



Project A.L.I.C.O.R.N

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Chapter 1

Twilight Sparkle let out an exhausted sigh as she and her friends approached what was once the ancient palace of the Royal Pony Sisters. She had expected to leave home early, gather the books that remained in the archives, and return to Ponyville while she could still see her hooves in front of her face. That was her plan before the wagon became stuck in what she hoped was mud, a wild manticore showered Fluttershy with all manner of affection, and a certain, fabulous serpent insisted on properly thanking Rarity for the restoration of his prized moustache.

The delays cost quite some time, more time than Twilight wanted to admit, but a quick glance at the receding daylight drew her to the conclusion nopony wanted to hear.

“Okay girls, ” Twilight announced, “I think we'll have to stop here for the night.”

“Are you crazy? Haven't y'all heard what happens to a pony who goes to sleep in the Everfree Forest?” Applejack asked, her face a mixture of superstitious worry and genuine concern. “All sorts of bad things, Twilight, they could never wake up, be eaten by monsters, or worse.”

“Applejack, Zecora *lives* here, she sleeps here every night and nothing bad happens to her. Besides, it's not like we can find our way back in the dark.”

“But, um, are you sure we should stop here, um, not that I mind?” Fluttershy asked. “It's just that there, um, there could be dragons flying overhead; big, scary dragons that could eat an innocent pony in one bite...”

“Fluttershy...”

“...and nopony would know until the next morning...”

“Fluttershy!”

“...and by then it....”

“FLUTTERSHY!!!”

“Oh, um, sorry...I got a little carried away,” her voice trailed off at the end.

“I admit, there are dragons living in this forest, but most of them are diurnal, so we shouldn't have to worry about them at night. Although I would like to get inside before it rains,” Twilight said as she eyed the dark clouds that were steadily forming overhead.

“I, for one, agree with Twilight. Those clouds look positively dreadful, and I would hate to have my mane ruined, again.” Rarity said, punctuating her statement with a look at Applejack.

“Consarn it! Ah already told you it wasn't mah fault,” Applejack retorted.

“I never said it was, but if you're feeling guilty about it.”

“Ah ain't feelin' guilty. Wagons. Get. Stuck. An' when they do, we all got to do our part to pull 'em out. Ah'm sorry that you slipped, but that's as much...”

Their argument was cut short by the groaning of the great doors as Twilight forced them open with her magic and called for everypony to follow her. They entered the remains of a once magnificent hall, the masonry echoing the sound of their hoofbeats and Pinkie Pie's playful performance. One quick spell later and the room was awash in a cool light that emanated from Twilight's horn.

“So, which way do we go?” asked Rainbow Dash, seemingly content to fly around the cracked pillars and high chandeliers.

“According to the map Princess Celestia gave me, we're here, and the royal archives are...here. We just need to go through these doors...” Twilight directed, “...and we should be there in no time.”

As they started toward the first set of doors, Rainbow Dash yelled and crashed to the floor, coughing and spitting. She was covered, head to tail, with a dusty cobweb. After some laughter and a joke about a very hungry spider, Rainbow Dash managed to clean most of the cobwebs out of her coat. Still chuckling, the group continued deeper into the ruins.

“How do you know there are any books here instead of a dusty, musty ol' room?” Pinkie Pie asked. “If I had to move a whole bunch of books I wouldn't say, 'Pinkie, we have to move some books for the Princess. Now let's leave some behind for the spiders to read.' That would just be silly. Spiders can't read, and even if they could, they would want to read about webs and bugs and stuff, not transcendental existentialism 'cause that would be boring.”

Twilight blinked a few times in confusion and opened her mouth to ask something, but she decided that Pinkie Pie was just being Pinkie Pie. Twilight did, however, discern what Pinkie Pie's rambling was asking, and she realized that she hadn't yet told anypony the full story of why she needed to go this far into the untamed forest. Trying to find the best way to begin, she recounted the recent events in Canterlot.

The Royal Library of Canterlot buzzed with frustrated energy as Twilight Sparkle frantically searched the shelves for something, anything to scratch the mental itch that was driving her mad. Dragon Anatomy, Dragon Breeds, Dragon Culture, Habitat, History, Lairs, Language—Twilight let out an exasperated sigh—no Dragon Magic.

“I think you should give it a rest, Twilight,” Spike yawned. “It's getting late, and we've already gone through the library five times.”

“But I have to know, Spike,” Twilight responded. “Historically, unicorns are the only species capable of using magic. If I can find evidence of another type of magic, it could revolutionize magic theory.”

“It was one book. We don't even know if...it was...historically...” Spike's overdue bedtime finally wore down his endurance, and he nodded off to sleep. Twilight picked up her baby dragon, put him on her back, and

trotted back to their room, completely forgetting the mess she left behind her.

“I'm sorry, Spike,” Twilight said softly as she tucked him into bed. “I didn't realize how late it was getting. We'll just try again tomorrow.”

She walked onto the balcony hoping that some fresh air would help clear her mind. A shiver found its way through her as a cool, night breeze reminded her of just how much time had passed.

That old book couldn't be wrong, could it? The passage was little more than a footnote, but it stated quite clearly:

*Despite the potency of the dragons' magic,
The combined power of the Royal Pony Sisters
Forced the Dragon Coalition back beyond our borders
Thus securing Equestria from draconian influence.*

“If only the library had what I was looking for,” she mused. “Maybe one of the off-duty librarians would know. No, I practically lived in the library. I should know it better than anyone. Well, what about one of the archivists? I should go down there and see if they...”

A look of sudden realization spread across her face as she remembered that she had completely neglected the archives. True, it mostly contained royal correspondence, but it also housed old tomes and scrolls that were too fragile to keep in the library. The archives must hold the answer. With her course set, Twilight broke into a full gallop toward the inner palace.

Twilight quickly learned a painful lesson about not galloping through a dark hallway. One of the side doors opened and another pony stepped into her path. After inadvertently ramming the other pony, Twilight found herself on the floor.

“Sorry!” Twilight apologized while rubbing her head. “It was dark, and I thought I was alone, and I was just in a hurry to get to—Princess Luna!”

“You were in a hurry to find me?” Luna asked, a little worried. “Are you alright?”

