she glanced at Luna, standing there with her eyes closed and lips pressed firmly together. Slowly Twilight walked to her and gave her a little nuzzle. “I’m sorry, Princess Luna. We were talking over your memories, we’re we. What can you tell us about Fury? Who was she?”

Luna looked at Twilight and raised her horn again, “She was like no pony I’d ever met before.” The sunlight flared off the tip of Luna’s horn, breaking into colors that reassembled themselves into a dusty boulevard. Luna looked older now, closer to Twilight’s age. A circle of well groomed mares and colts surround Luna, sniggering to one another.

“Well it’s not as if you’re a real Princess.” A white Unicorn said with a sneer that would persist through thirty six generations. “Auntie Celestia is the real power in Canterlot. You just take care of trifles after all the important things are dealt with.”

“I am too a real Princess! I’m just the same as Celestia!” Luna protested as she turned again and again to face down the sniggers. “When I’m older you’ll see!”

“Oh please,” The ringleader snorted. “When you’re older, so will she, and she’ll still be in charge. Face it, one day she’ll manage the sun and the moon and stars. And then where will you be? Probably exiled like your grandparents.” The white Unicorn rubbed his chin, “On second thought, who’d take you?”

“Just... leave me alone! Why won’t you leave me alone!?” Luna cried out, but that just prompted more laughter.

“Raaaaaaah!” screamed a dark red mare charging head long into the knot of thoroughbreds. Her bright orange mane flaring, she leapt on to the Unicorn leader and drug him to the ground. “Leave her alone you jerks!” The small Earth pony said as she slammed her front hooves into his head and tore his fine clothes with her teeth. Some of the other colts tried to

come to his aid as the fillies backed away in distress, but they quickly thought better of it as she bit ears and bucked savagely.

The ringleader finally found his feet and ran off crying, but not before the red mare had ripped out a chunk of his fine tail. "The princess will learn of this!" he bawled.

"She all ready does ya pointy headed jackass!" the red mare shouted after him. She turned and faced Luna with a grin. Her coat had to be the filthiest Luna had ever seen; scratched and covered with dark splotches. Her mane and tail were simply masses of tangles and dirt, and she was missing a front tooth. "Heh, sorry about that. Hope I can get a royal pardon for thumping some well dressed mules." Her grin wavered a little. "No, really. Um, if you don't pardon me I'm pretty sure that Blueblood will have my mane for his mantle." Through the black soot that covered her Luna could barely make out her cutie mark of a burning rock.

"You have it!" Luna said with a grateful smile.

"Whew. That's a relief. The name's Firedamp, yer princessness." She said, giving one of the worst bows in Canterlot and almost falling on her face before she straightened. "I'd given that lot a swift kick on general principle. They'd try to pull that on any pony if they can get away with it. Just a herd of well bred lunk heads. They'd never have tried that with your sister."

"No. They wouldn't, would they?" Luna said softly, frowning, bowing her head.

Firedamp's grin faded a little, but she gave Luna's shoulder a nudge with her hoof. "Well, any time you need somepony to give a swift kick to the head, let me know. But I better get back to the forges. Armor doesn't make itself."

"You work at the forges?"

"Ehhh... work at... live in... it's all the same, really." Firedamp said as she tilted her head to the left and right. She faced Luna with a casual little smirk. "I'm an orphan, see? Better there than nowhere, ya know?" She said it so simply, as if it was no matter to her at all.

Luna just gazed at the filthy young mare and said softly, "I'm an orphan too." Firedamp looked awkward, rubbing the back of her head as she looked away in embarrassment. "Would you want to come with me to see the castle?" Firedamp's eyes were confused, and then popped wide.

"Would I? Sure! Can we see Valor's golden armor? I hear the forge ponies talking about it all time. And maybe get a bite to eat? Or two? Or three? Kicking thoroughbreds can build up an appetite!" Firedamp said happily as she pranced next to Luna on chipped hooves with that gap toothed grin.

"Sure," Luna said with a warm and happy smile as she walked besides her first real friend.

The image slowed to a freeze, and Twilight Sparkle just stared up at that ecstatic grin on the filthy young mare. "Firedamp." It was a strange word to Twilight, "What's that mean?"

"I'm not surprised you're unfamiliar with the term. It's a gas that builds up in coal mines; highly flammable. It's essentially a disaster waiting to happen." Honesty explained.

"That's unfair, Honesty," Luna said softly, with a frown. The pale mare gave an apologetic shrug.

"I see why she was your friend," Twilight Sparkle said softly. "You two had a lot in common."

"Everything and nothing, she always said." Luna smiled with a distant look, "Rich and poor, quiet and brash, afraid and fearless, but we were both lonely."

The image of the red pony disappeared in a swirl of color. Twilight closed her eyes. Everything had been so much different when she'd simply thought of Fury as a thing; something to be stopped. Now she wasn't Nightmare Fury any long. She was Firedamp, changed into a monster. Somehow she had to save her. She glanced at Luna and swallowed. Quietly she asked, "Luna, how did you learn how to become Nightmare Moon?"

Teal eyes closed.

* * *

This was the finest moment in the Equestrian Guard's history, Captain Goodlight reflected proudly as he looked down at the assembled ponies. A hundred ponies across and six deep, they had been gathered from all across Equestria. Pegasus, Unicorns, and Earth ponies alike. Ponies sharing their devotion to the Princess and to protect the realm. A Brigade of Light in defense of the realm! Goodlight's heart could have burst.

"Soldiers of Equestria," he shouted as he stood before them. "We gather this day for the finest battle in Equestria's history! A battle against an evil that good ponies have suffered from and been helpless to prevent! A battle in service to the Princess Celestia, as we have all sworn! This is our time. This is our glory!" He called as he raced back and forth before the assembled host.

"Huzzah! For the Princess! For Princess Celestia!" The cheer roared across the mile and a half separating the Equestrian Guard from Nightmare Fury, and Captain Goodlight took pride in the thought that the enemy of the kingdom heard their cheers.

"Let's not let our enemy wait for their demise, noble six hundred. All ponies, charge!" He said as he reared before the assembled soldiers and in a great silver wave they charged as one up the shallow valley. "Charge the Brigade of Light!"

* * *

The great table of Canterlot was as it had been those many years ago, covered in a variety of papers and documents of the princess. Luna sat in Celestia's chair, laughing brightly as Evening Star shared some of the more salacious gossip the bright blue Pegasus with a magenta mane had picked up around Canterlot. "I overheard Trueheart saying it myself." She said as she stood on the couch, put a hoof over her heart, and mimicked Celestia's friend perfectly, "Princess Luna places perilous preferences on ponies pretending position past proper perimeters!" She shook her head, sniggering. "Where does she get all those P's?"

"Trust me, if there's one thing Lady Trueheart doesn't lack, it's P's. I understand she's also got Q's in surplus." Morning Mist replied softly, smiling as she joined the ribald humor. The lavender Unicorn folded her legs in front of her demurely, looking fondly from one friend to the next. No matter how she smiled and laughed so properly, a hint of pain lingered in her eyes.

"I can get all the 'P' out of Trueheart I need." Firedamp said with a smile. She looked so different cleaned and in polished steel armor, "I just have to give her the look."

"What look?" Evening Star grinned. Firedamp's grin disappeared and her red eyes focused on the Pegasus. "Yeah, I get it." Firedamp didn't move a muscle. Her red gaze bored into the Pegasus, who's who grin started to slide away. "Enough, Damp. I get it!" Firedamp finally cracked a smile, and the others laughed. Everypony except Evening Star, whom returned to her seat, muttering to herself as she scowled.

"Relax Evening Star. Firedamp doesn't mean anything by it." A gray Pegasus said with a fond smile at the red pony. Firedamp's eyes widened and she at once resumed the look. The gray Pegasus simply gazed on with a steady smile.

Suddenly from under the table came a loud thunk and Fury's eyes widened. She rubbed her rear leg with a pained wince, "You kicked me, Briar!"

"Well it worked, didn't it?" The gray Pegasus counted with a smile. The rose on her flank was such a difference from her gray and gray on gray. She had a particularly lovely blue rose tucked behind her ear and woven into her drab mane.

"Yeah, but you're not supposed to kick people." Firedamp protested. "I mean, *you're* not supposed to, Briar. You're too nice for that. I should be the one that kicks people. And bites. Pummels. Bucks. You know, the whole lot."

"Even lovely roses have thorns," Briar Rose replied calmly. Luna wondered where she found the magnificent flowers the Pegasus wore in her mane. Most Pegasus didn't care about plants beyond edibility.

Evening Star suddenly launched herself at Firedamp, "Sneak attack!" Firedamp barely had time to turn as the Pegasus barreled into her and the two rolled across the stones. Firedamp came out on top of course. Sitting on the Pegasus' belly, smiling and arching a brow. "Okay, fine, you win!" Firedamp rose and walked back towards her seat. Evening Star narrowed her eyes, "RE-Sneak attack!" She shouted as she tried again. This time Firedamp wasn't even knocked over as she sat down on Evening Star and looked to her friends as if she was sitting on a Pegasus shaped couch. "Get off! Get off get off get off!" The rest of them laughed as Firedamp rose, and even Evening Star joined in.

Luna watched on as her friends argued, bantered, and laughed with a fond smile. They were the only ones who spent the long and lonely nights with her. Year after year, Celestia had assumed complete command of the Realm save for those quiet inconsequential times from sundown to sunrise. There wasn't much governance needed at the rare ball that Mist came up with or while every pony snoozed. And in truth, as long as she had her friends, Luna was content. She may have wanted more, but she knew this wasn't a bad life.

"Enjoying yourself, sister?" Princess Celestia said from the doorway. Not just the Princess, her own inner circle. That fussy Trueheart, a bright green Unicorn who always looked scandalized at the sight of the five of them. Pale Honesty hanging back, blinking in concern and always looking worried. Of all of them the easy going Ribald was the only one that Luna could tolerate; the rose Earth pony seemed to always have the bawdiest songs at the ready with her lute. There was no love lost in the glares Firedamp gave Arclight, the electric blue Pegasus in matching armor fluttering as if ready to punt the red mare from the castle. Lily gave her sister a neutral expression as the lovely turquoise Pegasus remained calm and aloof from it all. At least Luna and Celestia acknowledged each other as sisters.

"Princess Celestia!" Luna cried out as she rose to her hooves, yet something was amiss. Very amiss. They were early, and Celestia was always punctual when it came to the rising and falling of the sun. Still, Luna trotted forward. "You'll be pleased to know that once again absolutely, positively, and without a doubt nothing happened tonight." Luna said with a smile and a bow.

"I'm glad to hear it. It'll be the last time nothing happens for a while." Celestia replied evenly. The tone was all wrong. It was official, even for Celestia.

"Celestia?" Luna asked softly, warily, aware something was terribly wrong.

"I've watched you, Luna, spending night after night wasting your potential with these... friends of yours. You could be doing so much more."

Luna stepped back towards the four as they rose. "I want to, Celestia! You know I do."

"Good. You'll have your opportunity. From this point on you'll accompany me on my royal duties. You need to learn the management of a kingdom as more than just planning for one of your silly Galas."

Morning Mist gasped, and Luna stepped in front of her friend. "I thought that the balls were spectacular. Mist and I spent days planning them!" They were one of the rare times everypony respected the night.

"A spectacular waste of time and money," Celestia countered, "You don't see the bigger picture, Luna. You can't see it at night. Ponies work for their money and we can't waste it on inconsequentials. Earth Ponies are laying the foundations for a brand new Pony community outside the Free Forest and we can't waste time on silly dresses and dancing all night."

"Well fine! The five of us will go help them." Luna countered in a rush as she looked back at her friends.

"And how can I know you won't mess it up, Luna? Have you ever had to take charge of anything of consequence?"

"I would have if you'd let me!" Luna shouted back.

"Could we please take it down a notch?" Evening Star said as she landed between the two, pointing a hoof at Celestia. "It's not right you say she can't cause she doesn't know how to rule when you're the one saying what she can and can't do." Her wings fluttered briskly as she hovered in place.

"The Princess will not be criticized by a half bred Pegasus." Trueheart countered coldly. "Everything she's ever done has been for Equestria,

including directing her sister. A misbred Pegasus has no place addressing her.”

“Fine! How about by a no breed pony?” Firedamp retorted, leaping besides Evening Star and stamping her hooves at the princess’ friends.

There was a woosh and Arclight flashed across, turning to slam all four of her hooves into Firedamp’s side and knocked her sliding across the floor. The electric blue Pegasus gritted her teeth, “You dare?”

“For Luna? You bet!” Firedamp retorted and launched herself at the Pegasus. The two went rolling into the corner, biting and kicking.

“Celestia, maybe we should reconsider this,” Ribald said as the red pony walked up besides Celestia. She nodded her head at Luna with her easy smile, “This is a lot to throw on Luna at once. Little steps for a change? That way she won’t pull a muscle taking the weight of the country off your shoulders?”

For a moment, Celestia seemed to relent. Honesty walked up on Celestia’s other side. “There’s time to wait, isn’t there? The Dragons might be willing to wait a few years yet. And I’m sure the aristoponies will need a while to adjust as well. After all, it will take time for her to learn as you learned.”

Celestia’s eyes hardened, “I had to time to waste, Honesty. Not with silly little balls and crude ponies. And I see no point in wasting more time. Luna can join me and learn the duties required to run Equestria.”

Even Celestia’s coterie seemed shocked by this as Celestia turned to exit. Ribard glared at Celestia and the red mare grumbled, “For pony’s sake, what’s gotten into you lately, Celestia?” She looked back at the stunned Luna and the mare with the mandolin mark tried to share her easy smile, “Look, she’s got a lot on her mind right now. Between the dragons and the dunderbred aristoponies and the new settlements... We’ll talk with her about this later. All right, Luna girl?”

“Certainly there must be some way to resolve this,” Honesty said quickly in her soft, scratchy voice. Her watery sky blue eyes looked from Luna to her friends. “This isn’t fair.”

Ribald looked at Honesty and the last two left together. Luna's legs finally gave way. She hugged her head, clenching her eyes shut. Suddenly she was a filly again arguing with her sister, knowing that she wouldn't win because Luna was Luna and Celestia was Celestia. Solemnly her friends gathered around her, no one daring to say a word in the stillness.

"So sad."

The voice was barely audible. A murmur in her ear in a strange mare's voice. She opened her eyes to glance at her friends, but they too looked confused. "Evening? Did... you say something?" The blue Pegasus shook her head firmly.

"So sad such a wrong should be visited on innocents," the whisper said again, soft and sibilant, "So wrong that no pony can stand up to such an injustice."

"Who's there?" Luna said as she stood, looking around for the speaker. "What are you talking about?"

"I know a way such a wrong can be fought. I know a way a pony could have the power to fight such a wrong." Everypony froze. Despite themselves, ears strained. The voice was silent for the longest time and nopony dared to speak. Then the whisper spoke again, and Luna imagined it was like the sound of her mother long ago. "Tell me, Princess Luna, have you ever wondered about your soul mark?"

The image faded away this time, but Twilight Sparkle's eyes stared widely at the empty space. "Soul mark?"

"What today ponies call their Cutie Mark," Honesty replied, "An older term from a more archaic time."

Twilight Sparkle felt so overwhelmed as she stared at Luna. The Princess just looked distant and sad. "How could Princess Celestia do that to you?"

"I beg you not to judge Princess Celestia harshly. She responded to harsh times as best she could and was under constant duress," Honesty said as she adjusted her glasses. "There were numerous attempts by many ponies to try and circumvent her authority. Equestria might have

disintegrated had she not been as tough as she was.” Honesty looked at Luna. “Celestia was desperate for help, and I fear that desperation prompted rash decisions. Had she known what was to come, perhaps things would have ended differently.”

“So you listened to the whispers?” Twilight Sparkle asked as she walked to Luna.

Luna looked at Twilight Sparkle with a small smile and a flat look, “Do I look like an idiot? No pony listens to spooky whispers told to them in a magical disembodied voice. But we didn’t tell any pony about the whisperer, either. We just hoped that Celestia would change her mind and let us be together again.”

“Then... what made you become Nightmare Moon?”

* * *

Never had Captain Goodlight felt more glorious or free; his heart swelled with pride at the thunder of six hundred hooves beating in concern across the shallow valley. Pegasus would strike quick, evading flames. Unicorns would summon water and chains. Earth ponies would subdue for the Princess’ Justice. Equestria itself rode against this threat!

The threat simply stood in a patch of char, smoke rising from behind the ridge. No doubt the farm beyond lay in desolation. A lone black shape rimmed in white flame simply stood, waiting for their summary punishment. Flames flickered into the ground as they spread around the Nightmare in a pool. For the first time, caution began to nibble at his mane.

Fire... into the ground? The flames weren’t rising up but instead seemed to be sinking into the earth.

“All ponies, break off and reform! Break off and-“

The explosion roared across the valley separating Apple Acres from the bridge accompanied by a massive pillar of flaming Earth flying upwards into the sky. Another explosion, and another, and another; they blasted through the air like cannons shooting wads of stone skyward. Cannons to

the left. Cannons to the right. Cannons ahead. The blasts drowned out any attempt at order as the line broke. Guardponies hesitated, looking to their officers for orders.

Through the dust and smoke, flaming cratered pocked the land in all directions save behind; the one direction he could not go. There was only one command he could give. "Forward! Charge Forward!" He tried to take to the sky to get above the torn field and lead his soldiers onward.

Then the skies fell atop him in a rain of stone.

* * *

Canterlot lacked real dungeons. There were stories about the horrible mountain dungeons of the old Pegasus King or enchanted pits of the Unicorn Queen, but Prince Valor and Princess Virtue had never installed them in Canterlot and Celestia preferred exile to imprisonment for those rare moments of capital punishment. Still, there were numerous underground cellars and store rooms that could convert to cells in a pinch. And right now, the cells were more than enough dungeon for Princess Luna.

It had been a horrible time since she'd left her friends to work with Celestia. Seeing the constant pressures Celestia faced hadn't made her sister's edicts any easier to bear, particularly for Luna's friends. Without her balls and night time festivals, Morning Mist had become like a ghost inhabiting the upper floors. Briar Rose had tried to send her flowers, but by the time they reached Luna they were withered bouquets. Evening Star seemed even more unstable and impulsive than before, trying desperately to find someplace to accept her. And Firedamp...

Slowly she descended the stairs and walked along the stone tunnel, horn glowing softly in the stark chamber. It illuminated the bars of the cell, and she tried to magic them open. The wrought iron refused her; the accursed metal was always fickle with magic. Steel was far more compliant to Unicorn magic. She put her front hooves in the grate, her glowing purple horn slipping through to illuminate the rust red pony in the corner. "Oh, Firedamp."

Slowly Firedamp lifted her head, her hide covered in dark splotches from the many bruises that were all ready starting to swell. "Hey, little Luna." She staggered as she rose to her feet, swayed, and sat hard on her haunches. "Sorry. Got in a fight."

Luna swallowed hard, "So I heard. With Blueblood. And half his family."

"I'm pretty sure there might have been some guards in there too. It's kind of blurry," Firedamp said as she brushed her hoof through her short chopped mane. There had. Almost two dozen before she'd been subdued.

Luna had a vague plan that one day her friends would help her in her duties just like Celestia's friends did her. Whether it was Arclight carrying out her orders, Trueheart keeping a thousand points of etiquette straight, Ribald cracking a perfectly timed sardonic quip, sad looking Honesty giving advice, or Lily just listening to ideas and problems they all helped Celestia run the kingdom. When she was alone in their company Celestia transformed into a different mare. She smiled and laughed and seemed like a sister Luna had lost so many years ago. Luna wanted to be with her friends again. She wanted to laugh again like she once had.

"Well don't worry. I'll have you pardoned and out of here. Just sit tight."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," murmured a voice from down the hall. Luna pulled out her horn to shine it on the pale mare Honesty. Her sad eyes looked up at Luna from under her hood. "I'm sorry but Firedamp has already been sentenced. She's to be exiled." Honesty coughed softly, "I'm afraid this attack on a noble family has forced Princess Celestia's hoof."

"No!" Luna gasped softly. She had to stop this.

Firedamp just laughed softly, "It's all right Luna. I'll probably be sent to Ponyville. It won't be that bad. Lots of Earth Ponies." There was no joy to her laugh, but she was trying to be strong. She was always trying to be strong, even when beaten and in a cell. "Pity I won't have boob-blood to punt though."

"I'll visit. And I'll bring you back!" Luna promised softly. "Even Celestia can't stand him! I'll bring her around." *I have to.*

Firedamp just sat there with that sickly frozen smile. Then Luna noticed that Honesty hadn't left. She stood like a ghost in her white coat and simple hood and dress, eyes dropped but occasionally glancing up at Luna. "What? What is it, Honesty?"

"I'm afraid that Blueblood's father was quite insistent. Firedamp isn't being sent to Ponyville." The albino mare said in a whisper, "She's being sent... west."

"West? West where? There's nothing west of Canterlot!" Luna shouted. Nothing, and a pony wouldn't last long alone. Luna's body chilled and stilled as she stared at Honesty. "No..."

Honesty hung her head as she turned away, "Well, I just wanted you to know..." Slowly she walked back towards the stairs, "...so you could say good-bye..."

Firedamp sat like a sack of rust, her eyes glassy and dull. "So, that's it then."

"Firedamp, no..." Luna begged softly.

The red mare didn't move as she stared at the floor. "It's okay, Luna. Better than Ponyville. I'm so angry all the time. Angry with Celestia for everything she's done to you. Angry with these aristoponies and their stupid pride and pettiness. Angry with myself for not being able to keep a cool head."

Luna sat, staring at her friend and tears ran down her cheeks. She stretched a hoof through the bars. "And... me?"

Firedamp slowly raised her eyes to meet Luna's. Her lips curled just a little and she stretched out her hoof to touch Luna's. "Never."

Luna clenched her eyes shut as she began to shake. Her little snuffles and hiccups echoed up and down the passageway. This wasn't real. This couldn't be real. It was a nightmare. This couldn't be happening! She bowed her head, the light of her horn dying till darkness engulfed them, but she could feel Firedamp's hoof still on hers.

Sitting there in the dark, Luna felt her insides twist and wrench. Her heart felt as if it died in her chest as her eyes changed hard and cold. She would be just like Celestia... no, she would be more than Celestia! Like her, she would be hard and cold and unloving; her soul mark became stark and sharp, more blade than moon. She would rule Equestria fairly, silence the aristoponies and punish those who were wicked and mean; in that horrible wrongness she felt power such as she could not imagine. She would be a Nightmare for every pony that had wronged her; her sister most of all. She was Nightmare Moon.

The darkness lifted slowly, leaving Twilight Sparkle to stare at Luna standing all alone in the shaft of sunlight. That had been more than just illusions. Twilight Sparkle felt as if, for a moment, she'd walked in Princess Luna's hooves. She found herself grateful that Dignity had taken the Cutie Mark Crusaders from the room. But more than that, Twilight Sparkle walked to Luna and wrapped her fore legs around the purple gray pony, hugging her as she trembled.

"I'm so sorry Luna. I'm so very sorry." What else could she possibly say after that?

Luna stood awkwardly, but didn't pull away. When Twilight Sparkle composed herself, the Princess looked into her eyes, "I wish I could give you more, but I don't really remember anything after that point. It's all broken up, like a bad dream you can't quite recall. The next thing I remember was a light cutting through the bad dream, and then seeing you and your friends."

"I can summarize the gap," Honesty said softly. "There are very few written histories that survived that period. Most of the battle has been recalled as myth and mare's tales. Nightmare Moon waged war against her sister for ten long and bitter years. The whole time Princess Celestia struggled to save Luna and Equestria alike. In the end, Nightmare Moon was banished forever."

"But she wasn't. She came back." Twilight Sparkle pointed out as she released Luna.

