

Storms on the Horizon

By Eeveexpert

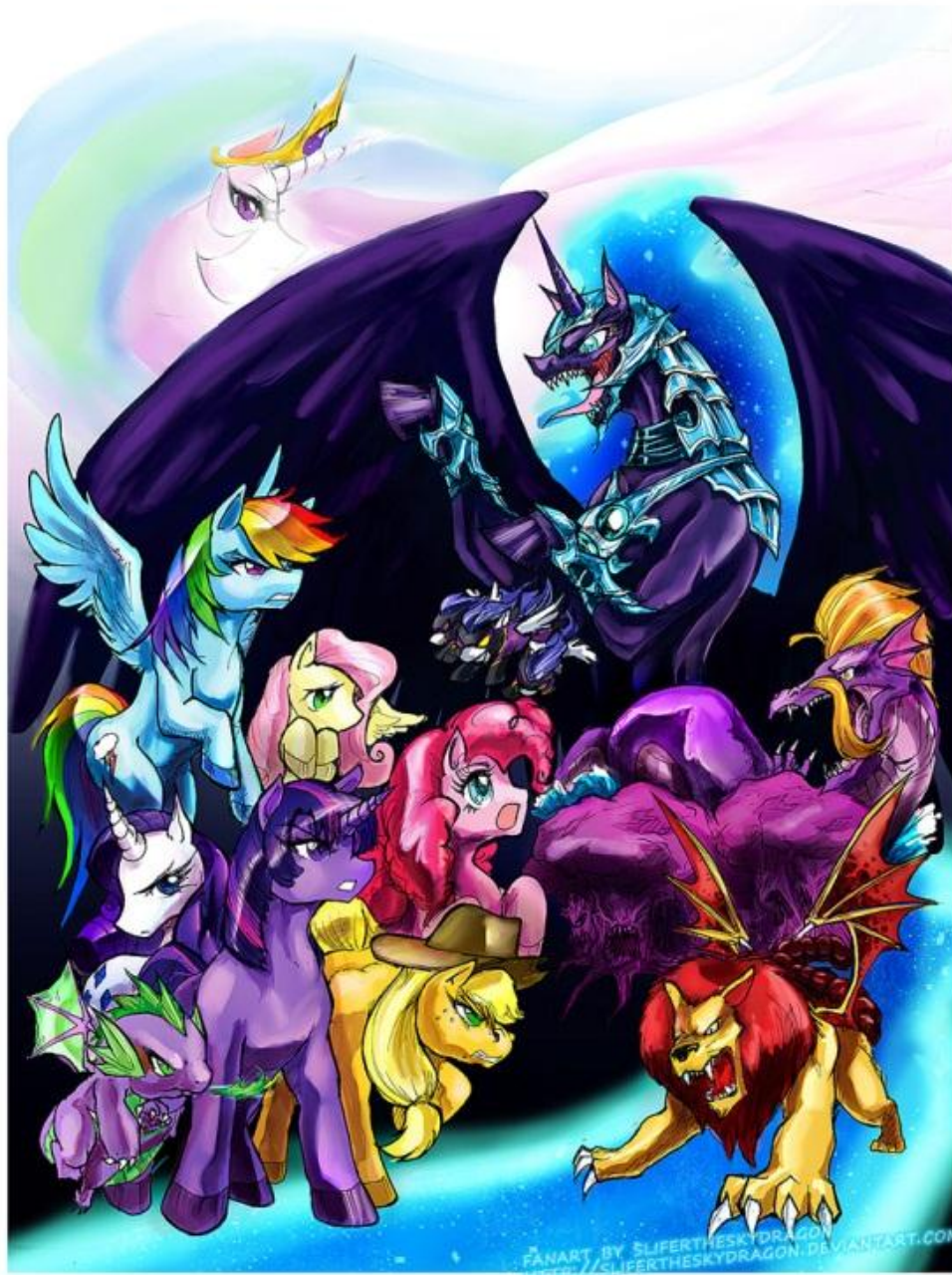


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Chapter 1

The Hunt Begins

Just a...little further...

Somewhere in the middle of the Everfree Forest, a brown pegasus messenger stumbled through the trees, engaged in a losing battle with the limits of his own body. He had been walking for what seemed like days. His hooves were sore and cracked, his wings hung uselessly at his side, their strength long since burned out. His vision swam with fatigue; a single tree before him danced and waved so erratically, it appeared to be three trees in one. An unearthed root directly in his path easily went unnoticed. Until his hoof caught it, that is.

I can't quit... he thought, spitting out a clot of decaying leaves and mud. *Celestia must receive this message... It needs...to get to...Canterlot...* Pulling another chunk of energy out of some deeply hidden reserve, the pegasus forced himself back to his hooves and resumed his aimless staggering.

At long last, he finally broke free of the seemingly endless trees, and suddenly, there it was. Like the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, there it was. The royal city of Canterlot, perched high upon the mountainside. Relief flooded the tired pegasi's body at the sight. At that instant, his legs buckled underneath him and he found himself with the unpleasant taste of mud in his mouth once more. *I...did it... I'm here...* Before finally passing out, the winged pony remembered seeing a pair of twinkling points of light descending towards him, shining brightly even in the midday sun.

Somewhere deep inside the Canterlot Palace, a white pegasus stallion sat in a simplistic room, all manner of books, scrolls, and various other manuscripts strewn about on the table before him. The decorated golden armor he wore gleamed softly in the candlelight. Several quick knocks on the door broke his attention away from his studies.

"General Headwind, sir!"

The pegasus general stood up from his table and slowly walked to the door. On the other side of it stood another white pegasus, clad in very similar golden armor who quickly threw up a respectful salute at his superior's presence.

"At ease, Jet Stream." Headwind said, dismissively flicking his wing.
"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"During one of our routine daily patrols of the city's outer limits, Cirrus and I discovered an unconscious pegasus messenger on the very edge of the Everfree Forest."

"Where is Cirrus now?"

"I requested he stay with the messenger so that the dispatched medical team could locate them easier."

The general nodded. "Very good. This pegasus, you mentioned he was a messenger. Was he carrying anything of significant importance?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, he was." The lieutenant produced a sealed scroll from a compartment in his armor located under his wing, which he passed to the other pegasus. "It is addressed directly to Princess Celestia." he added. "I know that you report directly to the Royal Sisters, sir, so I thought it fitting that I come to you first."

"Excellent work, Lieutenant." General Headwind tucked the scroll under his wing and gave a salute, to which the other pegasus responded with one of his own. "I want you to find that medical team and direct them to the messenger. Understood?"

"Yes sir, General, sir!"

"Very good. Dismissed!"

As the lieutenant galloped down the hallway, the general turned and started in the opposite direction, deeper into the palace. A lengthy trek up

several flights of stairs and down several more hallways placed him in front of a brightly decorated wooden door emblazoned with an ornate depiction of the sun. Raising a hoof, the white pegasus rapped smartly on the door.

A female voice floated out from behind the closed door. "May I ask who it is?"

"General Headwind, of the Royal Air Guard of Canterlot, requesting permission to enter Her Majesty's chambers." he replied in a very militaristic manner.

"Permission granted. You may enter."

As if by magic, the elaborate door swung inward. Standing against the far wall, gazing out the window, was a tall white alicorn. There was no wind whatsoever in the room, yet her multi-colored mane and tail danced and shimmered as though tousled by a gentle breeze. The same image of the sun that was on the door was also visible upon her flank. The shining gold tiara, amulet, and boots that she wore completed her regal appearance. The general bowed his head in respect. "Forgive the intrusion, your Highness, but something has come up. Something that I believe warrants your immediate attention."

"What is it, General?" Celestia asked, keeping her gaze pointed out the window.

"A scroll, addressed specifically for you. It was found in the possession of a pegasus messenger that was found unconscious on the edge of the city. A medical team has been dispatched to locate him and transport him back to the palace infirmary for proper care. I have the scroll for you here, should it please you to look at it."

At the mention of the message, the princess turned to face the significantly smaller pegasus. A magical blue glow surrounded her horn, and subsequently, the sealed scroll under the general's wing. Guided by her magic, the parchment rose to Celestia's eye level and unfurled itself. Her intelligent violet eyes silently traced over the words scribed upon the paper. As she read on, her brow furrowed and her tail began flicking in frustration.

"Beg pardon, your Majesty, but what seems to be the matter? It looks as though it's quite serious."

The mare let out a lengthy sigh. "Here, you take a look at it. You tell me." The scroll floated down to the general's eye level.

The pegasi's eyes were dark and clouded with worry by the time he had finished reading the message. "This sounds all too familiar, your Majesty. First it was Delamare, then it was Fillydelphia, followed soon after by similar reports from Manehattan. Finally, Appleloosa. This is the fourth case of such an occurrence in the-

"Past month, I know." Celestia finished. "They're getting closer to Canterlot. Ponyville, too." The image of a young lavender unicorn, surrounded by all five of her closest friends flashed through the princess' mind. "It is as if these 'storms' are searching for something. Whatever that something is, I feel that they are getting closer to it."

"What course of action do you suggest we take, Princess?" Headwind inquired.

Celestia turned to face the window again, gazing out it, in the direction of Ponyville. Lost in thought, she remained silent, even after the general repeated his question. Finally, the white pegasus was forced to ask for the third time. "Princess?"

"Have several of your guards pull a chariot to Ponyville and find my student, Twilight Sparkle. Escort her back to Canterlot. I wish to have an audience with her directly. I shall send her a message announcing your arrival and explaining the circumstances that are upon us."

"Very well, your Majesty. There is still the matter of her friends, however. Do you wish to have them escorted back as well?"

"If they choose to accompany you during the time of your visit, then yes. I have not observed any of these 'storms' in this region of Equestria. As of right now, I do not believe that anypony is in immediate danger. Even so, our actions must be swift and without hesitation. I want your stallions en route to Ponyville within the hour. Is that clear?"

"Crystal, your Highness. They will be in the air immediately. You have my word." Headwind saluted and made a prompt about-face to exit the chamber.

"Oh, and before you leave, General, I've one more request of you."

"Anything."

"After your guards have been dispatched, find my sister and notify her of today's events." Princess Celestia instructed, glancing back over her shoulder. "Also let her know that I wish her to be present for the meeting with Twilight. She should be in the palace library, busy with her studies. I've a feeling that this involves her too."

"At once, your Highness." The general saluted once more and took his leave.

The same magical glow pushed the door shut behind the general. The alicorn took a deep breath and slowly stepped away from the window, cantering over to a large personal bookshelf that dominated the entire wall. A few minutes of searching, and a voluminous, thickly bound volume floated magically off the bookcase. Standing out against the book's black leather cover, flowing gold lettering spelled out its title. *A Brief History of Harmony and Discord, by Stephen Colting*. "This should tell me if my suspicions are correct or not..."

"There we go. All done."

In a humble, tree-like cottage on the edge of the small town of Ponyville, another pegasus was attending to her own very important matters. In the main room of this literal tree-house, a pastel-yellow pony with a flowing pink mane stood at a small table with her patient. Her standard tools of the trade were spread out on the table within hoof's reach.

"How does that feel?" the winged mare asked her patient.

Her "patient" was actually a young robin who had been unlucky enough to fall from his nest and dislocate one of his wings. Fluttershy, who had

been going about her daily chore of feeding all the animals she attended to, immediately noticed his plight and whisked him inside, promising "I'll have you feeling better in no time, you poor little thing..." The pegasus had been true to her word, and the little bird felt great. He trilled happily and hopped about on the table.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're feeling better." she said, smiling from ear to ear. "Come with me, and I'll put you back safe and sound in your nest, okay?" Fluttershy brought a hoof up to table level, so the robin could hop on. With her precious cargo in tow, the pegasus spread her wings and began flapping. Taking great care to fly slowly and steadily, the pony carried the young bird back up to his nest in the tree next to her own. "Now, I don't want you to use that wing for a whole day, mister." Though the mare's words were stern, her tone was far from it. "I'll be back tomorrow to see how it's doing, okay?"

After receiving an affirmative nod, Fluttershy dropped back down to the ground to pick up her task where she had left off. Humming a familiar melody, she trotted back into her home, headed for the kitchen to prepare a meal for the last animal on her list, her special friend, Angel Bunny. She pulled open the door to her refrigerator, and dropped her humming. "Oh my... Out of carrots..." she murmured. As she thought of where she could acquire more carrots on such short notice, her first idea was a pony that shared the name of the orange vegetable. That idea was quickly dismissed, however. "No...that won't do; Carrot Top's shop won't be open until tomorrow..." A little more thought provided a reasonable alternative. "Applejack should be able to spare some carrots to tide me over until tomorrow."

Her mind made up, Fluttershy picked up her saddlebags and slipped them on. "Angel Bunny?" she called, stepping back into the main room. "I-I'm sorry, but I've run out of carrots for your dinner. I'll be back in about an hour, all right?" The mare stepped outside and spread her wings once more. Before she started for Sweet Apple Acres, the pegasus set her flight path toward the home of another of her friends, a one Carousel Boutique.

As she flew, Fluttershy recalled the reason she was stopping at the boutique. The day before, the pegasus had received a knock on her door. Upon opening the door, she had been greeted by a white unicorn proudly sporting a very well-kept violet mane. "Hello there, Rarity. Is there

something I can do for you?"

"Actually, darling, there is." the white pony answered. "I'm dreadfully sorry to drop in on you on such short notice, but I need a favor of you."

"Anything."

"I have found myself needing to accompany Twilight and Spike to Canterlot on business-related matters. You see, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie shall be joining us as well and I need somepony to look in on Opalescence for me. Not that anypony else has your talent with animals, my dear."

It goes without saying that the animal-loving pegasus had agreed to the request. As it turned out, reminiscing was a great tool for killing time; the tall, spired building known as Carousel Boutique had already appeared below the airborne pony. She barely made a sound as she landed upon the doorstep. "Now then, what did I do with that spare key that Rarity gave me?" Fluttershy muttered, rummaging through her saddlebags. "Oh, wait... Here it is." Slipping the key into the lock, the mare gave it a quick turn and pushed the door open.

The inside of Carousel Boutique looked every inch that one would expect a dressmaker's shop to look. The shelves were full of a veritable rainbow of supplies. The shelf space that wasn't occupied by fabric or string was taken up with other related items, such as tacks and safety pins. Tacked to the walls were a multitude of dress designs, some finished, some not. "Oh my... It certainly looks like Rarity has been busy lately..." the winged mare commented to herself, glancing at a sewing machine messily surrounded by the usual dressmaker's tools. "Goodness, I hope she hasn't forgotten to feed Opal... Speaking of Opal, I wonder where she could be... Opal? Opalescence, sweetie, where are you?" Fluttershy called softly, wandering up the stairs in search of the feline.

"Mrrowwww..." A sleepy sounding meow slipped under the door in front of Fluttershy.

"I heard you, sweetie..." the pink-maned pony answered, opening the door to Rarity's room. "Where are you?" A second meow above her caused the mare to look up. Perched on the top of a tall shelf, the white cat looked

around sleepily. "There you are, Opal... Come down here, silly." At Fluttershy's beckoning, the feline quickly hopped down to the floor. She greeted the yellow pony with another meow and began rubbing against her forelegs. "That a girl..." The mare returned the feline's affectionate nuzzle. "Who's hungry?"

One bowl of cat food (and one very happy Opalescence) later, Fluttershy departed Carousel Boutique, making sure to lock the door behind her. Sweet Apple Acres was only a short flight away, so the pegasus took to the air once more. After another few minutes of flight, the mare could see the wooden sign for Sweet Apple Acres coming up fast. At first glance, Fluttershy only spotted two figures upon the farm grounds, one of which came running towards her as she landed, barking and wagging its tail; obviously not Applejack, but Fluttershy was happy to see her nonetheless. "Hi, Winona!" The collie energetically bounded after the winged pony as she trotted up to the other figure she had seen from the air. "Uhm... Excuse me? B-Big Macintosh?" There was a distinct change in the level of confidence in the pegasi's voice when she went from talking with animals to talking with other ponies.

"Well, howdy...er...Flutt'rshy, is it?" The big red earth pony took a break from his field plowing and glanced at the timid yellow mare. "Can Ah help ya with sumthin'?"

"Oh...um...yes. I-if it isn't too much of a problem..." Fluttershy mumbled, uncomfortably rubbing her foreleg. "Do...do you know where Applejack is? I have to ask her something..."

The stallion nodded. "Sure do. AJ's out in the orchard, bringin' in the' last of t'day's apple harvest. Do y'all want me t'take ya out there?"

"Oh no... That's...fine, thank you." she politely insisted, turning to head for the orchard. An instant later, she paused and looked back at Big Macintosh. "Uhm...actually, would you mind showing me? I-if you're not too busy...I mean..."

"Sure thing. Ah was just about finished with mah plowin' fer the day. Ah'd be happy ta walk ya out there."

"Th-thanks..."

The mare was unusually quiet, even by her standards, as the big red pony led her into the hundreds of apple trees that were the Apple family's orchard. Big Macintosh was the first to break the awkward silence. "Winona seems ta have taken a real shine t'ya." he commented.

"Huh? Oh, she follows me like this whenever I visit."

"Y've got a real way with animals, if ya don't mind mah sayin' so."

"Th-thank you..." Fluttershy murmured, blushing at the compliment.

"Eeyup."

Any further conversation between the two ponies was interrupted by a frustrated shout bearing the same country twang as Big Macintosh. "Owch! Dangnabbit, apple! Ah'm supposed ta be doin' the buckin', not the other way around!"

"That would be AJ..." Big Macintosh chuckled.

"Big Mac? Is that you? Ya finished with that field plowin' already?"

"Eeyup. Y'all have got a visitor here ta see ya, AJ."