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I just needed to get to the archives, and I wasn't looking where I was going, and I'm very sorry! Please don't banish me or throw me in a dungeon or banish me and throw me in a dungeon in the place that you banished me to!"

"Twilight, calm down. It was an accident. I'm not going to banish you. I wouldn't wish banishment on anypony." The loneliness in Luna's voice was almost palpable.

"I-I didn't mean that you—I mean, I was just," Twilight stammered. She felt her face become hot as she remembered where Luna had been for the past thousand years.

"It's all right. I know you didn't mean it like that. Anyway, the palace is nearly empty, except for a few guards, so I'm the only one with a key to the archives. Just let me collect Abby," Luna picked up her abacus from the floor, "and I'll walk with you."

The long walk through the castle seemed even longer than due to the awkward silence that followed them. They walked together, self-consciousness stifling any conversation, until they reached the door to the archives. Luna was right; the door was locked, and no pony else was around to open it.

"Why did you need to come down here?" Luna ventured. "Judging from the letters Celly showed me, I thought you were studying friendship, not ancient history."

"You've read my letters? I didn't think Princess Celestia showed those to anypony. What did you think?" Twilight asked, brightening at the thought of Celestia sharing her work with Luna.

"Well, Celly insists that I be more sociable and learn about modern culture. It's hard being away from those you love for so long, but your letters are helping me readjust." Luna opened the archive door and stepped inside, calling Twilight's attention back to the matter at hoof.

"Oh," Twilight suddenly remembered the question Luna asked just a moment ago, "Princess Celestia didn't send me down here. It's more of a personal project. I'm trying to learn more about dragon magic. I found a

book with a note about how Your Majesties defeated the Dragon Coalition and drove them out of Equestria.”

“Please, not so formal. A simple 'Luna' will do. As for the Dragon Coalition, the name does sound familiar, but the details from that long ago are hazy. Moon dust isn't exactly a memory stimulant,” Luna joked, accidentally sending the conversation back into uncomfortable territory, “But I don't have any responsibilities until sunrise, I could stay and help, if you want.”

“I would like that. Thank you, Luna.”

Twilight Sparkle continued the story for her friends, “We didn't find much, but Princess Luna said that the old palace was abandoned in a hurry, so there might still be books and scrolls left behind. She gave me a magic crest that will unlock any door in these ruins. That way we won't have to break through the magical locks that protect the archives.”

They continued through the ruins until they came to what was supposed to be an arch. Instead of the hallway they expected, the ponies were staring down the remains of the palace above, conveniently displayed in heap form. With a sigh, Twilight pulled out the map and plotted another course, hoping that they wouldn't have to take the long way around.

“I can't believe we had to take the long way around. We've been walking in circles for hours,” Rainbow Dash complained.

“We just need to find another way around,” Twilight said. “It's not like I'm the one responsible for all the debris.”

“Twilight, sweetie, you *are* responsible for the ponies who follow you,” Rarity mentioned. “Everypony is exhausted, and after today's events, I certainly could use my beauty sleep.”

“Ah have to agree with Rarity there, sugarcube,” Applejack panted. “This here wagon's gettin' pretty heavy.” Applejack added a kick for emphasis.

“Ow,” a familiar pink voice squeaked.

“What the hay! Pinkie Pie what do y’all think you’re doin’ back there?”

Pinkie Pie popped up over the edge of the wagon. “Napping! You see, we’d been walking for hours and hours and hours, and I was getting super-duper tired, so I just thought, ‘Hey, why not take a nap in the wagon.’ It was empty, and I was soooooo sleepy...”

“Alright, I get the hint,” Twilight interrupted. “Let’s just go in this room and rest up for tomorrow. The map says that it’s a room for visiting dignitaries, so if we’re lucky, there might still be some furniture we can use.”

Twilight opened the large door, and led the ponies into the guest room where they noticed two things. First, there was a large hole in the far wall, a hole that, Twilight discovered, led to the inner parts of the ruin. Second, the room was indeed furnished, but there was something strange about the furnishings that kept the ponies from climbing into comfy seats.

“I’ve never seen such a giganterrific couch!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, gaping in awe at the plush monstrosity before her.

“Land sakes,” Applejack said, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the furniture. “Ah didn’t think it was possible to make ‘em that big.”

Rainbow Dash flew up and stretched out on the edge of the couch, “Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

After the ponies sufficiently gawked at the furniture, Applejack unhitched herself from the wagon while Rainbow Dash lounged and the others explored.

“Um, excuse me, Applejack?” Fluttershy asked. “Does this room seem a little funny to you?”

“Cept fer the size, seems alright to me.” Applejack answered.

“No, not the size, I mean it feels like we shouldn’t be here.”

“Hmm...Now that you mention it, somethin' about this place doesn't sit right, but I can't put mah hoof on it.”

“I think we could all be in terrible danger.”

Applejack carefully looked around at the room again—furniture in decent condition, floor clear of dust, corners suspiciously devoid of spider webs. Something definitely didn't sit right. No, something felt wrong; horribly wrong.

“Twilight!” Applejack cried, drawing the eyes of everypony to her. “Ah think we better hightail it out of here.”

THOOM

The sound was felt more than heard as it reverberated throughout the room. Whatever made that noise was close and was getting closer. The order to hide was no sooner given than acted upon as all six ponies galloped under a nearby cabinet. Twilight extinguished the light from her horn, and waited in the darkness with her best friends.

The hinges to the door creaked as the creature thudded its way into the room, dragging behind it a horrible scraping sound. A loud boom indicated that the door was closed once more, trapping the ponies. The echo receded and was followed by the unmistakable sound of bits, thousands of bits jangling to the floor in one big lump. The room was silent save for the heartbeats of Twilight and her friends.

A crackling, whooshing sound filled their ears, and they realized that they could see again as the torchlight reached their eyes. Despite the limited view from their hiding place, the ponies were able to see two things on the floor, one of gold and the other of silver. The gold pile was a mountain of bits interspersed with jewelry, goblets, and many other precious things all contained in a large cloth sack. The silver one did not consist of silver treasures. It was the largest mass of teeth, scales, and claws anypony had ever seen. The six friends stumbled into the lair of an ancient silver dragon.