"Yes. You see, only four of the five elements of Harmony assisted in the binding. One refused to do so." Honesty ducked her head sheepishly as she looked at Luna from over the tops of her glasses, "I knew what

Princess Celestia was doing was wrong, but I didn't stop her. I didn't try hard enough to make her see how her actions were a mistake."

Luna looked shocked to say the least. "I... Honesty... thank you."

"I'd appreciate if you didn't mention that to her majesty. It would be awkward," Honesty murmured, and Twilight Sparkle nodded at once. Straightening her thick glasses with a hoof, Honesty looked back at the stack of books. "Shortly after Nightmare Moon was banished, Nightmare Fury attacked Canterlot much as she is doing so now. In the fighting Ribald and Arclight were slain, and so only three of Celestia's Elements of Harmony were able to assist in the binding. Nightmare Stryfe orchestrated the murder of Trueheart before she was bound in a mirror. Nightmare Vicious slew Lily in the Everfree forest as she tried to reason with her sister. She was bound in a tree. Nightmare Screamer fled Equestria. By that point it was down to Celestia and I, and we focused on rebuilding Equestria."

"They died?" Twilight Sparkle felt sick. The thought of any of her friends gone forever hurt. Honesty nodded once to that question. "And Nightmare Whispers?"

"Disappeared, I'm afraid. As mysteriously as she appeared." Honesty concluded with a sigh. "I suppose without the other Nightmares she was too cowardly or powerless to act alone."

"Could she still be alive?" Twilight Sparkle asked in concern.

Honesty just gave a wan smile, "I am, Miss Sparkle. If Elements of Harmony can live so long, why not Elements of Discord?"

Luna turned to Luna looking quite drawn. Twilight Sparkle could only imagine how draining a spell like that had been. She had a new appreciation for the powers of the Princesses. "Was I able to help you, Twilight Sparkle?"

Twilight Sparkle thought for a moment, closing her eyes as she thought. "I think so. Maybe. But I'll need my friends. We won't have a chance without them."

* * *

Applejack looked at her friends, "All right. Final check for operation: Free Twilight. Rope?"

"Check!" said Rainbow Dash, holding the loop in her mouth, the hook dangling under her chin.

"Decoys?"

"Check!" Rarity said as she levitated the half dozen sewing dummies made in images of her friends.

"Honey?"

"C...c.... ready," Fluttershy said as she looked at the jars balanced carefully on her back.

"Whatever the hay Pinkie Pie's come up with?"

"Quack!" Went Pinkie Pie in a duck costume, a dozen balloons tied around her waist.

"Right. And apples?" She looked at her friends, then Applejack blinked and looked behind her at the bushel of red delicious. "Oh, right. Check." She took a deep breath and looked at her friends. "Let's do it."

True to their training and discipline, the guards hadn't left their positions at the library. They stood stalwart and defiant. Then a little metal hook slowly lowered behind an Earth pony guard and caught on the shoulder plates of his armor. The rope went taut and the guard disappeared into the sky with a wail.

"Halt, who goes there?" The guards shouted, looking around. Spotting the girls by the boutique, two charged towards the six, "You girls aren't supposed to be here! Ponyville is evacuated." Their hooves hit the patch of near perfectly round apples and went rolling right into the dummies and the stone wall behind them with a spectacular crash.

Two Pegasus stared at the sight of their comrades in a tangled heap with the dummies. Suddenly wet stickiness pattered down on them from

above as Fluttershy coated them in the sticky ooze. "So sorry about this," Fluttershy muttered to the pair. An apple flew up, knocking hard into the beehive atop the Library. A cloud swarmed out, seemed to survey the library, and then buzzed down to engulf the two guards who flew away as fast as their wings could carry them.

The last guard, a Unicorn, crouched nervously before the door to the library. His glowing horn swept left and right when some pony yelled, "Duck!" He hit the dirt, then blinked and looked up into the face of the biggest, ugliest avian in Equestria. It opened its mouth wide and a pink pony's head popped out! "Quack!" He screamed, backing away furiously before tripping over his own hooves to land in a heap.

Applejack and her friends assembled before the tree, slapping hooves. "Now let's get in there and free Twilight Sparkle and the Cutie Mark Crusaders!" Applejack declared.

Then the door to the library opened and Twilight Sparkle trotted out. "Hi girls," she said as she was followed by the Cutie Mark Crusaders, Dignity, Honesty, and finally Spike and Luna. The five friends went from shock to being stunned speechless at the sight of the Princess.

"Girls. Princess Luna. Princess Luna, my friends." Twilight Sparkle said as she gestured to the five ponies. Luna gave a small smile and a nod of her head. Twilight Sparkle could only imagine what Luna was feeling right now after what had happened to her circle of closest friends. She faced Luna, taking her gray purple hoof between her own. "We'll save her, Luna."

"Save her? You mean Fury? You mean Fury!" Applejack stammered. "What in tarnation are you talking about, Twilight?"

"Come with me. I'll fill you in on the details." Twilight Sparkle said as she passed on what she had learned about their foe. Dignity had the Cutie Mark Crusaders around her, keeping a stern eye on the three for any shenanigans.

Spike tapped his claws together, looking up at Princess Luna, "Um, Princess. Can I ask you something?" At her nod he looked back down at his claws. "Well, Celestia did all those things to you that made you become Nightmare Moon... so... why did you... well... agree to stay with her?"

Princess Luna closed her eyes, her mane billowing softly around her. "Do you remember that first argument? When it was over, I believed my sister didn't care about me. That she didn't love me." She looked over her shoulder at Canterlot sitting beautifully on its mountainside. "When she offered me forgiveness for everything that I had done, gave me a chance to be Luna again, I realized she did care. She always had." She looked down at Spike. "If she was willing to forgive me, how could I refuse her?"

Spike looked over at Twilight Sparkle and sighed, "Yeah. I guess I can understand that."

Princess Luna gave a soft sigh. "I can only hope that when this is over, Firedamp will do the same for me."

Chapter 7

Trial by Fire

Countless ponies lay scattered before her; screaming, crying, or bawling orders to try and rally some sort of resistance as she passed among them. The crackling of flesh and the sweet stink went unnoticed as every breath reeked of ash and blistering air. Her tail flicked fire and flame, and in her hooves burned death. She reared, hooves snapping with tongues of blue flame and raised her mouth to the sky. “Celestia!” A roar. A cry. A prayer that slipped from many ponies as they ran and scattered.

Building burst in tinkling crackles, collapsing on the terrified occupants who’d failed to flee. Walls crumbled as the heat of her passing softened stone and metal into blackened drippings. Cobbles were left with the molten indentation of her hooves. Rage. Such rage. She’d melt everything into slag and ashes! She had to. It was all she had left now.

“Celestia!” She shouted, knowing that all she would need to do was lay eyes on her for one moment and everything would be over. It would be the ultimate justice.

“Hey, hot head. Celestia’s not here!” a mare called. Blue flames turned in the direction of the red pony in the wide brimmed red hat shouted as she stood atop a cracked fountain. “Time to end this, Firedamp.” She said as she tossed her head, the phoenix plume tucked in the band bobbing. Ribald had no magical powers. The Earth Pony had only her flare and her certainty for doing what was right.

“Fury!” The nightmare screamed as Canterlot died around her and bowed her head, flicking flame at her enemy.

* * *

Captain Goodlight awoke under a blanket of dirt. Smoke crawled over the battlefield in thick banks that cut visibility to a handful of feet. All

around him he could hear the yelling and cries of his soldiers. The Equestrian Guard's valiant charge had broken. Even now he could hear the explosions to the left and right that sent hot smoking earth raining down upon him.

Then he heard it; the hiss of steam under hoof. Hiss. Hiss. Hiss. Behind him emerged a glow and a wave of heat washed over him. He slowly turned to glare at the nightmare standing with flames wreathed around her form. She no longer appeared black. The crackling nimbus transformed her into white and blue fire. This was what he had attempted to charge. This creature of destruction. "Monster."

"No argument," was all it said as it passed him by as if he was of no importance.

"I... I will stop...you..." He struggled to his feet

Fury just turned and looked at him. Not attacking. Not taunting. Standing. "How?" The heat didn't wash off her; the air instead drew around her burning form and sent flickering bits of grass popping to smoke. The ground beneath her didn't burn. It melted. "I stopped you from charging into an incinerator."

He stared up at her in shock. "Why? Why save us?"

Fury didn't answer for a moment. "I've killed enough ponies who don't deserve it. Only one does. See to your injured." She turned away again, but paused. "The Princess. Is she in Ponyville? And this Twilight Sparkle?"

"Yes.... But..."

"Good. Then, one way or another, this will be over." And with that she walked into the smoke.

* * *

"Okay. So how do we do this again?" Rainbow Dash asked as she stood and waved her hooves before her, "Elements of Harmony, activate!"

No... How about, 'By our powers combined, we are the Elements of Harmony!'" She fluttered, waving her hooves before her before she snarled, "Arrgh! Stupid magic powers! Is there an instruction manual or something, Twilight?"

"Not any that I know. When we were with Nightmare Moon it just sort of happened. I realized my friends were my strength and that we could stop her." She looked over at Honesty. "What about when you were Celestia's element, Honesty?"

"Similar experience. We didn't know we could do it either until we faced Nightmare Moon. There have been other groups of friends who have manifested it over the centuries. Less publicized and well known, but there if you know what to look for." The albino mare said calmly as she walked slightly behind the others. "I hypothesize that when the elements are together and come in contact with an Element of Discord like a nightmare that the powers manifest."

"But will these powers actually be useful?" Rarity said as she looked up at the smoke drenched valley. Explosions still boomed distantly

"The five powers amplify the sixth. It seems to parallel the nightmares own potency alone. Discord's power is solitary. Harmony's is collective." Honesty replied simply, "How the power actually manifests is any pony's guess. There's a large element of the unknown that we can't explain."

"So we hop up to miss sooty hooves, give Twilight all our juice and she gives her the big zap! Sounds easy," Pinkie Pie summarized, making zapping noises as she waved her hooves at Dignity. The blue unicorn simply arched a perplexed brow.

"Perhaps." Honesty said as she glanced at the fillies. "But only if you are all devoted in your support. I refused to help banish Nightmare Moon and she was freed after a thousand years. Something that I'm glad was only temporary." She added quickly, nodding to Luna. She hesitated as they approached the bridge. "You might have to also accept that what you do might have a permanent consequence."

"I'm not banishing her to the moon, Honesty." Twilight Sparkle said firmly.

“You may not have a choice. If she resists, she may perish.”

“What?!” Twilight Sparkle rounded on her. “I am not killing her, Honesty.”

“Then she may kill you.” Honesty replied as she adjusted her glasses with a little shrug. “This isn’t a neat story. Good doesn’t win because it’s good. Binding the nightmares came at terrible cost. Nightmare Moon was the first, and in many ways the easiest. In the end, Celestia and I were unable to trap Nightmare Screamer.”

“It’s not going to come to that.” Twilight Sparkle said firmly. “She’s going to see Luna and that should be enough to make her agree to let us fix her. No one dead.”

Honesty just gave a sigh. “I hope you’re right.”

* * *

“You really need to cool your head, Firedamp!” Ribald shouted, ducking behind the stone as

Fury’s flame dropped and detonated the tip of the fountain. She sprang up behind it and stuck her hooves into the spray, redirecting it to hose Fury. Steam blasted off her hide as she cried out in pain this time. Trailing a shroud of boiling vapor she rose and rammed her hooves down with all the force she could muster. The ground cracked and shook, and with a gurgle the pipe went dry. “Woah... water shortage.”

“Stop joking!” Fury shouted as she charged the fountain, but Ribald fainted to one side, then dove the other.

“Tell you what. You stop burning and I’ll stop with the jokes.” She said as the red pony gave ground to the advancing fireball. “Seriously. I’m pretty sure I could refrain from them for a bit if you’d turn down the heat.”

“Where is Celestia?” Fury growled. “Why are you here and not her?”

“Oh, you know how it is. You discover you’re magic and it takes time to adjust, you know?” She said as she tapped the scarlet mandolin on an elaborate silver choker. “She’s still trying to work out this whole Elements of Harmony thing.”

“Is that why you keep wasting my time?”

“Nope. I just wanted to keep your attention on me. Bell.” She said with a grin.

“Bell?”

From behind her came a resounding bong. She looked up in time to see Arclight kicking the iron bell from a bell tower. The blue pegasus’ wings powered as she accelerated the metal straight at Fury. The flaming nightmare barely jumped aside in time, and it still clipped her metal armor and knocked her to the ground. Arclight landed next to Ribald, her gem of crossed blue sapphire lightning bolts seeming to glow in Fury’s firelight.

“You will never touch Celestia, Fury.” Arclight swore bitterly as she landed, matching Fury glare for glare as the Pegasus gave an almost canine snarl. “She destroyed Nightmare Moon and she’ll destroy you too.”

“What?” Fury stared at the pair, her flames bursting in a corona around her. The arc of fire that sputtered from her mane sent the flagstones bubbling.

“Banished! Magically sealed away. Perfectly unharmed. The *opposite* of destroyed,” Ribald said as she waved her hooves in front of her. She gave a disgruntled look at Arclight, “Escalate the situation, why don’t you?” she hissed in a stage whisper.

“Very well. She *should* have been destroyed for her betrayal,” Arclight amended, not taking her flashing eyes off Fury.

Ribald groaned, rubbing her face as she pushed back her hat. “All right! I get it! You hate her! She hates you! Plenty of hate going around!” She shouted, waving from one to the other, “Am I really the only pony that wants to resolve this peacefully?”

“Yes!” the two shouted in union.

Ribald blinked and then stepped aside, “Oh, well... carry on then.”

Fury grinned at Arclight. "Glad to. Bell."

Arclight frowned, "Bell?"

The cobbles beneath the iron bell besides her exploded, launching the metal and a good chunk of the road at the Pegasus. The weight slammed into her, sending her skidding back along the road. She came to a stop, clutching the iron weight in both hooves. Fury gave a long slow whistle of admiration.

"Gotta find Celestia," Fury heard the pony say to herself, "At this rate they'll either kill each other, or end up dating after this is over!"

* * *

Fury smiled softly at the memory of Ribald's prognostication skills as the smoke slowly thinned. None of the Equestrian Guard appeared dead. Stunned, dirty, confused and scared, but not yet dead. Slow steps gave them time to get clear. If Celestia was here then she could finally end this. The last veil of smoke drew back to a small knot of ponies. So young. Just like we were when all this started. "I don't see Celestia. I assume you're her proxy?"

"I'm Twilight Sparkle, yes." The purple Unicorn replied. "Her student."

"Her favorite student!" The cyan Pegasus with the scorched tail said sharply. Fury recognized her as the filly from the Everfree forest who had pointed her in the direction of her enemy. "She knows more magic tricks than any pony and she'll... um..." Suddenly she looked a little at a loss for words as she glanced at Twilight Sparkle.

"Stop me?" Fury suggested.

"Yeah!" Rainbow dash replied, glancing at her friend before asking, "You got a plan for that, right, Twilight?"

"Hopefully talking her down," Twilight replied.

“What?!” The Pegasus stretched her hooves wide as she gestured to Fury. “You got like five hundred different spells in that horn of yours. At least one of them should kick her burning tail!”

Fury shook her head with a smile and then picked out the lemon yellow Pegasus pony hanging back towards the rear with a gray purple Unicorn and a white Unicorn with purple hair. Sisters? One looked familiar, hauntingly so, but that wasn't possible. Still her burning eyes looked at the Pegasus with a curious smile. “You're all right?” Fluttershy squeaked and cowered behind the white unicorn, which looked back at Fury coolly. Peeking over Rarity's flank, the Pegasus nodded. “Good.”

“Fury, we don't have to do this.” Twilight Sparkle said softly. “Let's talk. There has to be a sensible resolution.”

Ribald would be proud. She would have also made some sort of joke about the lack of sensibilities. Then she smelled something sweet and glanced besides her. A pink pony sat with a metal fork stretched towards her. A marshmallow crisped on the end. “What?” The pink pony said as she scraped the marshmallow on a gram cracker and chocolate square, munching on it happily and giving a sticky, “It's good.”

“Pinkie Pie,” groaned Applejack, rubbing her muzzle.

Fury closed her eyes, “I'll tell you what I've told every pony. I have a score to settle-“

“No you don't!”

Fury's flame extinguished like a blown out birthday candle. Her eyes stared at the dark Unicorn stepping to the fore. No, not a Unicorn. A Unicorn Pegasus. “Luna,” Fury breathed softly. Was this a dream? A trick? “This can't be.”

“It... It is,” Luna stammered as she stared up at Fury. “I'm not Nightmare Moon anymore, Firedamp.” Slowly she stepped closer, and Fury backed away.

“It's not possible. You were supposed to be bound away forever.” Fury stammered, trying to pull some sense out of this.

“The binding wasn’t forever. Only for a very long time,” Luna said softly as she looked at Twilight Sparkle. “I broke free as Nightmare Moon. But Twilight and her friends were able to help me.”

Something formed inside her; a gnawing anger that halted her retreat. “Help you? And what happened to overthrowing Celestia? What happened to making Equestria right?”

“Things have changed, Firedamp,” Twilight Sparkle said as she came up besides Luna. “Luna’s changed. Celestia’s changed. The world’s changed. It’s been a thousand years.” Twilight closed her eyes. “I can feel the...the wrongness inside you. Please, let me help you.”

Fury stood before the seven, before Luna, feeling like a great vacuum had formed around her. “Help me?” Fury felt like she was made of blown obsidian, cold obsidian. Fragile.

“You... you don’t have to fight any more. You don’t have to be this anymore, Firedamp. Don’t you understand?” Luna begged as she took another slow step forward. “Our fight was a mistake. We were wrong. Celestia was wrong. She admitted it.” Luna’s tears ran down her cheeks. “Firedamp...”

But Fury lips set in a grim line as she looked down at Luna. That hollow feeling grew stronger inside her, and there was anger too. Such anger. “I am very happy to see you again, Luna. I am glad that you have a chance to be happy again.” She said in terrible calm. “You deserve a second chance.”

Luna smiled. There was nothing as beautiful. “Firedamp.” Fury would have given anything to see it again. To accept her offer. But she couldn’t. She had nothing left to give.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go kill your sister.” Fury said calmly. Quietly.

“Oh horseapples,” muttered Applejack.

Luna’s mouth worked silently as she stared up at Fury in horror. “Firedamp, no...”

Rage such as she had never imaged grew inside her. A thousand years ago she would have simply rampaged till exhausted. Now that rage focused and condensed against the one who deserved it. "You returned to normal... saved by Twilight Sparkle. I assume from your being here that Celestia has forgiven you. Possibly even you her." The ground beneath her smoked and boiled, and the ponies took a step back. "So tell me then Luna... what was everything I did for?" Toes of lava started to creep towards the riverbank. "Nothing?"

"I... I don't understand... Don't you want it to be over?" Luna asked as she backed away.

"More than you know." Fury replied evenly.

"Then just... stop. You don't have to keep fighting!" Luna begged in tears, "Please, I'm sorry it was for nothing!"

Fury closed her eyes, struggling to maintain the calm and not kill her best friend, "I killed for you Luna," Fury said in the softest of whispers, her eyes locked on her friend's, "Was *that* for nothing?"

* * *

"I'll kill you!" Fury screamed as Arclight whirled through the air around the flame that shot upward with each snap of her tail. Arclight snapped a tight loop de loop before launching the clutched masonry at Fury. Fury dodged to the side, whirled, and kicked a burning meteor of debris back at the whirling pegasus.

"Then stop talking about it and do it." Arclight countered, deflecting the stone with her hooves in an elegant roll. The pegasus was every bit the fighter that Fury was, perhaps more so. Fury had always dealt with challenges directly with force; Arclight with finesse and precision. The sapphire lightning adorning Arclight's collar seemed to challenge the fiery glyph on Fury's flank.

Every projectile that Fury sent skyward found itself dodged or deflected. Arclight responded with her own barrage of broken off masonry.

Neither would win at this rate, but Arclight didn't have to win. She merely had to stall until the others arrived and they would do to her what they had done to Nightmare Moon. Celestia would win and her vengeance would be denied.

"There is a certain trick to beating Pegasus. It's all in the wings," spoke the whisper into her ear and the instructions for what to do next.

Fury didn't think. Fury acted. She summoned all her rage and pushed past the pain to send the flames down rather than up. Smoking ground slumped, shimmered, and proceeded to bubble. Inch by inch Fury sank as if slowly dipping into a molten bath. Arclight fluttered above cautiously.

Almost. Almost. She could feel the coolness in the earth; the wet. She pushed the fire towards it. Arclight fluttered over the pool at a loss. Then the lava touched the underground aqueduct that supplied Canterlot with its water. In a flash, water transformed to steam and the pressure burst in every direction. A thousand sinks and pipes screamed like kettles and the lava pool heaved before erupting in a shower of blazing cinders and scalding vapors. Arclight's wings beat furiously. She evaded the steam, even if her exposed hide took on a rosy hue.

What went up, however, came down; the rain of flaming particles transformed Arclight's wings into something like a phoenix's, and blazing she plunged to the ground. Her blue form bounced and rolled several times, armor denting and banging until she came to a rest. Slowly she rose to her hooves, swaying as she turned to face her enemy. Only blackened feathers clung to her wings.

"Nice trick." Arclight hissed through grit teeth.

"You took Luna from me." Fury said as she stepped out of the roiling lava pool, dripping molten rock and fleck of obsidian.

"The six of you waged war against Equestria. Stopping you was the point," she said as she tried to flex her wings and walk, but there was a resounding pop in her rear left knee and it refused to bend. "You have no idea how much pain you've inflicted."

"I don't care!" Fury roared, stamping her hooves to blast the rising Pegasus off her hooves again.

“That’s what I can’t stand about you. You have no control. No focus. Nothing. You’ve hurt so many, Fury.”

“I didn’t have a choice!” Fury screamed at her, feet raising and sending a shock wave rolling through the ground to explode beneath Arclight.

“Every pony has a choice.” Fury rose to her feet, her blue hide punctured by stony shrapnel. “We get a choice between right and wrong. And you... you just keep making the wrong choice.”

“Because I chose Luna?” Fury closed the distance step by step.

“No. Because you chose to involve innocents!” Arclight shouted. “Look around you, Fury. Look at all you’ve done! This is meaningless now! Luna is gone. End this pointless fight.”

“No.” Fury said softly as they stood nearly nose to nose. “This has meaning. It has to.”

Arclight swayed on her hooves before sitting down, her leg jutting out. She closed her eyes. “Make your choice then.”

Fury did not think. Fury felt. Fury consumed every part of her being. It roared in her heart and blasted through her brain. Fury was power and action. There was only one choice. She pressed her hoof to the Pegasus’ brow. Those lightning blue eyes never closed, never wavered, even as tears rolled down azure cheeks.

Arclight burned.

* * *

Twilight Sparkle looked at the stunned Luna as Fury stepped past her. Her burning eyes glanced up at Honesty and Dignity at the crest of the bridge in contemptuous indifference, but paused as they took in the three cutie mark crusaders watching from behind Dignity. Twilight Sparkle could feel a sensation coming off Fury like wind blown glass, yet for its rage it

wasn't directed at her. It whirled like a tornado around Fury, and if Twilight could just understand it she could fix it. She was sure of it.

Luna was clearly devastated by Fury's rejection, but after that last comment Twilight Sparkle wasn't surprised. They'd assumed that all of this was out of vengeance; that all Luna had to do was tell her it was all right and Fury would stop being a nightmare and return to being her friend Firedamp. Clearly that wasn't the case. "What's driving you?" Twilight Sparkle said, more to herself than the blazing nightmare.

"Don't try and save me, Twilight Sparkle. Don't try and understand me. Beat me. You have your friends, your magic, and your skills. Don't hold back, or I'll burn you, your friends, and Celestia," Fury said before turning and putting some space between her and the bridge. With a hollow pit in her stomach Twilight stepped away as well.

"Twilight! No," Pinkie Pie said as she shook her head vigorously. "Don't fight her."