The orange earth pony bent down to retrieve the offending apple, placing it in the baskets balanced across her back. "Well, who is it?" The blonde-maned pony answered her own question as she turned around.

"Fluttershy!" she exclaimed. "What are y'all doin' here, sugarcube? What's the occasion?"

"I-I've got a favor to ask of you, if that's all right..."

"Well, of course that's alright. Y'all got here at the perfect time. Ah was just about ta call it a day, anyhow. Ya wanna walk these apples back ta the barn with me?" The farmer pony shrugged to settle the baskets on her back a little more comfortably.

"Okay..."

"Alrighty. Let's get movin' then. Ah kin see a storm brewin' over yonder. Looks like it might be a real big'n, too."

"What?" Glancing out over the vast ocean of apple trees, Fluttershy could indeed see the dark, roiling clouds typical of a thunderhead growing on the horizon, most likely stemming from the Everfree Forest. "I didn't see any storms building after I left Rarity's..."

"Not surprisin'." the earth pony answered. "Ah've only just been watchin' this one fer the last few minutes. A li'l extra water's always good fer the apples, anyway."

"But from the Everfree Forest?"

"C'mon, sugarcube. Water's water. Don't make no difference where it comes from."

Disregarding the friendly banter between the two ponies, the trek back to the barn was largely uneventful, although the approaching storm did get a good deal closer.

"There we go. That's a right purty harvest fer a day's work." Applejack remarked, admiring the several dozen baskets of apples lined up in the barn, ready for sorting. "So, Fluttershy, what was that favor ya wanted ta ask of me?"

"Oh...that... Well, I was making Angel Bunny's dinner, and...I saw I was out of carrots... I was wondering...uhm...if it's all right, that is..."

"Y'all need a bushel or two of carrots, right?" the orange pony guessed.

"Yes. Just enough to last me until tomorrow. If you could spare them..."

"Of course. Ah'd be more'n happy ta loan ya some carrots. Not a problem." The hat-wearing pony cantered over to a large slotted crate filled to the brim with the orange vegetables. Out of this, she pulled half a dozen very healthy carrots, which she dropped into the pegasi's saddlebags. "There ya are, hun. The best of t'day's crop."

"How much do I owe you for these carrots, Applejack?"

The orange pony winked. "Consider 'em on the house."

"R-really? Are you sure?" Fluttershy asked. "I wouldn't want to impose..."

"Yer one of mah best friends, Fluttershy, y'all couldn't impose on me if ya tried. Shucks, Ah'd give ya the saddle offa mah back if Ah thought ya needed it. Take 'em. Ah ain't gonna take 'no' fer an answer."

The pegasus smiled. "Thank you, Applejack."

The mare's "thank you" was overshadowed by a massive peal of thunder that shook the very air inside the barn. Only in the following silence did the two ponies notice the sheets of rain drumming their rhythmic patterns on the roof of the barn. "Well, Ah'll be... That there storm got here right quick." The orange pony glanced out the open barn doors and grimaced. "Ah certainly hope ya didn't have anywhere ta go, Fluttershy... It's rainin' cats an' dogs out here..."

"Oh no... Oh no, oh no, oh no..." she fretted, joining Applejack at the door. "I-I'm sorry to run out on you like this, Applejack, but I need to get home..."

The farmer pony placed herself in the winged mare's flight path. "Whoa, reign it in there, sugarcube. Y'all can't go out flyin' in a downpour like this; ain't safe."

"Oh no, Applejack... You don't understand... I absolutely *must* get home; Angel Bunny is probably terrified right now... I-"

The stubborn pony refused to budge. "Nothin' doin'. Ah know ya wanna get home an' check up on all yer li'l animal friends, but it ain't gonna do *them* a lick o' good if y'all get yerself hurt on the way home. Do me a favor an' stay the night. Y'all can head out first thing in the mornin', deal?"

As much as Fluttershy still wanted to hurry home, Applejack's reasoning made too much sense. "All right... You win; I'll stay..."

"Thanks, hun. Ah couldn't forgive mahself if Ah let ya get hurt in this storm. C'mon, let's make a break fer the house." she suggested, motioning

toward the back door of the farmhouse. "Once we get inside, Ah'll help ya get set up fer the night."

Fluttershy nodded and sprinted after her friend, out into the deluge. Her mane and tail were soaked clean through by the time the pair reached the door. Applejack was in much the same state. The orange pony pushed the door open and ushered the pegasus inside.

"Shoot!" The orange equine stomped a hoof upon the doorstep in frustration. "Ah'm powerful sorry, Fluttershy, Ah forgot that the girls are out in the clubhouse. Ah've gotta go an' fetch 'em... Y'all make yerself at home, sugarcube. Ah'll be back in a flash." Without waiting for a response, Applejack turned and galloped off, quickly disappearing in the driving rain.

The pegasus watched as the other pony dashed off. "O-okay... Be careful, Applejack..."

Fluttershy didn't think it was possible, but, in the time that Applejack was gone, the storm seemed to get even worse. The thunder and lightning had started coming in waves, with shrinking periods of silence between each wave. The rain had forgone coming down in individual sheets and now just battered the farmhouse continuously. The pegasus sat at the window, staring out into the merciless downpour, dutifully searching for any signs of Applejack and the self-named Cutie Mark Crusaders through the growing darkness.

"Ya doin' all right there, Flutt'rshy?" Big Macintosh asked from the kitchen.

"H-huh? Oh yes, I'm fine. Just a little concerned, is all..." she added softly, turning her blue-green eyes back out the window.

"Ah wouldn't be too worried 'bout AJ if Ah was you." The big red pony joined the mare at the window. "She's a right stubborn pony; she'll see that the li'l ones get back safely. They'll be just fine."

"If you say so..." The winged pony glanced down at Winona's smiling face. At least, Fluttershy thought she was smiling; it was sort of hard to tell. The canine hadn't yet left her side since she'd arrived. She gave the loyal collie a light pat on the head and returned the smile.

As it happened, Fluttershy didn't have to wait very long before Applejack and the fillies returned to the farmhouse. Truthfully, Fluttershy probably would have been happier had they not returned so suddenly. The farmhouse door flew open with such force that its hinges creaked. As the door flew open, a bolt of lightning lit up the doorframe, giving the three silhouettes standing within quite the frightening appearance. The pegasus uttered a frightened "*Eep!*" and dove behind the nearest thing available, Big Macintosh.

The red earth pony chuckled softly. "Hey there, Apple Bloom. Ah see AJ got ya back safely."

"Yup! She sure did!"

Her fear forgotten at hearing Apple Bloom's voice, Fluttershy stepped out from behind Big Macintosh. "Girls! You scared me..."

The "girls" to which the winged pony was referring to joined their yellow filly friend in a cry of "Fluttershy! It's so good to see you!"

The pink-maned pegasus soon found herself knocked to the floor under the force of the Cutie Mark Crusaders' excited tackle.

"Applejack said you'd be here! Good to see you!" the orange pegasus filly squealed.

"Uhm...girls...?" Fluttershy found it difficult to get a word in edge-wise against the fillies' constant stream of questions.

"What are y'all doin' here, Fluttershy?"

"Oh...uhm... Hi, Apple Bloom... Ow..."

"Are you staying the night?" Sweetie Belle chimed in.

"Y-yes... Girls, please, let me up..."

With Fluttershy's quiet requests going unheard, it fell to Applejack to help out. "C'mon, you scamps, get offa her. Let the poor pony stand' up." That

did the trick; the three fillies finally extricated themselves from the tangled mess of tails and manes and let their quarry stagger back to her hooves. "Sorry 'bout that, Fluttershy. Ah shoulda given ya some warnin'. Ah mentioned y'all were stayin' over, an' before Ah knew it, these three were off an' runnin'."

Fluttershy smiled. "Oh, that's quite all right. I'm always happy to see the girls."

"So, what're we gonna do first, Fluttershy? Huh? Huh?" the white unicorn filly asked excitedly.

"Oh... Whatever you want, I guess. But I have to set my things up first." Pausing, the mare looked toward the hat-wearing farmer pony. "Where is your guest room, Applejack?"

"Hold on a tick. Y'all ain't staying in no guest room. Y'all can stay in mah room tonight."

"O-oh no... I-I couldn't..." Fluttershy murmured, taking a small step backward and averting her eyes. "I-I'm just going to be here for the night, anyway..."

"Nonsense. Ya weren't expectin' ta have ta stay over tonight; take mah room. Granny Smith is outta town visitin' Auntie Orange, anyhow. Ah'll stay in her room."

"But I-"

"Ah insist. Ah'm a big pony, Ah kin handle bein' outta mah own bed fer a night. C'mon, lemme show ya where you'll be stayin'."

Despite the apparently limitless energy of the Cutie Mark Crusaders, they were still only fillies, and that energy quickly burned itself out, leaving the little ponies fast asleep upon the couch. "Whew... It's about time those three fell asleep. Cutie mark this, special talent that. Lan' sakes, Ah thought they'd never settle down." Applejack whispered. "That was a right purty lullaby, Fluttershy; knocked 'em right out."

"Lots of practice." she answered simply, pulling a blanket over the sleeping fillies.

"You'll have ta teach it ta me, so's I can get those little ones ta sleep whenever they're stayin' over." The orange pony yawned widely as the late hour of the night began to take its toll on her.

Yawns were, of course, highly contagious, and Fluttershy soon followed suit. "Perhaps some other time, Applejack. I-If that's all right with you, I mean. I'm exhausted from trying to keep up with the girls..." The pegasi's voice showed just how tired she really was.

"Shoot. Ah didn't mean right now, Fluttershy." she chuckled, starting up the staircase. The hat-wearing pony paused at the top to wait for her guest. "Mah room's the first one on the right. If ya need more blankets or a drink of water durin' the night, the linen closet and bathroom are just down the hall. Y'all gonna be okay tonight?"

"Oh, yes. I'll be fine. Thanks again for letting me stay the night, Applejack."

"Don't mention it, hun'. If y'all need anythin' else just gimme a holler." The earth pony turned and headed in the opposite direction, yawning as she did so.

The pegasus stepped into the bedroom and pushed the door shut behind her. A few moments later, she was wrapped up snugly in the covers as the storm continued to rage unabated outside the small farmhouse.

Fluttershy was up long before the sun, startled awake by a particularly loud peal of thunder. The storm was still in full swing, so she assumed that she hadn't been asleep very long. A quick glance at the clock on the nightstand confirmed her assumption. She'd only been asleep for two hours. *Ugh...* Ignoring the glowing display of the clock, the winged pony rolled over and tried to find sleep again. Since she was now conscious, her body finally got a chance to tell her that she was thirsty. Ignoring her dry mouth was significantly harder than ignoring the clock, and she resignedly slid out of bed and clopped out into the hallway.

Thirst quenched, the pony was just about to round the corner back into Applejack's room when a loud crash stopped her in her tracks and made her heart jump into her throat. "That...that sounded like glass breaking..." she mouthed worriedly. Before she could take any further action, another noise reached her ears; *voices...*

"There's nopony in here... This is an empty room."

"Gee, I hadn't noticed, idiot... Thank you for stating the obvious..."

Fluttershy pressed herself against the wall, a hoof over her mouth to keep herself from screaming. *Oh my...! Burglars!* Swallowing nervously, she peered around the corner. The glow from the clock didn't provide nearly enough light to make out the intruders, but the terrified pony didn't have to wait long to get a glimpse. Another bolt of lightning lit up the small bedroom with a white, ethereal glow. That split-second flash of light seemed to stretch out into an eternity. During that eternity, Fluttershy got a very good look at the pair of thieves. Two female pegasi were against the far wall busily digging through Applejack's closet, tossing the earth pony's possessions helter-skelter.

The smaller of the two ponies stood up from rummaging through Applejack's things and sighed. "This is just like the last five places we've been to." she said to her counterpart. "The room is empty, and we haven't found a thing. Are we even looking in the right places?"

"Where else is there left to look?" the other pony sniffed. "The next closest city is...*Canterlot...* That's it! If we go now, we can be there by sunrise. Let's move."

After the hushed order, the two winged burglars made their escape out of the broken window, leaving the room in disarray with a very confused pegasus standing in the midst of the dishevelment.

Chapter 2

As the Phoenix Flies

Although the burglars had come and gone in quite the hurry without taking anything, there was *no* way that Fluttershy was going back to bed. In fact, for almost ten minutes, the pegasus sat in the middle of the room, nervously staring at the broken window pane, afraid the intruders might return at any moment. "G-get a hold of yourself, Fluttershy..." she murmured shakily. "No pony was hurt, and th-they didn't take anything..." After a good deal of further self-urging, she finally stood up and started moving about. Unconsciously, the yellow mare began tidying up her host's possessions. Respectfully, Fluttershy simply set the disorganized items right inside the closet door.

However, the pony's nerves were still on edge, and completing this task was not as easy as it seemed. Though the storm was finally moving away, each flash of lightning caused her to jump in fright. Every time she did so, she ended up scattering Applejack's things once more, and would resume gathering them up, her heart fluttering. Roughly an hour and a half later, everything was at last back in order. By now, Fluttershy was wide-awake and still too nervous to return to sleeping, so she ended up trotting downstairs.

Taking care not to wake the Cutie Mark Crusaders, who hadn't moved from their position upon the couch, the butterfly-marked pony slipped into the kitchen. Once in the kitchen, Fluttershy gravitated toward the refrigerator. "I certainly hope that Applejack won't mind if I make everypony some breakfast..." In a relatively short time, the sweet smell of freshly baking pancakes was wreathing its way throughout the small farmhouse. The pegasus had prepared food for many mouths for quite a few years and was a very efficient cook because of it. As the minutes passed, the plate of pancakes next to the stove steadily grew, finally reaching a grand total of seventeen. Just as the pegasus was lifting what would be the eighteenth out of the frying pan, another pony joined her in the kitchen.

"Geez, Fluttershy, yer up real early. What's the occasion?"

"Aah!" Startled by the new voice, the pink-maned pony jumped, tossing the final pancake high into the air. "Oops...!" Acting quickly, she grabbed the serving plate and spun around, catching the wayward food just before it hit the floor.

"Nice catch..." Applejack remarked. "How come yer up so early? Usually Ah'm the first one up an' about. Have trouble sleepin'?" she asked, fetching a small bottle of apple juice from the fridge and taking up a seat at the kitchen table.

The pegasus placed a short stack of three pancakes upon the table in front of her friend. "Y-you could say that..." she mumbled.

"Ah'm sorry to hear that, sugarcube. Well, Ah hope ya didn't have it too rough. At any rate, it was real kind of ya to make breakfast fer everyone. Ah'm always the one doin' all the cookin'. Big Macintosh's an absolute mess in the kitchen."

Fluttershy was only half listening to the orange pony's musings as she ate her breakfast. Inside she was wrestling with exactly how to tell Applejack what had transpired last night. "Actually, Applejack... There's...something that I need to tell you..."

"If it's about the flapjacks, don't you worry none. It's not a problem at all-"

"It's...uh...not about that..."

"Then what's it about, hun'?"

"Uhm...how can I say this...?" As she went on, the mare's already quiet voice became even more so. Finally, she became silent outright and just stood there, uncomfortably rubbing her foreleg.

"C'mon, Fluttershy." the green-eyed pony urged. "Y'all can tell me. Ah can handle it."

"Somepony broke in last night!" the winged pony blurted out nervously.

If Applejack had been drinking her juice at the time, she would have done

a marvelous spit-take. She did, however, cough and splutter on her bite of pancake. "Yer kiddin'! Where!?"

"It w-was up in your room... At about two-thirty in the morning..." Before Fluttershy was even finished with her first sentence, the blonde earth pony had bolted from the kitchen and was halfway up the stairs. "Applejack, w-wait!" the pegasus called from the kitchen doorway. Too late; the earth pony had already ducked into her room. "There's broken glass on the floor...!" Bypassing the stairs, the timid pony flew up to the upper level and joined the other pony in the bedroom.

"Lan' sakes... Ya weren't kiddin' about the glass. It's everywhere..."

"I'm sorry...I didn't get it cleaned up... I meant to, it's just-"

"Now hold on one applebuckin' minute." Applejack marched up to her friend, lifted up her downturned face and looked her square in the eye. "Don't start talkin' like that. Ah wouldn't have expected ya to clean up *anythin'* in *mah* house. If anypony in this room's gonna be apologizin', it's me. Ah was the one that insisted ya stay in mah room. Ah'm just thankful that y'all didn't git hurt. Did ya happen to git a look at who it was?"

"Y-yes, I did..." Fluttershy replied. "It was a pair of pegasus mares. One of them was quite a bit shorter than the other. They came and went, without taking anything. They did say something about going to Canterlot, though..."

"Canterlot, huh? That's where the gang is..." the hat-wearing earth pony muttered. "Ahhh, who am Ah kiddin'? They're fine. It'd be dang near impossible fer anypony to git past all of the Princess' guards."

"Y-you think so?"

Applejack nodded in affirmation. "Ah'm sure of it. Ah wouldn't worry none. An' neither should you. Ah'll git this here glass taken care of. Y'all can head back downstairs an' have yerself something to eat. Ah'll be down shortly."

As Fluttershy came to the top of the stairs she ran into Big Macintosh, who was coming from the other end of the hallway. "G'mornin' Flutt'rshy. How'd ya sleep?"

Fluttershy answered the big red pony's question with a wide yawn. "Not so well..."

"Sorry to hear that." Habit steered the big earth pony into the kitchen, whereupon he caught scent of the fresh pancakes. "Shoot! Those smell downright tasty. Wonder who made 'em..."

"Uhm...I did... You can have some. I-if you want, that is..." Just like the day before, the pegasus was noticeably more nervous standing next to Big Macintosh.

The orange maned stallion trotted up to the large plate of pancakes sitting on the counter. "Don't mind if Ah do. Hey, while Ah'm over here, d'you want me to make you up a plate too?"