Chapter 2

Twilight and her friends were safely concealed in the cabinet's shadow, but they needed to find a way to escape from the dragon's presence. Minds raced with half-formed plans, knees shook with fear of discovery, and a certain pony's eyes lit up with the sight of all that gold. All that stood between them and freedom was an endless expanse between the cabinet and the door. Their only problem was comfortably relaxing on his scaly side.

"So what's the plan, Twilight?" Applejack asked. "Ah don't know how long we can hide 'fore our lizard friend finds us."

"I know, I know," Twilight whispered back, "just give me a moment to think." She muttered thoughts to herself as she paced in the safe darkness.

"How about this?" Rainbow Dash suggested. "I fly out there and distract the dragon with my amazing tricks while you make a break for it. It'll be a snap."

"Nothin' doin'. Ain't nopony gonna risk her hide for mine," Applejack responded.

"Applejack's right," Rarity agreed. "There is no point in risking a pony's life when we can simply wait until the dragon leaves and then trot right out the door."

Murmurs of agreement came from the ponies as they watched the dragon from the safety of their hideout. Almost on cue, he plopped down on the floor, tipped over the sack, and arranged the bits in a neat pile for counting. By the look of it, this would take a long, long time.

"So much for that plan," Twilight needlessly announced. "Any other ideas?"

"Maybe he's a nice dragon and wants some friends," Pinkie Pie suggested. "Oh! We could throw him a 'new friends' party with cake and balloons." She bounced at the idea.

Twilight shook her head. "According to my research, dragons are possessive, territorial, and most importantly, solitary creatures. I doubt he'd roll out the red carpet for some trespassing ponies."

"But Spike's not a Loner McGreedyPants. He loves my parties."

"Spike has been around ponies his whole life. He's used to us. Wild dragons just aren't as friendly as he is."

"Maybe Fluttershy can use her Stare power to make the dragon leave," Rainbow Dash suggested. "You know, like that other one in the mountains. Then we wouldn't be seeing him around here anymore."

"Oh, no, I couldn't," Fluttershy responded. "It wouldn't be very nice to make him leave his home like that, especially since he's just minding his own business."

The pile of counted bits grew higher as the ponies continued planning until a deep rumbling sound, originating from the dragon's stomach, echoed through the room. Taking great care not to topple the tower of coins, the dragon rose to his feet and started to walk further into the ruins. Recognizing the small window of opportunity they were given, the ponies silently crept toward the door, waiting for the dragon to disappear from sight before risking the sound from the hinges.

The dragon stopped. The ponies froze. The dragon turned his head. The ponies followed his gaze. The wagon sat there, plain as day. The dragon turned to face them. The terrified ponies huddled against the door.

"Thieves," the dragon said with a gravelly voice. He added a sinister tone to that single word that gave it much more force than volume ever could. The other ponies turned their heads toward Rarity and noticed that she had adorned herself with glittering jewelry.

“Run!” Twilight cried as she threw open the door. The ponies sprinted down the hall with that silver behemoth following close behind.

“You go ahead. I'll hold him off,” Rainbow Dash instructed.

“You can't fight off a dragon!” Applejack protested. “Who knows what he'll do to you.”

“I want my friends to be safe. Besides, I'm way too fast for him to lay a claw on me.”

Applejack looked like she was about to argue some more, but realized Rainbow Dash was right; the dragon wouldn't be able to touch her. Applejack gave her one last look before she reluctantly galloped away with her friends.

The other ponies continued as fast as they could while Rainbow Dash waited for her moment of glory. This dragon was fast, still slow enough for her to outfly but faster than she would have liked. Any second now and she would be staring down a dragon for her friends. Rainbow Dash chuckled; she really did embody the spirit of loyalty. Closer...closer...now!

Rainbow Dash's haunches were against the floor. She was stunned. How could the dragon completely ignore her like that? He didn't even slow down to take a swipe. Chasing after her friends was bad enough, but brushing off her valiant sacrifice, that was too much.

“Get back here!” Rainbow Dash leaped in the air, pumped her wings, and followed after the dragon. She was flying as fast as she could, and the rapidly closing distance could attest to that. “Almost got you,” she said as she pushed herself faster. She noticed too late that the speeding dragon was no longer speeding, and she yelped as she accidentally rammed into his outstretched hand.

A deep “gotcha” was all she heard as the claws tightened around her.

“Rainbow!” Applejack stopped, hearing the yelp echoing down the halls. She turned around and charged towards the distant cry.

“Applejack, what are you doing?” Twilight called after her.

"Ah'm goin' to save Rainbow!"

"We can't let her go alone," Rarity said, and after realizing she was still covered in dragon gold, "It's me the dragon wants, not her."

Without any hesitation, the other four followed after Applejack, but the power she put into each stride gave the others no chance to catch her.

"Let me go!" Rainbow Dash struggled against the claws that were caging her in that monstrous hand. "I don't have any of your precious gold."

"You will bring me one who does," the deep voice said. The dragon's mouth was close enough that she could feel the hot breath all around her in a very uncomfortable way.

"And do you have to breathe on me like that. You're making me sweaty."

Rainbow Dash's ears twitched as she heard her name being called. Applejack was coming back for her. The orange blur of a pony propelled herself up to the leg of the dragon, and channeling all her years of applebucking into her flanks, she bucked the giant shin hard enough to allow Rainbow Dash to wriggle free of her clawed prison.

The two of them turned from the dragon and fled, but couldn't run very far before Applejack's fatigue overtook her and allowed the dragon to catch up and forcefully pin her to the ground. Rainbow Dash buzzed around the dragon, trying everything she could think of to free the pony who saved her just moments ago, but amounted to little more than an annoyance.

"Applejack!" A collective cry came from the four ponies who, just approaching the scene, watched the huge beast with their friend under his claw.

"You let my friend go right now, mister!" Fluttershy commanded as she flew up to perch on his nose. "You may be big; you may be strong, but

that doesn't give you the right to bully other creatures, especially those who are so much smaller than you.”

“Ah, another with the Commanding Stare,” the dragon said. “Let me give you a little advice—”

SNAP

Fluttershy had been taken completely into the dragon's mouth. Her friends cried out in shock, but she could not hear them. The dragon bent his head down to the floor and spit her out. Her tiny form was curled up into a little ball, shivering, and completely covered in dragon spit.