"I have to." Twilight Sparkle said softly. How she was supposed to do that without the Elements of Harmony manifested she couldn't guess, but she had to try. Fluttershy and Applejack had both faced Fury alone. Now it was her turn.

Fury's mane had returned to its white flare and her hide began to glow. "Ready?"

"Um... no?" Twilight said with a weak little smile.

"Apologies," Fury answered, and her hooves rose and slammed down in a shockwave of rolling, exploding grown that blast in a line straight at Twilight Sparkle. Her eyes widened and she concentrated, flashing away just as it past. Another blast. Another teleport. Slowly Fury drew a circle in the torn and smoking grass as dust filled the air.

Twilight Sparkle concentrated, and a dozen rain barrels lifted off from around Ponyville, scooped up the contents of the river, and bobbed ominously above her. Fury's tail flicked flame at each of them as she danced carefully out of the way of their watery contents. Twilight's horn glowed and she sprayed water from the tip like a garden hose. The stream steamed as it splashed over her form, but the heat returned despite her

water. Twice she tried to grab her with magic, but the iron armor she wore foiled her attempts to grip her magically.

Suddenly in the smoke appeared Pinkie Pie! She stood as if frozen in fear. "Pinkie Pie! No!"

Fury's tail snapped almost contemptuously at the pink pony's tail, yet Pinkie Pie didn't even budge as her tail burned. Fury broke her attack for just a moment to look closer at... one of Rarity's tailoring dummies expertly disguised in Pinkie Pie's place. Where there had been a curly pink tail hissed a stream of smoke. Then the dummy exploded in a shower of fireworks and sparklers that sent Fury ducking for cover, covering her head as rockets fired wildly over her.

"No interference!" Fury yelled as she spotted another of her friends and snapped fire at it as well. This time a Rarity dummy exploded in a cloud of powder that washed over Fury. "Wha... ahhh... ahchooo!" She sneezed, blowing a plume of fire before her. From the sidelines, Twilight Sparkle spotted Rarity and Pinkie Pie bumping hooves together. It threw Fury off her game enough that Twilight was able to nail her with one of the barrels.

Twilight Sparkle had to do some serious teleporting after that, but now it was Fury on the defensive. There were at least three Twilight Sparkle decoys in the smoke and Fury was now more discriminating where she flung her fire.

"Applejack. Think you're up to a few well placed apple kicks?" Rarity asked as she shrugged off her saddle bags.

"Well, sure, but I can tell you that apples won't be doing much against her at this rate," Applejack retorted.

Rarity dumped out the contents in a heap before Applejack. "I was thinking of something a little more substantial than apples."

"Diamonds!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, "Where did you get so many?" Even given the commonality of colored stones, diamonds were still valuable. And each one Rarity rolled out was the size of a hoof.

"I cleaned out my bank account when all this started." Rarity said with a smile and shrug.

“Well, let’s make the most pricy attack in history,” Applejack said as she turned to face away from Fury. “Toss em, Rarity!” Rarity gave the most expensive jewels in Equestria a sigh and parting kiss before tossing them one after the other behind Applejack. “Yeee haw!” Applejack cheered, launching them at Fury. The impacts staggered Fury to the side, denting the armor plates she wore and even knocking her aside. When Fury turned to blast a shockwave at the bridge, Applejack limped aside with Rarity supporting her.

“Stop treating this like a game and face me!” Fury roared as she went into a wild spree of kicking and firing completely wildly. Twilight Sparkle could only hit the ground as explosion after explosion blasted out around her.

“Hey, Hot Head. Face us!” Rainbow Dash shouted from above. She looked up in time to see Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy dumping two pails of honey right in her face. The sticky sugar coated her face and immediately bubbled and blackened as Fury screamed, trying to clear her vision from the boiling black gunk. “Hey! Honey Roasted Nightmare. Nice!”

Twilight looked at the river and the few rain barrels that remained. It just wasn’t enough! She looked at the water, then at the round roof of town hall. “I really hope this works,” she muttered as she reached out with her horn and gripped it. Her head jerked to the left and right, feeling the roof give way. It popped free with a loud crack and floated over the flood swollen river. Like an enormous cup she tipped it into the water and then gritted her teeth as she lifted it slowly over the blinded Nightmare.

Fury cleaned her eyes in time for a wet drop of plop right on the tip of her nose. Her eyes became huge round orbs as she saw the roof hovering overhead.

The blast of fire made the earth shake and coated them all in ash for a second before the roof gave way in a massive deluge that washed the battlefield into the river. Pinkie Pie and Rarity helped haul the injured Applejack clear of the muddy deluge that flooded back into the river. Twilight’s horn felt like it was about to fall off after magic like that.

“Where... where is she?” Pinkie Pie asked as she looked along the stretch of river.

"She must be in the river!" Fluttershy hovered over the churning bank. "We have to find her. We can't let her drown."

"I don't think she's in the river, Fluttershy," Applejack said as she pointed where Fury had stood. A massive knot of shiny black glass stuck out of the mud.

"Please be beaten," Twilight Sparkle said softly. One second. Two. Three. Then the water around the black stone started to bubble and steam.

"She'll never give up," Luna said miserably. "Does she want to die?"

The thought struck Twilight like a blow. She stared at the cracking dome of obsidian. "You know, Luna... I think she does."

* * *

The city was dead. Only a handful of ponies dared its burning remains as Fury patrolled through the city for her enemy. One sight was all she would need to push her over the edge. She wouldn't let Celestia bind her. In that moment, both she and her enemy would be annihilated. No more rage. No more fury. Peace.

"Firedamp," spoke the familiar sound of Ribald down a street. Not whom she wanted, but still an enemy. Ribald sat on a lump of cracked stone, hoof resting on a spar of wood sticking out of the middle of the street as she held the blackened silver collar of Arclight. Her cheeks were streaked with tears, but still a smile remained on her face beneath the shadow of the hat she wore. "Time to end this."

"You want me to kill you too?" Fury asked as she closed the distance between them.

"No. I don't want to die. I don't want you to die either. I didn't want Luna to turn into Nightmare Moon or Celestia to banish her." She said as her hoof rocked the beam back and forth with her hoof. "All I wanted was for everyone to be happy. Was that so much?" Ribald asked as she pushed back the brim.

“Celestia...”

“I don’t care what Celestia did or didn’t do. I don’t care what Luna did either,” She said softly as her hoof tapped softly on the beam. “Did you really have to kill Arclight?” Ribald asked as she wiped her cheeks.

Fury stood there, still feeling it... seeing it... “I had to. For Luna.”

“Luna wouldn’t have wanted you to kill Arclight.”

“No. She wouldn’t. For Nightmare Moon then. For an Equestria where she is free and we are happy, then.”

“Will that make you happy, Firedamp?”

Fury clenched her eyes. Fury didn’t think about these things. Fury felt and acted. It burned and burned until it was extinguished. She so wanted to be extinguished. “No.”

Fury stood right before the red pony. The funny one. The one that always tried to protect with her jokes and laughter. The only one of Celestia’s friends who understood. “Well, you don’t have to worry about it anymore.” Ribald grinned. “Bell.”

Fury ducked, looking at the sky before she frowned. Ribald placed all her weight on the wooden beam and with a grind of stone the cobbles and beams gave way to a shaft beneath Fury, splashing against the water far below. Fury scrambled and hooked her hooves on the edge as the ground gave way, her front hooves digging in. Slowly she clawed her way forward.

“Sometimes,” Ribald said quietly in front of her. Fury looked up into Ribald’s calm magenta eyes. “Sometimes I think all you nightmares just need a hug.” And Ribald wrapped her front hooves around Fury’s neck as her back hooves kicked off the edge, launching the pair of them into the pit.

* * *

She *wants* to die, thought Twilight Sparkle. She doesn’t want to kill us. She doesn’t want to burn Ponyville or Equestria. She probably doesn’t

even want to kill Celestia. She wants to *die*; to fight until she's slain or explodes from her own power. The thought was so shocking that Twilight ignored her friends' distant shouts and warnings. In that horrible moment, Twilight Sparkle didn't know if she could understand that feeling. If she even should try. Why would any pony want such a thing?

Guilt. Nightmare Fury had done terrible things. Was still doing terrible things. Would continue to do terrible things. Apple Bloom was wrong. Nightmare Fury was a monster, and no one knew it better than Fury herself. She couldn't accept forgiveness because she didn't want it. She rejected it. She wanted punishment, the most grievous punishment possible. In that moment Twilight Sparkle understood just what pain and self hatred Fury faced. And in that moment, Twilight Sparkle felt that pity deep inside her. That spark that made her care.

From within that spark grew in a wave that burst from her in white light. Her friends manifested a similar glow that coalesced into beautiful silver collars decorated with gems in the shape of their cutie marks. From her brow formed a delicate crown; but more than the decoration was the sensation of strength and certainty that flowed from her five friends.

The black stone split and a glowing fury pulled herself from the molten center, dripping molten stone as she looked at the Elements of Harmony. "I've seen those before."

"It's over," Twilight Sparkle said softly.

"Finally," Fury replied, and then laughed softly, "I always knew it would end like this, one way or another." Her blue white eyes looked up at Twilight and her friends. "So... going to turn me into stone? Banish me into the sun? Just blast me into ash?"

"No. I'm not going to kill you fury. I'm going to do what I promised Luna. I'm going to turn you back to normal." Twilight looked at the glowing nightmare. "You've made mistakes, but that doesn't mean you need to be punished forever for them."

"Don't you dare pity me," Fury hissed. "You can't forgive me. I've done nothing worthy of forgiveness! I'm a monster."

"Maybe. But I know that you became what you are out of loyalty to Luna. You've shown restraint and kindness to my friends. You've been

forthright and honest to every pony, except maybe yourself, and you're generous enough to give us chance after chance to get away from you. All you need is a little happiness and laughter in your life." She slowly approached fury, the aura of magic around her cooling the rock under her hooves. "Let me help you. I understand what you really want, but it doesn't have to be like that."

Fury backed into the far side of the pit and gave a soft laugh. For the first time, she sounded almost like the Firedamp of Luna's memory. "I like you, Twilight Sparkle. I really do. No one's said that about me in a long time. I wish that you could just help me get rid of all this rage. I'm tired of it. So very tired. I wish I could accept your forgiveness." For a moment, Twilight was sure that it was over.

Then the molten crater exploded in a detonation that sent debris showering across Ponyville. The blast ripped one end of the bridge from its foundations, making the heavy wrought iron posts lean precariously as the bridge began to disintegrate. Dignity and Honesty and two of the three Cutiemark Crusaders scrambled to reach the far side. Twilight Sparkle as her friends were partially protected by a magical shield that Twilight had conjured instinctively, but they were still scattered far and wide.

From the crest of the bridge, Apple Bloom continued to watch the battle in terror, even as the bridge collapsed behind her, leaving her stranded in the middle.

"Enough," Fury said calmly from above Twilight Sparkle as the purple unicorn regained her senses. She felt a warm hoof inches from her horn. "Let me prove to you I can't be saved."

"Nightmare Fury," declared a regal voice from the far side of the crater. Fury froze almost as she had when she spotted Luna for the first time. There, surrounded by a golden nimbus, stood Princess Celestia. "Let my student go. Your argument is with me. It always has been."

No flames burned now. Once again she'd gone quiet as she approached Celestia in almost a coy fashion. Twilight tried to rise, but the motion made the entire world spin around her.

"Princess Celestia," Fury said softly. "I am guilty of the murders of Arclight and Ribald, as well as incalculable destruction. Will you administer the appropriate punishment now?" Fury reached up and pushed the

blackened, pitted helmet from her head and let it fall with a hissing thud to the scorched earth besides her. Fury knelt before her, chin resting on the blackened stones as she closed her eyes.

Celestia simply closed her eyes, "No."

Fury smiled and said softly, "Pity."

* * *

"...don't cross that line." Ribald rasped from the darkness as Fury regained consciousness. She found herself chained in a great underground chamber. Chains of diamond clinked at her movements. The light of four glowing collars and Celestia's crown competed with the flames of her mane.

"Princess. She's awake," Trueheart said softly as Fury lifted her head. Above her she saw the great dome showing Luna becoming Nightmare moon, Fury burning the city.

Celestia rose, and Fury stared at Ribald laying her side. Her rosy hide was covered with horrid white patches and black burns. The mandolin on her flank was barely recognizable. Fury's burning eyes met Ribald's, and the cooked pony simply grinned slackly back at her. "Hey, Firedamp. You're a hard pony to keep afloat." She closed her eyes, "And look at me. Put an apple in my mouth and call me done. Well done."

Celestia's lips were pressed tightly together. "Fury."

Fury did not think. Fury raged. Yet as she lunched for Celestia, the power she'd given everything for was siphoned away along the glowing diamond chains. She strained for the hate that would allow her to explode once and for all, but exhaustion and the enchantments on the chains sapped her rage. When she finally gave out, she collapsed on her face in front of Celestia.

"Do it," Fury said softly.

"Do what?" Celestia asked in the softest voice Fury had ever heard.

"I killed Arclight. I've as good as killed Ribald. Do what must be done. Execute me."

Celestia just looked at her with her features frozen like alabaster. "This isn't about you, Fury. Your punishment has been rendered." She said as she turned back to the fallen Ribald and the rest of her friends. "Perhaps in time, you'll realize just what you've done." The scarlet mandolin on Ribald collar flickered and went dark. Celestia clenched her eyes shut, tears running down her cheeks. "Let's go. We have much more to do." With their horns Trueheart and Celestia levitated the still body and without another word walked up the stairs on the far side.

"No..." Fury moaned as she rose to her feet. "No, come back, Celestia. Come back! Celestia! Come back and kill me!" She screamed into the cold tomb. Her flames burned, melting the stone under hoof enough to coat her in a layer of basalt before finally she stilled in her rocky cocoon.

"Kill me... Celestia. Please kill me..." were her last whispers as time stopped beneath the earth.

* * *

The second explosion was every bit as potent as the first, but this time the blast was contained within a golden dome of magic. Twilight Sparkle watched in horror as Celestia was blasted off her hooves, struck the roof of the dome and crashed back down again. Fury didn't slow in the slightest as her hooves rose again and again, crushing Celestia with kick after kick. All civility and restraint gone now as her hooves crashed down upon Celestia again and again. "Why? Why won't you just kill me?! Why won't you fight back? Why Celestia? Why?"

"No!" Luna screamed as she beat on the golden dome entrapping the two ponies. She tried to dispel it with her magic, kick her way through. Twilight forced herself to her feet, trying to pull enough magic through her friends to stop this madness.

Fury pressed Celestia's head to the charred ground, two burning hooves on Celestia's throat. Fury grew brighter and brighter as she screamed in pain, pushing to that point where the magic rage inside her would exceed her body's ability to contain it. Fury felt only seconds remaining as her hooves burned against Celestia's throat. Burning tears fell as she stared down and begged softly, "Why Celestia? Tell me."

"You're not the only one who deserves punishment," Celestia said softly, "If I'd listened to Ribald and Honesty... If I'd given Luna and all of you a chance... If I hadn't been so stubborn... how much less pain would we all have gone through?" Celestia grimaced in pain, but there was a terrible ghost of a smile as well. "You didn't kill Arclight and Ribald, Fury. You didn't banish Luna. I did. I deserve this. Not you."

"No! Sister! Firedamp! Please!" Luna screamed, reduced to drumming her hooves on the dome.

There was a heavy stone grinding as the bridge behind them gave way and slumped slowly into the surging flow. The metal lampposts crashed down as the stone shifted beneath them. Then there came a the sharp scream of a filly as the center of the bridge slouched into the river, the heavy iron lamppost twisting as it fell across the roadway... and over Apple Bloom. "Apple Bloom!" Applejack shouted as she jumped across the broken remains of the stone bridge. Twilight Sparkle stood there, torn by the need to help Apple Bloom or Princess Celestia.

Fury heard the shout, raising her head to see the small form disappear under the water as the rubble continued to settle in the surging floodwaters.

You keep making the wrong choices.

I don't get you. Why do you do that if you know it's wrong?

I'm so tired. So tired of being angry all the time.

Fury rose off Celestia and leapt at the golden wall. She was so overflowing with rage and power that it shattered like magical glass. Fury raced past Twilight Sparkle as Luna fell atop Princess Celestia, holding her battered form as she wept. Twilight Sparkle followed and teleported on to the half submerged section of bridge along with Applejack and Rainbow dash.

“Can you lift it?” Applejack asked as the two of them shoved hard against the iron pole pinning Apple Bloom. Pinkie Pie waded besides Apple Bloom, trying to get her mouth above water.

“It’s... iron!” Twilight yelled in frustration, trying to grasp the resistant metal with her magic. Worse, it was still embedded in a block of stone connected to the rubble they stood on. She fought to try and lift that, but it threatened to just slide deeper into the river.

Fury looked at the swirling cold water and at Twilight Sparkle and her friends. She glanced back at Luna and Celestia. Glowing with destructive power, Fury smiled happily. “Every pony has a choice,” she said before she jumped down into the water.

Hip deep, her hide hissed and spat as the water swept by in a constant deluge that threatened to douse her. Fury pressed her hooves to the cold metal and let loose her rage and pain in one scream that drove every lick of flame inside her to the metal bar. Every second the river poured around her, robbing her strength, yet she pulled up more flame from deep within. She drew all she could. It was Celestia she was melting. Nightmare Moon. Arclight and Ribald. It was Nightmare Fury.

The metal suddenly gave way like stretching taffy before snapping off at the base. Fury, Applejack, and Rainbow dash gave a great heave and tossed the post aside. Pinkie Pie pulled a sputtering Apple Bloom from the waters. “Hold on!” Twilight Sparkle shouted, teleporting them to the bank.

All except Nightmare Fury. The armor she wore that had been so effective at resisting Twilight’s attacks had also blocked her teleportation as well. Alone in the river, she looked back at every pony with a happy, exhausted smile. Then the remains of the bridge gave way beneath her, dumping her into the churning water.

Goodbye, Luna.

* * *

The first thing she was aware of was water flowing over her hooves and soft river grass beneath her as she laid beneath a warm sky. The fire within had been put out, finally, and she took a slow breath. Then another. Hooves gently held her and she slowly opened an eye to look up at Luna. "Oh... what a waste of a heroic sacrifice..."

"It was an idiotic sacrifice, you hear me?" Luna shouted as she sniffled, "You and my sister both. I'm surrounded by idiots!"

"You okay, Miss Fury?" Apple Bloom asked from Fury's other side. She shivered even as Applejack hugged her close.

"Mmmm... I feel...wetter."

Slowly she rose to look at Twilight Sparkle. Celestia lay nearby, her pristine hide bruised and scorched terribly, but intact. The purple unicorn in the diamond crown looked down at her. "Thank you."

"I wanted to make the right choice, for once." Fury said with a groan.

"Then keep making them. You stopped yourself. You saved Apple Bloom. You can do so much, Fury, if you'll just let us help you," Twilight Sparkle said softly.

"I thought about it for a thousand years," Fury said softly, eyes closed. "I can still see Ribald. I can feel Arclight." She looked back up at Twilight Sparkle, "Can your Elements of Harmony fix that? Take me and bring them back?"

"I don't think it works like that. All I can do is to try and fix the harm you did to yourself. The rest is your own."

"I see." She said as she rose to her feet. She took a look at Luna and Celestia, then sighed and smiled, "Do it."

The white light flared from Twilight. *Honesty*. An orange ribbon of light streaked from Applejack's gem to swirl around Fury. *Kindness*. Green light streamed from Fluttershy's medallion and curled gently around her. *Laughter*. Pinkie Pie giggled as blue shown from hers to join the rest. *Generosity*. Rarity's violet ribbon joined the others. *Loyalty*. A scarlet streak raced from Rainbow Dash to swirl around Fury. And a golden yellow band raced to bind them all together. *Magic*. The brilliant colors

transformed into a flame, and from it raised thick smoke that seemed to scream for a moment, and then was scattered in a spectacular flash.

The heavy armor plates clunked to the grass, and standing in the midst of them was a far smaller Firedamp. Her hide had returned to its mahogany red color, her mane a brilliant orange ending in yellow tips. She rubbed her orange eyes, "Woah... flashy..." She muttered, and then looked behind her at her flank. The flaming mushroom cloud was gone. In its place was a heart shaped diamond surrounded by orange flame. She stepped free of the scorched metal plates and sat down next to Luna.

"What do you remember?" Luna asked her softly.

Firedamp didn't say a word as her eyes went round, then she bit her lip, "Everything," was all she could say before shedding a thousand years of pain one tear at a time.

* * *

"Sheesh. Sooooo much drama," Nightmare Screamer said sourly as she floated in the clouds above *the display, watching through binoculars. "I forgot Fury could be such a crybaby."*

"All that, spoiled by a foal," Nightmare Whispers hissed in her ear. "I had them. I had them! One death... Fury... Celestia... even Luna's... it would have been enough! Fury was wired to kill and die and she couldn't even do that."

"Yeah yeah. I weep for the foiled machinations of the puppet master. What now?"

"Now? We continue as planned. Fury was simply an opportunity to remove Celestia from the board. She was never the main thrust."

"And what is the main thrust?" Nightmare Screamer asked softly.

"We need Vicious," Whispers purred in her ear, and Nightmare Screamer shivered.

* * *

“Feeling better?” Twilight Sparkle asked as she found Firedamp besides the ruined bridge, watching as the Equestrian Guard Unicorns helped repair the damaged spans. Her orange eyes looked over and she signed.

“Yes? No? Kinda?” Firedamp whistled through her teeth. “Guess that covers all options, huh? Luna’s still plenty mad with me and Celestia, isn’t she?”

“A bit,” Twilight said as she sat beside her, “She’ll get better now that this is over.”

“It’s not over,” Firedamp said softly. “The other Nightmares are out there. Whisper is planning something big. Something I can’t even imagine.”

“We’ll save them, Firedamp.” Twilight Sparkle promised.

The red pony just sighed, but smiled and nodded once. “You know, I think I’ll change my name. I’m not Firedamp any more than I am Nightmare Fury. I’m somewhere in the middle,” She smiled to Twilight Sparkle, “How does ‘Diamond Fire’ sound?”

“Like a fresh start,” Twilight Sparkle replied softly.

Chapter 8

From Ashes

“Well, this sure is a lovely mess,” Gramps muttered as he raked bits of splinted wood from the truncated town hall of Ponyville into piles. Most of the smallest pieces would end up in the fire, but the larger planks were being used to bridge the broken span crossing the river. Fury’s final explosions had shattered windows and rained stones all over the town, but fortunately enough of the Equestrian Guard had recovered to prevent fires from spreading far.

“Aw, quit Bellyachin,” Granny Smith snapped back as she carefully swept broken glass aside. “This is nothing like the tornado of 07’! There wasn’t a roof left on Ponyville,” she said with a fond smile. “I remember there were plenty of fine ponies in armor back then too.” The green mare eyed the soldiers with the eye of a mare a quarter her age, “Ponyville needs some more disasters.”

“Like a hole in the head,” Gramps grumbled and then looked over at the new filly in town with a dark red coat and an orange and yellow mane. She faced off against four angry ponies, “Eh now, what’s this?” The old brown pony wondered with a frown.

“I just want to help!” Diamond Fire protested as she took a step towards a fallen slab of roofing. The small rust colored pony pushed against the sheet of roof.

“We don’t want your help,” scoffed one, cutting her off with a shove.

“You’re the reason for all this destruction,” accused another, pointing his hoof accusingly.

Diamond Fire looked at each of them, “I know it’s my fault. I’m trying to make it better.”

“Sounds like the filly’s got her heart in the right place,” Gramps called out. This arrival drew sour looks from the town’s ponies. “Unless you got a

funny fondness for sweat, let her help.” Diamond Fire looked at the old brown pony with a surprised but grateful smile.

“She should be in a dungeon,” one of the ponies said sharply.