"Y-yes, please..."

The two ponies had just sat down at the table with their meals when Applejack cantered back into the kitchen carrying a dustpan filled with shards of glass. Big Macintosh looked up from a mouthful of pancakes. "What'cha got there, AJ?"

"Seems we had ourselves a li'l bit of a break-in last night." she sniffed.

"Really?" The big earth pony didn't do so much as bat an eyelid at the news. "What happened?"

"Fluttershy told me that a couple of pegasi broke into mah room real early this morning. They didn't take nothin', and, thank Celestia, no pony was hurt." The orange pony shot an apologetic look at the timid pegasus. "Ah'm real sorry about that, sugarcube..."

"I-it's fine..."

"Don't go brushin' this under the rug, Fluttershy." Applejack said very matter-of-factly. "Ah went an put y'all in harm's way. If anythin' had happened to ya, Ah couldn't ever forgive mahself. Ah'll figure out some way to repay ya, darlin'. Promise."

The rest of breakfast was quite dull and equally as silent. The only words spoken were between Applejack and her brother as they discussed the daily chores. Despite having made the breakfast for her hosts, Fluttershy was largely uninterested in her share of the cakes and spent her time at the table idly poking them with a fork. *Those pegasi... They said something about the five other places that they had been to. I wonder...*

The blazing orb of the sun continued its climb into the sky, guided, as always, by Celestia's will. A glance at the clock on the kitchen wall revealed that it was going on eight o' clock. With her hole-riddled, barely half-eaten stack of pancakes still upon her plate, Fluttershy stood up from the table. "I'm sorry to eat and run, but I do need to get home. Angel Bunny needs his food, and I have some patients I need to check on."

Applejack jumped up from the table after the yellow pegasus. "Speakin' of Angel, lemme dash out to the barn real quick and grab ya some more carrots before ya take off."

The pegasi's quiet voice stopped the earth pony at the kitchen door. "Thanks, but no thanks, Applejack." she politely refused. "I need far more carrots than I would be comfortable taking from you, whether I paid for them or not."

"Well...all right. That's fine. No harm done, sugarcube. But, if yer needin' *that* many carrots, at least lemme give ya a way to git 'em back ho-

Before Applejack could finish her offer, an audible bang, more akin to an explosion than to thunder, sounded outside. The three ponies in the kitchen quickly sprinted out behind the house and stared into the sky. Far off in the distance, a massive shockwave comprised of every color in the rainbow, and a few colors that weren't, was rapidly spreading out from a single point.

"That's yer rainbow-colored friend, isn't it, AJ?" Big Macintosh asked slowly.

Applejack gave a slight laugh. "What in Equestria is that silly filly up to now?"

"Oh my... I hope everything is all right..."

"C'mon, Fluttershy, this is Rainbow Dash we're talkin' about here; she's probly jus' showin' off for the Wonderbolts again. Now then, as Ah was sayin', lemme give ya a way to git those carrots back home."

Within the next half hour, Fluttershy was on her way, with her helper following close behind. The wooden cart creaking along after her helper was hardly what one would call small or streamlined, yet Big Macintosh showed no difficulty whatsoever in pulling it. "I-I'm sorry, B-Big Macintosh, I didn't think Applejack was going to have you follow me all the way into town..."

The big farmer pony shook his head and gave a low laugh. "Ain't a problem, Flutt'rshy. Any friend of AJ's is a friend of mine. 'Sides," Big Macintosh leaned in close, like he was about to tell the winged pony a secret. "B'tween you an' me, she's a bit of a slave driver. Ah'm glad to get away fer a bit." he chuckled.

"If you say so..." Fluttershy mumbled. "Uhm...I hate to ask this *now*, but...could we stop by Rarity's on the way into town? I want to check on Opal..."

"Sumthin' about last night?" the stallion asked.

"Y-yes... Those two that broke in last night...they mentioned something about having been to five other places... That got me thinking..."

"Ah get'cha. Y'all wanna make sure that this here Opal's doin' all right." The pegasus nodded, silently continuing to stare at the path in front of her. "Ah git where yer comin' from." Big Macintosh went on. "Winona's given us our fair share of scares. It's fine if we stop by. Ah don't mind."

"Oh, thank you. I'll be right back..." Fluttershy broke into a quick trot, heading for the front door of Carousel Boutique. A short rummage through her saddlebags provided the key once more. The pegasus opened the door in a hurry, dashed inside and quite literally flew up the stairs. "Opal? Opalescence? Sweetie, where are you?" The pony instinctively dashed into Rarity's bedroom, the last place she knew the feline to be.

The bedroom that had been in perfect condition less than twenty-four hours prior was now in total disarray. The large window against the far wall had been smashed clean out of its frame, and now lay in countless razor-sharp shards upon the floor. The rest of the room had been torn apart. Dressers had been relieved of their drawers, and the drawers of their contents, both of which had been strewn carelessly about the room. The custom-made curtains hanging near the shattered window were nothing more than tattered shreds. Anything that could be picked up now lay awkwardly somewhere else in the room. "Oh my... Opal? Opal, are you all right?" Fluttershy couldn't help it; upon seeing the damage to her friend's room, the pegasus was becoming frantic with worry, and it started to leak into her voice. "Answer me, Opal! Please!"

Before the winged pony got an answer, she succeeded in finding the terrified Opalescence. The feline was huddling, wide-eyed, as far under Rarity's bed as she could squeeze herself. "*Opal!* Sweetie, come here... It's all right..." After much coaxing, the reluctant animal finally crawled her way out from under the bedskirt. "Goodness, Opal, you aren't hurt, are you?" she asked, carefully inspecting the feline for any sign of injury. Thankfully, aside from some mussed fur, Opalescence was completely unharmed.

After relocating Opal to another room, and attempting to restore some semblance of order to Rarity's room, Fluttershy was once again locking the door of Carousel Boutique. "So? How was she?" Big Macintosh asked as the pegasus slowly walked up to him. "Was the li'l one all right?"

"Mm-hmm... The window was broken, though. Rarity's room was a mess too..."

"Jus' like back home, huh?" the earth pony muttered. "Alright then, let's git a move-on." he added, quickly turning and making a beeline towards downtown Ponyville.

"W-why?"

"We're already halfway into town. Let's hurry up an' git ya yer carrots. The quicker we do that, the quicker we can git ya back home."

"O-oh." Fluttershy took off and flew after the red pony who was by now a good distance away and still moving at a quick clip. "W-wait...!" The gift of

flight easily let the pegasus catch up to Big Macintosh. Once she had done so, the winged pony got the stallion's attention with a small squeak of a question. "B-Big Macintosh...?"

"Eeyup?"

"Thank you for your help."

The orange-maned earth pony smiled broadly. "Sure thing, Flutt'rshy."

The pair's lively pace had them in Ponyville's main square in a short five minutes. Coincidentally, they arrived just as Carrot Top was opening her stall. The vegetable-named pony recognized the yellow pegasus as her best customer and waved a hoof in greeting as she approached.

"Fluttershy! Right on time, as usual. Here for your monthly supply, I take it?"

The pegasi's hooves lightly clicked upon the cobblestone as she landed before the storefront. "Yes. The usual fifty pounds, please."

"Coming right up, hon'." Carrot Top replied, disappearing back into her shop. A moment later, her head popped back into sight. "I see you even brought your own help today." she commented, winking at the butterfly-marked pegasus. A wink that made the timid mare blush hotly and uncomfortably rub her foreleg. Carrot Top had her name for a reason, and in the blink of an eye, the earth pony nearly had all of the requested fifty pounds of orange vegetables loaded in the cart behind Big Macintosh.

"How much do I owe you, Carrot Top?" Fluttershy asked as the other mare dropped the last of the vegetables into the cart.

"For any other pony, I would say three bits per pound, but since you're one of my best customers, I'll give them to you for our usual price. Seventy-five bits for the whole cartload." she answered in a very business-like manner, trotting around behind her outdoor stall.

"Sounds fair." The winged pony pulled out a tied pouch full of the small golden coins. She upended this upon the stall counter and began counting out the required payment. "That was some storm last night, wasn't it?" Her attempt at idle chit-chat was met with an awkward silence that was

eventually broken by a confused reply from the orange mare.

"Beg your pardon?"

Fluttershy looked up from the currency, now equally confused. "You didn't get a storm last night?"

Carrot Top shook her head. "No, we didn't. The weather team hasn't scheduled a storm for this week yet. Its been dry as last month's hay lately."

"R-really? But it was coming down in sheets last night..." The yellow pegasus trailed off under the other pony's awkward stare. Fluttershy quickly glanced at Big Macintosh, who answered with a simple shrug.

"Ponyville didn't get a drop of rain last night, hon'. Are you sure it wasn't just a bad dream or something?"

"Th-that must have been it then..." she stammered. "J-just a bad dream... Anyway, thank you for the carrots."

"Of course, Fluttershy. Any time." the orange mare replied as she waved the two ponies off.

Fluttershy nervously glanced at the big red earth pony walking alongside her. "D-do you think that what happened last night was just a nightmare, I-like Carrot Top said...?"

"Ah doubt it. If it was, it musta been one powerful dream to go around breakin' windows an' such. Whatever's goin' on here, it's a whole lot bigger than jus' a simple storm."

The stallion's speech was as it always was; slow and methodical. Even so, Fluttershy didn't doubt his words for a second. Pieces of the puzzle were beginning to come together. The pegasus burglars having been to five other places and the broken window at Carousel Boutique. The pegasus burglars heading to Canterlot and the Sonic Rainboom that had come from the direction of the royal city. That was the thing that worried Fluttershy the most. Applejack had made a lot of sense, though; the royal city was very heavily guarded. Still, the pegasus couldn't shake the

haunting feeling that something very serious had happened to one of her friends.

"Um...Flutt'rshy? Y'all might wanna take a look at this..."

"Take a look at what?" The sight that met her eyes as she looked up sucked all the breath out of the pegasus. "*Oh no...*"

Back at Sweet Apple Acres, Applejack had just finished putting away the breakfast dishes and was out in the barn sorting out the baskets for the day's harvest. "Let's see now... Yesterday Ah got about five dozen baskets in... Today Ah ought to git about-"

"*Kreeeeeh!*"

The farmer pony had just succeeded in hefting a full basket of apples onto her back when the harsh caw cracked the soft atmosphere of the barn, causing her to jump about a foot and a half into the air in shock, scattering the apples every which way. "What in tarnation!?" The startled equine quickly looked about the barn in search of the offending noise.

Perched high in the rafters, probably having entered through the open hayloft door, was a magnificently plumed red-orange avian. Applejack gave a shaky sigh of relief. "Philomena, y'all dang near gave me a heart attack... What're ya doin' here anyway?" The phoenix leapt from the rafters and spiraled down to the barn floor, landing in front of the apple-marked pony. At this close range, Applejack saw that the bird was wearing some type of harness. Attached to the back of this harness was a sealed tube. "What'cha got there, girl?" The earth pony popped the lid off the tube and removed the rolled parchment from inside. Her green eyes became worried as she read on. "*Oh no...*" she breathed. "Thanks for the message, Philomena. Ah'll take this to Fluttershy. You go find the guards and lead them to Fluttershy's place, got it?"

The phoenix nodded and soared out of the barn door as Applejack dashed back into the house to retrieve her saddlebags and prepare for the adventure she knew was coming. Soon after, she was packed and galloping full-steam for Ponyville. *Fluttershy was right... Somethin' has*

happened to one of the gang... That letter from the princess sounded real hasty... Whatever happened, it sounds serious... Shaking the unsettling thoughts from her mind, the pony willed herself to run faster; time was very much of the essence. *C'mon, AJ, pick up the pace...*

Applejack didn't plan to stop in Ponyville, but fate had decided otherwise. She sprinted into downtown and quickly ducked around a building, nearly flattening another pony as she did. "Whoa nelly! Ya nearly ran me over there, Bon-bon! What's the rush?"

"I could ask you the same thing, Applejack." the cream-colored pony retorted. "Wait a minute, you mean you haven't heard?"

"Heard of what?" Applejack was now thoroughly curious.

"There was a fire last night! Twilight's library went up in flames!"

The orange pony felt like she had been kicked in the stomach. The message to Fluttershy could wait. That break-in last night was no longer just a random act. Some outside forces were at work here. Applejack knew that Twilight's tree-house was protected by a lightning rod. This must have been done from the inside out. The earth pony spun on her hooves and set a new course. It wasn't long before a multi-colored crowd of ponies standing around a smoldering, blackened husk of a tree came into view. "Celestia, no..." The earth pony shouldered her way through the crowd to get a better view, although she really didn't know *why* she wanted to get a better look at *this*. Before anypony could say otherwise, she dashed into the burnt shell that used to be her friend's home. The door, now hanging loosely on a single hinge, offered little resistance to the pony as she burst inside.

If the external fire damage was to be used as an indicator of the interior condition of the tree-house, the comparison would have been sorely inaccurate. Ash and soot blackened every visible square inch of the walls and floors. Countless piles of ash lined what was left of the shelves as a cruel reminder of the many tomes that used to reside upon them. Still more ash covered the floor in a layer almost two inches thick. This wasn't a library anymore; it was a scorched wasteland. "How in Equestria am Ah gonna explain this to Twi'?" The very thought of the prospect, along with the sickening stench of burnt parchment and ink that still pervaded the air

nearly made the orange mare vomit. "There's nothin' left... Every last book...gone..."

After seeing this wanton destruction before her, Applejack now fully understood the gravity of the situation at hand. *Those two burglars were lookin' fer me and the gang... And, judgin' from that letter from the Princess, it sounds like they got one of us too... The sooner Fluttershy and Ah git to Canterlot, the better.* she thought, eyes glinting with determination. The farmer pony galloped out of the library, leaving the gruesome scene, and one lone book sitting unseen behind the unhinged door, behind her. However, the scenes that were awaiting her at Fluttershy's cottage would prove to be no better.

Yes, the pegasi's cottage had been heavily vandalized as well, but that wasn't the first thing that the orange mare noticed. Instead, she saw a pair of ponies off to the side of the tree-house. One of them, the smaller of the two, was sitting upon the ground and seemed to be sobbing uncontrollably. "Fluttershy! What's the matter? Please tell me ya ain't hurt!"

The pegasus slowly shook her head. "I-I-I'm f-fine..."

"Then what's the matter, sugarcube?"

"L-look..." Fluttershy pointed a shaky hoof toward a sizeable pile of splintered wood and bent nails lying haphazardly before her. "I-it's An-Angel Bunny... Applejack, I can't find him anywhere!" The usually gentle pony slammed her hooves into the dirt in frustration. "I-I should have c-come home last night!"

"C'mon Flutt'rshy..." Big Macintosh started quietly. "Ah'm sure the little guy's all right. Ah'll bet he's jus' holed up somewhere..."

"Then where is he!?" she shouted very uncharacteristically. "We-we've looked *everywhere!*" The mare's tear-filled turquoise eyes burned with an angry flame.

The large red earth pony sighed. "There's nothin' that Ah haven't tried to tell her, AJ... None of it has worked... What are y'all doin' here anyway? An' why are ya covered in soot?"

Unsure if the yellow pegasus was listening or not, Applejack began explaining all that she had seen lately; the message from Philomena, the burned library, and the very vague details of what had happened in Canterlot.

As it turned out, Fluttershy had indeed been listening to her friend's recollections. Upon hearing the news about the incident in Canterlot, she stood up and spun around. "Wh-what happened? Is everypony all right?"

The orange, apple-marked pony shrugged. "Ah don't know, sugarcube... Ah didn't git a whole lotta info in that there letter. No names, no nothin'. Princess Celestia just wants us in Canterlot on the double. There's a ride fer us on its way. Mah guess is it'll be here in about ten minutes."

"Oh no... I c-can't go..." Fluttershy sniffed. "N-not...*now*... Angel's still...m-missing..."

"Ah don't mean to sound rude here, Fluttershy, but we ain't got the time for this. Something downright nasty is goin' on. One of the girls is in real serious trouble. This ain't like anythin' we've had to deal with before. Y'all need to go an' git ready fer the trip." The orange pony began nudging her reluctant friend toward the front door.

"No." she answered adamantly, digging her hooves into the ground and leaning back against Applejack's shoving. "I'm n-n-not leaving until I know that Angel Bunny is a-all right..."

"Dang it, Fluttershy, stop bein' so stubborn! Our friends are in trouble! They...need our...help! We gotta-oof!"

The pink-maned pegasus finally took a step forward and ended up setting Applejack face-down in the dirt. Fluttershy quickly turned to face the prone pony. "I. Said. *NO!*" she yelled, her wings flaring out angrily. "Angel B-Bunny is my friend, t-too! I'm staying *h-here!*" The kind pony wasn't used to raising her voice so much and she had given herself the hiccups as a result. She also wasn't accustomed to being angry, and her bright spark of fury rapidly fizzled out, leaving a wide-eyed look of shock upon her face. "Oh m-my... I-I'm so sorry, Applejack... I-I'll...I'll go g-get my things..."

The orange earth pony sat up, wide-eyed, as the pegasus disappeared

inside her house. "Golly..." she mumbled. "Ah ain't never seen Fluttershy *that* upset before..."

Big Macintosh sniffed. "Can ya really blame her, AJ? How would you feel if something happened to Apple Bloom? That poor pony nearly fergot to breathe when she saw what was left of that there hutch."

"There they are! Bring us around for a landing!"

The two pony siblings squinted into the sky, looking for the source of the heavily militaristic voice. They didn't have to wait long before a chariot, pulled by two members of Celestia's royal guard came spiraling down out of the blue sky. A third pegasus, clad with the same style of armor also dropped out of the sky, to land before the two members of the Apple family.