“—It doesn't work on me.”

Seeing her friend in such a pitiable state was enough to stoke Twilight's fury. Her horn glowed with enough magic to render a lesser pony unconscious. She screamed as she directed her will against the reptilian beast.

The dragon gestured with his free hand and spoke in a tongue that nopony understood. Glyphs, glowing with a magical light, appeared around the free ponies and pressed them against the ground. Twilight nearly fainted as she felt her magic drain out of her body. All of the ponies were held in place by magic, claws, or fear. The noise died down and left silence in its place.

“I'm sorry!” Rarity cried, her body trembling with sobs. “Let my friends go. I'll do anything if you just let them go. They didn't do anything. I was the one who took your gold.”

“Anything,” the dragon asked, “for your friends?”

“Yes, anything,” her voice saturated with desperation, “I can make you new clothes or find gems for your dinner or even be your dinner if you just let my friends go. Please!”

Her friends gasped as Rarity's pleas expressed just how much she was willing to give for them. The dragon thought for a few tense moments that had the weight of an eternity.

“In all of my years, few have dared to steal from me. Even fewer admitted guilt, though all regretted their actions. Your heart speaks to me of the depth of love for your friends. I have found your words true and your offer genuine. Therefore, I will grant your request. Your friends may come and go as they please and even stay as my guests, provided they do not act against me. In return, you will stay here as my servant and bring me gems for my plate. This is my offer.”

Rarity agreed without a second thought. The dragon stripped her of the ornaments and cast a spell to bind their agreement. The magic symbols flowed around Rarity's forelegs and coalesced into metal bands. A moment later, her friends were free from their physical and magical restraints. After draping the catatonic Fluttershy across the backs of Applejack and Rainbow Dash, the six friends followed the dragon back to his room. The walk back was painfully silent. All of the somber ponies' eyes followed Rarity.

True to his word, the dragon was a gracious host. He procured hay and water, prepared a bed, and even heated a bath for Fluttershy, who was still in no condition to wash herself. He listened to the story of why the ponies ventured out this far, and told them his story of how Princess Luna called him here for a favor he owed and how he, being an honorable dragon, had waited nearly a thousand years for the Moon Princess.

Their night closed with the ponies reminiscing about Ponyville, their friends and family, and their adventures. No pony wanted to face the morning and what it would bring, so they spent their time trying to make the night last even longer. However, sleepiness wears upon even the most stubborn of ponies, and they had no choice but to relent to the calls for bed.

Twilight excused herself and stepped out to an overgrown garden. She looked up to see that, thankfully, the moon was still in the sky. She tried to think back to the time when Celestia taught her that spell, the one to be used only in emergencies. A friend going into servitude seemed urgent enough. She gazed at the moon, summoned her magical reserves, and cast the spell.

“Luna?” Twilight thought to the moon. “Are you there?”

“What?! Who is this?” a very surprised Luna responded.

“I'm sorry to have to call on you like this, but I need your help.”

Twilight explained the situation and begged for Luna to do something. Unfortunately, she had royal duties that would keep her occupied for some time, but she promised to be there after sunrise. Twilight accepted that answer, she had to. She thanked Luna and broke the spell. Seeing no alternative, she headed to rejoin Rarity and the rest of her friends.

Twilight came back to a room that was dark and cold. She climbed into the dragon-sized bed with her friends and crawled next to the frightened ball of pegasus under the massive blanket. Despite the vastness of the bed, the pony friends chose to lie close together, not wanting to leave each other, even in dreams. There was nothing more they could do tonight but try to sleep. The room was completely silent, except for Rarity, who let bittersweet tears flow into her mane.

Chapter 3

The moonlight danced on the surface of the pond, reflecting its silver glow across the face of the purple unicorn. The garden was quiet and still, almost peaceful. Nothing could disturb her solitude, not in this secret place. Twilight watched the tears fall down her cheeks and ripple through the shallow water, distorting her reflection.

"I'm sorry, Rarity," she spoke to her mirror. "This is all my fault. If only I had come here by myself, then you would have never been taken from me, from us, all of us. You were right. I was responsible for the ponies who followed me, and I led you into the claws of a dragon. I let you down. I-I..."

She shut her eyes tight, hoping to smother the guilt.

"Twilight," a tired voice called to her.

Twilight opened her eyes to see that the reflection changed to show a dirty, withered, white unicorn mare looking back at her.

"Rarity, what happened to you?" Twilight asked the reflection.

"I'm glad you came to visit. Forgive my ghastly looks, darling. Lately, I've just been too tired to keep up appearances." Rarity lay down on the bank, her unkempt mane skimming the surface. "Now, tell me everything, and don't leave out a single detail."

"I didn't want this. I never meant for this, any of this, to happen."

"I know you didn't, and I don't blame you. This is my own mess. I brought it on myself. Now, please tell me what I've missed while I rest a while." She closed her eyes and let out a heavy sigh.

Twilight started a story about her life in Ponyville when she noticed something odd about the unicorn she was talking to. Rarity's head was

slumped forward in the most peculiar manner, and more importantly, she wasn't breathing.

“Rarity?! No, don't leave me, not yet!” Twilight plunged her hooves into the pond to save her friend, but the water vanished before her. A pile of ash lay at the bottom of the empty pit, all that was left of the white unicorn. Taking a hoof-ful of powder, she held it close to her heart and wept.

Twilight suddenly sat up in the bed, causing the hoof that was gently shaking her to recoil in surprise. She felt a hoof brush away her tears and saw that her comforter was watching her with worried eyes.

“Shh, it's okay. It was all a bad dream,” Fluttershy's soft voice calmed the turbulence that had grown in the purple unicorn's mind.

Twilight just stared for a while before she turned away from the yellow pegasus, trying to hide her sorrowful expression.

Fluttershy continued, “Do you want to talk about it? Whenever I have a bad dream, I always feel better after talking about it with Angel Bunny.”

“O-okay,” Twilight managed. “Are you sure you don't mind?”

“It's no trouble at all. Let's go for a walk so we don't wake our friends.”