“Really? Might be a little hard for her to help out being all locked up,” Gramps countered with an arch of his brow, “Maybe you can explain how she’s supposed to pull that off?” The four didn’t seem too inclined to argue the point, but didn’t look happy about it either.

“That slabs too big for her anyway,” one said with a nod of his head to the hunk of roof, “And I’m sure not helping her pull it!”

“Well if you can’t handle it,” Gramps said as he walked over to the harness hooked to the roofing. He looked at Diamond Fire and smiled, “guess an old hoss like me will have to step up.” Diamond nodded gratefully and slipped into the harness next to him. She set her legs and began to pull, and Gramps jumped as her surge shifted the heavy roof. Another stallion looked at the others, shrugged, and gave the roof a shove and with the three of them they managed to drag it to the broken bridge where a team of ponies were busting up debris for building materials.

Unhooking her harness from the slab she turned towards Gramps, “Thanks.” The blue stallion ignored her as he returned to his fellows, but Gramps just tossed his battered green hat, caught it on a hoof, and mopped his brow as he looked up at her with curiosity.

“Fer what? You’re the one doing all the pulling! Never seen a filly with that much muscle,” Gramps pointed out as he wiggled himself free of the straps. It was true that when she’d reverted she was as she was prior to her transformation, and she’d been no slouch back then. Fighting with big iron plates chained to her torso did wonders for her strength.

“For sticking up for me,” she said as she ran her hoof through her orange and yellow mane. “Not many people do that. Not that I blame them.” She looked back where the knot of ponies watched the two suspiciously; as if they expected her to explode into flame again and resume her rampage.

Gramps snorted, "Shoot, that's nothing. When I was a colt I figgered a hydra'd be a fine pet. Critter's momma came looking for it. Wasn't that a heck of a mess!" He cackled as he chewed on the end of a grass stalk. "Folks make mistakes. I figger, long as they're willing ta try and make right, then live and let live."

He walked back to his clean up, leaving Diamond Fire to find something else to haul. From the library, Twilight Sparkle watched Diamond Fire trot away and the purple Unicorn glanced over at Luna besides her, "That's the third fight she's gotten in in the last three days. Ever since ponies found out she was Fury, they've been pretty mad at her." Evacuated Ponies had been returning for the last three days and worked to make Ponyville right again, but there were still a lot of worried and mad folks out there.

Luna sighed, folding her hooves in front of her. "That's why Celestia kept me out of sight after you turned me back to normal. Let ponies forget a little about Nightmare Moon and what I did. But I don't think Firedamp... I mean... Diamond Fire can just sit around and do nothing." Princess Luna said softly as she watched her friend disappear out of sight around the corner.

"Have you two talked yet?" Twilight Sparkle glanced down at the dark Pegasus Unicorn as the Princess lowered her gaze and shook her head morosely.

"It's hard. When you changed me back it was like waking up from a horrible bad dream. I don't really remember every minute of being imprisoned on the moon, or what I did while fighting Celestia. Diamond Fire does. She looks at me and I can't tell if she's seeing Luna, Nightmare Moon, or something else," Luna said with a sigh and stamped her hoof in annoyance. "I've thought of ordering her to talk to me, but I doubt that'll work out well."

"Probably not," Twilight Sparkle agreed. "Most friends don't do well with commands like that."

"Maybe, but it's that or I'm going to sit on her till she talks!" Luna said with a snort.

“No offence, Princess, but I’m pretty sure she would just get up anyway. You’re not exactly a heavyweight,” Twilight Sparkle said as she smiled and they walked back into the library. Luna smiled a little at the joke. In the last three days she and Dignity had been dealing with the constant stream of messages arriving from all over Equestria. Much of it involved reassuring the kingdom that Celestia was okay and the threat ended. Aside from her duties with the sun, Celestia had spent most of the time recovering. Fury had nearly beaten her to death before abandoning her rampage to save Apple Bloom.

Books lay open on almost every surface, maps had been tacked to the walls, papers were organized with reports from all over Equestria, and sitting on a cushion was the Princess. Looking quite battered and bruised, she none the less had insisted on spending most of the morning pouring over old maps and charts to determine where Nightmare Vicious and Nightmare Strife had been bound. Honesty scrambled to extract every bit of lore she could from the library tomes.

“What about with your sister?” Twilight asked softly, gesturing with a nod of her horn.

“Oh we talked. Actually I yelled. She took it. I called her an unimaginable hoof brain, cried at her, and did everything short of kicking her. I think she got the message.” Luna said with a little frown at her sibling. “She better have gotten the message. I’m not going to let her do something stupid like that again.”

“She really blamed herself for Fury... Nightmare Moon.... everything?”

“Of course. Celestia’s had a thousand years to kick herself for what happened,” Luna said with a scornful look at her sibling, “I guess she saw Fury’s revenge as the appropriate time to flog herself like an idiot.”

“Oddly enough, in a thousand years, I’ve also had ample time to improve my sense of hearing,” Celestia said loudly as she levitated a map of old Equestria in front of her.

“Oh, that’s good. I’d hate to have to repeat myself about you being a hoofbrained idiot, sister.” Luna said as she walked over and sat next to her sister, looking up at the maps. “Any luck?”

“Things change a lot in a thousand years,” Celestia said as her eyes traced over the faded drawings. “It also doesn’t help that at the time we were hard pressed to find Vicious, and once we did, we were in a rush to finish Strife and Screamer.”

“And Fury doesn’t have any solid recollection of any bases beyond Nightmare Keep, Nightmare Moon’s old base of operations,” Honesty said as she unrolled a scroll. “We can’t even find that for the same reason. Maps are old and inaccurate and the topography’s changed.”

Twilight frowned as she looked at the maps. “She was bound in a tree in a forest...” There was a lot more forest back then as well. The woods stretched from Trotterham to Fillydelphia, encompassing not just the Everfree Forest but Whitetail Wood and Sunset Sward. There were even forests with ominous names like the Thornbriar and Spiderbranches. “After that where did you confront Strife?”

“Here, at Manor Imbrium,” Honesty replied. “True Heart was poisoned by Lord Imbrium, but we were able to use the elements to bind her within a mirror. Fortunately we know where that is.”

“Oh?”

“Safely locked up in the deepest and most secure vault in all of Canterlot,” Celestia said softly. “I checked it myself, but it hasn’t budged in a thousand years.” There was something in the way she said that which Twilight Sparkle didn’t like.

“Princess, can you show me your memories the way Luna did? Maybe they did something or said something that might give us a clue,” Twilight Sparkle as she looked away from the map.

Celestia looked at her sister with a smile, “Unfortunately, I have no idea how my sister does it. I wish I did. So much has happened that I’d like a second peek at what happened.”

"There is another possibility," Honesty said softly as she pushed her thick glasses back up her muzzle. "We could question Nightmare Strife."

"No, Honesty. She can stay locked up until we're ready to deal with her." Celestia said softly.

"And Nightmare Screamer's never been bound. She could be anywhere," Dignity added as she levitated scrolls. "There have been sightings from Ponyville to Zebranna across the sea." She pointed her hoof. "Here is story of a foreign blue and red pegasus becoming a part of the Sultan of Araby's harem. A year later he's deposed in a revolution. This is a report in Majing, where a 'sky pony' from far away lands befriended an ambitious duke. He rebelled against their Empress and after a terrible war he was deposed and she fled. They go all the way up to a sighting in Manehattan a century ago when she was working for apple cider runners and left them all to be picked up by the Equestrian Guard."

Twilight Sparkle gave a sheepish little smile, "No offense, Princess Luna, but Nightmare Screamer seems a bit... um..."

"Untrustworthy? Unstable? Unreliable?" Honesty suggested.

Luna frowned at the albino pony. "I trust her. She might have issues, but she was always loyal to me when I knew her." The gray Unicorn Pegasus gave a dismissive wave of her hoof to Dignity's scrolls as she said, "This is from her being a nightmare. It has to be."

"I agree," Celestia said firmly. "Of the three, I think that Nightmare Screamer will be the least problem some." That drew a surprised look from her sister. "We need to deal with Vicious or Strife. Preferably Vicious."

"Why prefer her over Strife, your majesty?" Honesty asked as she looked up from her school.

"You know why, Honesty." The two shared a look and Twilight Sparkle suppressed an urge to throttle the battered ruler of Equestria.

Thankfully Luna was less tolerant of evasion as she said crossly, "Why don't you tell us, Celestia?"

The white princess looked at her sister before she sighed and closed her eyes. "When we fought Strife, I nearly killed Honesty." The pale pony smiled and shook her head softly as Celestia continued. "Strife has the ability to get into a person's head. Its magic I've never seen before. For a time, she got into me. I nearly became a nightmare myself. I almost crushed every bone in her body."

"Fortunately Honesty and True Heart managed to snap me out of it before that happened and we bound her. But tragically Strife had corrupted the heart of Imbrium. He slew True Heart after Strife had twisted his love to hatred." From the look on Celestia's face she did not want to talk about it any longer.

"There is also Nightmare Whisper to remember," Twilight Sparkle reminded.

"But since we have even less on her than Screamer, we'd best focus on the Nightmares we know are bound." Dignity swept her scrolls aside with a wave of her horn, wrapping them up. "I suggest we put all our effort into finding Nightmare Vicious. We know she's somewhere in Equestria, rather than the wide world, and if she's bound or not is of paramount importance."

"I disagree," Honesty said softly, "We know where Nightmare Strife is. We can question her, and Miss Sparkle can try to help the poor dear."

"I think we might be able to draw out Nightmare Screamer... somehow..." Luna said softly, "What do you think, Twilight?"

The purple Unicorn suddenly became aware of all eyes on her. "Me? Why are you asking me?"

"Because ultimately you're going to have to deal with the remaining four nightmares. You and your friends, Twilight." Princess Celestia's calmly reminded her.

Twilight Sparkle's eyes widened as what that meant rest upon her shoulders. Fury had almost killed Fluttershy, Applejack, and Celestia. Had she not stopped at the last moment her suicidal detonation might have killed all of them! She found herself backing away from the others. "I... I..."

I..." Her rump bumped into the door. "I think I need some air," she said with a flash of her horn and disappeared from sight.

* * *

"Fluttershy, darling, you simply must stop for a moment and let me check those bandages!" Rarity called as as Fluttershy limped after a clutch of rabbits she gently herded back towards their burrow.

"Oh, but I can't. There are so many bunnies and deer and squirrels that need help getting back to their homes," she said as she limped along.

"Fluttershy..."

"And don't get me started on the poor frogs. Their ponds have so much ash in them it might be weeks before they can return home!" Fluttershy stretched out her wing to gently nudge the smallest back in line. Once they reached their burrow she gave a gentle smile, "Don't fret, little one. I know it smells smoky, but the fire's all gone now."

"Fluttershy!" The Unicorn stomped her hoof firmly as the rabbits returned to their den and the Pegasus started to walk back towards Whitetail Woods. "Enough stalling. Those bandages need to be checked. You were hurt, remember? Nurse Tenderheart made me promise to look after you and I'm going to do it."

Fluttershy gulped and looked at the gauze wrapping her limbs. She gave a little nervous mewl in the back of her throat as she closed her eyes tight. Rarity's magic deftly removed each of them, coiling up the gauze nice and neat as she focused on the task before her. Her purple eyes widened at the sight of raw orange patches covered in white blisters. "Well... you're on the mend," she said as casually as she could. She levitated a jar of salve from her saddle bags and scooped out some of ointment within. Fluttershy wrinkled her nose, "Now now. I know it's not a pleasant smell, but Nurse Tenderheart assured me that it would help with the burns. Really, it's amazing how quickly Pegasus heal, but given how many times Rainbow Dash has gone through roofs and windows I shouldn't be surprised."

"Does it look bad?" Fluttershy whispered.

"Yes," Rarity replied briskly, "But far better than yesterday. And you'll be better tomorrow," she said as she levitated fresh bandages and gently wrapped them in place over the healing burns. "I doubt you'll have a mark at all in a week or so. Applejack's ribs are going to take a bit longer to heal, even with Tenderheart's magic."

Twilight Sparkle listened in from some bushes. She wasn't trying to spy, but right now she wanted to check in on her friends. Fluttershy's injuries seemed to have slowed her down. Would she be okay against in another fight? Rarity's might not have been injured beyond some scuffs and bruises, but would she fare better against a pony wreathed in lightning, cold, or toxins? Could she subject her friends to that again?

A shadow passed overhead and the ivory Pegasus stallion with midnight black mane landed before them, sending the animals around them scurrying for cover. Radiant folded his wings and looked down at the pair of them... well rather at Fluttershy as Rarity edged into his field of vision.

"Why, hello again, Radiant," Rarity began, seeking to distract his hard dark gaze away from Fluttershy. "I must say again how thankful the ponies of Ponyville are for..." neither of the pair acknowledged she was even speaking, "...your people's... generous... sacrifice?"

Radiant's dark eyes drilled into Rarity for one long and terrible moment before returning to Fluttershy. "I'm returning to Cloudsdale," he said in his deep, soft voice. It was like distant thunder. "We have plenty of repairs of our own to make. Every Pegasus is needed."

"Yes sir," Fluttershy said softly, her eyes on her bandaged hooves. The silence stretched on. Twilight Sparkle thought about stepping out, but even out of sight as she was the ominous presence of the Pegasus kept her rooted.

Rarity stepped between the two of them. Her voice was much more high strung as she said, "Yes, well I'm sure you've lots of work to get to. Plenty of work cleaning up Cloudsdale..." The grim stallion didn't move or say a word. His dark glare seemed to reach out and seize Rarity as if he had Unicorn magic. "So... um... so do we. Much work. Fluttershy is so busy with her animals."

Radiant's eyes didn't shift off Rarity's, and the white unicorn started to sweat, looking as if she'd hope he'd blink soon. "Is that true, Fluttershy?" he asked low and steady.

"Yes sir," she whispered, hiding behind Rarity. The white Unicorn looked as if she wished she had something to hide behind as well. Enough was enough! Twilight Sparkle rose to stop this bully.

His dark eyes stared for another moment before he said in his low, ominous voice, "Very well. Be more careful in the future, Fluttershy." Fluttershy simply nodded and Radiant flapped his wings to fly towards Ponyville. Twilight Sparkle looked at her two friends, then at the departing Pegasus, and quickly rushed to her friends. Whoever sourwings was, he took second priority to Fluttershy.

She raced up. "Rarity? Fluttershy? What's going on? Who was that Pegasus?"

Rarity started to answer when Fluttershy whispered, "My father." Both of them went silent as they stared at the gentle pink and yellow Pegasus. Her blue eyes looked up in the direction he'd gone.

"Fluttershy, why didn't you tell me the Head Pegasus of Cloudsdale was your father?" Rarity asked as she knelt, putting a hoof on her shoulder. Twilight Sparkle agreed, it was hard to imagine any relationship between the two. Radiant was hard and cold; a bit like Nightmare Moon when Twilight thought about it. "You don't even look similar."

Fluttershy just looked away, lowering her eyes as she said, "I was always told I look just like mom."

"I can't believe he'd act like that with his own offspring! Some pony should give him a stern talking to!" Rarity stomped her hoof, azure eyes narrowing as she scanned the skies over Ponyville. "Fathers should not do that!"

"Please, no. Don't," Fluttershy said as she stepped in front of the white Unicorn.

“Fluttershy...” Rarity said softly.

“Please. Don’t bother him. Not about me. He’s a very important pony,” she said as she looked after him again, “He has so many people that count on him.”

Twilight Sparkle stepped up to her. “Fluttershy, how he’s treating you is wrong!”

“Oh. Yes. Well... no,” she said as she turned away. “You see, it’s my fault that mom died, so it’s only fair he blames me.”

“What?” Twilight Sparkle gasped as Rarity pressed her hooves to her mouth.

“I was just a foal, and she gave me a little pink ball. The three of us were on a cloud and I was throwing it over the edge. Father would catch it with all kinds of tricks he learned.” She smiled softly, her eyes now looking as something much more distant than her father. “He warned me if I threw it that he’d let it fall to the surface where there were all kinds of monsters, but I threw it anyway.” She closed her eyes, looking back at them with a little mirthless smile. “He refused to go, so mother flew down to get my ball. She didn’t come back.”

Twilight Sparkle gulped and didn’t want to ask. She didn’t have to. “She ran across a dragon. A mean one... he gobbled her up,” Fluttershy said simply, “and that was that.”

“No!” Rarity sniffed. Fluttershy’s eyes were dry, but so terribly sad. The yellow Pegasus just nodded.

“Father went into his room and didn’t come out for a very long time. I cried a lot. I’d dream about it; what happened to her. When he came out, he went straight to work. He didn’t look at me. Didn’t talk to me. So he must have blamed me,” she said with a little smile that didn’t touch her eyes. “I used to think that if I flew, I’d fall down to the surface where dragons would eat me too. Sometimes I still feel like if I fall there will be a dragon down there.” She sighed and shook her head, “Silly, isn’t it?”

Twilight Sparkle's jaw dropped. She couldn't imagine such a thing. She'd hadn't talked to her own parents in years, but knowing they were in Canterlot and caring about her was a constant comfort. To have lost a parent like that... no. Fluttershy hadn't lost one parent. She'd lost them both, but where one was gone the other changed into something cold and unloving.

Rarity, however, hugged Fluttershy. "It's not silly at all, darling," she said as she brushed Fluttershy's mane from her eyes. "I only wish I'd known sooner."

Twilight Sparkle looked from one to the other feeling suddenly like an intruder. She'd once read a diary of Rarity's. The entries had shown that the well bred Unicorn knew loss and tragedy all too well. Twilight Sparkle simply couldn't sympathize with that kind of loss. She could only empathize with their pain and hope that somehow it could get better. Turning away from them both, she quietly made her way back to Ponyville.

Is that what it was like to lose someone you cared about? Did it gouge a hole inside you that never really healed? She wondered how she would feel if Fluttershy died, or Pinkie Pie, or Rarity. Celestia had lost every single one of her friends except pale Honesty. How many centuries had it taken for her to become the kind monarch Equestria now enjoyed?

Suddenly Luna's wish to save her friends became far more real to Twilight Sparkle. Is that what friendship really meant? If so, how could she risk her friends, even to save Luna's? The selfish thought was both disgusting and comforting at the same time.

"Hey, Twilight. What are you doing all the way out here?" Called a voice from above. Rainbow Dash lounged on one of the small black rainclouds broken off from Cloudsdale; she spotted a swollen cloud pillar sticking out of the side.

"I was checking on Fluttershy. Rarity's with her." Twilight said as she looked at her sprawled out on top of the cloud, "Aren't you supposed to be pushing that out to the Everfree Forest and making sure all the fire is out?"

"That fire is done. It didn't stand a chance against Equestria's best flyer. So I'm catching up on some much needed nap time." She gave a

dismissive wave of her hoof as she rolled on to her back. Twilight couldn't help but smile. No matter what happened, Rainbow Dash remained Rainbow Dash.

Twilight glanced back the way she'd come before looked up at Rainbow Dash, "Hey. Did you know that Radiant is Fluttershy's father?"

From the shock on Rainbow Dash's face it was clear she hadn't. "He's her *dad*? Oh geeze, and I thought I had parent problems." She rolled off the cloud, snapped her wings to flip upright, and floated down in front of Twilight Sparkle. "That makes some sense though. Did you know that winged jackass wasn't going to lift a feather to save Ponyville? His plan was to move Cloudsdale and let earth ponies save earth ponies. It wasn't till I mentioned Fluttershy that he moved his rump."

"Really?" Twilight Sparkle looked back behind her before regarding her friend, "Can I ask you a hypothetical question?"

"A what question?"

"Hypo... never mind." Twilight Sparkle hung her head as she regarded her friends. "Do you think we should go after the other nightmares?"

"Sure," Rainbow Dash replied without hesitation.

"Even if it means we might lose our friends?" Twilight added with a little frown.

"Yeah, absolutely," Rainbow Dash answered, just as casually.

"Rainbow, I'm serious! You nearly got burned to death saving Zecora. Fluttershy... Applejack... Celestia... any of them could have been killed." Twilight couldn't believe that Rainbow Dash wasn't taking this seriously!

"Sure," Rainbow Dash replied just as evenly as before. She looked at the purple Pegasus and her lips smiled into a cocky little grin. "Twilight... we could die *tomorrow*. Applejack might make a batch of baked bads again. Pinkie Pike could be buried under a mountain of cupcakes. Rarity

may chip a hoof. And someday, Twilight, it's gonna happen. And that day is gonna be completely unawesome, which is why it's never going to happen to me. " She put her hoof on Twilight's shoulder, "But if we just sit around and let super nasty Nightmares run around when we can fight them then not only is it going to happen but it's going to happen sooner."

"I know... it's just... when we were fighting Fury I didn't really think about it. Not like right now. We had to do it. But thinking about going from protecting ourselves to actually hunting them down...." Twilight closed her eyes for a moment, "Dash, I'm scared!"

I'm scared. Saying those two simple words quieted the fear that had been boiling and twisting inside her. She was scared. Seeing Rarity and Fluttershy hurt like that... physical pain was nothing compared to that.

"Every pony's scared. Well, except for me," Rainbow Dash said with a little smirk that almost convinced Twilight, "It's just another race. It's just got higher stakes, sure. We win and there's sunshine and rainbows. We lose? Unawesomeness."

Twilight felt herself calm. "You're right, Dash. Thanks." It certainly helped dampen those worries inside her.

"You're the smartest Pony I know, Twilight. You tell us what to do and we'll do it. No worries. Kay?" Rainbow Dash said as she stretched. "Now if you don't mind, I've got a few more hours of sleep to catch up on. See you later, Twilight." And with that she launched herself back up to the cloud and pulled the fluffy surface over her like a blanket.

"Thank you, Dash." Twilight Sparkle said as she trotted towards Sweet Apple Acres.

Nightmare Moon. Nightmare Fury. Nightmare Vicious. Nightmare Strife. Nightmare Screamer. Nightmare Whispers.

Of the six nightmares, Moon and Fury were the most well known. Nightmare Moon may have been the leader of the fight against Celestia, but from Twilight's research she thought more and more of Nightmare Moon as a figurehead. Inspiring, fear inducing; the face of the six. She wasn't a tactical genius or a political creature. Worse, from listening to her

many speeches, it was clear Moon believed she was. She inspired fear, and while that fear sustained the rebellion for a while eventually she was isolated and banished. It wasn't a pleasant topic in the library for any pony.

Nightmare Fury had been the muscle. When Nightmare Moon played general, Fury was always on the battlefield. In many ways Fury was more feared than Nightmare Moon; Moon had vast magical powers but she rarely used them. A visit by Fury could level a community. Fury wasn't subtle. Every pony knew she was coming and knew to surrender, run, or burn. Her charge on Ponyville actually was very true to form.

Nightmare Vicious, more than any pony, was the smart one in the bunch. Instead of bold statements or open aggression, Vicious was subtle. She kidnapped countless victims, sometimes returning them to their families injured and mutilated. Others didn't return at all. She likewise was something of a cook of sorts; only instead of pies and cupcakes she brewed all sorts of noxious poisons, drugs, and chemicals. Luna had been so busy running Equestria the last few days that Twilight hadn't had a chance to ask who Briar Rose or the others were before their transformations.

Nightmare Strife had been the manipulator. She, far more than Moon, seemed to control things from behind the scenes. By every account she was beautiful, but cold and vain. She led to the ruin of hundreds of aristoponies and orchestrated the murder of Celestia's friend Trueblood via the poor love sick stallion Lord Imbrium, one of the founders of Ponyville. Diamond Tiara's family were his descendants. Twilight contemplated visiting their manor, but doubted that they would know much about a Nightmare from a thousand years ago.

Nightmare Screamer was the odd bunch of the party. Charismatic, but not as much as Nightmare Moon. Powerful, but not as strong as Nightmare Fury. Intelligent, but not as clever as Nightmare Vicious. Manipulative, but not as tricky as Nightmare Strife. Screamer was the one that got away. Where the others were all experts in their fields, she was always the back up.