Before the two ponies could pick their mouths off the ground after the guards' impressive appearance, the lone pegasus marched up to them and immediately began reciting his mission. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is General Headwind, of Princess Celestia's Royal Air Guard. I have been sent, under direct instruction from the Princess herself, to find a Miss Applejack and a Miss Fluttershy and escort them back to the royal city of Canterlot."

"Pleased to meet'cha." Applejack replied, stepping forward and extending a friendly hoof in greeting.

"Miss Applejack, I presume?"

"Yup."

Headwind took the orange pony's hoof in his own and lightly touched it to the tip of his snout in a very respectful manner. "The pleasure is all mine. I assume this is your brother, Miss Applejack?"

The large red farmer pony nodded. "Eeyup. Name's Big Macintosh. Good to know ya."

"Likewise. Well, Big Macintosh, I must say, in all my years of service, I've never seen a pony of your stature before. Even the tallest member of our Earth Pony Division is a full head shorter than you are."

"Thank ya kindly." the big pony chuckled.

"I wish we could continue with the pleasantries, but time is not with us. As my guards and I approached, we observed a particularly large storm building upon the outskirts of the Everfree Forest. We must be on our way quickly. Are you ready to depart, Miss Applejack?"

"You bet'cha."

"Very good." Headwind sniffed. "What about Miss Fluttershy? Is she ready?"

"Ummmm... I dunno about that." Applejack answered hesitantly. "She went inside to start packing just before y'all got here."

"Mah guess is that she's probly still upset about her li'l rabbit friend. Ah'll go an' see if Ah can't help her out." Big Macintosh offered.

"Hold on a minute... Why you, Big Mac? What're you gonna do? Let me go. Fluttershy's mah frie-"

"Trust me, AJ. Ah'll be right back." As he walked into the disheveled cottage, Big Macintosh could make out a soft crying emanating from somewhere upstairs. With each step up the staircase, its origin became clearer, until the red stallion was standing just outside what he assumed was Fluttershy's room. "Flutt'rshy? Are ya in there?"

"Wh-what is it...?"

"Celestia's guards are here fer ya. Ah guess there's another storm comin' in fast. They want to git a move-on before it hits."

"I-I can't do this..." The mare's voice was barely audible, just above a whisper.

"What was that?"

"I can't do this..." she repeated. "I c-can't leave... Not now..."

"Look, Ah know y'all wanna stay an' look fer Angel, but Ah really think ya need to go with AJ."

"N-no... I can't..."

"Listen, if it'd help any, Ah'll stay here fer a while and keep lookin' fer the little guy."

Fluttershy shook her head. "N-no... I couldn't ask you to do that."

"Ah know Ah'm just a simple farmer pony," Big Macintosh sighed, "and Ah know Ah don't know much about all of this 'Elements of Harmony' business that AJ and yerself a part of, but Ah *do* know one thing. The both of ya were *picked* to be a part of it. That right there's gotta mean somethin'."

"What...what are you saying?"

"Ah'm sayin' that yer friends need ya, Flutt'rshy. AJ knows it, and Ah know it too. What would yer friends do if it was yerself that was in trouble?"

The winged mare bit her lip and looked away. *They'd drop everything to help me...* An image of each of her friend's faces flashed through her mind's eye. *What kind of friend would I be if I didn't do the same...?* "A-all right, you win. I'll go. Just...promise me one thing before I do."

"Sure thing."

"As soon as you find Angel Bunny, let me know. I don't care how, I...don't care if it's good news or bad news, just find a way. Please?"

"Ya have mah word." the male pony promised. In a hugely unexpected gesture, Big Macintosh very lightly touched his muzzle to the surprised mare's cheek. "Just make sure ya bring AJ back safely..." he added quietly.

Fluttershy's muzzle couldn't have been a deeper shade of red. Slowly, almost unsure if that had just happened, she brought a hoof up to her cheek. "O-of c-course..."

"Thank ya. Now, let's git the two of ya on the road before that storm hits."

Too late. The encroaching storm broke directly over the humble cottage, announcing its arrival with a blinding flash of lightning and an equally deafening peal of thunder. Applejack's astonished voice could barely be heard over the building wind. "Whoa, nelly! That was a close one! Fluttershy! If y'all can hear me in there, we gotta go, *now!*"

Big Macintosh started nudging the startled Fluttershy toward the stairs. "C'mon, we gotta git the two of ya on yer way before this gits any worse." Rain was already beginning to fall as the two ponies reached the front door. This storm was growing quickly; if the chariot wasn't in the air soon, there would be no chance of a successful take-off.

"Quickly, Miss Fluttershy!" General Headwind shouted. "Into the chariot! Let us make haste while we can!"

The yellow pony shot a fleeting look at Big Macintosh, who simply smiled and nodded, before galloping into the rain. The chariot was not far from the door, but the storm seemed to become more active with each step Fluttershy took. With the lightning now almost coming down on top of her, the pegasus took a flying leap into the chariot, landing in a heap next to Applejack.

"Miss Fluttershy is in! Double time!" Headwind barked. At the general's command, the two pegasus guards leapt against the leads and the chariot lurched forward and into the air.

"General Headwind, sir! What is our flight path?" the larger of the two pulling ponies asked. "Are we avoiding the part of the Everfree Forest we passed earlier?"

The general shook his head. "Negative, Cirrus. Skirting the Everfree Forest would take time that we do not have. Run the gauntlet at full speed."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Unlike the chariot that Princess Celestia often traveled in, this particular one was smaller, built solely for speed, and lacked comfort. The ride through the storm's turbulence and crosswinds was quite literally nerve rattling. The compact vehicle shuddered and jostled about like a leaf caught

in a gale. "Ow..." Fluttershy rubbed her sore shoulder after being slammed against the chariot's side for the umpteenth time.

"How ya holdin' up, sugarcube?" Applejack asked, a hoof clamped over her hat.

"I suppose I've been worse..." The pegasi's voice was nearly drowned out by the wind rushing by.

"So, what did Big Mac say to ya that got ya back outside so fast?"

The thought of what had happened between her and the big red earth pony brought the blood rushing back to Fluttershy's face. "O-oh...uhm... He asked me about what you and the girls would do if I was in trouble."

"Gotcha." Applejack was silent for a bit before she looked suspiciously back at her friend. "Hang on a minute... Yer blushin' as red as an apple, Fluttershy! What else happened?"

An answer would have to wait. A rogue bolt of lightning came blazing out of the angry-looking storm clouds and swiftly severed the chariot's link to the two pegasus guards. With no more forward propulsion, the chariot only had one way to go. Down.

Chapter 3

Shadows in the Night

Fluttershy came to with a splitting headache, and dizzier than if she had been on the losing end of a battle with a tornado. She didn't remember much after the lightning bolt had struck the chariot. A cry for help, a rending crunch, it was all very fuzzy. With a great deal of difficulty, she forced herself into a seated position. As she did so, she felt something lightly brush against her flank. Looking to see what it possibly could have been made her sick to her stomach. Her right wing hung limp and useless at her side. *Oh no...* Her first panicked thought was that it was broken. A closer inspection alleviated that concern. "No...it's not broken, it's just dislocated..."

The thought of dislocated wings quickly shifted the mare's thoughts to that young robin from the day before. "Ohh... I should have asked Big Macintosh to check...on...him..." Fluttershy trailed off, feeling her muzzle turn beet-red again. "B-Big Macintosh..." That spot where he had kissed her cheek began tingling softly. The pegasus physically shook off the light-headed feeling that was slowly working its way into her mind. There were more important things to attend to first.

Not the least of which was finding out exactly where she was. Doing her best to ignore the very odd combination of the dull pains coming from her limp wing and the euphoric feelings coming from her head, the mare gathered enough strength to stand up. "Where...where am I...?" she muttered, slowly taking in her surroundings. Just beyond the thick curtain of fog, she saw what looked like dozens of long, shadowy claws reaching out from the dark backdrop of trees. The rain was still falling heavily, adding an eerie ambience to the atmosphere as it battered the dense foliage. The realization of where she was hit Fluttershy like a blast of frigid winter air. "T-t-the Everfree F-forest...!" She swallowed nervously, and her eyes began jumping from one dark spot to the next. The more she looked about, the more tricks her worried mind played on her.

A rustling in the undergrowth behind her quickly drew the pony's wide-eyed attention. "W-who's th-there...?" she stammered. As answer, the

rustling intensified and moved closer. "A-Applejack? Is...is that you?" Unconsciously, the winged mare began backing away from the approaching noise. Fluttershy was so fixated on this unknown threat, that when she backed under a broken branch, she nearly jumped out of her coat. "Aaahhh!" The butterfly-marked pony uttered a shriek of terror, and bolted forward, the rustling before her now irrelevant.

Now, as most anypony would agree, running with one's eyes closed is not the smartest thing to do. It was some kind of miracle that Fluttershy didn't gallop headlong into one of the dozen trees flying by her. Ultimately, it wasn't a tree that halted her panicked flight, but her own discarded saddlebags. She hit the muddy ground with a wet thud. The pegasus covered her eyes and lay there, shivering with fright.

"Brrrrrii..."

The familiar noise snapped the pony out of her scared trembling. Sitting upon her saddlebags, struggling to free their latch and get at the provisions inside, was a small, spherical insect-like creature commonly known as a parasprite. The little blue critter looked forlornly at the pony. Fluttershy bit her lip; she was very familiar with parasprites. The tiny animals were unbearably adorable, but they also had voracious appetites and reproduced faster than ten rabbits.

These little buggers, armed with those two traits, had literally eaten quite a few Ponyville citizens out of house and home. Fluttershy, having befriended the first parasprite, had been responsible for the infestation. She had definitely learned her lesson from the mishap. Still, it was nigh impossible for the kind-hearted pony to ignore *any* animal in need, and this time was no exception. "It's all right, little one... I'm not going to hurt you..." she called softly, approaching the wide-eyed parasprite. The pegasus made a gentle clicking noise as the small animal looked like it was about to flee. "Come here... It's okay..."

"Biiii..." The little insect-like animal buzzed in response and floated up to the pony, tucking itself into the driest part of her mane.

"There we go... Good boy... I think I'll call you Angel..." she murmured, her mind returning to worried thoughts of the white rabbit. Sighing to keep the tears from flowing anew, Fluttershy picked up her saddlebags and

slipped them on, struggling quite a bit in getting them over her injured wing. "Ow..." Finally, with her saddlebags on, the parasprite safe and dry, the pegasus...realized she hadn't the slightest idea where she was going. Applejack was missing, along with all of Celestia's guards; she was standing, alone, in the middle of the Everfree Forest. She wouldn't be able to pick out the right direction to Canterlot if it was given to her.

As the gravity of her hopeless predicament sank in, the pegasus mare dejectedly sat down to ponder her next move. She quickly wished that she had looked before sitting down, as she planted herself square on the business end of a sharp green pinecone. She was back on her hooves in an instant, doing a little jig of pain. "Ow, ow, ow..." When the bright snap of pain had faded, Fluttershy turned to investigate its source. "A pinecone...?" Wait, this pinecone is much too young to have fallen now..." Further inspections turned up half a dozen more of the young pinecones, scattered amongst several broken branches. These branches had not fallen naturally; something had knocked them from the trees.

A chance bolt of lightning going off overhead afforded the yellow pegasus a glimpse of the forest before her. It was like a tunnel of broken branches and crushed foliage leading deeper into the dark forest. Yes, it looked scary, but Fluttershy had no other options. The mare swallowed nervously and started into the darkness.

With each shaky step, the dislodged leaves and twigs crunched noisily underhoof, echoing into the inky blackness. "It's all right, Fluttershy..." she said to herself. "You can do it... Just keep walking..."

"Oooohhooooaaa..."

Fluttershy froze at the ghostly moan. Her frightened turquoise eyes darted from left to right. She didn't dare turn around, for fear that she would see whatever had just made that noise right behind her. "W-who's there...?"

"Somepony, help..."

The pegasi's eyes snapped open at the agonized plea. "That's no ghost..." Concerned, she broke into a quick trot. "Hello? Who was that?"

"This way... Over...here..."

The voice led the winged pony to the twisted, splintered mound of wood and metal that had been the chariot. Bits of debris, all various sizes, were strewn about the new clearing. Underneath the largest piece, probably what was left of the chariot's body, was the trapped owner of the voice. "General! Oh my goodness! What happened? A-are you all right?"

"Oh, Miss Fluttershy...it's you..." General Headwind wheezed. "Yes... I'll be fine...once I'm...free of this...wreckage... Could you-"

"Oh, yes, o-of course." Fluttershy nodded and set her shoulder against the chunk of debris, allowing the pegasus general just enough room to wriggle free.

"You...have my thanks, Miss Fluttershy..." he replied, quickly climbing to his hooves. He drew in a sharp breath of air and released the straps on his heavily damaged armor, letting it fall away. As it did so, Fluttershy spotted a trail of blood streaming from a fresh puncture wound directly under his left wing.

"Oh my... That looks serious..." the mare commented. "Where did it come from?"

"Look at my armor." he answered quickly, focused on his wing. He gave it an experimental flap and winced.

Confused, Fluttershy gave the discarded armor a closer look. One of its plates had been forcefully bent inward by some great force, creating a wickedly sharp edge. This keen edge was tipped with a sticky, crimson substance. No further inspection was required to figure out what *that* was. "A-armor's supposed to protect you...isn't it...?"

"It did." Headwind corrected. "After that lightning struck the chariot, it dropped like a stone. Not too far from here is a giant rift, and you and Miss Applejack were set to drop right into it. I did everything in my power to prevent that from happening. I was able to give the chariot enough of a pull to get it over the rift. Most of it, anyway; the wheels clipped the edge, and...well..."

Fluttershy clapped a hoof to the side of her head and screwed her eyes shut. A piercing cry for help ripped through the confines of her mind. "Applejack was thrown out..." she finished slowly.

The general bowed his head. "Yes...I'm sorry..."

"What...what happened to Applejack? Where is she?" The yellow pegasi's voice was suddenly fatigued.

"I...do not know. My apologies. The chariot was moving faster than I had anticipated and I was unable to stop it after the two of you had fallen out. The thing that did stop me was this tree here. If I *hadn't* been wearing armor at the time, I wouldn't be standing here talking to you." General Headwind explained. "I'd rather take a wound under my wing than become part of a tree."

"I see..."

"There should be first aid supplies somewhere in this wreckage. Once I'm patched up, we can be on our way."

"That won't be necessary."

"Beg pardon, Miss Fluttershy?"

"Wh-what I meant to say is that I actually have medical supplies in my saddlebags. Better safe than sorry, right?"

"Very true."

"I-if you'd like, I-I could dress that wound for you..."

The white pegasus nodded and held his wing aloft. "Be my guest."

The Element of Kindness was an expert at tending to all types of injuries and quickly had General Headwind's wound tightly bound. "I-I'm sorry, sir... But, uhm...your wing won't be useable for a while. That wound was deeper than I thought... I'm sorry I couldn't do more..."

"Nonsense, Miss Fluttershy. It feels as good as new. If you didn't already

live in Ponyville, I would personally recommend you to the Royal infirmary."

"Th-thank you..." she murmured, blushing from the compliment. Shaking off the embarrassment, the shy pony mustered up enough courage to pose a nervous question. "Uhm...General, sir?"

"Yes?"

"I-I know that you want to get to Canterlot as soon as possible, but...but...I can't go without Applejack. She's my friend and she wouldn't leave without me. I have to do the same for her."

"My thoughts exactly." the general agreed.

"Re-really...? I thought we were supposed to get back to Canterlot as fast as we could?"

"I promised her Highness that would escort the *two* of you back to Canterlot. The first a pegasus is taught upon joining the Royal Air Guard is to *never* fall through on a promise. We'll find Miss Applejack, you have my word; and my promise." The stallion paused and focused his eyes on a gap in the swaying foliage. "It looks like the storm has passed for the most part. Princess Luna has also given us a full moon to travel by. Let us make the best of it. Follow me, if you would be so kind."

"Where are we going...?"

"Well, the most logical place to begin our search for Miss Applejack would be where she was last seen, wouldn't you agree?"

"I-I suppose..." the winged mare murmured hesitantly. "W-wait for me!" she quickly added after the general's short blue tail disappeared between two trees. As she trotted up beside Headwind, he flipped her a quick glance.

"Might I ask why you're not flying, Miss Fluttershy? Personal preference, or have you been injured?"

"Uhm... A little of both actually..." Reluctantly, the pegasus turned to reveal her limp wing. "It's not broken, just dislocated... It...it must have

happened during the crash, I think..."

"Two usable wings between two pegasi..." Headwind muttered. "Not exactly the best situation to be in. Unfortunately, I possess very little medical knowledge concerning pegasi wings. Members of the Royal Air Guard are taught to continue their mission, even if they should lose use of their wings. I'm deeply sorry that I can't return your favor, Miss Fluttershy."

"It's all right, really. I'll be fine." the mare insisted.

"That aside, I do have another question for you. The Princess asked for you and Miss Applejack by name. How did you come to be so close?"

"Oh, that. I suppose being good friends with Twilight-"

"Wait, you're the friends that Miss Sparkle always refers to in her letters to the Princess?"

"Y-yes. Why?"

"Her Majesty speaks volumes about her student and her close friends. I've heard many things about you, Miss Fluttershy."

The pegasus mare was genuinely surprised. "Good things, I hope?"

"But of course. I feel honored to be protecting the Element of Kindness."

The female pony didn't have an appropriate response to a compliment like that. Not that it mattered much; Headwind's quick pace had already brought them to the edge of the ravine that he had mentioned earlier.

Fluttershy swallowed nervously, the pegasus general was right. This ravine was giant. Gingerly, the pony leaned out over the edge to peer downwards. All she could see was a thick, wispy bank of fog below her, endless for all she knew. Just looking down into this gray, roiling soup was making her nauseous. "Oh my... Y-you don't suppose Applejack...f-fell in, do you? Ohh...it looks like such a long way to the bottom... I hope she-"

"Nay, yellow pony; do not fear, do not worry. Two pegasi, they caught her, and took off in a hurry."