The two ponies slipped out of bed and picked their way over to the door. Opening the door very carefully, they produced a squeak that could have come from Fluttershy herself. After exiting the room, they made their way to the garden Twilight visited last night, and sat on a stone bench underneath an old tree. Fluttershy listened closely as Twilight added her story to the symphony of the nighttime forest. When she had finished unburdening herself, she heard the gentle pegasus speak consoling words in her ear and felt two arms draw her into a motherly embrace.

“I think we should be getting back soon,” Fluttershy said, noticing that the sky was getting lighter over the treeline. With one final squeeze, they

broke the hug and trotted back through the hall when they bumped into their friends.

“Good morning,” Pinkie Pie yawned in greeting. “Where have you two been? You were going to miss the big send off.”

“We were just talking in the garden,” Twilight gestured outside. “And what do you mean 'the big send off'?”

“Oh, I'm going to be flown out to the gem mines today,” Rarity informed the newcomers as she continued forward, “and I need to be outside soon. I don't see what all the fuss is about; I'll be back later this evening.”

“We just wanted to see you off on your first day,” Applejack answered.

“Yeah, that and see where His Lizardship sends you,” Rainbow Dash added.

“As you wish,” a deep voice said, startling the rainbow pegasus.

The dragon sat comfortably in the wide courtyard and opened both of his hands for the pony passengers. Rarity, after many farewells, clambered into the scaly hand of her master and was taken close to his body. He stared at Rainbow Dash, waiting for her to climb aboard his other hand. She glared back at him.

“You don't have to insult me. I can keep up with you easy.” She spread her wings and zipped around the courtyard. “See, easy.”

“Very well.” He retracted his hand and turned away from the ruins. Blocking the ponies' view of the sky, he unfurled his huge wings and tensed his muscles in preparation for the rigors of flight. Running forward, the dragon bit his wings into the wind that somehow managed to lift his great weight. He easily cleared the treetops as he flew toward the horizon, with a rainbow speck riding the skies beside him.

“D-do you think they'll be okay?” Fluttershy's voice trembled from behind Applejack's protective tail.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Twilight responded. Watching the figures in the distance, she said to herself, "They'll be fine."

The dragon landed with a heavy thud. Before him lay a field of holes that led deep underground. The scowl he wore told the two ponies that whoever was inside was not in for the best of mornings.

"DIAMOND DOGS!" the dragon bellowed, echoing through the caverns.

Almost instantly, three dogs, smiling nervously, appeared and saluted the towering beast. The mid-sized Rover gulped and said, "Y-yes, boss?"

"Where are my gems? You are a week late."

"W-we just need a little more time."

"What!"

"T-t-the gems h-have been..."

The dragon held up a hand. "I do not want excuses. I want results, and since you are unable to produce them, I must take matters into my own claws. Count yourselves lucky that I am a generous dragon." He set Rarity on the ground before them.

"Not the pony! Anything but her!"

"She makes terrible noises," the large Fido added.

"Please don't make us take her," Spot pleaded.

"Silence!" the dragon yelled. "You treat my clemency as you would punishment? Have you forgotten what you owe? Have you forgotten how you sought me out and begged for my protection? You have come to me with empty paws, and I have been more than tolerant. You will take her and be grateful for the opportunity."

“But—“ Rover began.

The dragon drew his teeth close to the dogs. “You will take her and be grateful other dragons do not *dare* approach this place while I still guard it.”

“Y-yes, boss.”

“Good. I will return for her before the sun sets.” He turned and said over his shoulder, “And I will be hungry.”

The powerful dragon took back to the skies, leaving the dogs in silence with Rarity in their midst.

Yesterday's events dampened the mood around the breakfast table, but at least the hay was good, if a little bland. Despite Pinkie Pie's best efforts, everypony ate silently, absorbed in their own thoughts. Applejack's ears swiveled toward the hallway, noticing a strange sound, and she stepped out of the room to investigate. Curiosity pestered the other ponies until they followed, wanting to discover what could have possibly drawn Applejack away from her breakfast.

“Twilight! Twilight!” a distant voice called through the ruins.

“We're over here!” Twilight answered, recognizing the voice.

“Who in the hay is callin' for you all the way out here?” Applejack asked.

“That's Princess Luna. I asked her to come here as a favor to help Rarity.”

“Twilight!” Luna's voice called again.

“Over here!”

“An' just when were you plannin' on tellin' us to get ready for a visit from a princess?” Applejack asked.

“Well...”

“Twilight!” Luna called

“Almost there!”

Luna finally rounded a corner and cantered up to the ponies.

“I came as quickly as I could,” Luna said, trying to recover her breath, “but some of the hallways collapsed. I had to go around.”

“Thank you again for coming, Luna. It means a lot to us that you came to help Rarity like this,” Twilight said.

“Of course, Twilight. I'll do what I can, but you didn't give me many details last night. Specifically, which dragon is keeping Rarity captive?”

A look of shock spread to Twilight's face, and she was forced to admit that she didn't know.

“You mean you don't even know the name?” Luna asked, just as surprised.

“He never told us, and when I asked, he said something about names having power.”

“That actually *does* narrow it down. Hmm...”

Luna's thoughtful expression changed to one of slight embarrassment as her stomach broadcast its feelings to everypony present.

“Would you care for some breakfast?” Applejack offered.

“Ooh! We could have a breakfast party for Princess Luna,” Pinkie Pie giggled.

"I would enjoy some breakfast," Luna accepted. "It will be nice sharing a meal with the ponies who saved me from...her."

"Great!" Pinkie Pie bounded off to prepare for the festivities.

Luna followed the pink pony through the door and was met with an astonishing sight. The room was filled with balloons and streamers. Cake, punch, and more traditional breakfast fare sat on the table. Pinkie Pie had even hung a banner that read, "Happy Breakfast Luna".

"How..." Luna began, her mouth unwilling to close.

Applejack trotted past her and said, "It's just Pinkie Pie. The fewer questions asked, the better."

"Don't worry. You get used to it," Fluttershy added before joining the others.

"But-" Luna tried again.

"Trust me," Twilight interrupted, "some things just can't be explained, especially when Pinkie Pie's involved."

Defeated, Luna shrugged and enjoyed the celebration.

Rarity had been hooked up to a familiar rusty harness, and forced to find gems deep in diamond dog domains.