Nightmare Whispers. The unknown. That unnerved Twilight Sparkle more than anything: a manipulator behind manipulators. Twilight Sparkle stopped as she slowly looked around herself. The air was terribly still. The

buzz of insects droned softly around her, but not a breath of wind stirred the grass under hoof. Her hackles rose as she swallowed. "Nightmare Whispers..." she murmured as softly as she could. "Nightmare Whispers. You can hear me, can't you?"

She felt silly. Now she was starting to get paranoid on top of everything. Yet she stood there as still as she could manage, straining her ears. The faint buzz of grasshoppers dwindled away. Twilight felt her heart pound as she closed her eyes.

"Twilight Sparkle?"

Pinkie Pie's squeak made Twilight Sparkle jump and land in a heap. The pink pony wearing saddlebags cocked her head and then grinned. "Oh? Is it a game? I was wondering what you were doing just standing out here all alone. What are the rules? Who's playing? Can I be the car? I want to be the car!" She said as she looked around with a grin, then noticed Twilight Sparkle was twitching a little she frowned and looked down at her. "Um... Twilight? Are you okay?"

"Fine, Pinkie. Just fine. And it was a game and I just lost." She said as she sat up, rubbing her horn.

"Oh, that's too bad. Well, here." She dug into her back and fished out a cupcake and tossed it to her friend. "Consolation prize." Twilight caught it with her magic, and then smiled. It smelled excellent and she hadn't had much appetite all morning.

She munched and then smiled, "Thanks, Pinkie Pie. I needed that. This whole nightmare business has got my tail in knots."

"Ohhh, and no pony likes a knotty tail," Pinkie Pie commiserated. "Well I'm taking these treats to Sweet Apple Acres. They're all working so hard to fix it up after all that mess."

Twilight Sparkle chuckled as they continued walking together. The air of the glade was still silent after their passing. Then a low soft laugh carried through the long grass before that too faded. The insects, unconcerned by such things, resumed their soft droning buzz.

* * *

Apple Bloom and Zecora picked their way along the muddy trail towards Zecora's home. Long strips of black wood streaked through patches of green and brown. Here and there Apple Bloom could pick out hoof prints baked into the mud. The little pony had agreed to accompany the zebra back to her home to see what remained. "Zecora, what are you going to do if your home's not there anymore?" she asked as she trotted besides her, looking up. "You're not going to leave Ponyville, are you?"

The zebra chuckled and said in a voice still scratchy from the smoke, "It may be I'll have to roam, but nearby I'll find another home. More worried am I for what remains. Some losses will cause me great pains."

Apple Bloom nodded, knowing quite well herself. A lot of Sweet Apple Acres had gotten demolished, but thankfully neither their house nor their orchards were damaged. "Zecora, I was wondering, where did you come from?"

"Ah, a land beyond the sea where the grasslands grow far and the wind blows free. Where the stars are bright and the moon glows true and the sun bathes everything through and through. Where the land is strong and not quite tame; Zebranna is its name." Zecora said with a fond smile. "Villages of thatch and muddy bricks and palaces of stone with walls quite thick. Markets with goods from all around could be found in almost every town. Music plays and zebras dance... oh it makes me want to prance!" The zebra said with a little hop skipping walk that made Apple Bloom giggle.

"Well then why'd you leave?" Apple Bloom asked, hoping it wasn't because of something bad.

"The world calls, dear Apple Bloom, and you cannot see it without leaving your room. I've walked seas of burning sand and left them colored black and tan. I've seen great mountains that bite the clouds with snow clinging all year in gauzy shrouds. Forests great and oceans deep where strange and wonderful beasts creep. Flowers great and blossoms small as the seasons rise and fall. With all the world holds with its call, how could I not travel and see it all?" Zecora asked with her dreamy smile. "Coming to this Forest Everfree I knew there was much to see. I found a home and

made it nice, such a trivial price for the wonders which I have seen and the ponies I've met who are so keen."

Apple Bloom could almost imagine those wondrous sights as she walked besides her. When all this began the cutie mark crusaders had talked about being explorers, but Zecora was the real explorer. She'd left her home and travelled all around the world only to make her home in the Everfree Forest for a time. It was enough to make Apple Bloom want to go to Zecora's homeland to hear the music the zebra no doubt remembered.

The young pony looked at the ugly black char. "I can't believe how bad this is. She must have burned miles and miles."

The zebra stopped and walked to an ugly patch of wet ash and mud. "Look here, Apple Bloom," she said and gestured to thin green shoots poking out of the ashes. "Fire does not always spell doom. Though fire may rage and chastise, from the ashes life will always arise."

Nudging the little green shoots with her hoof, Apple Bloom smiled and said, "Take care, little guys."

Unfortunately further along the pair found her home in its state of near desolation and Zecora's mood sobered quite a bit. Of all her belongings, she was most upset by the loss of her books. She set them down and carefully paged through them to save any that were recoverable. The masks were likewise a sad loss, but she simply bid them farewell until she could make them anew. With their saddle bags full the zebra then approached the steps down to the root cellar.

"This place has also tasted fire; the blaze must have been very dire," Zecora said as she stepped between the bins and boxes that were all blackened. Zecora walked back to a small alcove, and then froze. "No! This cannot be! How could I lose the seed of the tree?"

Apple Bloom frowned as she climbed on some crates that creaked, but supported her lighter frame. "Zecora. What is it? What's wrong?"

"In my travels far and wide I was seized by a strangest tide that led me to a place powerful and green where magic could be felt just unseen. Trees older than all grew there, more beautiful than beyond compare. In

that place a gift I received more precious than could be believed. A seed of the potent three, offspring of the World Tree,” she cried as she put a hoof inside the space, as if the fire had made it invisible. “Hidden well within this space were treasures from that distant place.”

“Maybe the fire burned it all up?” Apple Bloom looked around the scorched crates.

“Find me the hottest flame’s greed, it could never consume that seed.” Zecora insisted.

Apple Bloom then looked upwards at the roof and frowned. “Zecora? Why is your roof all shiny?” In the wan light coming down the stairs, Apple bloom could see black lines of melted glass.

Zecora’s eyes widened, “By my hooves, I do not know what could make the roof just so.” Then she paused and frowned. “Wait, in my travels I do recall a stone found in merchant’s stall. Blackened glass in jagged line: the product when lightning and sand combine.”

“Lightning? Well how in tarnation did lightning get in your cellar, Zecora?” Apple Bloom asked.

“Truthfully, I do not know; I can only read what the letters show. If this lightning stole my seed then it is a clever thief indeed.”

* * *

Sweet Apple Acres was only slightly less dinged up than Ponyville, thanks to the efforts of the Apple family. Everywhere Twilight Sparkle could see the family busied themselves with clearing away what’d been destroyed. Most of the barn and water tower lay in two heaps and Twilight could see big Macintosh hauling a wagon of lumber over to where the building had once stood. The vegetable garden was probably destined to become Sweet Apple Acre’s new duck pond.

“Yoooo hooo!” Pinkie Pie called as she bounced down into the farm. “I got pastries, confections, punch, and cookies!” She said as she opened her bags and dumped them on a picnic table near the house. Anypony who approached quickly got a pointy hat as well as something sweet to eat.

"It's a congratulations and thanks for all your hard work party!" She proclaimed as she broke into a musical number.

"That filly could celebrate grass growin, I reckon," Applejack said as she approached Twilight Sparkle.

"Don't give her any ideas," Twilight Sparkle said with a smile, looking impressed as a half dozen of Applejack's relations joined in. "Someday I'll have to find out how she does that."

"Does what? Hop around like a bunny? Cause that's been biting my biscuits since we first met."

"No Applejack. I wonder how she always makes everyone smile like that." Twilight said as Pinkie Pie launched into a chorus about hammers and nails. Twilight let out a soft sigh as she said, "I have to decide which Nightmare we're going to deal with next. Vicious. Strife. Screamer." Twilight laid out the problems as she saw them. Vicious was the most dangerous. Strife was locked up. Screamer was free.

"Well shoot. We can search till the cows come home and never find this Vicious critter. I say, till she pokes her nose outta whatever hole she's in, we go pay a visit to the one Nightmare who's hiding hole we know." Applejack said, giving her two bits. "And if we come across this Screamer, we can give her the punt too. Teach her it was a mistake to come back to Equestria."

"I suppose you're right. She's not as powerful as any of the others. So, I guess we'll just have to go to Canterlot and deal with Strife." She looked at the bruises on Applejack's sides. "Though I think we can wait a little longer for your ribs to mend."

"I'd appreciate it." She looked at her older brother with a sharp snort and said, "I just know Big Macintosh loves hauling around those loads in front of me like I'm a little filly. I'd haul them and him if I'd hadn't gotten applebucked halfway across Sweet Apple Acres!" Twilight Sparkle smiled and shook her head. Some days she was sure she had the orange equine figured out, and other days...

* * *

The hole loomed in the ground like a great pit in the foggy field. Her wings spread wide as she drifted slowly down to the ground. Wet wood and gray thorns surrounded her on all sides. Her hooves touched down in the base of the low shaft, sinking into the soggy rot that filled the bottom of the void.

Vicious terrified Nightmare Screamer. Of all her former friends, none truly gave her the same gut loosening sensations as the sweet pony that had gone completely off the deep end. She could see the thorns growing before her eyes. They curled into the gaps in the wood, twisting out of sight. Others bent and tore at their own, and she spotted a thick thorny length split in two as another runner tore it slowly in two.

She swallowed and then called out, "Vicious?"

The thorn vines stilled their movement for a moment. Then beneath her hooves she felt the squirm of thorn vines. Lightning flashed in her eyes as she reared and struck the mung beneath her. Every strike blasted apart pale clingy roots that wiggled towards her. "Knock it off, Vicious. It's me!"

The roots stopped their advance. From the shadows a voice said softly, "Go away."

"I can't. I know Whisper's talked to you. Told you what she needs." And not told Screamer, she reminded herself. In this case, however, screamer didn't want to know. The vines continued their crawling around her. Some vine tips pressed tip to tip, increasing pressure till they both split. "Look, just take it and I'll get out of here." I'm not begging. This is not begging!

The thorn vines slowed their movement. Then two walls of vines pulled open to reveal a rotted out space. Even with the flickers of lightning off her mane, Screamer couldn't see the depths of that hole. From it stretched a thick root. Slowly it approached and then unfolded before Screamer's eyes like an open skeletal hand.

Screamer pulled off the pouch and shook out a silvery white seed about the size of a walnut, shaped vaguely like an apple. The root coiled around the seed and immediately drew into the space. "I want..." Vicious muttered, trailing off into a soft mumble.

"What?" Screamer couldn't help herself as she leaned closer to the hole.

"I said I want..." but more mumbling obscured the words.

Screamer turned her head and leaned just a little more towards the hole. "You want what?"

Thick thorn vines whipped around her throat and legs and pulled her head into the hole. A white, gaunt shape pressed its face against hers. Baleful green eyes grew as it opened a mouth full of razor sharp thorns and screamed, "I WANT A PONY!"

The blast of lightning erupted from the earth as Nightmare Screamer flew like a thousand rabid Princess Celestias were on her heels.

Chapter 9

Misspoken

The afternoon light transformed the library into a patina of yellows and golds. The books, treasures from all across Equestria for their lore and scarcity, lay in neatly tended rows on the shelves in careful alphabetic order by category. Marble pillars rose to a graceful dome overhead; the stone apparently seamless thanks to Earth pony skill and Unicorn magic. The large round window set high in the wall created a spotlight effect in the center of the floor; and framed by golden light stood Princess Virtue calmly watching as a white unicorn taught Princess Celestia her letters.

“Mommy?” Princess Luna asked timidly as she poked her head around the leg of a table. Gentle golden eyes turned to regard her daughter and she knelt. “Mommy!” She cried and rushed to her, nuzzling against her side as her mother knelt as gently stroked her neck.

“What’s the matter, Luna?” The Princess asked, softly running her hoof along her flank. Celestia looked over from her book in concern.

“Princess Celestia, focus,” the young pale green Unicorn mare with a jade mane said softly as she gestured back at the book.

“I just want to see my sister, True Heart.”

“And you will. Later. For now you must focus.” True Heart said in soft and precise words. She may have been only a year or two older than Celestia, but the young green unicorn obviously knew a great deal about self control.

“What is it, my dear?” Princess Virtue said softly as she gazed into Luna’s eyes.

“I couldn’t find you or daddy or Clesta or any pony!” Luna wailed, “I thought I’d be alone forever!”

“Oh Luna.” Princess Virtue said softly as she touched her horn to Luna’s, “As long as you have love, you’ll never really be alone.” Luna smiled at that thought, nuzzling her happily.

True Heart walked from where Celestia studied, the white Alicorn giving an almost envious look at her sister with their mother, and said in a low voice, “I must apologize your majesty, but I’m afraid this is distracting the Princess.”

“*This* Princess is scared, True Heart,” Princess Virtue said softly.

“Indeed, but she’s recovered.” Her eyes settled on Luna a moment, “I believe I may have a solution.” She clapped her hooves together and from the edge of the room scampered a lavender unicorn only a few years older than Princess Luna.

“Y...y...y...yes, my l....lady?” she stammered, giving a hasty bob of her head and she looked nervously from True Heart to Princess Virtue to Luna.

“Decorum,” True Heart said without moving her lips. The lavender unicorn with darker purple mane took a few seconds to compose herself. Giving a satisfied nod, the pale green unicorn smiled at the Princesses. “Mother took this young lady into our service just a few days ago. I hardly need another hoof maid, but it occurs to me that Princess Luna has none at all. I humbly entreat you to accept her into your service, your majesty.” Emerald eyes glanced at Princess Luna, “The Princess is fast approaching the age where she will need attendants.”

“You’re giving me a pony?” Luna said in bafflement. “Momma, can she do that?”

The lavender maid swallowed and bobbed her head, “I... I p...p...p...promise to s...s...serve...f...” she stammered horribly, not able to look either of them in the eye.

“I suppose you’re right, True Heart. My daughters will need attendants to help with their duties.” Princess Virtue looked at the unicorn maid with her radiant smile. “I trust that you will see to my daughter’s needs?”

“Y...y...y...” she tried to speak, grimacing as she struggled to say the simple word. Princess Virtue just smiled at the young lavender unicorn till she finished, “Y...yes your M...m...m...ma...majesty.” The lavender unicorn positively beamed at the accomplishment of simple speech.

“There. I so enjoy it when things come together nicely,” True Heart said primly as she walked back to where Celestia sat alone in ill humor. Perhaps she wasn’t aware of how voices carried in the library, but Luna heard the green unicorn say to her sister, “Now that Luna has her babysitter, perhaps we can return to important matters.”

Princess Virtue reached out to nuzzle Luna once again before rising, “All better now?” Luna certainly didn’t feel all better, but she knew what answer her mother needed to hear and nodded. “That’s a good girl. Now I need to go find your father. Some pony needs to keep all these silly ponies from fighting each other.”

As her mother left Luna followed her into the hall, watching her walk away. Princess Virtue looked back at her with a warm smile before disappearing around the corner. Princess Luna then looked at the lavender maid and frowned. The unicorn blanched. “You. What’s your name?”

“M...m...m...”

“Spit it out!”

“M... m... m...” she seemed to be fighting to say the words, and Luna’s frown turned a little more concerned. “M...Morning.... m... m... m... Mist.” She breathed hard, as if the act of speaking was physically taxing for Morning Mist.

She narrowed her gaze up at her baby sitter, “Morning Mist?”

The Unicorn nodded.

“I hate you.”

Twilight Sparkle watched the young Luna trot away in the vision, her jaw dropping at the devastated expression on Morning Mist’s face. “Luna!”

She turned to the dark Alicorn as the vision disappeared around them like night giving way to the dawn. They were in flight towards the castle and Twilight had asked the Princess to share her memories of the unicorn who would become Nightmare Strife. "That was terrible!"

The dark gray Alicorn covered her head with her hooves as she leaned against the rail of the chariot. "I know! I know I was terrible. I was barely older than a foal back then." She sighed as she sat, looking at the terrain passing underneath the chariot. "I resented being treated like a baby, even though I practically was a baby."

"Ah, don't worry about it none, sugar cube," Applejack said with an easy smile, "You shoulda seen me when I was your age. Whoo nelly, wasn't I a terror fer Big Macintosh?" Twilight Sparkle and her friends rode with Luna in one large chariot while Celestia, Dignity, and Honesty travelled in another.

"So Morning Mist was your hoof maid?" Rarity asked. Luna nodded.

"Um, excuse me, but for all of us that aren't up on all the rich fancy smanchy stuff, what the heck is a hoof maid and why would any pony want one?" Rainbow Dash asked crossly.

Rarity sighed with a smile, "Oh a hoof maid is simply a darling companion to help one dress, keep one's hooves neat and polished, bring you your tea, and take care of all those annoying little distractions in life." She saw all of her friends looking at her oddly, "Or so I've heard," she quickly added.

"It was also a good job for a young filly or mare," Twilight added, taking some of the heat off Rarity. "In old times when jobs were scarce and often dangerous, a filly would be lucky to serve as a royal hoof maid. Believe it or not, True Heart was actually doing Morning Mist a favor."

Rainbow Dash stuck out her tongue, blowing a raspberry as she crossed her hooves. "Well it sure doesn't seem right to me. You'll never see me with one!"

"I think that goes without saying." Rarity replied with a smile.

Suddenly a blast of wind shook the chariot and her friends dug in their hooves as it rocked wildly. When the gust past Twilight Sparkle sat up and rubbed her head. "Ugh, what happened?"

"Rogue weather," Rainbow Dash said as she pointed at a bank of dark clouds to the west. Lightning flickered along the edge. "Since Cloudsdale's rainstorm, the weather across Equestria's been wonky. There isn't enough Pegasus out and about right now to kick it all back in line. They're mostly still working at Cloudsdale and Ponyville."

"Can't you do something about it, Princess? Oooh! Ohhh! Point your horn at it and give it a big zap! Bye bye you big rainy meany!" Pinkie Pie asked Princess Luna as she waved her hoof at bank of clouds like she could just wave away the storm front.

"Weather magic is very dangerous," Princess Luna said as she looked at the approaching storm. "There's a lot of magical power in a storm. If I just try to get rid of it then all that magic has to go somewhere. I could make the weather a lot worse. Tornadoes instead of just thunder storms, or start a drought. That's why we leave it to Pegasus. They're better at it than Alicorns," she said as she looked at the cyan Pegasus. Rainbow Dash's eyes widened and she flushed with pride at the complement.

"We're almost to the castle anyway. Hopefully all of this will just blow over." Twilight Sparkle looked at Fluttershy, shaking as she wrapped her hooves around the rail with her eyes clenched tight.

"Yeah. I just hope no pony gets caught up in that. Wild storms are no picnic at all." Rainbow Dash said solemnly as the distant growl of thunder rolled across the valley.

* * *

"It seems the Great and Powerful Trixie is forced to endure another rainstorm," the Great and Powerful Trixie said to herself as she hunkered in the meager shelter of a tree on the edge of a large grassland. She could make out the glorious lighted towers of Canterlot far above, but that wasn't her destination. In reality, the Great and Powerful Trixie was at a loss to find any place impressed by greatness or power. Ever since her disastrous

showing in Ponyville word had gotten around Equestria that she was a liar, hack, and something of a joke. It was on nights like this that she missed her covered wagon.

“Well the Great and Powerful... nnnngghh....” She sighed as she pressed her hooves to the sides of her head. “Ugh, who am I even talking to?” She sighed as there was another roll of thunder. The rain began to fall, much colder than the season warranted. She carefully collected whatever dry sticks she could and lit a fire with her horn. “I need to try some new venue. Maybe Manehattan. There’s so many ponies there surely some of them would be impressed by the Great and Powerful Trixie.”

From the rain came a long low laugh. In the gloom the blue unicorn spotted a shape slowly approaching with leisurely steps. There was something ominous in that lazy gait that made her horn itch. She rose to her hooves, “You! I warn you, the Great and Powerful Trixie is in no mood for... for whoever you are!” She adopted the most imperious tone she could muster, “The Great and Powerful Trixie bids you be gone!”

“Great and Powerful,” the stranger said in a harsh, grating voice. “I’ve known great ponies. I’ve known powerful ones too. I don’t think I’ve ever seen both at the same time though... well... except for the Great and Powerful Nightmare Screamer.” The blood red mare who stepped into the wan light of Trixie’s fire looked at her with a cruel twist of her lips. “Ever hear of me?” Slowly a grin appeared as blue white lightning crackled along her midnight blue mane.

“The... the Great and... and...” She swallowed as she backed up against the tree.

“Powerful, right?” Nightmare Screamer said as she slowly walked a slow circle around Trixie. “Do you have a clue what power is? What it really means?”

Trixie’s horn flashed and from her bags emerged a rope that snaked itself around the red Pegasus’s legs and wings. Seeing her tied tight, Trixie managed a nervous smile. “Clearly, the Great and Powerful Trixie has shown you...” her words died as lightning crackled over the red pegasus’ body and incinerated the rope. “...oh dear...” she muttered.

The nightmare cocked her head and seemed to address the rainy night. "Please tell me I can just kill this one and find a pony that doesn't speak in the third person?" A pause and a sigh. "I never get what I want..."

Trixie's horn flared as she summoned a black cloud over Nightmare Screamer. She pushed as much magic into the attack she could, and forked lightning snapped down to zap Screamer's black lightning bolt cutie mark.

"Really? I have lightning coming out my mane and you zap me? Brilliant." She said as blue crackled along her legs and sent up smoke from the wet ground. "That's not how you do it, anyway." The air flashed and filled with a resounding boom that struck the tree and ripped the trunk in two. The detonation sent Trixie rolling through the leaves, her ears ringing. The Nightmare turned and faced her with a murderous smile. "That's how you do it."

Trixie gave up any illusion of fighting at that point and focused on flight. A bolt of lightning blew a hole in the turf in front of her, bringing her to a skidding stop. "A little to the left," Screamer said as she panned her gaze to follow Trixie's flight. Another bolt slammed down in front of Trixie, this time making her roll several times. "Run. Run. Or you'll be well done!" Screamer laughed as Trixie looked on in horror.

The world became white light and pain. When she came to she lay on her side, paralyzed and twitching. She couldn't seem to draw breath. She couldn't even feel her heart beating. Screamer filled her vision as she stood over her, darkness closing in around her. "What a waste," Nightmare Screamer said dismissively as hooves were pressed to Trixie's chest. An incredible pain and pressure jerked through her body as she spasmed and writhed. However, when Screamer stepped away she could once more feel her heart beating inside her chest. She trembled as she drew a shaky breath.

"Now, listen," Screamer said softly as she looked up at the castle. Trixie stared at her in shock and fear, but the Nightmare said nothing.

Listen? To what? But as Trixie lay there she started to become aware of a noise underneath the hiss of rain, the grumble of thunder, and

the creek of trees in the wind. It was as if all these sound combined, muted, and transformed into the softest whisper within her ears.

"I apologize on Screamer's behalf. She's been in a foul mood for a very, very long time," the mare whispered in her ear. "I do hope that she's made an impression on what power truly means Great and Powerful Trixie."

"Who are you?" Trixie whispered.

"No pony of consequence. I'm just looking for mares with the drive, ambition, and courage to seize the kind of potential that is possible within you. One who is not afraid of real power. Power enough to show all of Equestria how Great and Powerful Trixie really is."

Trixie's eyes widened as she stared at the Nightmare whose mane crackled with lightning. Power that could defeat an ursa minor with ease; power that she could take back to Ponyville and put Twilight Sparkle in her place. She lay in the rain, her mind tantalized by the possibilities. Then she whispered softly, "What do I have to do?"

The whispery voice laughed softly. "Tell me, Great and Powerful Trixie, have you ever wondered about your cutie mark?"