Only one pony can rhyme like that. The butter-colored mare's gaze flew up out of the foggy ravine as she spun around to face the familiar voice. Her turquoise eyes lit up hopefully. "Zecora! What are you doing all the way out here in the middle of the forest?"

"A healer of animals cannot possibly doubt, that she can make medicine when her supplies have run out. You see, I have made this journey to where we now are, in order to find more herbs for my jars." The small zebra turned to reveal the baskets she was carrying, filled with glass jars of all sizes, that were in turn filled with various herbs and berries.

"Those pegasi that carried Applejack away, were they female?" Fluttershy asked concernedly, envisioning the pair from the burglary the night before.

Zecora shrugged. "They were flying too high for my eye to see clearly. I only knew they held onto their quarry quite dearly."

"Oh, o-okay then..."

Finally, the other pegasus deemed it time to join the conversation. "Forgive the intrusion, ma'am." he began politely. "My name is Headwind, General of the Royal Air Guard of Canterlot, and I have been instructed by her Majesty, the Princess, to escort Miss Fluttershy here and her close friend, a one Miss Applejack, to the royal city. This mission is of the utmost importance, so if you could point out the direction these two pegasi flew, I would be most grateful."

Even though the general stood a full head taller than her, Zecora remained as amiable as ever, even when he stepped right up to her. "Come with me, pony of great caliber. I would be happy to be the guide to your traveler."

"Oh, thank you, Zecora! Thank you so much!" the yellow pegasus said joyfully as she followed the two ponies along the ravine's edge.

Little by little, the trees began peeling away from the canyon rim, before finally opening up to a massive stone structure, crumbling in places from the ravages of time. Despite its disrepair, the ponies couldn't help but stop

for a moment to take in its majesty.

"The ancient castle of the Royal Pony Sisters..." Fluttershy remembered *this* place; the site of the first (and last) showdown with Nightmare Moon. Something told the timid pegasus that this place was going to be very important in the near future.

Even General Headwind found himself in awe. "I was always told that this place was nothing more than myth. I can remember being told bedtime stories about this place when I was just a colt..."

Not to be left out, Zecora put in her two bits. "I remember hearing stories of this castle so grand, even while back in my homeland."

Standing before the trio was an imposing entry hall. The dark stone of the arched doorway gleamed invitingly in the strong moonlight, almost beckoning the wandering travelers into its gaping maw. The rough cobblestone path leading into the hall was horribly overgrown, slowly being reclaimed by nature. Significantly less confident than the ponies before her, Fluttershy cautiously followed them into the long-abandoned entry hall. The instant her hoof touched the stone inside, it felt like something stabbed her mind. "*Ahh...!*"

"I couldn't do it... I...wasn't fast enough..."

"Rainbow Dash, darling, you did all that you possibly could have done..."

"No, I didn't... I could have gone faster..."

"C'mon, Dashie, turn that frown upside-down. How could you have flown faster than a Sonic Rainboom?"

"Augh! You don't get it! Neither of you do! I could have done something! For Celestia's sake, I'm supposed to be the Element of Loyalty! Bottom line: Twilight needed me and I wasn't there for her! I...failed..."

Fluttershy didn't know it, but by this time she was unconscious upon the cold stone floor. General Headwind and Zecora had heard her fall and quickly stood over her. Above all of them, visible only in the moonlight streaming in through a hole in the dilapidated ceiling, a shadow moved. It

rapidly leapt into the night sky, where feathered wings carried it off toward another massive stone structure.

Entering through an arched window frame, the pegasus trotted up to a circular stone slab that sat before a majestic stained glass window, whose artistic appeal had long since been shattered. Once in the center of the altar, the winged pony pressed a hoof into a small circular depression in the stone. A "*click!*" was heard in response, and, one by one, steps began appearing, spiraling their way down into the darkness under the stone disc. At the bottom of this staircase one would find a sturdily locked wooden door. A knock on the door and a small panel on it slid back.

"Password?" the revealed pair of pink eyes asked.

"Good and evil, their cycle eternal, hearkens to the moon's glow and the sun's inferno." the pegasus stallion recited.

The pair of eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How do I know it's you...?"

"Open this door, numbskull, before I knock it down on top of you..."

The female voice behind the door giggled. "Yup, that's you all right. One sec'." The panel slid back into place and moments later the door was opened, revealing yet another pegasus. One with a jagged, dark blue mane not unlike the shape of a bolt of lightning. "So? Whadd'ya find out? Huh? Huh?"

"Zip it... Just tell me where the boss is. We've found another Element."

"Oh. She's in the library, looking up spells we can use."

The winged stallion sniffed and set off down the torch-lit hallway, ignoring the stream of babbling from the pegasus behind him. A glow emanating from an archway showed him where the library was. As he turned the corner into the room, the pony was halted by a voice from the far wall.

"This had better be important... I don't need any more interruptions, so unless Nightmare Moon has somehow returned of her own accord, you can back your flank right back out of this room."

For some reason, the formerly serious male pegasus began snickering, very obviously holding back laughter. "W-we've located...a-another Element, just outside the e-entry hall...*Pffft!*"

The pony at the desk looked up upon hearing this. "Normally, I would lay into you again for laughing like that, but that's going to have to wait. Which Element did you locate?"

After regaining (some of) his composure, the stallion continued. "It was a little dark to see, but I believe it was the yellow pegasus. Kindness, I believe."

"Then I've got the perfect spell to test out our new 'power source.' Get me a charged sinkstone and meet me outside. It's time I tried walking in an Element's hooves."

Chapter 4

Nighttime Stories

Twang!

Sssss-thunk!

"A little too much to the left..." the unicorn sighed.

Another arrow magically floated out of the leather-bound quiver strapped to the white pony's side. The icicle-sharp projectile glided up to the equine's face, where she studied it intently with her dark blue eyes. *Rainbow Dash is taking all of this very hard... I've never seen the poor dear so shaken up before...* Still guided by magic, the arrow nocked itself upon the suspended bow. In one fluid movement, the unicorn drew the bowstring taut... *Draw...* she sighted down the shaft... *Aim...* Finally, she took a deep breath, and... *Release...!*

The crisp *Twang!* of the bowstring reverberated through the still night air.

Thok!

"Exceptional shot, Miss Rarity. Dead center."

"Thank you, sir..." the unicorn mare replied absentmindedly. Her focus remained on the quivering arrow protruding from the bull's-eye at the far end of the range. Before long, she had selected another arrow and sat it upon her bowstring. One more *Twang!* later, and the new arrow was on its way downrange.

It was hard to tell in the low light, but if one looked just so, they would see that the second arrow had been split,nock to tip, by the third. This was quite the achievement, but the mare's expression remained unchanged. There really wasn't much to smile about at the moment. Sighing, she propped the bow up against the small table next to her and picked up the small bottle of sparkling water from said table.

"Are you finished for the night, Miss?"

Swallowing her sip of her beverage, Rarity glanced at the pegasus guard standing at attention several yards away. "No, I'm not quite finished yet. Although, it is getting rather late, isn't it?" she remarked, noting the height of Luna's full moon. "You do look like you've had quite a full day, too... If you wish, you may retire for the night. I shouldn't think I'll be too much longer."

The armored stallion adamantly shook his head. "I appreciate your concern, Miss Rarity, but I must refuse. Our weather teams have been carefully monitoring several rogue storms over the Everfree Forest. Following today's affairs, Her Majesty Celestia has ordered every member of the Royal Air Guard to remain on full alert. I'm afraid I am not permitted to let you out of my sight while you are outside the palace. My apologies."

"No need to apologize, sir. If such is the case, I shall be done within the next five minutes." The unicorn picked up her bow and faced the archery range once more. She had just drawn back another arrow when...

"Princess Luna, milady, it is an honor to have you join us during this beautiful night you have given us."

"Wait, did you just say Princ- *Waahaah!*" Surprise caused the white pony's magic to yank back heavily on the bowstring as she looked over her shoulder, but only for a second. She quickly lost her grip and the arrow streaked off into the night sky. Standing before her was the younger of the two royal sisters; a tall alicorn with a smooth navy blue coat and a voluminous gray blue mane. The jewelry and boots she wore twinkled and shimmered as though they had been forged from the night sky itself. "*P-princess Luna...! Your Majesty...*" The violet-maned unicorn bowed respectfully, if a little hastily, in the presence of the royal alicorn. "Forgive me, your Highness; I must look simply dreadful... My mane is a mess, my hooves are-"

The winged unicorn laughed; not quite the reaction Rarity was expecting. "Oh, that's quite all right; I don't mind at all."

"Re-really?" Rarity stammered, hesitantly looking up at the princess.

"Really. That's another thing; everypony's always afraid to look me in the eye, like I'm some kind of high and mighty ruler. To be completely honest, I haven't really done anything more than an average citizen of Ponyville, probably even less, come to think of it. Stand up and look me in the eyes as an equal."

The diamond-marked pony stood up, but still wouldn't meet the alicorn's eyes. "Oh no, Princess, I couldn't... I-"

"That's an order."

If Rarity had brought her head up any faster, she probably would have injured something. She soon found that her apprehension was totally unfounded, however.

"Kidding." The royal pony's eyes were twinkling with laughter. "Now, what exactly were you doing out here at this hour?"

The wayward arrow that had taken to the sky earlier couldn't have picked a better time to return to the earth. It reappeared in the blink of an eye, embedding itself in the table, right next to Rarity's drink. Luna flicked the vibrating arrow with a hoof. "Ah, I see. I don't recall any of Twilight's letters ever mentioning that you practiced archery."

"Not to be rude, your Highness, but how do you know of Twilight's letters?"

"Whenever 'Tia finishes reading one, she lets me borrow it so I can copy it down and learn a little something about friendship, because, well...I've been a little out of practice lately... That's not to say that I haven't learned a lot, however; your friend is very studious."

Rarity nodded in agreement. "She is indeed. At any rate, archery is something that I just picked up in my spare time. Idle hooves, as they say. Orders for dresses have a habit of coming in a very irregular fashion, if you'll pardon the clothing humor. If you think about it, archery is very much like making a dress. Threading the needles, drawing the bowstring, and so on."

"I can see how that would be true." Luna agreed. "But practicing at night?"

I don't often make my moons this bright."

"That's...easily explainable, too. As you could very well imagine, everypony is quite upset about today's events. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie have barely spoken to anypony and my mind has been galloping in so many directions, there isn't the slightest chance of me getting any sleep."

"I can understand." Luna nodded sagely. "From what I've read, you all seem very close. I know I have not been formally introduced to Twilight, but I'm equally as concerned."

"Thank you, milady."

"Enough of those silly titles. 'Luna' will be quite all right. Now, if you wish, you're more than welcome to join me back in the study if you think that would help take your mind off things. I was about to do a little research on our current situation, and I wouldn't mind a little help."

"Thank you for the offer, and I don't mean to be rude in saying this, but I couldn't. I feel as though I should look in on my friends and try to get some rest. I would probably be more of a knot in your mane than anything else."

"If you insist." the princess replied simply.

The white unicorn nodded. "I do. It was a pleasure talking with you, mil-*Luna*." As Rarity passed the guard, she bowed her head in thanks. "Thank you very much for your patience, sir."

"My pleasure. Enjoy the rest of your night, Miss."

"Oh, before I go, could you direct me to Rainbow Dash's room? I'd be most grateful."

"Of course. Head left down this hallway and take your first left. That should take you to a staircase. Once you are at the top, Miss Dash's room should be the first on the right." the guard pony instructed.

"Thank you." Rarity bowed once more and took her leave.

"Are you retiring for the night as well, your Majesty, or do you plan to

return to your study?" the white pegasus asked as Luna came back inside.

"Yes, I was planning to keep studying. I'd feel better if I could figure something out, no matter how small."

"Very well. Do you require any further services from me?"

"I should be fine for the night-" The pony paused and looked up at the ceiling. "Actually, yes, there is. Stop by the kitchen and have the cooks begin preparing a dozen scones. Send half of these to Rarity and her friends. I think they could use something to eat. Also, have the cooks start boiling some water for tea. I'll be down shortly to pick it up. After that, have guards stationed at each of our guests' rooms. We can't have a repeat of today's incident."

"At once, milady."

"Very good, Lieutenant. You may go." Luna waved off his salute and watched as he subsequently turned and marched away. Waiting until she was sure he was out of earshot, she let out her held breath. "'Milady' this, 'your Majesty' that." How in Equestria does 'Tia put up with it? It drives me insane..."

Rarity had little trouble in locating Rainbow Dash's room after following the directions from the guard. Despite the hour, something told her that her friend wouldn't be asleep yet. The unicorn raised a hoof and knocked quietly upon the door. To her surprise, the door wasn't locked, let alone latched, and it slowly swung open, creaking softly. Rarity's intuitions had been correct; the rainbow-maned pegasus was still awake. She was sitting silently at the window, idly tapping a hoof against the stone sill. However, there was one more pony in the room than the unicorn had initially seen. "Pinkie Pie, dear, it's getting awfully late. What are you still doing up?"

The aptly-named pink pony that was lying upon the bed looked up and blinked sleepily. "Hiiiiii..." she mumbled, sounding as if she was forcing herself to sound happy and upbeat.

"But what are you doing in here, darling?"

"I kept having these really scary dreams every time I fell asleep. Like really, *really* scary. I came in here to see if Dashie was having the same problem, but she says she hasn't even gone to sleep yet. She's been sitting at the window since I came in." The curly, pink-maned pony let out a long, depressed sigh. "I don't blame her..."

"I understand you're upset, Rainbow Dash, but you should try and get some sleep anyway." Rarity urged, lightly laying a hoof upon her friend's shoulder.

The sky-blue pony snorted indifferently and shrugged off the unicorn's hoof. "I'm not tired..." she muttered.

"Okay... That doesn't mean that you couldn't try to go to sleep anyway. Things always seem better after a good night's rest."

"She's right, Dashie." Pinkie chimed in, hopping off the bed. "Whenever I'm feeling down, I always like to have a really biiig piece of cake and take a nice long nap. It always helps me!"

The unicorn couldn't help but flash a confused glance at the pink earth pony. "In that order, dear? Really?"

Pinkie Pie forced a grin onto her face and shrugged. "What? It works for me..."

"Just...leave me alone... Just go..." Rainbow Dash sniffed. Not bothering to see whether or not her friends had taken her advice, she continued murmuring to herself. "I couldn't do it... I...wasn't fast enough..."

"Rainbow Dash, darling, you did all that you possibly could have done..."

The pegasus shook her head. "No, I didn't... I could have gone *faster*..."

"C'mon, Dashie, turn that frown upside-down. How could you have flown faster than a Sonic Rainboom?"

"Augh! You don't get it!" For the first time since Rarity had entered the room, the pegasus turned to face her. The pony's expression was a

frightening mix of anger, sadness, and deep regret. "Neither of you do! I could have done *something*! For Celestia's sake, I'm supposed to be the Element of *Loyalty*! Bottom line: Twilight needed me and I wasn't there for her! I...failed..."

As the multi-colored pegasus sank to the floor, slowly dissolving into a puddle of angry tears, Rarity could feel her heart moving in the same direction. *What is happening to all of us?* she thought. *This is tearing us apart...*

Luna's trip back to her room didn't take very long either. Several hallways and an equal number of staircases later, and she was in her private quarters. Just inside the alicorn's room, a little off to the left, was her own private study, walled in by three fully stocked bookcases. Even more books were spread upon the finely crafted desk in the center of the room, mingling with scrolls, quills, and a candle or two.

The princess made a quick lap around the room, carefully scrutinizing the shelved books, selecting one from here and a few from there. She placed the stack of books upon the desk and turned around to head back down to the kitchen as she had promised. She made it no further than her door. A pony dressed in typical chef's garb stood just outside, a serving cart before him.

"Here are half a dozen freshly baked maple scones and a kettle of boiling water, along with a selection of our finest teas, as you requested, your Highness."

Luna was a little surprised to see the head chef at her door. "Oh...my... You didn't have to bring that all the way up here. I was just on my way down to the kitchen to come get these."

"Nonsense. It was my pleasure. Will this be all for you tonight?"

"Yes, this will be fine. Thank you, Five Star." The familiar glow of magic surrounded Luna's horn as she removed the silver platter from the cart. "Have you taken the other scones to our guests yet?"

"Of course. Just as you requested."

"Very good. Enjoy the rest of your night."

"You too, Princess." The chef pony bowed respectfully and left to return to his kitchen.

At least he didn't call me "milady." the horned pegasus chuckled to herself. This time, as she closed the door behind her, she made sure to lock it; she wanted no further interruptions. "All right... Back to wor- Wait a minute... What's this book?" Out of the clutter on the desk, one book in particular stood out to the pony; a rather thick volume, bound in fine black leather. Attached to the front cover was a short message. Luna easily recognized the writing upon the parchment.

"Here's the book you wanted to read. I wanted to get into it a little bit more, but after what happened today, I don't have the time. I hope that you can take a longer look at it and perhaps shed some light on what's going on."

Love ya, sis,
'Tia."

Luna pulled the note off the book and looked at the gold calligraphic text of the title. "A Brief History of Harmony and Discord... 'Tia must've left this for me while I was outside. Looks like as good a place as any to start." Before she dove into the book, Luna picked out several bags of crushed rose petals and rosehips from the serving tray. These she put into the kettle so that the boiling water could do its work while she did hers.