"Okay, pony, the boss left you here to work for us." Rover pointed down a tunnel and ordered, "Now, get going and find us some gems."

"My goodness," Rarity said, "you can't even remember my name? You dogs are in worse shape than I thought. How do you expect me to find gems if you can't even address me properly?"

"Fine, fine, we will call you whatever you want, just find the gems."

"Another thing, I hardly feel that pulling is the best use of my talents."

Rover groaned. The thought of what would happen to him if he didn't deliver the gems tonight sent chills down his spine. Negotiations, as they were, went on for the better part of an hour before Rarity reached an agreement and the dogs had no choice but to accept.

"Okay, Miss Rarity," Rover sighed, "we dogs will follow this "basic hygiene", and you will find the gems and pull the wagon, after we clean it."

"And..." Rarity prompted.

"And after the first payment, we will get mules to do the pulling, not pretty ponies."

"Perfect."

Rainbow Dash swooped into the room laughing, "You'll never guess where the dragon just took Rarity...whoa, Pinkie Pie party?"

"Yep," Applejack replied.

"Anyway, remember those diamond dogs that couldn't stand her? Turns out, they work for him, and since they've been running behind, he practically put Rarity in charge of the place."

"Wow," Twilight said, "I kind of feel bad for them after what happened last time."

"That was the one with the defenseless pony using her wits, if I remember right," Luna said, referencing Twilight's report.

Twilight nodded in response. Remembering her manners, she introduced Luna and Rainbow Dash. After explaining why Luna was here, Twilight asked for the whereabouts of their dragon host. Rainbow Dash informed her of the dragon's intent to go hunting until later in the day, eliciting an exasperated groan from the purple unicorn. Now she understood what he meant about power in names. Talking to an absent

dragon would have been possible with an alicorn's help, but without a name, failure was assured.

After the party was over and everything was cleaned up, Twilight led the way deeper into the old palace until they came to an unassuming door at the end of a narrow hallway. Luna unlocked and opened it, letting everypony inside the abandoned archives. Channeling magic through her horn, she sent forth a burst of stars that collected on the walls and illuminated the occasional tome or scroll occupying the dusty shelves.

Twilight sensed that the magical preservation spells had long since dissipated. She pulled from her saddlebags several pairs of mouth guards and hoof coverings and instructed everypony to wear them when touching anything. Using these new tools, the ponies set to work gathering whatever could be recovered.

When their task was nearing completion, Pinkie Pie tried to pull a book off one of the shelves, but it snapped back into place. She was about to try again but was interrupted by a rumbling, grinding noise coming from the bookshelf. Such a sound breaking through the stale air caught the attention of the other ponies, who turned to see the newly revealed staircase leading deeper underground.

"A hidden passage?" Twilight said, unrolling her map. "That's not listed anywhere on here."

"It wouldn't be a hidden passage if it was on the map," Rainbow Dash observed.

Choosing to ignore the comment, Twilight lit her horn and proceeded down the stairs. Luna and the others followed close behind. Twilight descended down the staircase and found herself in a bare antechamber made of stone, but it wasn't the hewn and carved stone of the castle above. It could only be described as a type of artificial stone, as though the rocks themselves had been molded like clay in a potter's hooves. Across from the stairway was a metal portal that magically opened when she drew near. Still wary of the opening, Twilight examined the next room.

The hallway that lay before her was made of the same stone as the antechamber. Unlike the room she was in, this one seemed new. The

floor did not have any cracks. The walls were painted with vibrant, colored lines tracing down the hall. Even the air seemed fresh. Twilight crossed the threshold and was greeted with a bright flash of light. Shielding her eyes, she gazed upward at this newfound light source. Bottled lightning arced across the ceiling inside of glass tubes that hummed with the force of a million fireflies.

“There, at the end of the hall,” gasped Luna, her eyes wide.

“What is it?” Twilight asked, looking at the place where the hallway forked. “I don't see anything.”

“These symbols on the wall, I can read them. I've never seen them before, but I can read them.”

“How can you read a language you've never even seen before?”

“Didn't you tell me earlier today that some things can't be explained,” Luna said, earning a sheepish grin from the purple unicorn. “Besides, it doesn't matter how I can read it. What's important is its message.” She turned toward the wall and translated for the other ponies: “Elements of Harmony Research and Development Laboratory”

“Hold on there,” Applejack said, “Ah thought you an' Princess Celestia made the Elements of Harmony, not some pony in a lab.”

“No, we just found them. We didn't know where they came from.”

“It looks like we're going to find out,” Twilight said, leading the ponies toward the secrets of this mysterious place.

Chapter 4

Rarity sighed with relief as she dipped her exhausted body into the steaming water. Although it didn't have all the amenities of her own salon, the hot spring was perfect for soothing aching muscles. The warmth seeped into her body as she lowered herself deeper. She had toiled and trudged all day, but now it was Rarity time.

"Miss Rarity?" Fido said, casually walking into the cavern.

"EEK! Get out! Get out!" Rarity scolded. "Can't you see that a lady is bathing in here?!"

Fido quickly covered his eyes and said, "Sorry, Miss Rarity, but-"

"No 'buts'. You should always knock before you go barging in like that. Now go out and try again."

Fido obediently left and knocked on the stones just out of view.

"Just a moment," Rarity called as she pulled herself out of the spring and shook herself dry. "Come in."

"Miss Rarity?" Fido said, cautiously walking into the cavern. Hearing no complaints, he continued, "The boss is back."

Rarity thanked him and trotted up toward the surface. The dingy tunnels didn't seem quite so bad anymore, not after a little sprucing up. A ribbon here, some cleaning there, the mine was almost tolerable now. It still wasn't fit for a lady, but at least she didn't have to live down here.

The sun was about an hour away from setting when Rarity stepped out into its light. Blinking a few times, she let her eyes adjust to the light before she trotted over to the silver dragon, who was watching the dogs empty carts of jewels into a large sack.

“There, boss,” Rover said, looking up from his parchment. “Six carts for payment and one for late fees.”

The dragon sampled a few of the gems and said, “These are acceptable. You have earned your keep for another month.” He turned to face Rarity. “Are you ready to depart?”