* * *

Luna awoke to the rising of the sun breaking the horizon. Sitting up in her bed, she ran her hoof through the mussed hair; her wavy star mane a mass of tangles and spikes. On a cot besides her snored Firedamp, legs spread wide as her tongue lolled out the side of her mouth. They'd spent all night talking after Luna had seen to raising the moon and sent it on its way through the skies. She slipped from her bed, walking to the window to see her sister flying in the east and guiding the brilliant sphere of flame up into the sky.

Once she'd have flown out to talk with her and ask her about magic. Now she simply looked from afar. After all there were meetings and appearances and studies and a thousand things more important than bothering with her sister. Celestia had a kingdom to run. Luna had only Luna to run.

Firedamp let out a deep snort as she rolled on her side and started to drool all over her pillow. Luna smiled at the ridiculous sight. Maybe not just Luna anymore. She stretched and looked around, curious where Morning Mist was. The unicorn had an uncanny knack for knowing when Luna was awake and they'd developed a tolerable routine. Carefully she walked to the door and heard voices in the hall. The servants were all ready about tending to their duties.

All except for four at the end of the hall. Morning Mist stood there surrounded by three other hoof maids. "Why do you even bother talking at all if you don't know how?" asked a unicorn with a mean little smirk.

"I... I... I..." Morning Mist stammered, struggling to back away from the knot as she held a levitated tray in her magic grip.

"I... I... I... Idiot?" Snickered another. "That's obvious."

"S...S..."

"Stupid?" Cracked the one with imagined wit.

Morning Mist looked near tears as she looked down towards Luna's door. Luna ducked her head back, "D...D..."

"Dummy?" suggested the second.

The third glanced down the hall nervously. "Maybe we should get to work. The gentlefolk are waking. If the house mare catches us we'll be in trouble." Her friends ignored her warning, however.

"You're only Luna's hoof maid because True Heart handed you over. I can only guess she keeps you around because it's funny to have a stammering idiot." The first said sharply, "One day she's going to get tired of your babbling and then she'll have a decent hoof maid for once, like me."

Had Luna witnessed this a few days ago she would have closed the door and done all she could to forget about it. Glancing back at Firedamp, she remembered how the scruffy pony had come to her rescue. Looking back out the door her eyes hardened and she swallowed hard as she

stepped out. "You! What do you think you're doing?" She said as she stormed up towards the four. She must have been such a sight with her bed mane tangled up around her.

Morning Mist lowered her head, clenching her eyes shut as the three others backed away with their polite little smiles. Those smiles didn't last as Princess Luna walked right up to the first one who seemed to think she would be such a better replacement. "How dare you distract Morning Mist from her duties? How dare you delay her for your own entertainment? And how dare you think that you could ever take her place?"

"Y... you... your majesty! I... I..." The blue unicorn suddenly looked neither confident nor amused.

"Now who's a stammering idiot?" Luna said as she glared up at the older pony. Her eyes snapped at the second, "And you! Morning Mist knows perfectly well how to talk. And she knows how to keep her mouth closed. And she knows that being mean doesn't mean you're being smart." She glared at the third, but clenched her jaw. "I'm of a mind to tell the palace house mare what you three have done!" Luna would never do so, the strict mare terrified her, but she was riding a thrilling wave of rigorousness.

"N...n...no!" Morning Mist stammered, to four surprised looks. "P...p...p..." she struggled and swallowed before spitting out, "Please... d...d...don't."

Luna saw the expression on the three other hoof maids; surprise, but in at least two others there was shame too. "You should thank her," Luna said firmly as she turned to return to her chambers. She didn't dare look back until they were out of sight. Once the door closed Luna slumped. "Oh my... oh my! I can't believe I just did that! Did you see that?" She looked at Morning Mist's nervous expression and gave a sheepish smile. "Are you sure you don't want me to get them in trouble? I'm a Princess. I think that means I can throw them in jail or something if I want."

"N... n... n..." she tried to say quickly, struggling so hard that she almost dropped the tray holding Luna's breakfast.

Luna reached out and put her hooves on Morning Mist's shoulders. "Shhh... it's okay..." That was always what they did. She'd tell it was okay and she'd stop trying to talk. But as Luna looked into the lavender Unicorn's pink eyes she realized she didn't want her to stop. "Take a deep breath... talk slow..."

Morning Mist's eyes widened and she took several slow breaths. "No, P...Princess Lu... Luna. That w...won't make m...m...me t...talk a...any... b...b...b...better." She hung her head a little. "T...t....t...they're r...right. I... I... I... am a d...d...."

"If you say dummy I will kick you," Luna said firmly, "You are not a dummy. You just need to... to practice. Practice talking with me. I know you can get better." She brushed her violet hair out of her eyes. "I know you have things to say, Mist."

A loud yawn from the door announced Firedamp's arrival. The majority of the rust pony's mane stuck straight up along her spine. "What's going on?" She asked, rubbing her orange eyes.

Luna looked at her hoof maid for the last time and smiled at Firedamp as she introduced her friend. "Fire? This is my friend, Morning Mist. Morning Mist, this is my friend, Firedamp." Morning Mist's eyes grew wide, and for the first time since they'd met, she gave a true smile of happiness.

As the illusion faded away, Twilight Sparkle's returned to the dark Alicorn. "You defended her, Luna," Twilight Sparkle said with a smile. Princess Celestia had watched the memory with a wistful, regretful expression. "Did her speaking improve?"

Luna nodded, "With time. She learned to be slow and careful with her words."

"I wish I'd known she'd been harassed like that. That both of you were. I just assumed that everything was all right," Celestia said solemnly.

"You were dealing with a hundred problems at once," Honesty said calmly, the pale little pony having watched the exchange with an oddly pensive expression. "You couldn't manage every hoof maid in the castle."

"I know. I just see these and wish I had done something. That I'd even known." Princess Celestia gave an apologetic smile to Luna.

"It's okay," Luna said quietly as she went to her sister. "Dealing with aristoponies like Blueblood was a full time job for you."

"Not that waltzin down memory lane isn't interestin, but how is this supposed to help us deal with Nightmare Strife?" Applejack asked from her cushion. Her ears folded down, "It's hard when ya'll find out about em. I mean, when Fury was nice ta Apple Bloom it nearly kicked my cart."

Twilight Sparkle looked at her friends, "When I faced Nightmare Moon, I had to feel a spark for the Elements of Harmony to work. I think..." She looked over at Luna, her ears folding a little. "I think that... well... Nightmare Moon wanted to be beaten when she saw all of us together. I mean, she had the power to stop the sun from rising. The six of us shouldn't have been a problem. I think even Nightmare Moon wanted friends." She pressed her hoof to her chest. "When I realized you were all my friends... I felt it. I was happy. And I think Nightmare Moon was too at the end. That was why we were able to turn her back."

"Wait a minute. Then why did it take so long for us to zap Fury back to normal?" Rainbow Dash asked as she pointed a hoof at Twilight.

"Because I didn't understand her, Rainbow. It took Luna's memories for me to realize Fury didn't want to destroy anything except herself. She was guilty. She wanted punishment and thought she deserved only the gravest." Twilight Sparkle slowly walked around the study looking at her friends, "When I could share that feeling, it made me able to connect to her. I could help her then, because I knew what to help."

Rarity looked to Twilight as she said, "You know, I never imagined the Elements of Harmony to be so complicated. Wouldn't it be easier if it was just a spell you cast?"

"No pony knows why the elements of harmony exist, Rarity. It's not just magic. It's something... something more," Twilight Sparkle said as she looked out at the flickers of lightning growing closer. "When we have them I feel like I'm touching something... something powerful. Something so vast and wonderful that it's almost frightening." Twilight looked at her

friends soberly, "I'm glad it's not easy. Power like that shouldn't be easy. Otherwise I'd be just like a Nightmare."

"It makes me wonder if the phenomenon is related," Honesty said as she pushed back her glasses. "Nightmares scar themselves to tap into an immense source of power permanently. The elements of harmony let the magic flow through them, but only when the gate is open."

"But that doesn't make sense! I mean who wouldn't just take super awesome power if they could?" Rainbow Dash complained.

"Would you?" Dignity asked in a soft voice as the blue unicorn gazed coolly at the cyan Pegasus. "You're the competitor as I recall. Do you work hard for your speed and skill?"

"You know it!" Rainbow Dash said proudly.

"Then would you throw all that work away for a short cut to amazing speed? Would you live every day of your life knowing that you win only because you cheated? Face your friends with them knowing you have the powers that you have by rejecting the person who was their friend?" Dignity asked as she stared down at Dash in disdain. "Would you become a monster simply to win?"

"Well... no...", Rainbow said as she ran her hoof through her mane. "When I win, it'll be one hundred and twenty percent Dash."

"And that's why no pony would ever become a Nightmare unless they truly felt they had no other choice. It's a violation of self," Dignity concluded with a proper little nod.

"Ya know, you seem to have thought about this a might more than your average pony," Applejack observed of Dignity.

The blue Unicorn looked back with an expression of haughty dismissal, "I know something of regrets. That is all you need to know."

Twilight Sparkle stepped between the two of them. "Stop, please. If we're going to face her then we'll need to work together." Dignity looked at

Applejack and gave a cool nod of her head. Twilight looked at Luna. "Can you show us something else? Some memory of Mist that was important?"

Luna paused, glancing over at Celestia before looking out the window. "Well. There was one time..." The light caught the tip of her horn and splintered. The beams of light refracted and split to weave into the magical illusion that draped the chamber.

Luna stood with her five friends on the balcony overlooking the city. Far below they could see the fires and hear the angry shouts rising through the night air. "Are they still rioting?" Firedamp asked sullenly as she folded her front legs on the rail. "This has been what, the third night? And still nothing from the unicorns?"

"They maintain that the Earth Pony foals should not have been in Blueblood's way. Their injuries were their own fault," Briar Rose said solemnly as the gray Pegasus sighed softly. "Until there's an apology I doubt that it'll stop any time soon."

"Some pony should ride Blueblood down and break his legs 'accidentally'," Firedamp said as she looked at her friends, "I nominate me! Anyone second it?" She looked around, but there weren't any takers. She sighed and frowned, looking back into the burning night.

Luna's wings shifted as she gazed down sadly. "So much work for nothing. I don't understand. Do they want to go back to how things were before? Ponies killing ponies... enslaving ponies..."

"It's not like that," Evening Star said as the Pegasus hopped nimbly on the rail. "No pony wants that. It's just that no matter how we want it to be, ponies are different. Unicorns don't associate with Pegasus. Earth Ponies don't work with Unicorns. Pegasus can't stand either." She crossed her front legs and sighed, "All three might be living in the same city, but that doesn't mean that they're friends."

"But it doesn't have to be that way!" Luna said as she spread her wings and hooves wide. "Look at us! All three kinds of ponies and we're friends. We don't have to fight and be suspicious. Look at all the fun we have together."

"You're right Luna, but how do we convince them of that?" Evening Star asked, nodding her head towards the fires below the castle.

They all exchanged looks, but then Luna noticed the lavender Unicorn wasn't listening. Her pink eyes stared down at the fires. "Misty?" Luna asked softly, "What are you thinking?"

Morning Mist started, she bit her lip as she thought. "W...well... I think we should throw a party."

"City's burning and you want to celebrate?" Firedamp asked as she cocked a brow in bafflement.

"No. Not that." She said softly, flushing. "I mean we should throw a party. A great big party. One so big that all three kinds of ponies will attend."

Luna rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Well... it's unusual. But how does that stop a riot?"

"Well, if the Earth Ponies know they're invited to a royal party held by a princess, then they'll have to stop rioting to come. Parties are usually for the aristocrats." She said and she turned to Evening Star, "And you know that Blueblood never misses a public appearance. If we require him to extend a... a pittance to those two foals and give a speech on compassion for our fellow ponies then that's a small price to pay for him to strut around," Mist said, her voice quavering and pausing frequently as she presented the idea.

"That might work. You ask Blueblood to give a speech and that ass will bray all day," Evening Star said as she hovered over the rail. "But what about the Pegasus? I mean, we're not one for parties."

Mist, however, smiled as she looked up at the blue Pegasus, "No, but you are for flying. What if some of the best flyers in Equestria came and performed some of their best maneuvers for the guests? I know that there's lots of Pegasus who would attend just to see that. If they did, they might also see how other ponies are in awe of their flying skills. And we could find some unicorns to perform tricks. Ask Earth ponies to cook the

meals and have a cooking contest,” Mist was positively gushing now, her pink eyes aglow with possibilities.

Her enthusiasm was catching. “But my dear, when are we going to do this? Every pony works all day and there won’t be any time off till winter. That’s months off,” Briar Rose pointed out. “And what about paying for it all?”

“Well, why not do it at night?” That made Luna’s ears stick right up in interest. “You can raise the moon to start it off, and we can play all night. As for the money, you’re a princess too. Surely Celestia could give you some gold to cover it.”

“Equestria being saved by a party...” Firedamp chuckled and shook her head. “If this works it’ll be the party no pony ever forgets. But what are we going to call it? Luna’s Festival? The Moon Party?”

“How about,” Morning Mist said softly, “The Grand Galloping Gala?”

Rainbow Dash’s voice broke the illusion as she nearly shouted, “*That’s* how the Grand Galloping Gala got started?” As the images faded as every pony turned to regard her. “What?”

Luna turned to face Rainbow, “It was. It wasn’t easy, but when I announced a party for all ponies, the Earth ponies stopped the riots long enough to address the injury Blueblood the third caused galloping through a marketplace. The thought of not appearing in front of hundreds of ponies was too much and Blueblood agreed to pay for his damages.” Luna saw Celestia looking at her oddly.

“Why didn’t you tell me *that* was why you wanted to throw a party?” Celestia asked with a wondering smile. “I thought that you simply wanted to appear in the public eye and cooked up the Gala as an excuse!”

“Well... we weren’t talking then, remember? And we shouted a lot about the money.”

Celestia rose and walked stiffly to Luna, wrapping her legs around her sister in a hug, “You are a genius, Luna. I’m sorry it took me a

thousand years to recognize it.” Luna flushed, but hugged her back before they parted.

“Well, it was Mist’s idea. I just had to do something to help,” Luna said awkwardly as Celestia positively beamed at her.

Pinkie Pie slowly leaned towards Luna, her eyes wide as her grin as she seemed to almost vibrate. “Ooh! Ooh! Can I see it? I wanna see it! Please let me see the first Gala ever!” She fell and hugged Luna’s hoof. “Oh please! Please please please!”

“Heh. Betcha it was as rotten then as it is today,” Applejack said to Rainbow Dash as Luna formed the illusion.

It wasn’t.

There had to be a thousand or more ponies in a great courtyard in the center of the city. Tables were loaded with all sorts of delectable and heart foods mixed together on the serving tables. Mugs of foamy beer, glasses of delicate wines, and bottles of potent brandy were all in abundance. Earth Ponies squared off to dance in rows and squares, pulling along wide eyed Unicorns and Pegasus into the milling throng. Dozens of musicians played whatever music came to them alone, in small groups, or, in the case of one corner of the party, as an impromptu orchestra formed. Pegasus squads maneuvered and performed spectacular stunts with magical lights trailing behind them as each vied for more fame and recognition. On tables and raised platforms, Unicorns juggled fire, levitated ropes, created mesmerizing illusions, and shot sparklers over wide eyed audiences. Blueblood gave a speech that no one paid any attention to.

Then Luna raised the moon above the horizon, her dark form silhouetted by its ivory glow and enmeshed in a starry cloak that shimmered around her. The night filled with so many glimmering gems of light that it almost seemed like a new dawn. And the thronging masses looked up in awe and wonder at the other Princess of Equestria. In ones and two, then by dozens, then hundreds, then thousands, they started to cheer and chant her name.

The illusion faded save for one voice. “Lu-na! Lu-na!” Pinkie Pie called out from the table she stood upon. Then she looked around at all

the others, "What? You got to admit that was amazing! The cakes and the tricks and the woosh and weee!" She spun and tumbled down on to her rear. That didn't slow Pinkie Pie down as she grinned at Luna, "You gotta do next year's Grand Galloping Gala, Luna! You just gotta! And let me help!" She said as she bounced on her hooves in front of the embarrassed Alicorn.

Twilight Sparkle looked over at Celestia. The princess looked terribly sad. "Princess Celestia? What's wrong?" She kept her voice down as Pinkie Pie spewed forth a rush of ideas.

"I didn't go," Celestia said softly. "I thought it a terrible waste of time and money. I thought it was only a coincidence the stress in the city abated afterwards." She clenched her eyes closed and then said, "No. Actually, I thought that I was the one responsible for it in spite of the Gala's success. I was such a fool, Twilight." Celestia looked across at Luna, "How many opportunities did I miss to save our relationship? How many times did I let stubborn pride over ride my love and common sense? I know the stresses of governance pushed me but how much of it was my own impatience, hubris, and jealousy?"

"Princess," Twilight Sparkle said softly as she listened to her friends going on and on about how amazing that was to their experiences. "What happened was in the past. You can't change it. All you can do is learn from it, so that this time, things go all right."

Celestia slowly smiled and put her hoof on Twilight's shoulder. "Twilight Sparkle, you are my dearest and most faithful student," she said softly, and then said, "You are also sometimes my teacher as well."

* * *

Trixie clung to Nightmare Screamer's back with the strength of absolute terror. Every part of her body ached, her soft blue mane blackened at the tip, and scorch marks marred her hide. Flying through the storm, Nightmare Screamer whooped and laughed as she made her way toward the royal palace. She flashed through the towers as lightning danced behind her. Finally they flitted over the outer wall and landed on a tower. Her hooves shaking, Trixie happily dropped to wet tower top.

“Do you have everything?” Nightmare Screamer asked as she leaned towards her, a wing riding to shield her from the rain.

Trixie opened her bag and levitated out the small glass vial of crushed purple leaves. Just touching it made her coat crawl.

“Excellent. And where does it go?”

“Pantry. Porcelain jar of Hoofington’s finest. Mix in well,” Trixie said quietly, flinching at each flash of lightning.

“And then?” Screamer asked softly in her grating voice.

“Down into the vault to the mirror.”

“And then?”

Trixie refused to answer as she swallowed hard. Finally she swallowed hard, “Shatter it.”

“Good girl,” Nightmare Screamer said as she stood. “If it makes it easier, just keep in mind how many pieces you’ll be blasted into if you don’t. That should keep your conscience clear.”

Trixie didn’t answer as she replaced the vial. “And you? Where will you be?”

Screamer looked up at the stormy sky and said with relish, “I’m going to go pull a Fury.”

* * *

For a thousand years Canterlot rose above the lands of Equestria like a crystalline orchid clinging to the cliff face. It was the political, historical, educational, and magical heart of the kingdom, and just as modern Equestria rest upon the foundation of Canterlot, so did the city rest upon the foundation of the royal palace. Towers connected by impossibly thin and graceful bridges rest upon the magical fundament of the palace that was its heart. And the foundation of the palace itself was the magic of its creator, Princess Celestia.

But before the magical spires of Canterlot raised high above the lands around it, something else had clung to the cliffs and stark mountain sides. And as Twilight Sparkle and her friends descended into the cliff face, the glorious alabaster and marble gave way to hard chipped granite. Severe pegasus seemed to glare down at their little procession, hooves raised as if to crush any non-winged interlopers. It seemed a particularly appropriately foreboding place to lock away an enchanted mirror.

“What is this place?” Twilight Sparkle asked Princess Celestia. They passed a gruesome mural of pegasus flying over running herds of ponies, raining spears upon them.

“An eyrie of the Thunder King, last ruler of the Pegasus. Hundreds of earth pony and unicorn slaves were forced to labor here to carve out these tunnels. When they served their purpose they were marched out over the edge en masse. Pointless slaughter of a savage era,” Princess Celestia said gravely, illuminating their way with their horns.

“I never knew that Canterlot was founded on something so... gruesome,” Twilight Sparkle admitted.

“With Old Canterlot razed and our old castle left in ruin we were forced to find a defensible position. Pegasus flight with unicorn magic and earth pony ingenuity created the Canterlot of today. I prefer to think of these tunnels and passages as reminders of all that we’ve accomplished over a thousand years.” Celestia said with firm determination. “As Equestria settled, New Canterlot changed from a fortress to a proper community.”

“It’s not so usual, Twilight,” Honesty said as they trotted along. “Manhattan rests on the ruins of Queen Arcana’s capitol, and Ponyville was once a refuge for earth ponies in dark times before it was abandoned and then refounded. Many are hidden by powerful and lost magics, and others lost by the simple passage of time.”

Twilight Sparkle noticed the pale mare hobbling a little more than usual. “Are you all right, Honesty?”

“Simply bad memories. Since we started talking about Nightmare Strife I keep remembering that night. We chased her back to Imbrium manor, where she’d been born. Sadly, she’d all ready built up an intrigue with Lord Imbrium. We were able to bind her with the three of us, but we underestimated her. We thought she’d be helpless. She wasn’t. When we faced her, she momentarily took hold of Celestia. I’m afraid a moment was long enough.” The albino closed her watery blue eyes and shuttered.

“You said she almost broke all your bones,” Twilight Sparkle said softly. “I was hoping that was a euphemism for being hurt bad.”

“As do I. It was actually more of a literal description,” Honesty said softly as they approached a large metal door. It showed an engraving of Celestia that looked positively terrifying. “I hope you’ll understand if I wait out here.”

“As will I,” said Dignity, and she looked at Luna and Celestia, “As should your majesties as well. The danger of Strife getting control of either of you is too great.”

“Interesting, Dignity. It sounds as if you were implying the rest of us are expendable,” Rarity said with a dismissive toss of her head.

The blue unicorn looked back at Rarity and said calmly, “There are other dress designers in Equestria.”

“You know, the more I know that Unicorn the more I want to find out if we can banish HER to the moon,” Dash said in a low sour tone.

Celestia’s head rose and from her horn shot a golden beam on the horn of the carving. There was a resounding crunch and grind as the heavy stone doors opened. A shimmering field of yellow greeted them. “A part of the binding. I don’t know precisely what it would do to any nightmare that passed through it, but I am sure it would be unpleasant,” Celestia said calmly.

“Be wary. We don’t know what condition the spell or Nightmare Strife are in. Just remember she will manipulate you if you are unwary.” Celestia glanced at Honesty, who flinched. “Also... if you break the mirror, you’ll kill the nightmare inside.”

“Kill her?” Twilight Sparkle gulped as Celestia nodded.

“Yes. You might be tempted to do so. You might be forced to do so. You and your friends should know that breaking the mirror means ending Nightmare Strife’s life.” Celestia touched her horn to Twilight’s and smiled, “But I have every faith in you and your friends, Twilight. Good luck.”

Together Twilight Sparkle and her friends stepped through the magical field. It filled Twilight Sparkle with a warmth like lounging in a summer sun. That made the interior all the more shocking as her hooves slipped and slid on the rime of frost that covered the floor of the square chamber. For a few moments she wondered if there was some mistake and the room was empty. Then she spotted the mirror.

“That’s it?” Rainbow Dash snorted. Somehow Twilight Sparkle imagined a huge intimidating mirror the size of a small building. This was barely as high as high and wide as a pony. The edges were delicate silver tracing holding a glass pane covered in frost. It rest in the corner of the room as if it’d been discarded or forgotten when the rest of the room had been cleared out.

“It doesn’t have to be big to be dangerous,” Twilight Sparkle warned as they carefully fanned out in front of it. She cleared her throat and then said softly, “Nightmare Strife. My name is Twilight Sparkle. I’d like to have a word.”

Nothing. Their breath puffed in the air as her friends glanced at each other. Twilight tried to feel for the spark inside her; something that would let her make a connection with the Nightmare within. Nothing. Slowly she extended a hoof toward the frost covered mirror to wipe the frost away.

“Woah nelly,” Applejack said softly, stepping up to Twilight. “You better take a step back. If this nightmare critter’s gonna mess with one of us, it best be one without magic or wings.”