Of course, it made sense to start at the beginning of the book, and as the pony opened to the foreword, something jumped out at her. "This work seeks to explain the many intricacies of the mysterious forces at work in our world today, collectively known as 'Harmony,' and those ponies that have wielded them." Luna read out loud. "As you read on, keep in mind one simple fact. Know that everything in this world, even the governing force of Harmony, has an opposite equivalent and is not always as it appears; good and evil, light and dark, so on and so forth."

Separated from this ominous-sounding reminder, farther down the page,

was another line of text that appeared to be a quote of some kind. "Not every cloud has a silver lining, but everything good has something evil to go along with it." Strangely enough, this quote was not followed by any sort of name, not even "Anonymous." *Interesting...* Luna folded the top corner of the page down for later reference and flipped past the various dedications and introductions to section one, entitled *Exploring the Elements: An in-depth look at each individual Element*.

"Perfect." the blue alicorn mumbled around a mouthful of scone. Phoenix-feather quill and fresh parchment at the ready, she dove into the first section. With each hour that passed, Luna found herself a few more pages in, with several more scrolls of notes on the table, and one less scone on the plate.

Things were refusing to add up however. The beginning of the section had distinctly mentioned all six Elements, from Honesty to Magic. As she read, Luna had noted that each Element had a very thorough chapter dedicated to it. At least until she got to Magic. "Wait a minute... There's almost nothing here." Confused, she flipped back a page to see if she had missed something. "Nope... That's not it. Odd...there's barely even a paragraph for the Element of Magic. Even then, it just mentions it as a 'key.' That's it..."

A quick set of knocks at the princess' door interrupted her confusion. "Luna? Are you still awake?"

'Tia? The blue pony looked up from her book and ran to the door. The winged unicorn on the other side was lacking her tiara and usual accoutrements, but it was indeed Celestia. "You look awful, sis! What are you doing up? It's still the middle of the night."

The tall white alicorn blinked sleepily and yawned. "I know, but I'm waiting for Applejack and Fluttershy to arrive. Their chariot is long overdue and I'm becoming worried. I need somepony to talk to. May I?"

"Of course! C'mon in." Luna saw something in her sister's eyes; something other than fatigue. She took a step back and allowed the white pony to enter.

Celestia's gaze quickly fell upon the cluttered desk within the study. "You

look as if you've been quite busy tonight. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, you're fine, 'Tia. I was just looking through that book you left me."

"Oh. Please tell me that you've figured some of this mess out." Celestia sighed, a touch of desperation in her voice.

"Sort of..." Luna answered hesitantly. She looked toward the book laying open upon the desk and followed it as it magically floated back to her. "Look at this." The slightly yellowed pages flipped backwards, to the dog-eared page with the strange quote.

"Not every cloud has a silver lining, but everything good has something evil to go along with it..." Celestia stared intently at the passage as something long since buried in a millennium of memories squirmed to free itself. *Why does this sound so familiar? Where have I seen this before?* Finally, like a drowning pony breaking the water's surface, it came to her. "That's it..." she murmured distantly.

"What's it?" Luna looked at the quote in confusion, then to her sister, and finally back at the text again. "Have you seen this before, 'Tia?"

The white alicorn princess nodded. "Let me see the book for a minute." Two pages before the enigmatic quote was the standard publishing information that all books possess. "Here. Read the publication date."

"December 22nd, 1010. What about... Oh, right... That's one thousand years ago..." she mumbled.

"One thousand and one, actually. This book was published one year after our..." The princess paused, unsure of how to breach the delicate subject.

"Disagreement?"

"Yes, that's a good way of putting it. Thank you, Luna. This book was written and published one year after our disagreement, in an attempt to explain just exactly what the Elements of Harmony were and how they worked. It also tried to explain why there were so many rogue storms in Equestria at the time."

"Wait, *what?*" Luna looked like she'd just been slapped. "So what's going on now has already happened?"

"Yes. There just isn't a pony alive that still remembers it. I'm the only one that does. Even back then, those storms were searching for something, just like now."

"But what exactly are they looking for?"

Celestia sighed and closed the book. She slowly walked over to a window and stared out into the night sky for some time. When she spoke again, her tone was very shaky. "I-if you...had asked me that two days ago... I...I couldn't have told you... A-after today, though...I...I..." The alicorn trailed off, refusing to finish her sentence.

"What's the matter, 'Tia? You look like-" It was Luna's turn to trail off, as her question was answered by a single tear dropping to the window sill. She'd never seen this before, not from her sister.

"I know what you're thinking, Luna...but there's something that you should know about that night one thousand and one years ago. That night... That night was the worst night of my life. I don't think I've ever shed so many tears in my life. For a week, I would cry myself to sleep, wake up an hour later, and keep on crying. I cried so long, and so hard, I actually believed that there weren't any tears left in me. For almost one thousand years, that was true; nothing could compare to what had happened between us. Until, that is, I met one pony. In that instant, I knew if anything should ever happen to her...it would bring those tears back..."

"Twilight..."

Celestia nodded weakly. "Yes... She reminded me so much of you... I had already failed to protect you, Luna... I swore to myself that I wouldn't make the same kind of mistake again. So much for *that* promise..."

Luna nudged her sister in her trembling shoulder. "It's not your fault, 'Tia. You can't be everywhere at once."

"T-that's true..." she sniffed. "But I *could* have paid more attention to what

was going on. I should have done something the instant I saw the storms turn toward Ponyville. I saw *all* of the signs, just like I did with *you*. You weren't acting like yourself, you weren't the Luna I knew. By the time I knew something was terribly wrong, that evil force already had you tightly in its grip. I could have stopped it if I had acted sooner...and now...that evil force has returned, again taking s-somepony close to me... I...I'm sorry, Twilight..."

"I wouldn't worry too much, 'Tia. You've told me great things about Twilight. She sounds like she has a good head on her shoulders."

"Y-you're right, Luna. I shouldn't be worried. Twilight is a very smart pony. She'll be fine. Still, I can't help but worry as to *why* she was taken to begin with."

"About that, 'Tia. I found some-"

Luna's news would have to wait until later. Out of nowhere, Lieutenant Jet Stream appeared at the open door. "Princess Celestia! Princess Luna! Your Majesties! Your presences have been requested at the main gate!"

After exchanging confused glances, the sisters followed the lieutenant down numerous hallways and staircases toward the palace's main door. "What is the problem, Jet Stream?" Celestia asked over the rapid clicking of three sets of hooves upon the marble flooring.

"Your guess is as good as mine, your Highness." he replied. "One of the guards on watch said he spotted something approaching the palace."

"Not again... Once a day is more than enough..." The alicorn's violet eyes glinted angrily.

The trio slowed to a halt as they approached the main gate. "Open the gate..." Celestia ordered coldly.

The sight beyond the imposing double doors was not one that any of the three ponies expected to see. Two pegasus stallions, clad in a damaged variant of the typical armor issued to the Royal Air Guard, stood, exhausted from their quick flight.

Jet Stream instantly recognized the two guards. "Cirrus! Wind Shear! Where have you-"

One of Princess Celestia's majestic wings flicked out, cutting off her lieutenant both physically and verbally. "At attention! Quickly!" she barked.

The pair of guards scrambled to stand up straight and salute. "At once, your Highness!" they replied simultaneously.

"Excellent. Full report!"

"We had no trouble locating the ponies you asked for."

Celestia's eyes narrowed darkly at the pause in narration. "Then where are they, pray tell?" Understandably, the guards were quite nervous under the princess' cold, scrutinizing stare. "Well?"

Finally, one of the armored pegasi mustered up the courage and stepped forward. He swallowed visibly and launched back into his narrative. "We were able to take off without any problems. However, as we passed over the Everfree Forest... We...we lost the chariot..."

"How exactly does one just *lose* a chariot?" The princess' voice was quickly becoming frustrated.

Luna noticed this and gently nudged the white alicorn. "Calm down, 'Tia." she whispered. She flinched a little as she was smacked in the face by the feathers of Celestia's other wing.

"Hush. What happened to the chariot? How did you lose it?" Celestia repeated.

"A bolt of lightning cut the chariot loose from us and knocked us from the sky over the Great Scar. Since then, we've been picking our way through the forest until we were free of it. That's why we arrived so late."

"I see... Am I to assume that General Headwind followed the chariot down?"

"Affirmative. His orders were for us to return to Canterlot and find you if

anything were to happen."

"Very good. The two of you have had a long day. You are dismissed."

The guard ponies bowed respectfully and rapidly took their leave. Perhaps they too could sense the princess' mounting irritation? "Shall I ready a combat squad?" Jet Stream asked the princess as the guards galloped away.

Celestia shook her head. "A regular combat squadron would draw too much attention to us. I want this operation to be as covert as possible. Ready the G.R.A.S.S. team. We will be moving within the hour."

"We,' your Majesty?"

"Yes, Jet Stream. I will be leading this mission. I have observed from the sidelines for long enough; this time I take action."

"Forgive my saying so, Princess, but with regards to the day's events, I suggest you reconsider."

The alicorn turned a smoldering glare on the lieutenant, causing him to flinch. "Are you disobeying a direct order, Jet Stream?"

"N-not at all, your Excellency. It is just my opinion that-"

Celestia's gaze softened slightly as she spoke. "Jet Stream, you have served in my Royal Air Guard for many years and I do respect your opinion. However, this is not something I will be swayed upon. Too many things, today included, have only come to pass because of my lack of action. Send word to the armorer, have him begin preparing my armor. Quickly!"

Jet Stream gave a militaristic salute. "Yes, your Highness!" Soon, he too was off down the hallway.

"Come with me, Luna. I need to talk with you."

The blue alicorn watched as her sister started after the lieutenant. *What's wrong, 'Tia? You don't often get like this. The last time I remember seeing this side of you was back while we were fighting against-*

"Luna!"

"C-coming!" she stammered.

"Listen to me carefully, Luna." the elder princess instructed. "I do not foresee this...errand of mine taking more than a few hours, but in the event that I am wrong, I want you to raise the sun in my stead."

"Really? You've always done that, 'Tia. You think I'm ready for that?"

"I know you're ready."

The sisters rounded a corner and entered a massive chamber lined with dozens of variations of the standard Royal Guard armor. Against the far wall was a highly ornate, glass-doored cabinet housing two sets of armor, vastly different from the numerous other sets in the room. These two sets were identical in every way, save for their color. One of them seemed to act as its own light source, gleaming a bright golden yellow. The other one was forged from a nearly pitch-black metal that absorbed any and all light that came near.

"Princess Celestia, your Majesty." A unicorn garbed in a brown blacksmith's apron appeared from a small room alight with the glow of burning coals. "Jet Stream told me you would be coming. Your armor is ready and waiting."

"Very good. Begin my fitting."

"At once." The golden armor pieces drifted out of the cabinet, guided by the blacksmith's steady magic. "Pardon me, your Highness, but would you raise your wings? Thank you." Two parts of a magnificently crafted breastplate, floated up around Celestia's neck and fastened themselves together. A specially made helmet and knee-high leg armor, also made from the same golden metal, completed the ensemble.

The alicorn shrugged slightly to better adjust the armor over her back. It had been quite some time since she had last worn this. "All right, Luna, you're in charge until I return." Without waiting for an answer, the princess turned away and headed for the exit.

"Wait up, sis'!" Luna called after her. "I need to tell you something!"

"Don't worry; I know you can handle being-"

"Just stop and look at me, 'Tia!"

The desperation in her sibling's voice surprised the winged unicorn and she faced the smaller pony. "What is it?"

"P-promise me that you'll come back..."

Celestia smiled at her sister's concern. "I'll be back. Promise." She lowered her head and met the younger princess in a sisterly embrace.

"Please be careful, 'Tia..."

Chapter 5

Dark Dreams

"...the sixth Element; the Element of Magic!"

The glowing stone sphere high above the purple unicorn burst into a magnificent light, illuminating the entirety of the cold stone chamber. As this light neared the pony underneath it, it morphed into a jeweled tiara.

A new light began shining throughout the chamber, surrounding the group of six ponies. A massive, double-helixed rainbow erupted vertically from the pink glow, twisting high into the air before radiating out toward the dark alicorn standing upon the pedestal.

"No... Noooo...!" The rainbow energy began circling around the alicorn, revolving faster and faster until it was a multicolored blur. Before long, however, the cyclone exploded outward, knocking the six ponies to the stone floor. Still upon the circular pedestal, standing there as if nothing had happened, was Nightmare Moon.

"What...what happened? The Elements of Harmony...*failed*?"

"Ahahahaha! Insolent foal! I am Nightmare Moon, darkness incarnate! What did you expect those useless little baubles to do?"

The purple unicorn staggered back to her hooves, dizzy from the shockwave. "The Elements are a force of pure good... Evil cannot stand against them!"

"'Pure good?' *Ha! Nothing* in this world is pure! Everything has an opposite; kindness, honesty, generosity, all of them! As long as there are those that fight for good, there will be those that fight for evil... True evil can never be defeated!" the black pony laughed. "It will *a/ways* return!"

"But...but..."

"*Enough!* Your inane ramblings grow tiresome. Your efforts have failed,

and this battle is *over!*" Nightmare Moon's amorphous mane began swirling itself into a violent, frenzied tornado. The very air became charged with an unnatural energy as lightning bolts started manifesting out of thin air.

"No!" Twilight shouted defiantly. "The Elements of Harmony *will* prevail! Back on your hooves, everypony! We can still do this! We can still win! We can...girls?" Met with silence, the unicorn glanced behind her. To her shock, nopony was there. She was alone.

"Pathetic little foal! You shall be the first to experience my endless night! *Sleep forever!*"

"*Aah!*" Twilight awoke with a start, her mane and coat damp with a cold sweat. The transition from dream to reality is always shaky, and it took the unicorn mare a good chunk of time to realize the difference. "T-that was just a dream... Nightmare Moon was defeated a year ago... That wasn't real..."

"Look who's finally awake... It's about damn time; you've been fidgeting and whining in your sleep like a newborn filly..."

Twilight's hadn't fully woken up yet, and her vision was a bit blurry, so she had no idea who (or what) she was talking to. Her first instinct was to conjure a simple light spell at the tip of her horn. The result was less than desirable; the spell fizzled, only succeeding in producing a tiny spit of magenta-hued magic that miserably sank to the floor and burned out.

"We won't have any of *that* while you're in here. This is a magic-free zone."

"Magic-free? But that would require a massive amount of oppositely polarized energy. How are you-"

"That's on a need-to-know basis. You don't qualify." the silhouette sniffed.

Twilight snorted in frustration at her roommate's silence. Her mind was a hurricane of questions and she just wanted some answers. After a short time, it became painfully clear that she was not going to get any, so the unicorn gave up waiting and began doing it herself. Her head had finally stopped swimming from her rapid awakening, and there was a tiny bit of

light leaking in from the candle-lit hallway to aid in her search.

This tiny room was every inch a dungeon, from its purely cobblestone construction, its lack of furnishings, right down to the cobweb-coated chains snaking from the back wall. It wasn't until she went to stand up that Twilight found she was sporting her very own set, complete with heavy manacles fastened about each of her legs. As she stared at these in confusion, the mare discovered she was wearing some kind of strange jewelry; a choker inset with an odd gemstone.

"Ow!" Touching it quickly turned out to be a bad idea. The surface of the gem was about as hot as sticking one's hoof into an open flame. *Where in Equestria am I?* she thought, her worry mounting as her mind put together what little pieces she had before her.

"Y'all git yer hooves offa me, ya varmint!"

Twilight's ears shot up at the familiar voice. *Applejack?*

"C'mon! Lemme go, Ah dare ya! Ah'll back yer sorry no good flanks halfway into next week!"

Above the rising din from the hallway, a solid *Thud!* could be heard, followed by a very angry "Ouch!"

"Hah! How do ya like them apples? If ya'd hold still, Ah'd be happy ta do yer other eye so's yer all nice an' matchin'! How's that sou-uff!"

"I've had enough of your lip! Charger! Skies! Get her in there!"

Shortly thereafter, Applejack was forcefully ushered around the corner by a pair of pegasi. With a great amount of difficulty, along with a good number of bruises between them, the eventually succeeded in restraining the stubborn orange pony. As these two pegasi left the room, another, this one wearing a rapidly swelling eye, entered. "All right, ponies, cock an ear. This is important."

"Go choke on an apple core." the farmer pony snorted.

"Excuse me?"

"Y'all heard me. Or did some of that mud livin' in what you call a brain leak into yer ears too?"

The earth pony's insults were taking their toll. The pegasus was trembling with barely contained rage. Applejack saw this and decided to give her a little something extra. In a manner most cheeky, she pointed the tip of her tongue at the winged pony. As answer, she received the pony equivalent of a backhand across her mouth.

Thoroughly fed up, the pegasus mare turned to leave. As she passed the stallion standing guard at the doorway, he burst into a fit of laughter. "Hahahaha! She sure as hay gave it to you! Hahaha! What's the matter? The high and mighty Nightshade can't handle a simple earth pony? Haha-"

This "Nightshade" aggressively shoved the larger pony into the stone wall, glaring daggers at him. "Put a lid on it, smart-flank. You. Recon. Now." she growled.

"S-sure thing..." he stammered, still giggling like a schoolfilly. "R-right away..."

"Idiot..." Nightshade finally pulled the heavy door shut, leaving the pair of ponies in near total darkness.

A period of uneasy silence followed before either of the friends spoke. Applejack was the first to break the silence. "Heh. Ah thought that slap was gonna hurt a bit more. Guess not..."

After waiting to see if there was a response from beyond the door, Twilight finally let out her held breath. "Applejack!" The unicorn was overjoyed to see her friend, but terrified that it had to be under the current circumstances. "Are you all right? What are you doing here? Where are w-"

"Woah there, sugarcube. One question at a time. Take a deep breath an' start over."

Twilight obliged, already feeling better. The silent confidence radiating from the earth pony was immensely calming. "Are you all right?" she repeated. "That slap looked like it hurt."