She indicated that she was most certainly ready and climbed into the offered hand. Waving goodbye to the dogs, she was swept up into the skies while the trees sped under her, the bag of gems barely brushing the branches below.

After all this time, she finally understood what Rainbow Dash meant. Flying was absolutely breathtaking. This wasn't the kind of flying she did in Cloudsdale with her beautiful, delicate wings. The wind whipped through her mane, and the ground raced below. She closed her eyes and let the experience wash over her. The exhilaration, the freedom, the rush, it was all terribly intoxicating.

The impact of their landing, one that came a little too soon, jolted Rarity out of her reverie. Her giddy smile slowly faded after she put her hooves on the stone paths of the courtyard. Despite the thrills of flight, she couldn't ignore what wind does to a perfectly curled mane and hurried inside to find her brush.

“I'm baaaack,” Rarity sang, trotting over to rummage through her bags, “and you will not believe what happened to me today.” Applying the brush to her mane, she continued, “I was taken out to the mine only to discover that...ladies?” She looked around and saw that the room was devoid of other ponies.

“It would seem your friends have left,” the dragon commented as he dropped the bag of gems next to another bag filled with gold.

“No, they wouldn't, would they? No, they would have at least waited and said goodbye. I'm sure they're just gathering up books. That must be it, they went to the archive to go and get books.” She rushed toward the inner parts of the ruin before she sheepishly returned and asked how to navigate the passages.

Thanks to the dragon's directions, Rarity easily found the archives and the wagon full of aging treasure. She searched for her friends and called out to them but heard no response. Knowing that Twilight would never abandon a book in need, Rarity continued her search down the stairs behind a bookcase and discovered the same portal that her friends recently opened.

Proceeding through the portal and into the brightly lit hall, she marveled at the strange patterns decorating the walls. Starting down one of the paths at the end of the hall, she noticed Rainbow Dash in the distance. Rarity cantered toward her friend and waved to get her attention.

"Rainbow Dash!" Rarity called. Her cheerful smile vanished when she realized that the rainbow pegasus was fleeing at top speed from what looked like two pony-sized metal spiders.

"Rarity, run! Go get he—hrng!" Rainbow Dash yelled before her body stiffened and fell to the ground. Regaining control of her muscles, she yanked out the metal barbs that had become stuck in her side, flinching at the pain. Another spider appeared from a side passage and joined the two that had overtaken the grounded pegasus.

Rarity moved to help her, but the sudden attention of the spiders froze her where she stood. Her breath was caught in her throat for only a second before one of the spiders broke off from the others and charged toward the stunned unicorn. Before her mind could react to this new threat, her hooves were possessed by that primal instinct that demands survival. She galloped at full tilt up the stairs, screaming for help. The clacking from that alien abomination sounded in her ears and pushed her even faster.

She ran as fast as her hooves would carry her. Around a corner, over the rubble, she had to get away. Through the door, another corner, up the stairs, that thing was closing in. Another corner, straight ahead, she felt something pierce her skin. Her muscles seized up, causing her to trip, and her heart pounded its panicked cry. She wriggled around to face the scuttling horror only to see it reduced to scrap by an enormous, scaled fist.

"Are you all right?" the deep voice of her rescuer asked.

“Need help...friends...in danger,” Rarity panted and shook with adrenaline. “Archives...stairs...behind bookcase.”

“Take refuge. I will return with your friends.” He barreled down the corridor, leaving Rarity to regain her composure amidst the oily splotches.

Rainbow Dash lay on the floor of the cell. Fluttershy did her best to bandage up the rainbow pegasus with what supplies she had, but the fact that Rainbow hadn't moved since the spiders threw her back brought worry to all of the ponies' faces.

“Applejack?” Rainbow Dash asked groggily, her eyes barely focusing on the orange pony.

“Ah'm right here, Rainbow,” Applejack said as she knelt down next to the pegasus. “How're you feelin'?”

“I feel like Uncle Charlie bit my leg, except all over.” She lifted herself onto her hooves, albeit with some help from Applejack and Pinkie Pie, and her wobbly legs managed to hold her weight. “Did it work? Is everypony safe?”

All the other ponies looked around nervously, anxious to avoid her gaze. Rainbow Dash examined her surroundings and saw the same stone floor, same gray walls, same burning bright lights, same patrolling sentries, same magical barrier, same everything. All wooziness left her body and a fire kindled behind her eyes.

“You mean I FAILED, again?! I can't believe it!”

Twilight tried to console her, “It's not that bad—“

“Not that bad?! You don't understand! I'm not allowed to slip up, not even once! I have to do everything right! I have to be the best! If I'm not, then I'm just a loser, a screw-up, a failure!”

“But Rainbow, you're not a failure. You're one of the most talented ponies I've ever met.”

"Yeah," Pinkie Pie chimed in, "You're brave and fast and good at a whole bunch of stuff."

"You still don't get it!" Rainbow Dash yelled. "I had my chance, and I blew it!" She stamped her hoof and winced as pain shot up her arm. Noticing the bandage around her leg, she continued in a subdued tone, "I couldn't save you from the dragon, and I couldn't save you from this. I let you down, and I'm sorry."

"You didn't let us down, sugarcube," Applejack said as she put a reassuring hoof over Rainbow Dash's shoulders. "You did your best, and we're proud of you. We'll find a way out of this mess, don't you worry. 'Sides we still got Rarity out there. She's sure to come lookin' for us."

"No, we don't. I saw those spiders go after her. There's no way she could outrun those things."

"Well then, uh...what about that dragon. I'd bet you apples to hayseed he'd come lookin' for Rarity."

"I guess, but he wouldn't care about us?"

"Darn it all, Rainbow. Ah'm tryin' mah darnedest to cheer you up. What's it gonna take to—Pinkie Pie, what are you doin'?" Applejack looked at the pink pony who had her ear pressed to the ground as the rest of her body bounced up and down.

"It's my Pinkie Sense," Pinkie Pie responded, "Something scary is about to happen and it has something to do with this beat coming from the floor."

The ponies put their ears against the floor and felt that it really was giving off a faint vibration. It was very subtle but carried a distinct rhythm that was getting more and more powerful. A klaxon sounded from nearby, causing the ponies to jump at the sudden noise. About half of the sentry spiders hurried out the door to respond to this new occurrence.