“But Applejack...” Twilight began when the orange pony shook her head firmly.

“Nothin doin,” the orange pony turned back to the mirror, and received a faceful of curly pink tail. “Pinkie Pie! What are ya doin?” Applejack demanded as she tried to push the pink pony aside.

Pinkie pie looked back over her shoulder with a grin, “What? You think I wanna get applebucked? If she takes me over then all she can do is throw a spectacular party!” Pinkie Pie reached up and tapped the surface of the mirror. “Knock knock, is any pony home? Calling all Nightmares!” she said before the frost fell from the mirror in a sparkling sheet of white. With the frost sparkling around her hooves, Pinkie Pie looked at her reflection in confusion.

“Huh? Maybe I have to say a magic word or something?” She said as she looked at herself. Then her mouth opened and closed as she fought for her next comment. Then she gave herself a disgusted look. “Such a stupid joke...” she said to herself.

“Pinkie Pie?” Fluttershy whispered as she flew closer.

Then Pinkie Pie turned to look at them. Contempt covered her face as she looked up at Fluttershy, “Yes, doormat?” Her eyes were like a winter sky as she grinned up at the shocked yellow Pegasus. “What? Going to cry? That always works for you, doesn’t it, Fluttershy? Cry and act bashful and pray that no pony stomps on you too hard.”

“Pinkie Pie!” Rarity gasped.

“No. Not Pinkie Pie,” Twilight Sparkle stood before her friend. “Nightmare Strife, I presume?”

“Wouldn’t that make it easy?” Pinkie Pie laughed, but her laugh was hard and cold. “The Nightmare made me say it. That way you can pretend your friends are all sweet and kind and wonderful. No dark secrets. No suspicion. Must be nice,” Pinkie Pie said with the cruel twist of her lips. “I have to wonder if you’re more pathetic than Fluttershy though, Twilight. She’s every pony’s punching bag, but you? What are you but Princess Celestia’s little stooge?”

“I am the Princess’ student!” Twilight retorted, and Pinkie Pie’s smirk grew as her eyes narrowed.

“Oh? Interesting way of teaching: throwing you against nightmares and monsters... and for what? To learn about friendship? You’re a tool, Twilight Sparkle, with a fixed value.” She pointed a hoof towards the door. “She’s the supremely powerful thousand year old Alicorn princess. She raises the sun. Do you really think she wants to be your friend? That she ever could?”

“Don’t listen to her, Twilight. Clearly this is all the Nightmare’s influence.” Rarity said imperiously. Twilight felt a horror creeping through her as she saw a terrified desperation on the face of Pinkie Pie’s reflection.

Pinkie Pie laughed, high and jarring as she rocked back on her flanks. “Oh that’s precious, coming from the would be princess.” She cackled as she hugged herself in cruel mirth. “How did you get so full of yourself, hmmm, Rarity? Is it genetic? How does a stuck up like you end up in Ponyville as a seamstress? Mommy and daddy cut you off? Is that it?”

“How dare you?!” Rarity roared.

“It’s not hard!” Pinkie Pie cackled back as she hopped to her hooves and glanced up at Rainbow Dash. “Oooooohhhh Dashie!” She called as her grin widened. “How’s that whole Wonderbolts thing coming?”

“Oh, so it’s my turn, is it?” Rainbow Dash crossed her hooves with her own cocky smirk. “Bring it on!”

“Okie dokie lokie,” Pinkie Pie replied. “I’m curious, when you finally do manage to get into the Wonderbolts, is that finally going to be the confirmation that you’re not a total loser?”

“Who you calling a loser, Pinkie- I mean, Nightmare?”

“You. And you know it. You’re not half as cool as you pretend to be, and the second you think we’re going to find out you fall all to pieces.” She mocked, blatantly feigning sympathy, “Because you know the truth: your flying means nothing. Applejack and Rarity make things. Twilight serves a princess. I actually make people happy. Fluttershy’s nice. But you? You fly. And the second the spot light is off you? You’re nothing.”

Rainbow Dash looked ready to strangle Pinkie Pie, or cry, or both. But Applejack stepped in front of Pinkie Pie before Dash could throttle her. "Guess it's my turn, right? Shoot."

"Stepping up? Oh so noble, Applejack," she said with a snort. "You know, you give Rarity a run for most stuck up pony. Oh, not in attitude, but in pride. You have to be able to do anything and everything because deep down the only pony you really trust is yourself isn't it? You just know that someday you'll turn to one of us and we won't be there. And you know what? You're right!" She yelled into Applejack's stoic face, "So what do you think of those apples? Huh?"

"I reckon you're right," Applejack said quietly, and Pinkie Pie jerked as if slapped. "I know it's wrong of me, Pinkie Pie. I've always had to be tough and push myself. Guess it's just natural I'm wary of trusting another. But I'm trying to be better."

Pinkie Pie's eyes slowly widened as her sneer melted. Her curls unwound into flat straight sheets as horror crept over her features. Tears ran down her face as her mouth worked silently. "Applejack..." she whimpered as she looked up at her friend. Applejack just smiled and put her hooves around the pink pony as Pinkie Pie began to sob uncontrollably.

Applejack gently stroked her mane. "Shh. It's s'alright. I forgive ya."

"But... that was the Nightmare... wasn't it?" Rainbow Dash asked in confusion, clearly no happier about this than any pony else.

"Was it?" Twilight Sparkle felt her lips moving, the words spilling out.

"Or did your friend just confess what she really feels?" Fluttershy whispered, and put her hooves to her mouth in shock.

"So many little resentments," Rarity murmured.

"So many petty hatreds," Applejack said quietly as she hugged Pinkie Pie.

"You call yourself friends?" Rainbow Dash said, and then glared at the mirror with undisguised loathing.

Twilight slowly stood in front of the mirror. "Now I understand why Celestia was concerned," she said, watching her reflection turn intrigued even as she spoke. She could feel her face aping the reflection. "You don't possess ponies, do you? You just make us bring out all the horrible things we keep locked away inside."

That meant it hadn't been Nightmare Strife that had nearly crushed Honesty...

Her reflection's smile widened, "I would never hurt any pony. But making ponies hurt each other? Oh yes."

"I want to help you," Twilight said calmly to herself.

"Why? So I can get hurt again?" her reflection asked with a disdainful sniff. "Let me tell you the absolute best thing about being a Nightmare: you never... ever... have to feel remorse."

Twilight Sparkle looked at her friends. She felt closer, but she didn't know how to summon the elements yet for Nightmare Strife. Her horn glowed as she summoned a cloth and covered the mirror with it. Then she looked at the five upset friends. She wished that she'd gone after Vicious instead. She wished that she'd never left Ponyville to fight another Nightmare.

Suddenly Dignity shouted through the sparkling golden field, "Twilight! Hurry! Canterlot is being attacked!"

* * *

From the darkness and the storm above the castle her magic reached out to command the winds to twist in dark funnels and the clouds to blast with lightning. She hovered in a nimbus of crackling light and shouted with glee, "Good evening, Equestria! Nightmare Screamer is back in town! Time for some fresh mayhem!" With that she dove to attack.

Chapter 10

Storms

A storm raged over Canterlot, and her name was Nightmare Screamer. Blood red and midnight blue, she raced amid the marble towers of Canterlot trailing lightning and thunder in her wake. Where she past glass shattered like razor edged snow and wind tore at anything it could pluck into the air. The gales stirred up by her flapping wings shrieked like a thousand tortured ponies in the black sky. Under her direction the storm became a living extension of her malice, and swirling cones crept down to tear at the streets.

“What does she think she’s doing?” Shouted Rainbow Dash, eyes narrowed against the howling winds and stinging rain.

“I reckon being a Nightmare!” Applejack replied, yelling in her ear.

“No, I mean what’s her point?” Rainbow Dash said as she pointed a hoof up at her. “Nasty as this storm is, it’s not doing much to Canterlot!”

“Yer criticizing her effectiveness?” Applejack yelled in incredulity. Twilight Sparkle, through the rain and spitting wind, could see the cyan Pegasus’s point though. For all the lightning, thunder, and wind, Canterlot was made of stone. Maybe Fury’s fire could have melted it or blasted it apart, but the snapping bolts; while terribly dangerous to the inhabitants, did little but flash off the many flagpoles in the city and fill the air with sparks and the reek of ozone.

“Are you feeling anything?” Princess Luna shouted over the storm.

Twilight shook her head. This bordered on madness. She couldn’t even begin to feel a spark of empathy that would allow her to summon the elements of harmony.

“Well I’m not waiting here!” Rainbow Dash shouted, crouched, and launched into the air. Screamer’s path was drawn with crackling lightning

and contrails. Beating her wings like she'd never had before, she closed the gap on Nightmare Screamer.

"Rainbow Dash! No!" Twilight Sparkle shouted after her friend.

Nightmare Screamer banked in a lazy, almost bored turn when a hoof tapped her shoulder. "Excuse me." Her flashing blue eyes turned just in time to receive a faceful of Rainbow Dash's hooves. The blow flipped the Nightmare over in the air, but she recovered almost immediately. The two of them hovered inside a rain filled pillar of swirling wind.

Screamer rubbed the kick, her lips curling in an expression of delighted malice. "I remember you. Best flyer in Equestria, right?" Nightmare Screamer grated as she grinned, eyes narrowed.

"You better believe it," Dash replied, refusing to be intimidated. This might be the nastiest storm she'd ever seen, but she was flying. This was her element.

"Good. Then when the best flyer in history rips your wings off every flyer in Equestria will know just who they need to fear," Her wings gave a mighty snap and the calm pillar blasted away in all directions. The wind immediately switched around and blasted around Nightmare Screamer. "Now fly!" Screamer screamed as forked lightning blasted from the clouds and straight at the sole cyan pony.

Okay. Maybe just a little intimidated! But regardless Rainbow Dash turned to fly like her life depended on it. Because it did.

* * *

The royal palace was nearly abandoned as every pony that could hide did so. With nearly every guard still in Ponyville there was no pony that asked Trixie what she was doing here. Every pony simply assumed she was another servant or maid trying to find protection as the wind howled through broken windows.

Trixie's instincts for showmanship fell beside the terror that had befallen her in the last two hours. Finding herself drafted with promises of incredible power made the blue Unicorn's mind spin. All she had to do was

complete these two final tricks and she could put her showmanship aside and attain true magical power to rival every pony... even *her*.

Or at least that was what the whispering voice had promised. And Trixie hated to admit it, but it sounded like a great deal. Power without effort. Right up her alley. It was everything she wanted... right?

The kitchens were empty as windblown rain sloshed across the floor and hissed around the stoves and fireplaces. The pantries were right around the corner; she knew because she'd often snuck in them after hours when she was just a filly. It was far easier to help herself than wait for a servant to bring her a meal, particularly when it would inevitably get to the wrong ears.

Inside the pantry she could almost ignore the lightning and thunder through the thick stone walls. Her horn glowed softly, illuminating the many shelves. They'd been reorganized since she'd left, but the tea cupboard hadn't been changed. She pointed her horn at the lock and used one of her less flashy spells, grunting as she twisted her horn left and right. Finally there was a click and the lock opened. Within were dozens; perhaps even hundreds of different tea blends from all over Equestria kept in neat alphabetical order. She scanned the rows till she found Hoofington's Finest and carefully unscrewed the lid to the jar. Thick musty smells rose from the dried tea leaves within.

Trixie raised the vial and carefully tipped the crushed purple leaves into the jar. She didn't know what she expected: a skull shaped cloud to indicate it was poison? Some kind of magical effect? It was almost anticlimactic. Carefully she mixed it back up and put the container on the shelf. She glanced around the pantry and swallowed, tilting the jar of tea so it was out of alignment. She even dribbled some of the purple residue on the edge. She thought of leaving a note saying 'tampered, do not drink' would be a bit much. She closed the cupboard and peeked around the pantry.

While she was here... it really couldn't hurt, could it?

When she trotted out of the pantry she had two bulging bags draped over her flank. No more grazing for Trixie. At least not for a while. Then her smile faded. "What am I doing?" She asked as she looked at the bags

of purloined snacks. "I'm going to become an all powerful nightmare. I don't need to worry about all that anymore." She thought, but doubt nagged at her terribly. She wanted power, didn't she? This was the easiest way to get it, right?

"I should have known you'd be here," the voice, dripping with contempt and disappointment, came from the door to the kitchen. Dignity stepped into the chamber. The chamberlain of Equestria, Mistress of the Equestria's college of magic, pure bred aristocrat descending from Unicorn royalty; Dignity was all of these things. "Given you're stealing from the palace, I can see you still haven't come to your senses," the stately blue unicorn said in blatant disapproval.

Trixie grit her teeth. "It's just food, Mother," she said the word like an insult. "I'm sure the princess can afford more. Or why don't you just pay her back? Do whatever you have to do. Because you always do." The little jar of Hoofington's Finest faded away as the old arguments and angers boiled up inside her.

Why can't you try harder? Why can't you be better? Why did you do that? What were you thinking? Oh Trixie... How could you? How dare you? Why do you do this to me? Why can't you be serious in school? Don't you think about what this says about you (me)? The list went on and on as their eyes locked in their familiar glaring matches.

"I don't have time for the Great and Powerful Trixie's melodrama," her mother said in a hard, low voice. "In case you hadn't noticed, we're being attacked." Dignity turned to continue on her way towards the palace proper.

Yes, and I know what she wants me to do because she's going to kill me if I don't. "Mother..."

"What do you need now, Trixie?" She said as she looked back in disdain. The look was clear of what her mother thought she should do: go back to school, learn useful boring spells, and become a productive member of society. Of course she couldn't understand... she never did.

I need to tell you that I'm about to become a Nightmare. I need to tell you that I might have poisoned someone! I need to tell you that there's a

monster whispering in my ear and I'm scared of what she's going to do to me if I don't! I need you to stop being the Princess's hoof of steel and be my mother for once! They rested just on the tip of her tongue.

"I see," her mother replied, and for one moment she thought that somehow her mom had read her mind so she didn't have to bring herself to admit it. "You want money to replace that wagon I suppose. I heard about what occurred in Ponyville," she said coolly, her voice heavy with the unspoken comment that it had been an embarrassment as well. All the words that should have been spoken were bitterly swallowed instead.

Her mother horn sparkled as she summoned a pair of saddle bags. "There. Those carry alls should have enough for your immediate needs. Is there anything else you require, Trixie?" The unspoken came through as clear as day, 'because I have a hundred critical duties to perform that do not include you, Trixie.'

"No. This should be fine," Trixie said as she tossed the sack into the saddlebags. The magic carry alls could hold anything so long as you could put a corner inside the bag. "Well, you're busy, mother. I'll show myself out." Trixie looked up at her mother, her voice low and her anger unhidden, "I'll make sure no pony actually sees me leave."

And now the final twist, "I hope your next show goes better, Trixie." Her mother said as she turned and went on her duties. "I'm sure it will be spectacular," she said in her matter of fact tones.

"How would you know, Mother? You've never seen one," she said softly as her mother walked away. And she never would, no matter how awe inspiring, great and powerful Trixie became her mother had no time for Trixie.

* * *

As Rainbow Dash flew for her life in the skies of Canterlot, a far quieter battle was being waged in a dark, wet doorway. Pinkamena Diane Pie curled up on the hard stone, pressing her forehead against the wet clammy rock as if she could somehow squeeze out all the thoughts that refused to fade inside her. She'd looked into the mirror to protect her friends... and she'd looked into it in the vain hope that the silly pink pony

would get some respect... and she'd looked because she'd been an idiot and had no idea just what a Nightmare really could do.

"I thought it'd be funny," She whispered to the water sloshing under her face. "I thought... if she took me over... there'd be nothing she could do. I can't do magic. I can't do anything." She hissed as she shook. It didn't matter that Strife had left, the damage was done.

A hoof gently reached over to stroke her straight pink gray hair. She didn't want to look. She knew. The doormat- No! Fluttershy! Fluttershy wasn't a doormat or a punching bag. Why had she thought that? "Shh... it's okay Pinkie Pie."

Slowly Pinkie Pie raised her face enough to look at Fluttershy and Rarity. "No... it's not. It's not at all."

"Darling, I know you're upset, but it's not as if you really meant what you said," Rarity said softly, giving Pinkie Pie an out. All she had to do was say it was a joke. Laugh. Smile. Pretend to be okay so her friends could focus on Rainbow Dash, Twilight and Applejack. She tried to grin, but it felt more like a grimace as she started to cry.

"I meant it, Rarity. I meant every single horrible word. I just never ever meant to say them. Ever. I never meant to ever think them," She said softly as buried her face in her hooves. "And I can't stop thinking them now. I'm trying to be a good friend, but I can't stop myself." She looked up at Fluttershy. "I look at you and... and... I wonder the next time some one's going to say something to make you bawl. I want to do it myself!" She confessed, shaking. "But that's wrong! I know it is. So why can't I stop thinking it?"

"Oh Pinkie Pie," Rarity said softly as the pair of them sat on either side of her. "Did you know at times I find you almost as annoying as my sister and her friends making capes of my finest silk? Sometimes you can be absolutely infuriating. And there've been times I've almost hated Fluttershy. I so envied her that it nearly made me sick."

"And... um... I think you're... um... too loud... sometimes," Fluttershy offered with a little smile.

"We're not perfect Pinkie Pie. We're not. Not one of us. Some days Applejack simply makes me want to scream. Sometimes I simply want to muzzle Rainbow Dash the next time she crows about how awesome she is. And it's petty of me, I know, but I still think it." Rarity replied with her compassionate eyes, "I guess... with you being so happy and all... well the things you said were just more surprising for it. Had Rainbow acted like that I doubt we'd have noticed."

"What was it like?" Fluttershy asked softly.

Pinkie Pie stared across the doorway at the stone. She wished they hadn't asked. "Have you ever looked into a mirror and hated how you looked? Like you had bed mane or a zit? It was like that... only you see everything wrong. Everything wrong with yourself. Everything wrong with every pony else. And... you can't help it... you hate it." She leaned back, tapping the back of her head against the hard stone wall. "I saw a little rock farmer pretending to be smart and funny and liked. A suspicious little filly that's not as good as any of her friends."

"I'm sorry, Pinkie Pie," Rarity commiserated. "I want you to know that no matter how annoying I might find you from time to time, I'll never regret being your friend." The white unicorn said softly as she embraced her.

"Me too," Fluttershy replied, hugging her from the other side. "And... um... now that I know, I'll stop being a doormat. Is that okay?"

Pinkie Pie couldn't help but laugh a little at Fluttershy's question. For a long, terrible time she thought that she might never laugh again. "I'll tell you what. If we do free Morning Mist... I'm gonna give her a hug... a boot to the snoot... and a welcome back party. I think she deserves all three." She smiled, feeling a little of the old Pinkie Pie returning. She struggled to her hooves and walked to the doorway, "So where's the mad dasher?"

* * *

Imgonnadielmgonnadielmgonnadie... ran through Rainbow Dash's head as she fought to stay ahead of the Nightmare that dogged her heels. Lightning flashed as it tried to blast her from the sky as the cold rain poured all around her. Simultaneously, as that thought burned through her mind, came the simple overwhelming fact that she could not shake: *this is SO*

awesome! If she WAS going to die, well it couldn't get cooler than this, now could it?

It didn't help that the storm fought her every inch of the way. Part of being a flyer was making the wind work for you. She'd been in nasty storms before, but that hadn't slowed her down no matter how strong the gusts. This storm, however, cheated like she'd never experienced before. Gusts would sheer from the left and right to fling her into buildings. Holes would open in the air and she'd struggle just to make her wings keep her aloft. The rain always seemed to orient itself so it'd pour right into her eyes. Then there was the lightning, which was snapping around her to try and slow her down.

"Dash! Over here!" Yelled Twilight, barely heard over the storm. Rainbow Dash wasted no time as she dove down and buzzed the street. As she passed over a heavy wood cart, a bright glow surrounded it and lifted it right into Nightmare Screamer's path. Rainbow Dash looked over her shoulder, eager to see the nightmare plastered over the solid wood cart.

Before her eyes through Screamer turned herself horizontal and crouched against the side of the levitating cart with all four hooves. The solid wood exploded, flinging shrapnel at Dash which she barely avoided. Worse though was the sight of Nightmare Screamer launching herself back the way she'd come right at Twilight Sparkle! "No!" Rainbow Dash shouted as she chased after the nightmare.

An orange hide flashed as Applejack leapt in front of Twilight Sparkle. Once again, Screamer was nearly sideways as all four hooves connected with Applejack's side. The orange workhorse didn't scream through her grit teeth as Screamer crouched against her and launched off Applejack as she had the levitated cart. The two went sprawling as Screamer resumed her course straight for Dash.

"Oh no..." was all she managed to say as four crackling hooves smacked into Rainbow Dash with a thunderous detonation that sent Rainbow Dash flying through the rain and slamming into the wall of a tower, leaving an indentation. "Oh so not fair," Rainbow Dash muttered as little Wonderbolts orbited her head. Another flash and Nightmare Screamer

rammed into her with another blow that put her completely through the stone wall.

Ow... ow... ow... Rainbow Dash had been through her fair share of walls, windows, doors, and roofs, but even highly resilient pegasus usually didn't make it through solid stone. She opened one rose colored eye as she looked at the Nightmare standing in the gap she'd made with Dash's body. "Fair. What a word. I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to use it." The Nightmare growled. "Nothing's fair. Everything is always to somepony's advantage."

"Oh please tell me you're not going to go all warrior-philosopher on me," Rainbow Dash panted as she stood in what apparently had been a bakery of some sort. Piles of flour from split open bags filled the room with dust that made her eyes sting. "Is all this excessive talking a side effect of becoming a nightmare?" Dash asked as she rose to her hooves, trying to ignore the pain rolling inside her chest.

"Why? Interested in becoming one?" Screamer asked with a grin. Rainbow Dash's eyes widened. "Nightmare Dash. Sounds good, doesn't it?" Screamer slowly advanced. "You get power. You get fear. You get anything you want."

"I all ready have what I want," Rainbow Dash retorted.

"Oh really? Everything?" Screamer said with a teasing grin. "No nagging little self doubts you'd like to rid yourself of? No niggling little moments where you realize it's all an act?" She asked as she stirred up the flour with flaps of her wings. "Well, you might want to consider it. It's the only way you're going to be able to beat me."

"I don't need to be a nightmare to beat you," Rainbow Dash said, coughing faintly at all the stirred up flour. "I've got my friends. I'm faster than you. Better than you."

"A pity you're not smarter than me," she said from the hole blasted in the wall. "If you were you'd know how dangerous a powder suspended in the air can be." As she leapt out into the storm her tail flicked a spark into the dust filled air. The trailing edge of airborne flour ignited in a puff of red flame that expanded into a roaring inferno.

Fortunately flying out through a window was easier than crashing in through the wall as the bakery exploded behind Rainbow Dash. Still trailing smoke she crashed into a cart of sodden hay which helped put her wings and mane out. "So... not... fair..." she groaned before passing out.

* * *

In the tunnels of the Eyrie of the Thunder King, Trixie's horn light played over the grotesque carvings in the wall. Ahead she could make out the iron doors and the magical field that played across the opening. The attack had been so sudden and severe that the Princess had not sealed them again, just as Whispers said she wouldn't. She could feel the presence right behind her, like the nightmare was breathing softly into her ear.

"Why do you want to destroy the mirror anyway? Isn't she a nightmare too?" Trixie asked, licking her dry lips and trying to swallow. "Aren't you supposed to be on the same side?"

"Oh, Great and Powerful Trixie, don't worry yourself about the ways of nightmares."

"Considering you want me to be one, I'd say that bothers me even more," Trixie replied.

"Why? Nightmare Strife exhausted her usefulness centuries ago. She's from an era of distrust that simply doesn't exist any longer. If she were free, she'd simply be a liability." Whispers purred softly, "What I need is a Nightmare like you. One that won't let anything stop her. One with the power to put Nightmare Screamer in her place... I cannot tell you just how annoying that one's been for so long."