Applejack nodded. "Don't you worry none, Twi'. It's gonna take more'n that to- Oop, 'scuse me... *Ptoo!*" The blonde pony took a quick pause and spat out a small mouthful of blood. "Like Ah was sayin': It's gonna take more'n *that* to harm one of the Apple clan. We're stubborn as the day is long."

"That's a relief... So then, what are you doing here?"

"We were on our way to Canterlot when our ride was knocked clean outta the sky by a lightnin' bo-"

"We?' Who else was with you?"

The hat-wearing pony clapped a hoof to her forehead, making her chains rattle noisily. "Shoot! Fluttershy! Those pegasi had me so ticked, Ah plumb fergot about her... Ah hope she's doin' all right..."

"Fluttershy's in trouble too? What's going on, Applejack? Why were you two heading for Canterlot?" Twilight started rattling off questions again, forgetting what her friend had said moments earlier.

"Ah ain't got the foggiest idea... Ah just know it's real nasty." All of a sudden, the orange pony felt sick. Breaking the news about the unicorn's library to her wasn't going to be easy. "Ah...Ah've also got a bit of bad news..."

"What is it? Please tell me the others are all right..."

"Well...uh... Ah don't know how to break this to ya, Twi'..."

"Come on, Applejack." Twilight pleaded. "Tell me, please. I can handle it."

The earth pony sighed. There was just no other way to explain this. "Alright, sugarcube... Just know that this ain't any easier fer me to say this. The day after you and the girls took off fer Canterlot, that was when stuff started gettin' real bad. We got hit with a nasty storm an' Fluttershy ended up havin' to stay the night. Anyway, the next mornin', we found out that somethin' had gone and broken into all of our houses; includin' yer library, Twi'..."

The unicorn was becoming anxious again. Applejack wouldn't meet her eyes. "Why...why do you sound so depressed? They couldn't have taken *that* many books...right?"

"They're gone, Twi'. All of 'em. Whoever's b'hind all this burned every single thing inside that library. There ain't a thing left... Ah'm awful sorry..."

The look on the unicorn's face was indescribable by mere words. Images of charred, burning pages fluttering upon a hot, ashen breeze were all she could see. *No...* Scrolls, books, entire encyclopedias, all full of beautiful knowledge, burning...burning until they were no more than miserable piles of ash, ready to be blown away by the slightest wind. She shook her head, refusing to believe what she had been told. "No... No, no, no!" Twilight sank to the dusty floor, hooves pressed to the sides of her head. "That can't be true! It just *can't!*"

"Ah'm sorry, Twilight... For once in mah life, Ah wish Ah-"

"That's not true! Don't lie to me, Applejack!" she yelled, an angry spark in her violet eyes. *"Don't lie to me!"*

The apple-marked pony shook her head sadly. "Ah wish Ah was, hun'. Ah wish Ah was..."

"No! It's not true! It's not-"

"Fer Celestia's sake, Twilight! Look at me! Look at who yer talkin' to!"

The purple pony slowly looked up, hot tears still in her eyes, right into the green eyes belonging to the Element of Harmony. Realization hit her like a dropped anvil. "I...I apologize, A-Applejack... I didn't mean to accuse you of be-being a liar... I just-"

"Ah fergive ya. Ah'd feel the same way if anythin' happened to mah family."

"S-so Apple Bloom and Big Macintosh... They-they're both okay then?"

"Yep. They're both right as rain."

Twilight wiped her eyes and sat up. "G-good to hear. What about everypony else's houses. I hope t-they're still standing..."

"Uh-huh. All still in one piece. We...weren't able to find Angel Bunny though; little guy's still missin'."

The unicorn was legitimately surprised at hearing this. "Fluttershy left *while* Angel Bunny was missing? What did you say to her to convince her to do that?"

"Ah didn't say nothin'. It was Big Macintosh who did all the sayin'."

Twilight's tearful expression gave way to a soft smile. "R-really? I had a hunch that that's who it was." she said mysteriously.

Applejack's eyes revealed nothing but confusion. "What in Equestria are ya talkin' about, Twi'?"

"You know that Big Macintosh came by the library recently, right?"

"Yeah, it was about two weeks ago. Why?"

"I was getting there." she chuckled. "Do you know what book he came looking for, though?" A shrug from the earth pony let her continue. "The book he ended up checking out was *The Stallion's Standard to Going Steady*. I didn't really think anything of it at first. A week later, though, I figured it out. This time, it was Fluttershy that came in looking for a book. *The Complete Encyclopedia of Rabbits*, I believe. Guess who had that one?"

Even though she was not one for "fancy mathematics," as she called them, Applejack easily put two and two together. The smile that crept onto her face was so bright, it almost lit up the small room. "Shoot! That's the best thing Ah've heard in a long time. Ah've been telling that ol' pony that he really should find himself a mare. What're the odds that it'd be Fluttershy?"

"Well, considering the apparent imbalance in the ratio of-"

"C'mon, Twi! Ya know darn well that ain't what Ah meant!" the blonde-maned pony laughed.

"I know, I know." Laughter has a habit for being notoriously contagious, and Twilight was soon giggling along with her friend. "Ever since I got that letter from Princess Celestia two days ago, it's been nothing but bad news." the unicorn sighed. "It's so refreshing to hear something like that."

Good news or not, the two ponies *were* still in a dungeon, the door to which suddenly flew open, startling them both. The pegasus that had been sent on recon earlier had returned, and he had a very evil grin upon his features. He made a beeline straight for the unicorn. "Time we put that magic of yours to good use."

Unsure of the stallion's motives, Twilight screwed her eyes shut in fear. Barely anything happened, though. She felt her choker being forcibly ripped off and instantly replaced with a new one. "That's it...?"

The winged pony left just as quickly as he'd appeared, slamming the door behind him.

"What was he talkin' about, Twi'?" Applejack asked warily. "Puttin' yer magic to use?"

The early morning sunlight seeping through the closed curtains fell upon the sleeping pony's eyelids causing her to roll over in an attempt to escape nature's wake-up call. Contradicting her actions, the pegasus murmured sleepily, "I really should get up; I've a lot to do..." The pony then gave a massive yawn and sat up.

After returning the butterfly-marked quilt to a neat and tidy position upon the bed, Fluttershy happily trotted down the stairs, in the best of moods. "Good morning, Angel Bunny." she called out in a singsong voice as she passed his basket en route to the kitchen. "Are you hungry?"

IN the blink of an eye, the mare had pulled three carrots from the refrigerator and was cutting them up for her animal friend. Humming, she scooped these into a bowl and carried it back out to where the rabbit was

still sleeping. "Wake up, my little Angel..." she murmured softly, touching her nose to the blanket-wrapped bundle.

"One mouth taken care of..." Fluttershy remarked, opening her back door. Her next course of action was to go about feeding the myriad of other animals under her care. Of this myriad, she saved a certain few for last. After digging a mouthful of worms from the ground, she flew up to the tall tree she had placed her patient in the day before. Just as expected, the young robin was still there, wing bandaged up just as she'd left it. As she spat the admittedly foul-tasting bunch of worms into the nest, the robin greeted her with a warm, friendly trill.

The mare smiled. "Well, good morning to you too. How does that wing feel?" Three cheerful chirps told Fluttershy that her treatment had worked. "Oh, I'm so glad to hear that. Now hold still and I'll have those bandages right off, okay?"

Each gauze strip that the winged pony removed was neatly draped over her foreleg. She was about to do the same with the last bandage when she noticed several jet black particles settling upon the white cloth. "Ash...?" Ash only comes from one source. *A fire!* Given her home's proximity to the Everfree Forest, the pink-maned pegasus was right to be worried about a fire. However, a quick, frightened look around revealed a black cloud on the horizon slowly climbing into the sky. At first, Fluttershy was relieved that the fire was on the opposite side of Ponyville. Until, that is, she realized just what was on the opposite side of Ponyville. "Sweet Apple Acres... *Applejack!*"

Leaving the bandages swirling in her wake, the pegasus took off for the apple farm. "Oh my goodness, oh my goodness!" The pony's wings were a blur as she tore through the sky. She flew faster than she had ever flown before, yet the far-off wisp of smoke was not getting any closer. Night had fallen by the time Fluttershy reached the farm. The orange, unsteady glow of the dancing flames revealed a single pony standing far below her. The more the pegasus spiraled down to her, the better she could see that the young pony was wearing a large bow in her mane. "Apple Bloom! Are you all right?"

The little yellow filly nodded shakily, the burning farmhouse clearly reflected in her wide, tear-filled eyes.

The mare's relief at hearing this was short-lived, as she quickly noticed the lack of the rest of the Apple family. "W-where are Applejack and Big Macintosh?" she asked hesitantly.

"B-B-Big Macintosh never came out... AJ went b-back in to find him...!"

"Oh no..." With her heart suddenly in her mouth, Fluttershy spun around to face the raging inferno that was the farmhouse. It looked as though flames had consumed the entire upper floor. The longer the pony stared at the crackling flames, the louder that little voice in her head became. Of the two ponies that were supposedly still inside, the pegasi's thoughts turned to one of them.

Throwing caution (and logic, as running into a burning building is *never* a good idea) to the wind, Fluttershy went for it. The heat inside the farmhouse was sweltering and everything was bathed in a strangely eerie red-orange light. "Big Macintosh!? Where are you? Please! Answer me!" she shouted over the angry crackling of the fire as it slowly consumed the house. Obviously, this had not been a smart idea to begin with, but the pegasus was now learning why. The flames dancing all around her were greedily sucking up any available oxygen and simultaneously superheating whatever was left, making each breath burn from the inside out. The overabundance of soot floating through the air clung to the pony's mane and coat, and stung her eyes horribly. Still, something inside the yellow mare would not let her quit.

She shook away the light-headedness induced by inadequate oxygen and sprinted up the staircase. She looked to the left and right; both directions were overrun by tall crimson flames. Panicked tears began welling up in the mare's frightened eyes. "*Big Macintosh! Answer me!*" she sobbed. "*Please!*"

Fluttershy was not the hardiest of ponies to begin with, and her surroundings were draining her stamina reserves faster by the second; the intense heat was steadily strangling the life from her. A foul mixture of soot and sweat ran into the pegasi's eyes as she bent over fighting to catch the smallest breath possible. Though her eyes were red and swollen, there was still a glint of determination present in them.

Determination, no matter how strong, means nothing if one's body doesn't have the strength to back it up, and it was taking all of what Fluttershy had left just to remain standing. It wasn't long before even this was overpowered, though. The structural integrity of the farmhouse was reaching critical levels. "Aaah!!" The blazing cross beam above the winged pony gave way and collapsed onto her.

Struggling proved useless; the more Fluttershy squirmed, the more the burning wood pressed into her back. "Big Mac... Please..." Her voice was little more than a raspy whisper, yet it was finally answered. She could faintly make out a frenetic barking quickly approaching her. "W-Winona?"

The loyal collie bounded up to the trapped pony, barking madly. "N-no..." Fluttershy breathed. "You...have to get...out of here, Winona..." Ignoring the pegasi's command, the canine began frantically pulling on her right wing, obviously trying to free her. "O-ow... Winona...stop... It's not working..." she wheezed. Despite the weak protesting, Winona kept up her furious tugging on Fluttershy's wing, with each tug significantly more painful than the last, until...

Pop!

Fluttershy sat bolt upright, her chest heaving in and out. A quick inventory of her surroundings revealed her to still be in the Everfree Forest with General Headwind and Zecora. Her right wing was quite sore, yet an experimental flap proved it to be useable once again. Confused, she looked from Headwind to Zecora and back again. "Wh-what happened?"

"Miss Zecora helped me to tend to your dislocated wing." the general explained.

The zebra nodded in agreement. "A sadder sight has not passed my eye, than a pegasus that could not fly."

The shock of her nightmare had not yet passed, and Fluttershy was still on edge. She tried looking around again to calm herself down. The dark trees of the Everfree Forest stretched out before her. Against her back, casting a long shadow in the bright moonlight, was a rundown cobblestone wall. There was no sign of a farmhouse, burning or otherwise. *That was just a dream...? It was so...real...* Her heart skipped a beat as she realized

just what had happened. *I just ran into a burning building to find Big Macintosh...* "Where are we?" she asked, shrugging off the apparent meaning of her dream.

"We're just outside the castle of the Royal Pony Sisters. The instant you stepped inside, you fainted." Headwind informed her.

At hearing this, Fluttershy's memory returned; meeting Zecora, seeing the castle, hearing her friend's voices. With the return of these recent memories, came the flood of concerns. "What about Applejack? Have you found her yet?"

Zecora looked up from a mixture she was boiling over a small fire. "A place such as this has many places to hide. Had I told you 'yes,' I would have lied."

"What...what does that mean?"

"It means we could walk around the castle for weeks, perhaps even months, without finding a single sign of Miss Applejack... This castle has spent so long on the edge of memories, that nopony, not even the Princesses themselves, know all of its secrets."

Fluttershy swallowed nervously. "W-what's the plan now...?"

General Headwind flashed the mare a roguish smile. "What makes you think that it's any different? The day that I break a promise is the day that Her Majesty stops raising the sun. I'll find Miss Applejack, no matter how long it takes me."

"Well, shoot, y'all ain't gotta look real far!"

Everypony, Headwind included, jumped at the sudden voice. From the dark foliage behind the general an orange hat-wearing pony materialized. "Miss Applejack!" Headwind exclaimed. "You gave me quite the scare. I was of the impression that you were being held prisoner."

"Ah was, fer a while, anyways. But here Ah am now."

"Hold on..." Fluttershy slowly stood up, her eyes narrowed in the manner

of one who is suspicious. "What is my cutie mark?" she asked, keeping her wings folded down over her sides.

"Butterflies." Applejack answered easily enough.

"How many?"

"Three." There was a tiny bit of hesitation in the orange pony's voice; short enough that it was undetectable.

The gentle pegasi's wings flared out in rage. "*Liar!*"

Chapter 6

Mirror, Mirror...

General Headwind was forced to dive for cover as an angry yellow streak blazed past him.

The Applejack impostor was roughly buffeted to the forest floor by Fluttershy's wing-powered tackle. The yellow pony's eyes burned with a rage-fueled flame that was truly terrifying. "*Where is my friend!?*" she shouted at the top of her voice.

"Wh-what are ya talkin' about? Ah'm right here..."

"*No! You're not Applejack! Where is she!?*"

With a good deal of difficulty, Headwind managed to pull the enraged Fluttershy off of the other mare. "By her Majesty's mane, I've never seen this kind of ferocity from such a gentle pony before..."

Zecora offered a small piece of cryptically worded wisdom from her spot near her campfire. "True friendship is a power that can see through the most convincing of lies, even when no difference can be seen with the eyes." she chuckled.

By now, the cat was not only out of the bag, but was sprinting away. Even so, the fake Applejack continued her charade. "What in tarnation was that for?"

The general took a threatening step toward the impostor. "If you know what's good for you, you will drop the act *now*."

Before the pegasus got an answer either way, he got a tap on the shoulder from Zecora. A quick tilt of her head suggested he step aside. The zebra then crouched down in front of the orange mare and stared intently at her, murmuring under her breath. At length, she proclaimed, "Fluttershy, kind pony, please be a dear. In my things there is a tied pouch; quickly, bring it here."

"R-right..." The pegasi's anger was not directed toward Zecora, and her soft-spoken demeanor had returned. She hurried over to where the striped pony's baskets sat upon the forest floor. Jars clinked against one another as Fluttershy nosed through them in search of the aforementioned pouch. "I...I don't see any- Oh, wait. Here it is." The sought-after item was hiding at the very bottom of the wicker basket. The pastel-colored mare grabbed the leather pouch and trotted back over to the zebra. "Here you are, Zecora."

The striped pony nodded in thanks and untied the pouch. She poured a small amount of fine purple powder into her upturned hoof as six eyes looked on in confusion. With a quick breath, Zecora blew the glittering dust into the orange pony's face.

"Ack! What-*pffft!*-did ya do that fer?"

Zecora said nothing, but continued to watch the cloud of dust as it eventually gathered, floating in a small area just above the earth pony's chest. "A tiny bit of finely powdered dust of amethyst always reveals any magic within its midst." Faster than any eye could follow, her hoof flashed towards where the amethyst dust hung. Her hoof came back wearing a choker inlaid with a smooth black gemstone.

General Headwind and Fluttershy shared the same curiosity concerning the odd accessory. "What is that?"

"This strange jewel is known as a sinkstone, something I have seen many times in my home. It allows any pony without a horn to use magic just as well as a unicorn."

With no more magic to power it, the Applejack illusion faded, leaving an angry, violet-maned, slate-grey pegasus behind. Saying her expression was anywhere close to friendly would have been an egregious lie, and her swollen eye wasn't helping her cause. "Congratulations... You've found me out... What are you going to do now?" she muttered condescendingly.

The pegasus general snorted angrily. "Give me a minute; I'm sure I can come up with something."

"I'm shaking..."

Since the other pegasus mare had appeared, Fluttershy had been unable to look away. She had seen this pony once before, quite recently, actually. She just couldn't put a hoof on it.

"I want some answers and I want them *now*. The orange pony you were impersonating; where is she?" Headwind demanded.

The grey mare's quick yellow eyes spotted the bandage restraining the stallion's wing. An evil smirk crossed her features. "I'll tell you... But you'll have to catch me first!" In an explosion of leaves, dead grass, and air, she leapt into the sky. "Let's see how well you fly with that lame wing!" she jeered before wheeling around and taking off into the night sky. "Have fuuuun!"

"No-!" Fluttershy watched in horror as the only pony that knew where Applejack was vanished into the night.

Just make sure ya bring AJ back safely...