Screaming echoed in the cell as the lights that had been illuminating the room were suddenly extinguished. After a few seconds of darkness,

sparse red orbs appeared along the ceiling and dimly lit the room's features. The ponies huddled together as the beat that had been growing ever louder turned into a pounding that was denting the heavy, metal door.

The sound of tearing metal filled the cell. Enormous claws and teeth were rending the door leading out of the prison. A moment later and the serpentine head of their dragon host filled the space outside of the ponies' cell. Thrashing from side to side, he cleared a path to the barrier separating them. With a mighty heave, he thrust his head through the magical field to reach the inside of the cell.

"Hurry! Enter my mouth!" the dragon boomed and opened his mouth to ferry the ponies to safety.

All of the ponies jumped toward the safety of that gaping maw, except for Fluttershy, who had shrunk into a corner and was trembling with fear. No amount of pleading would move her from that spot.

"Now!" the dragon commanded again. He groaned loudly as a bolt of lightning flashed from a cluster of spiders and arced across his body.

"We don't have time for this," Twilight said as she leaped over the teeth and ran toward the cowering pegasus. Fluttershy shot up several feet into the air as Twilight used her horn in a more mundane fashion. Catching the flailing pony with her magic, Twilight flung her into the dragon's mouth and hurried to join her. With all ponies accounted for, the dragon closed his mouth and began to slither his way back through the corridors.

The moist ride back was a particularly unique experience that left the group wishing for it to remain unique. The shuffling and jostling inside of the dark mouth threw the ponies against tongue and teeth as the dragon squirmed through impossibly small openings.

When they finally got to stand on solid ground, Rarity's strange look of elation and revulsion only drew laughter as she insisted on hugging each and every one of them, and when news came that the dragon had prepared a hot bath for them, their joy overflowed.

"Thank you for saving us," Twilight said as she turned toward the burned and bloodied dragon. "We truly appreciate all you've done for us."

"No guest of mine shall come to harm while I still draw breath," the dragon said dutifully and then chuckled, "Old dragon custom. Rare are those who still follow our code. Now go and wash before the water cools."

Carrying the whimpering Fluttershy, who had returned to the safety of her ball, the friends washed the slime out of their manes and left the exciting day behind them. When they returned, they found the dragon reclining on the huge couch, his hand glowing as he passed it over his wounds.

Looking up from his work, the dragon fixed his gaze on Luna and actually smiled, "Forgive me, it has been some time since I have seen you wearing this form. Nevertheless, it is good to see you again, Nightmare Moon."

Luna eyes widened at the sound of that detestable name. "Don't call me that!" she commanded, wings flaring in anger. "I'm not Nightmare Moon. I'm not her. I'm not, not anymore."

"My sincerest apologies. That was the name by which I knew you many years ago. By what name would you have me address you now?"

"Luna, just call me Luna. Now, please help me remember, who are you?"

The room filled with the dragon's laughter. "Surely you recall your favorite dragon and the time we spent together." He smiled as he awaited a reply.

Furrowing her brow, Luna tried with all her might to summon any memory about the dragon. She shook her head in defeat and looked back into the eyes that were filled with expectation and hope. Cuts and burns may have covered his body, but they were nothing compared to the alicorn's silence.

"You *have* forgotten me," the dragon said solemnly. With a crestfallen silence, he pulled himself onto his feet and headed toward the ruin's inner halls.

"Please wait, Salazar? Moonscale? Richard?" Luna blurted out names, hoping that one would stick. Trying to stop his course, she tried a few more, but the dragon refused to acknowledge the effort. Luna gritted her teeth, and summoning a bolt of lightning, punctuated the air with thunder. "I said WAIT!"

The dragon turned around to face the Moon Princess in all her terrible glory. She breathed heavily as energy sparked along her body and into the ether. Her midnight shroud flowed around her, its myriad stars twinkling as the depths of the night sky responded to her call. Flying level with the dragon's head, she began her tirade when a loud slam and a bright light startled her, and she fell, quite ignobly, to the floor.

"Athanox!" A voice cried. The ponies turned to see Princess Celestia standing in the open doorway. Moving with an inequestrian speed, Celestia interposed herself between the dragon and the prone alicorn.

"You shall not harm my sister!" Celestia said, her eyes trained on the huge form before her.

"I have no intention of harming my mate. You are another matter," the recently named dragon snarled.

"Mate?" Luna echoed, feeling the eyes of everypony on her. "You mean that I...did we..." A furious blush rose to the alicorn's features.

"Planned how we would rule pony and dragon lands together? Yes, many times. Now, excuse me, there is something I must do."

The mighty dragon reared back and filled his lungs with as much air as the room could muster. Focusing her magic, the Sun Princess crafted a magical shield to deflect the imminent flames. The dragon leaned his monstrous form forward, ready to incinerate the white alicorn, only to choke down his fire when he saw that Luna stepped in front of Celestia and planted her hooves between them.

"What are you doing?" the dragon coughed, the withheld fire smoking out of his nose and mouth. "I must rid you of your sister if our arrangement is to be complete."

“I don’t care what kind of deal you had with me when I was Nightmare Moon. I’m not her anymore,” Luna said, determination lining her face. “I love my sister and don’t want to see her hurt. Can’t you just let her be?”

The dragon heaved a heavy sigh, flushing the rest of the smoke out of his mouth, “It is difficult to break an oath sealed with magic. Though time has weakened the bands, I am unable to break them alone. For you, and only you, will I make the attempt, but I need your help to do so.” Luna nodded and followed the dragon who led her out of the ponies’ sight.

With the tension in the room defused, Celestia visibly relaxed and addressed the ponies, “While I’m glad that all of you are safe, I would prefer if word not spread about what transpired here. Luna’s reputation has been recovering ever since her return, and truth or not, she doesn’t need a scandal about a lizard lover. Is this understood?” The ponies nodded, and she continued, “Luna told me what brought her here. I knew she could handle any negotiation, but when she didn’t raise the moon, I feared the worst.” She walked up to Rainbow Dash and touched her horn to the bandages which fell off to reveal an uninjured pegasus. “My little ponies,” she said, lying next to Fluttershy and draping her wing over the traumatized pegasus, “Would you like to tell me what happened?”