It's a lie. Trixie had told enough of those to know evasion when she heard it. Whatever her reasons were they were substantial, not simply petty. "Well, I'm glad some pony finally realizes the value and potential of the Great and Powerful Trixie. I expect I shall be first and foremost among your new Nightmares?"

“Oh yes. Absolutely,” Whispers purred in Trixie’s blue ear. “Once you leave that chamber, I’m sure you will become a spectacular nightmare with power to rival the Princesses, or even Queen Arcana.”

“Who?” Trixie asked as she looked at the shimmering field.

“No one studies anymore,” the whisper said in a faint tone of frustration. “She was the last ruler of all unicorns in Equestria. Glorious and cold and cruel, she ruled from her enchanted palace with spells and glamour too horrible to recount. I like to think of her as the second nightmare.”

“Then who was the first? You?”

“No,” Whispers said so softly that Trixie wondered if she’d imagined it. Just like she hoped she imagined some pony touching her mane, “I was the third.”

And at that moment Trixie knew she wasn’t going to become a nightmare; or if she did it wouldn’t be long until Whispers found a way to kill her the same way she was using Trixie to murder Nightmare Strife. Those two little comments had been slips, and Trixie had made enough of them to know that there was no way that Whispers would let her live having heard them. “Pffft, whatever,” Trixie said with a dismissive snort. “When I’m a nightmare I want to be strong enough to rival anypony. Even Celestia. You can do that, right?” She asked as she stood at the shimmering barrier.

The silence stretched on, and when Whispers replied it was in a voice oozing with sincerity, “Of course, Great and Powerful Trixie. All you have to do is look inside and smash it. And do be careful not to look into the mirror.” Then you’ll get everything you desire.

In a pig’s eye, Trixie thought as she stepped through the field and into the chamber beyond.

* * *

“Well, she got Dash,” Applejack muttered as the waterlogged mare looked in the cart at the sprawled out, blasted Pegasus. “And the might have busted my other set of ribs,” Applejack said with a wince as she

looked at four hoof shaped welts rising on her side from Screamer using her as a launch pad. She looked back at the soggy purple unicorn, "What have you got, Twilight?"

"Nothing," Twilight admitted. "I don't know Screamer at all. Who is she? What makes her tick? I mean, she hides all over the world for a thousand years causing trouble but comes out right now that Fury's been stopped to attack another city. I'd guess she was trying to free Strife, except that she's not going after the vault. It doesn't make any sense."

"Well... there's your secret weapon," Applejack said with a laugh and then winced.

"My secret weapon?" Twilight Sparkle frowned in confusion. "What, you mean some spell I haven't used yet?"

"Shoot no. "

"Then... research? I suppose I could but I doubt I could find the right book in time..."

"Twilight, wave a white flag or something and get her talkin! Cause if she's talkin she ain't blastin and she might just let something slip." Applejack said, ducking her head as another thunderous boom shook the skies over the capitol. "You remember Fury? That girl wouldn't shut up long as she wasn't mad."

Twilight blinked in surprise. That was true; all the Nightmare's they'd encountered had proven rather chatty. Maybe it was the thousand years isolation or just wanting to reconnect with other ponies. Twilight looked at her friend and said "Fine, but I want you and Dash to find the Princess and get a healing spell." Twilight said as she looked into her friend's eyes. "No argument."

Applejack didn't look happy about it as she glanced back into the cart. "All right. I'll get this turkey outta the rain and see if the Princesses can help." She glanced up at the burning bakery above them. "Just be careful, Twilight. This canary seems ta have a lot more tricks than Fury." She said as she drug Dash from the cart and draped her over her back.

“But mom... I don’t wanna get up...” Dash moaned still dazed.

“You hold tight. Gonna get your auntie Celestia to fix you up proper.”

“Auntie Celesty? She’s got poofy hair...” Dash said as they trotted towards the palace.

Now there was just the question of how to get her attention without simply getting blasted off her hooves. Right now Twilight didn’t even know where she was. Twilight sighed, looking at the rain sheeting down the towers all around her as the shy flashed and flickered. “Well. Here goes nothing.” She clenched her eyes shut and her horn flared as she appeared atop the tower. From this vantage she could see Screamer tearing through the night sky.

Twilight Sparkle smiled and shot magical sparklers and fireworks into the air above her. The glowing motes of light spelled out ‘Over here’ with an arrow pointing at the tower. Twilight braced herself, ready to teleport away if it seemed like Screamer was about to blast first and talk second. The swirling storm around the blood red Pegasus dissipated and to Twilight’s relief seemed to casually wing closer.

With a crackle Nightmare Screamer landed before Twilight. Electric lightning rippled along her mane. “Can I help you?” The wind began to swirl around the tower, but within the cyclone was perfect calm.

“I... I want to talk. Don’t you want to talk?” Twilight Sparkle said, swallowing. Nightmare Screamer was an unknown. She didn’t know anything about Evening Star.

“Sure. I love to talk,” Screamer said with a sly smile. “What should we talk about? You up here with me? Celestia being occupied with patching up your two friends? Dignity playing princess? Luna biting her hooves as she watches us from the palace? Honesty hiding under her bed?” She asked as she walked around Twilight. “Oh... wait... you want to talk about me, don’t you? Help you find that special spark?”

Twilight was completely taken aback by the direct thrust of Screamer’s questions and at that last she frowned. “No. You seem pretty open and closed.”

Screamer hadn't expected that. "Oh really?" Twilight's dismissive tone seemed to make the Nightmare intrigued.

"Yeah. Bit of an attention hog, aren't you? Always second best. Not as strong as Fury, or charismatic as Moon. Pretty pathetic actually," Twilight tried to put as much indifference into her voice as she could. "I am more curious about Luna though. You know she wants to save you, right? She wants her friends back."

"No. She wants her childhood back," Nightmare Screamer said as she looked towards the palace. "If she can just fix her little mistakes then we'll be together again. Better, her sister won't be a complete hag to her! And she even has you to do all the hard work for her, because you're just so darn 'goodie goodie'." Nightmare's gaze hid not of her contempt.

"Goodie goodie? Is that a Nightmare term?" It sounded like something from a playground.

"You know what I mean. Altruistic. Helpful. Useful. Whichever term you prefer. Good. All the Princesses have to do is ask you and you'll do it." She grinned as her eyes narrowed, "Have you ever told Princess Celestia to buck off? Told your friends to solve their own problems when they come running to you? 'Sorry, I am too busy to resolve your interpersonal conflicts for you.'? Anything?" Screamer laughed softly at Twilight's expression. "Yeah. Didn't think so."

"I help my friends because they're my friends," Twilight retorted. "Did you ever do that when you were friends with Luna?"

Screamer's smile turned even sharper, "Oh, so we are talking about me. Well then let me tackle your first big assumption." She stalked closer to Twilight Sparkle, "What makes you think that I was ever Luna's friend?"

"What?"

"Luna was a Princess of Equestria. Of course I cozied up to her. It got me what I wanted. Access to the palace. Comfort. Ease. Let me spell it out for you: I used Luna. Friendship was cheap compared to what I got for it." Screamer said as she looked towards the palace. "That's all

Friendship is. This for that. She wanted friends because her sister had them.” She snickered softly, “For that matter, how do your friends use you, Twilight Sparkle?”

“No. My friends are my friends!” Twilight retorted, not letting that insidious thought take root. “And I think you were Luna’s friend. Why else would you become a nightmare?”

“Awesome powers aren’t good enough?” Screamer asked with her grin as she gestured at the wild storm raging around them. Twilight just glared at her and the nightmare’s smile melted. “What was there to gain by remaining normal? Luna had become Nightmare Moon for that insipid, idiotic, irresistible, irresponsible, Firedamp. If we hadn’t we’d have been ruined either way. Guilt by association. So why not take the choice that gave us the power to do what we want?”

And again, Twilight Sparkle remembered Dignity coolly asking if Rainbow Dash would betray everything she was just for quick power. “Stop lying!” Twilight Sparkle shouted at her, and Screamer’s eyes widened in surprise. Clearly she hadn’t expected Twilight to reject her simple, easily believed excuses. “I don’t know why all of you became what you did, but I know it wasn’t for something as meaningless as ‘power.’ No pony just mutilates themselves because they think it’ll give them what they want. So just tell me the truth.”

“The truth,” Screamer said softly, “The truth is it’s been so long for me that I can’t even remember anymore.” Slowly she approached step by step. “You know, I envy the others. They were all locked up, sealed away, got to go crazy all alone. I got away. Can you imagine how many lives I’ve ruined? I got to live year after year knowing that inevitably everything would fall to pieces.” In the eye of the storm everything was calm as Screamer stepped right up to Twilight, “And while it might be nice to imagine that there is some way you could make a thousand pointless years somehow matter, there is one thing you have to remember, Twilight Sparkle.” She said as her voice dropped even lower.

“What?” Twilight Sparkle asked in a near whisper herself.

She stretched forward and whispered softly into her ear, “I’m the treacherous one.” And with that word a bolt of lightning blasted from the

black clouds like a vengeful finger. Lightning sparking over her body, Twilight Sparkle flew off the edge of the tower and plunged towards the hard stone road below. Looking down the Nightmare said solemnly, "I betray everyone, eventually."

* * *

Trixie's breath curled before her as she slowly approached the shrouded mirror. The rime frost coated every surface; it didn't look as if any pony had set hoof within the space in a thousand years. "So... ready?" Trixie asked the whispering voice. Nothing. "Are you there?" Still nothing. Trixie licked her lips as she looked back at the magical field. Perhaps, somehow, it blocked Whisper's voice? Slowly, step by step, she approached the cloth wrapped mirror.

"Nightmare Strife? I... I need to talk. I need help. Your help," she said as she glanced behind her. "That whispery one... she wants me to break your mirror and kill you. And then... then I'm pretty sure she'll kill me to. I need your help to get out of this." She frowned at the mirror. "Can you hear me? Strife?" Oh Goddesses, she really didn't want to pull the cloth away.

Her magic reached out and gently pulled the sheet off the mirror. To her shock it disintegrated into frozen fragments as it fell away; scattering under hoof. She clenched her eyes shut, "I don't want to die. I don't want to kill you. I just want to get out of this. So... help me out here?"

Slowly Trixie cracked an eye and looked at the mirror. At once her face slowly widened in shock, and then... then she sat as she stared at her reflection. "Trixie. The small and powerless," she felt herself say as she looked at her pathetic image. No hat, cloak, wagon, or adoring fans would change that. Twilight Sparkle had power; power to help her friends and save Ponyville. Her mother had power to affect the entire land of Equestria though executing the Princess's wishes. And the Princesses... how could she ever call herself great and powerful?

"Stop it. I know I'm useless and weak!" She shouted at her reflection. "I know I don't have real power. I just want to stay alive."

Her expression then became appraising, even intrigued. "Then why not take the plunge? Violate yourself. Rend your cutie mark and become your own nightmare. You know how... deep down every pony does. Kill. Break. Hurt. Defile. All you have to do is do it."

"Because that's not me. I might not be anything but a performer and bragger, but I'm still Trixie. I'm not going to change that just..."

"Just to survive?" Her reflection asked, and Trixie was horrified to see frost slowly starting to form on her legs, crawling up past her knees. "Are you saying you'd rather die than become that?"

"Yes!" Trixie shouted, wishing she could clench her eyes shut and stop looking as she felt her tears start to freeze. She was going to die, just to the wrong nightmare. Any second that cold would reach her heart and she'd shatter into frost just as the sheet had.

It seemed like forever the blue unicorn stared into that terrible mirror. Then to her horror her hoof stretched out to stroke the cheek of the reflection. She could feel the cold sensation on her cheek. "It is a rare pony who knows that final inch. Very well. My terms are simple. Take me from this place and I will tell you how to evade Nightmare Whispers."

"Y...y..." her teeth chattered horribly.

"I will take that for assent," she said, her jaws stopping their clattering as she spoke to herself, "Nightmare Whispers can view any place at any time, but she does not inherently know where a pony is at any time. That is, unless you are a Nightmare or speak her name aloud. She knows the secrets of every pony's heart, and if she cannot corrupt you or push you to kill yourself then she will influence others." Then the freezing sensation passed and though she shivered terribly she forced herself to look away.

Trixie knew she could just leave right now. She knew she should leave! She knew what she needed to know and didn't need to honor her word. That final inch... what was that? Trixie clenched her eyes shut as she asked softly, "Why does she want you dead?" No answer. Slowly she peeked once more.

And received a wink in return. "Because I know what she is," her reflection assured her, "Perhaps I may even tell you once we're free from here."

* * *

Ponies are inherently magical creatures. The magic that makes up their being renders them more resilient than most creatures throughout Equestria. Ponies could fall with some pain and discomfort but still remain whole and healthy. So perhaps Twilight Sparkle could survive getting blasted by lightning. Perhaps she could even have survived the plunge to the street below.

No way was Luna going take that chance.

Swooping in on her dark wings, the small Alicorn caught Twilight Sparkle in a field of magic and set her down near her friends before winging upwards towards the tower. Wind that cut at her wings found itself deflected by her magic as she moved with a strength and solidarity only an earth pony could know. She landed atop the tower opposite Nightmare Screamer, her teal eyes narrowed. "How could you, Evening Star?"

The blood red Pegasus looked grim as she stared across the rooftop at her former friend. "Hmmm..." She rubbed her chin with a wing. The bolt of lightning split the night and silhouetted Luna in blazing, crackling electricity. "Like that?"

Luna cried out in pain, but her horn captured the lightning, held it, and scattered the charge. "That's not what I meant! Why are you fighting me? Why are all of you doing this? Whispers was wrong. I was wrong! Let us help you." She asked as her hide smoked.

"Didn't Fury say it best? It's not all about you, Luna," Nightmare Screamer said as her eyes narrowed and grin widened. "So thanks for the offer, but I'll pass."

"Evening..." she began softly.

"Screamer, Luna!" The nightmare roared. Once more the lightning crashed into Luna, but she was ready. Her horn seized the crackling bolt in

her magical grip. She was not, however, prepared for the nightmare's crackling kick across her face. Concentration broken, the lightning surged once more in a continuous crackling stream that washed over Luna.

A bubble of pale moonlight deflected the energy enough for her to rise as she struggled against the energy pouring around and over her. Ponies are inherently magical creatures. Alicorns, the unicorn princesses that possessed a bit of all three of the pony races, were even more so. But for all her power Luna had never been well versed in combat. Thus when she caught sight of nightmare Screamer hovering above her, her hesitation might be understandable. The blood red pegasus seemed to glow as she rode the conduit of crackling lightning down and struck Luna's moonlight shield with such force that the tower top crumbled and collapsed in on the top floor.

"You never knew me, Luna," Nightmare Screamer said softly as she hovered over Luna's twitching body.

"But I do," and the voice was accompanied by a golden beam of light that sliced across Screamer's body, drawing a smoking line in her hide. Landing besides Luna, battered from Fury's assault, Princess Celestia still looked magnificent. Her glare of disdain shone through despite the pouring rain drenching her blue, green, and pink mane to her bruised hide. "What are you doing here, Nightmare?"

"Isn't it obvious? You were clearly paying attention to the wrong Nightmare. It hurt my feelings. So I simply had to stop by and remind you who the true threat is," Screamer said as she kept her eyes on Celestia while Luna rose to her hooves; smoking but still intact.

"And that threat is you?" Celestia replied calmly.

"Naturally. Couldn't let you waste your time on the wrong nightmare. You should focus on the most brilliant and dangerous one," Nightmare Screamer said with a grin, gesturing to herself.

"Congratulations," Celestia replied in soft earnest, "You have my focus."

Luna looked at her friend sadly, "I'm sorry. This is my fault... but we have to stop you."

Nightmare Screamer just grinned as the lightning struck her as she disappeared. "Where'd..." Luna began when another bolt tore down towards the both of them. Streaking along the crackling energy was Screamer. The golden dome summoned by Celestia proved more resilient than the moonlight one of Luna's, though the force of the impact did rock the tower to its core.

Up and down Nightmare Screamer rode the lightning, and each impact drove Celestia's hooves into the stone. "Drop it," Luna shouted as Screamer flashed back up into the storm clouds and began to drop. Silver rays of light shot from Luna's horn, running up the crackling flow of electricity and flashed over the nightmare. White burns that hissed with cold appeared on her crimson hide and she peeled away, breaking the conduit of lightning. Together, the sisters took to the air as Nightmare Screamer recovered.

Gold and silver flashed and flared as Screamer tore around the towers of Canterlot, trailing lightning. Two vortex beneath her wings propelled the nightmare with a noise like a single continuous wail as she came around to attack with her own arcing blasts of lightning. Walls of gold cut in her path, but the nightmare was a superb flyer and evaded each attempt to block her. Luna sent a rain of sparkling stars streaking down atop her, but the gusts scattered the cold white light.

Suddenly Nightmare Screamer once more rode the lightning, but this time as she fell her hooves didn't crash against white and golden magical shields. They slammed into a tower with such force that the entire structure began to collapse. "No!" Celestia shouted as she removed her shield to wrap the tower in her golden energy, buying time for the ponies within to run for safety.

Nightmare Screamer rode the lightning again, but this time she landed atop Celestia, "Lost your focus?" She screamed as she exploded with lightning, sending arcing blue bolts racing over Celestia's body. Celestia screamed, but kept control till she allowed the tower to safely crumble into a heap. Those precious seconds were paid for dearly as Equestria's ruler received black burns to her pummeled body.

Suddenly a giant pair of glowing pincers reached out and plucked Screamer from Celestia's back. The luminous scorpion, its body filled with stars, clung to the top of another roof as it raised its stinger. A starry dragon roared above her while a lion perched atop a neighboring tower ready to pounce. "That's new," Screamer muttered as she looked at the giant luminous arachnid.

"Give up, Evening Star." Luna demanded, her horn glowing as she maintained the shimmering constellations.

"Sure. I give up," she said as she put her front hooves into the air.

"Really?" Luna couldn't help but smile.

Nightmare Screamer just sighed in disappointment as she once more exploded into lightning. The entrapping claws disintegrated into stars. The lion sprung and the dragon dove, but there was another flash of lightning and she flickered out of sight. Luna raised her shield as she moved over Celestia, waiting for her to come back down again.

When she reappeared the mare wasn't attacking though as both Princesses turned to face her. Her eyes were wide as she shouted, "I don't care what she did! I am fighting BOTH Princesses here! Kill her yourself!"

"Problems?" Celestia said as she hovered besides Luna.

"Oh the usual. Fighting two of the most powerful ponies in the world, and she wants me to just drop everything because one of her plots didn't turn out just so," Screamer replied and then hissed, "Don't tell me to shut up! I am fighting Princesses here!"

"I think this fight is over," Celestia declared. "You can't beat both of us, Nightmare."

"Yeah. Guess you're right..." Then lightning blasted once again, but instead of racing towards the clouds, the electrified Nightmare rode the lightning directly into Celestia's shield. Luna barely raised her own in time as Screamer immediately deflected straight at the younger Alicorn. Back and forth Screamer passed from one to the other, striking faster and faster.

Gold and silver rays futilely flashed along the crackling arc as the impacts shook both sisters. "Who breaks first?" Screamer shouted over the electric sizzle as the charge built up more and more. Luna felt her shield faltering under the continuous assault.

Then her eyes met Celestia's and she knew any second Celestia would drop her shield and take the hit. Even after she'd been hurt so many times recently by Fury and now Screamer, her sister would make the hoofbrained choice. "Don't do it Celestia!" Luna shouted across the arc at her sister, then gasps as she felt sparks starting to sneak through her barrier spell. Back and forth, back and forth, faster than the eye could follow.

"Celestia! Move away!" Luna shouted as she took to wing and moved away. Celestia looked confused for one moment, her eyes widening in comprehension as she flew in the opposite direction. The lightning arc stretched between them, and even though she still ripped through the air almost too fast to see, she could still be seen. Silver and gold flashed, striking Screamer from both sides and she fell in a heap atop the tower.

"Good one, Luna..." Nightmare Screamer gasped, smoke and icy mist rising from her as she coughed. She laughed, coughed, and laughed again as she rose to her hooves. For a moment, Luna heard her clever friend. "Didn't think of that," she muttered as she staggered to her feet. "Guess I just have one last trick to play."

"Give up, Evening Star. You're done," Celestia said in an oddly soft voice. Nightmare Screamer's eyes widened and she laughed softly. It was such a familiar laugh that it made Luna's heart ache.

"Nah," she said as she looked at Celestia, "Thought I was. Pretty sure. But there's one last big trick to work out," Evening Star said as she pulled herself to her hooves. "Watch this."

"Stop her!" Luna yelled as she tried to form a barrier around Screamer. The bolt of lightning flashed up into the clouds, with Screamer riding it into the swirling clouds. "She got away..." Luna said in frustration. Then a gust rolled across the city.

“No, Luna, she didn’t,” Celestia said as she looked to the storm above Canterlot.

The roiling clouds suddenly took on a more uniform direction as the winds reoriented in one continuous direction. As Luna watched they spun faster and faster, lightning blasting out completely at random as the funnel slowly descended towards the city. The wind caught the stars in her constellations and despite her grip they scattered and winked out. Soon the lightning wrapped vortex began to pull debris into its funnel as it scoured the stone. A pony shaped lightning bolt fueled the funnel as she circled around faster and faster.

“Sister!” Luna wailed, not knowing what spell could possibly counter act that terrible force.

“This is done!” Celestia roared at the storm. Golden light enveloped her, and the swirling clouds over the city became awash in terrible red light. The swirling wind abruptly shifted in the direction of away as the clouds began to stream away. Suddenly the storm broke and the raging setting sun broke through in a baking wash of heat. Red like an ember, it still sent the clouds and tornado scattering in all directions, leaving a lone Screamer staring up at the immense fiery orb plucked prematurely from its bed in the west.

“Awesome,” Nightmare Screamer said as her mane and wings started to smoke. Then with a laugh she turned and raced away to the west with a dull roll of thunder.

Slowly Celestia rose the tired sun into the sky and with her horn directed it back down below the horizon. For years to come ponies would talk of the day with two sunsets. Finally she crumpled next to Luna. “Ugh... I’m feeling my age today.” Celestia muttered as she looked at the electrical burns Screamer had left in her hide. “How is it I can go centuries without even a blemish, but in one week look half dead?”

“I dunno. Maybe a thousand years of being pampered are catching up with you,” Luna teased gently, knowing now that running a Kingdom wasn’t easy. It’d take Luna a thousand years to be able to run Equestria with the skills and finesse that Celestia possessed.

"I think I'm going to have to send Cloudsdale a thank you basket. They'll be taming the weather Nightmare Screamer and I stirred up for months." Celestia rose to her hooves, "Let's go check on Twilight Sparkle and her friends."

Luna looked at Celestia for a long moment as they drifted down to the street below. "Celestia. Did you know Evening Star?" Celestia paused, looking back at her. Luna hung her head as she said, "She said she wasn't my friend. That she'd used me. I heard everything she told Twilight..."

Celestia's gentle lips curled softly, "I'm sure when this is done, you'll have that one back."

"You do? But..."

"There are friends, Luna. Then there are friends," She said as she checked up on the six friends. Ponies were starting to flock out on the streets to survey the damage. Many were injured and many of the ponies seemed in shock that something terrible would happen to them here in the capital. "I'll need to help." Celestia said simply.

"We'll all help, if you don't mind, Princess," Twilight Sparkle said as she stood, a bit shaky with her friends around her.

* * *

Trixie clung to the back of the carriage as it rattled away from Canterlot. The whispering had finally broken along with the storm, and Trixie knew she was a dead mare if she couldn't figure something out. She glanced at the carry-alls tied to the chests and trunks of the wealthy pony folk. First thing to do when she arrived was finding someplace safe for the enchanted mirror. Then... well... then she'd work on it.

Unseen by her in the growing night, a dark shape pursued the carriage with dogged perseverance.