The mare's heart skipped a beat at the unexpected voice. *B-Big Macintosh...* The sincerity in his tone; that feather-soft touch against her cheek... Her promise to him. "I'll find you, Applejack." Fluttershy whispered. "Never go back on a promise." The pony winced as she spread her wings. This flight wasn't going to be easy, but it was either go after this other pegasus or wander the Everfree Forest for who knows how long looking for Applejack. She dropped her saddlebags and unsteadily took to the air. *Oh no... She's already gone... Now what do I do?* The yellow pony hovered in place, scanning the sea of treetops. With each flap of her wing, she wobbled slightly. Maybe that wing wasn't ready for use yet...

One would expect a pegasus in flight to remain in flight, not be perched upon a branch like some four-legged bird. In the tree just below the struggling Fluttershy, was the other pegasus. *Look at her! She can't even keep herself in the air! It's time to clip this pony's wings!*

"G.R.A.S.S. team at your service, your Highness."

Just outside the main gate of Canterlot, four lightly armored pegasus stallions were waiting patiently for Princess Celestia's arrival. "Excellent. I will brief you en route. Let's move." The princess' magnificent wings opened wide and effortlessly lifted her from the ground. She could hear the simultaneous unfolding of another four sets of wings behind her as she turned her path toward the Everfree Forest. *Hold on, everypony. I'm coming.*

The four pegasus soldiers flew in a tight formation around their princess. After a rather long period of silence, one of them broke formation and neared the alicorn. "Beg pardon, your Majesty... But what exactly is our objective?"

Celestia's eyes glinted in the moonlight. "The Elements of Harmony are under attack. It is time we struck back. A messenger chariot was downed over the Everfree Forest, near the Great Scar. Two of the Elements were in that chariot. That was hours ago, and they could be anywhere in the forest by now. Our objective is to comb the forest until they are located. Once we reach the forest, I want two of your team in the skies with me, and the other two scanning the area from the ground. We will move silently and undetected. Understood?"

"Yes, your Majesty!"

The winged unicorn abruptly halted her flight as the edge of the forest appeared below her. She turned to face the rest of the soldiers. "We will be scouring this forest from end to end, looking for three of the Elements of Harmony. Be on the lookout for an orange earth pony; answers to Applejack, a yellow pegasus; answers to Fluttershy, and a purple unicorn; answers to Twilight. If you locate one of these ponies, you are to stay with them at all costs. Should the need arise, use of lethal force for the Element's protection has been authorized. General Headwind is also in this area. If you are to locate him, inform him of this clearance. You have each been equipped with three flares as well. I trust that the conditions for their use are clear enough?" the princess asked, running her gaze across the quartet of ponies.

Each of the four gave a salute and replied in unison, "One per Element, your Highness!"

"Correct. Gust and Sky Runner, I want you at ground level. Cross Wind, Zephyr, you're with me. Luck be with us all. Godspeed."

Another round of salutes, and the troop parted ways. Celestia and her party spread into a wide formation to cover more area. With each wingbeat, the alicorn became more and more worried. There wasn't the slightest sign of any pony to be seen. *Where are you? Please, give me a sign...*

Suddenly, Zephyr could be heard shouting over the rushing wind. "Pony spotted! Twelve o' clock high!"

Twelve o' clock high? Could that mean...? Celestia spotted a pegasus hovering above the treetops. A wave of relief washed over her as she saw the silhouette of the pony's mane and tail against the strong moonlight. *Fluttershy!* That wave of relief quickly ebbed out when she observed another winged shadow explode from the treeline under Fluttershy and collide with her.

The Element of Kindness never deserved to be involved in this mess, and she definitely didn't deserve *this*. This was the final straw, Celestia's patience had worn through. With a powerful clap of her wings, the princess put on an impressive turn of speed and streaked toward Fluttershy's attacker. Horrified, she saw the second pegasus circle back for another shot at the other pony. Celestia pushed her wings to the limit, further increasing her velocity until a golden wave of energy built up in front of her.

That first glancing blow that Fluttershy had taken hadn't knocked her from the sky, but it was all she could do to keep herself aloft. Any sort of dodging was out of the question, especially with her attacker too quick to track.

"Miss Fluttershy!" General Headwind's voice rang out from below the mare. "Behind you!"

As the pony turned around, she was forced to shut her eyes when a blinding light violently exploded before her. The light quickly faded, leaving a furious Princess Celestia in its wake. The yellow pegasus was both shocked and awed. "P-Princess...!"

"*Enough!*" Celestia's voice boomed out over the forest like thunder. "*Not an inch closer!*"

The slate-grey pegasus scowled and muttered something under her breath, slowly retreating from the alicorn. Then, like an arrow from a bow, Zephyr was upon her, knocking the winged mare into a chaotic, earthward spiral that landed her unmercifully upon her back.

"Oh my, that looked like it hurt. I hope she's all right." Fluttershy commented, staring down at the unconscious pony.

Celestia sniffed coldly. "That is of little importance to me right now. I'm more concerned about *your* well-being, my dear. Are you all right?"

The smaller pony bowed her head respect, an awkward gesture while in flight. "Oh yes, your Majesty, I'm just fine. I'm-*wah!*" Fatigue decided to cut Fluttershy off in mid-sentence by momentarily stopping her wings. Thankfully, she was swiftly caught by a soft yellow aura.

"Let's continue this conversation after we're safely on the ground, hmm?" Celestia chuckled.

"Yes, please." Fluttershy breathed a sigh of relief when she felt the ground beneath her hooves once more. It felt as though there were thousands of tiny, fiery needles embedded in her throbbing wing. It wasn't going to be used for a while. "What are you doing here, your Majesty?"

"Your escort finally made it back to Canterlot and informed me of the situation. I finally decided to take matters into my own hooves. I believed that the situation warranted my input." The alicorn princess paused and looked over the small company that had gathered here. "Wait, where is Applejack?"

Fluttershy uncomfortably rubbed her foreleg. "Uhm... I...don't really know..." The pegasus flinched a little as Celestia pounded a hoof on the ground in frustration.

"Don't worry, Fluttershy," Celestia quickly added. "it's not you that I'm angry with. It's myself; I let this mess get too far out of hoof, and you and your friends are paying the price. I'll do everything in my power to fix this. General Headwind!"

"At your service, your Highness!" The white pegasus stallion stepped forward and saluted briskly.

"Do we have any information regarding the whereabouts of Applejack?"

"Affirmative. Based on an eyewitness report from Miss Zecora of the Everfree Forest, I believe Miss Applejack is being held somewhere in the castle above us."

As soon as the princess had called Headwind to her, Fluttershy correctly guessed that her part in the conversation was over. Her first task was retrieving her discarded saddlebags. Task number two? The yellow pony nervously trotted up to one of the two male pegasi standing over the unconscious grey mare. "Uhm... E-excuse me, sirs, but, uhm... Do you think you could let me take a look at her wings...?"

"Negative." the soldier quickly answered, blocking Fluttershy's path with a stiffly extended wing. "I'm afraid I cannot let you do that."

Out of the corner of her eye, Celestia had been watching Fluttershy's actions. "Stand down, Cross Wind!" the alicorn ordered. "Let the Element of Kindness do as she wishes!"

"Your Majesty, that would go against your earlier orders-"

"I know what I said! Listen to what I'm saying now! Let her pass."

"Very well, your Highness." Cross Wind sighed. "Right this way, ma'am."

The pink-maned pony smiled timidly at the soldier. "Sorry..."

Celestia sighed and shook her head. "You've certainly done a good job of teaching your troops to follow every order to the word, Headwind. What is our next plan of action?"

"It is the same as when you first dispatched me from Canterlot. I still fully intend to see that Miss Fluttershy and Miss Applejack reach the royal city."

"It is admirable to stick by your promise, General. I certainly hope that you are aware of the uncountable secrets the castle behind us holds, yes?"

The general nodded. "Indeed I am. However, I believe that our captive will be able to help us immensely."

"Oh my..." Fluttershy had succeeded in gently turning the other pegasus over so she was better able to look at her wings. It was a very familiar sight; both of the mare's wings were completely limp, having been dislocated from her heavy impact with the ground. Unlike the general, however, the yellow pony knew how to tend to injured wings. Bracing herself, Fluttershy carefully gripped the wing close to its joint and started pulling upward at a sharp angle. With some finessing, the wing finally popped back into place.

The timid pegasus cringed a little bit at the noise. *Ugh... I hate that sound.* After performing the same procedure with the other wing (and cringing just the same), the winged pony took a short trip into her saddlebags. She returned with a tightly wound roll of gauze, just as a new problem presented itself. She wouldn't be able to properly bind her patient's wings in her unconscious state. Not without a little help at least.

The Element of Kindness again found herself approaching the soldiers. "P-pardon me, sirs, but... I'm sorry I got you in trouble before...a-and I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor... I-if that's all right, I mean..."

"Of course, ma'am. What can I assist you with?"

With the support from the two stallions, Fluttershy quickly and efficiently bound the dark pegasus' wings. As she replaced the gauze in her bags, one of the male ponies spoke up. "Enlighten us, Miss..."

"Fluttershy." she finished.

"Enlighten us, Miss Fluttershy, but why bother with mending this one's wings?"

"Why not?"

"She is the enemy, and was attacking you just moments ago." Zephyr pointed out.

The mare's voice became just the tiniest bit sterner and more confident. "Enemy or not, she's still a pony just like us, and just because she was attacking me doesn't mean she can't be shown a little TLC."

"Spoken like the true Element of Kindness, Fluttershy." Princess Celestia added, stepping up behind the pegasus. "Kindness harbors no prejudice toward anypony. No pony is exempt from it."

"Well said, your Majesty." Headwind stated. "Now, let us come up with some way to acquire the information we seek. Time is not with us."

"I'm really worried, Applejack..." Twilight mumbled, nervously tapping her hoof against the hard stone floor.

"What's eatin' ya, sugarcube?"

"I'm worried about what that pegasus was intending to do with my magic. I didn't like the tone in his voice."

"Ah don't see how he could be doin' much of anythin' with it. It ain't like he's a unicorn with a horn to go around magickin' and whatnot."

"I know, I know..." the unicorn fretted. "But still, I don't know what these stones can do..." Twilight experimentally poked the stone of her choker. It didn't take long to find it was just as hot, if not hotter than the last time she had tried that. A cacophony of rattling metal could be heard as she shook her stinging hoof.

With how often the door was roughly swung open, it was surprising that it hadn't fallen off its hinges yet. "Hey! Enough of that!" the stallion standing in the doorway barked.

"Jus' swell..." Applejack snorted. "This room was a lot prettier without yer ugly mug stinkin' it up."

"Hold your tongue, earth pony, or I'll stuff it back down your sorry throat."

Two other pegasi, one of each gender, entered the room after their

cohort, each carrying a long, thick strip of cloth and several heavy ropes.

"Hold on a minute! What are you doin-*mmph!*" Twilight let out a shrill, muffled shriek of horror as one piece of cloth was shoved into her mouth and promptly tied around the back of her head. The brief glimpse that the unicorn had of her friend's equally terrified face would be an image that would stay with her forever. Another strip of cloth was in turn drawn over her eyes, leaving Twilight completely at the mercy of her assaulters.

"What in tarnation are ya doin' with mah friend!?" Applejack's demands went unheeded; the three pegasi were having their own conversation.

"So... Why exactly are we doing this again?" the pink-maned pegasus asked as she tightly fastened a rope around the struggling unicorn's neck.

"Before Nightshade left, she said if she wasn't back in thirty minutes, we were to assume the worse and to fall to our back-up plan. Now quit blathering and get those ropes good and tight."

"Okay... What about the other one?"

"Not important. Magic is the key. We can afford a small setback such as this. The Elements call out to each other; they will all be ours in due time. Enough questions; let's go!"

The combined strength of the three pegasi leaning on the ropes easily pulled Twilight from the small room, despite her constant struggling and muffled pleas for help.

The orange earth pony still left in the dungeon bucked and snorted like a wild beast enraged, but to no avail. "*Y'all bring her back here this instant! Ya hear me!? Let me outta here! Ah'll buck yer heads clean off!*" Unfortunately, like the battle with her restraints, Applejack's threats would ultimately amount to nothing.

In the dark, solitary silence that followed the angry echoes of her voice, the earth pony made herself a promise. *Ah'll save ya, Twilight. Ah promise.*

After Celestia had left, Luna returned to what she had been doing earlier that night, albeit with a much heavier mindset. Retrieving the rather hefty tome from the sill where her sister had left it, the dark blue alicorn carried it back to her desk and sat down again. "Come on, Luna...stop worrying. 'Tia is going to be fine; just focus on the book."

At the princess' guiding, the book magically opened itself to the next section, titled *Element and Harmony; Their enigmatic relationship*.

Compared to the previous section, this one was relatively short. It was barely two hours before the final page presented itself. Luna blinked and yawned widely. "Recall that Harmony is the governing force of our world. Recall also that the Elements are embodiments of that force, and they will actively call to and seek each other out over great distances in order to maintain Harmony." Luna sleepily glanced up from the yellowing pages toward a clock, simplistically divided into two halves, one illustrated like the day, the other like the night. "Still an hour left..." After a moment of thought, the alicorn decided to set an alarm and sleep the hour away.

Picking the small clock off the desk, she slowly clopped over to her canopied bed, where she set it upon her nightstand. Her tiara and necklace soon joined it. The feathery softness of the pillow and comforter were incredibly comfortable, and Luna quickly fell asleep.

In what seemed like less than five minutes, the young princess was ripped from her brief slumber by a shrill scream.

"Nooo!"

Half-asleep or not, it didn't take Luna very long to know that voice belonged to her sister. "Celestia!" In an instant, the dark blue pony was out of bed and skidding out of her room. "Hold on, 'Tia!" She shouldered her sister's door open and stopped dead in her tracks.

The white alicorn was crouched over a dark heap, sobbing uncontrollably. "What is it, 'Tia? Please tell me you're all right!" Luna pleaded, taking a step toward her sister.

"Not a step closer, you monster..." Celestia growled in a threatening voice.

Luna failed to hear the true malice in her sister's voice and took another step forward. "W-what are you talking about, 'Tia? What's the matter?" she asked, not noticing the yellow magic that enveloped the curtain rod hanging on the far wall. It became significantly harder to ignore as it came whistling through the air and thudded into her side like a club, buffeting her to the marble floor. With her head swimming from the impact, the confused alicorn looked up and saw Celestia just above her, reared up to her full height. There was a furious, almost murderous look in her violet eyes. "Celestia...? What's wrong with you?" The winged pony slowly began backing away from her taller, curtain rod-wielding opponent.

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with *me!*?" The princess' eyes radiated nothing but pure fury.

Luna suddenly found the decoration-turned-weapon held horizontally across her throat. It picked her up and rapidly carried her backwards into a full-length mirror. "Aaah!"

Step by step, Celestia continued her advance, pressing the curtain rod tighter against the other alicorn's throat. "You attack my loved ones... You invade my home... Yet you still have the audacity to ask me that!? How could you possibly bring me lower...?"

"Nngh...!" Whatever was going on, Luna was fed up with it. Her eyes lit up with an ethereal white glow. "*That's it!*" A concentrated sphere of magic appeared at the tip of her horn, and grew in size and brightness at a frightening rate. When it seemed like it couldn't get any brighter, it exploded with a great deal of concussive force. The hastiness of the spell meant Luna didn't have time to properly shield herself from its effects, but then, neither did Celestia. The sun alicorn had been thrown across the room from the blast.

A millennium of being the sole ruler of Equestria has its benefits, however; a great magical resistance being one such perk. With it, Celestia was back on her hooves in less time than it took to bat an eye. "I will make you pay, *ten-fold*, for what you have taken from me!" A blinding yellow magic surrounded the enraged princess.

Luna's heart skipped a beat as she saw a thin, laser-like beam tracing a

deadly path toward her. She hurriedly looked around for something to defend herself with. *The mirror shards...* It was better than nothing. The mare's horn flickered to life, and dozens of reflective shards obeyed her command and quickly lay themselves along the outside of her wings like a coat of armor. With no time to wonder if it would work, she brought one of her wings around in front of her. The golden beam glanced off one of the shards and shot in a random direction.

The elder sister was just as quick on the draw, however, and another volley of twelve more shots were seeking a path toward the younger alicorn within the second.

Assisted by her magic, the night alicorn spun like a silver top. Beams flew in all directions, deflected by her mirror-coated wings. Numerous explosions rocked the bedchamber as Celestia continued her assault. Finally, one of the rays bounced just so that it impacted the floor right in front of Celestia and knocked her off her hooves once more. Noting the cease-fire, Luna stopped spinning and lowered her wings. Anger had replaced all timidity in her voice. "Just what did you expect to accomplish with that? You know I'm more skilled with defensive magic! Or have you forgotten?"

"I've forgotten *nothing...*" Celestia spat. "How could I forget what you have taken from me!? My most faithful student... My beloved sister...? I will *never* forget!"

"Your...sister?" Luna repeated slowly. "But, 'Tia, *I'm* your sister..." The alicorn swallowed her growing apprehension and looked toward the heap that Celestia had been hunched over. Her heart jumped into her mouth so quickly that she almost choked on it. The dark blue coat matted with crimson stains, the dislodged and broken feathers... It was *her...* "I-if that's me, then... What am *I*?" Hesitantly, Luna looked down at a chunk of the mirror that lay before her. The face that looked back was not her own. It was the pitch-black face of Nightmare Moon.

Luna awoke with a start to find herself back in her own bed. She cautiously glanced around, worried about what she might see. From the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of an amorphous, star-filled mane and panicked. Her frightened scramble to get away did little more than entangle her in her bedsheets, ultimately resulting in an unceremonious

tumble onto the cold floor. As the rush of adrenaline faded, Luna's reasoning returned. "Wait... That's *my* mane..." Even with that one question answered, the princess' mind would not be so quickly put at ease.

There was a large-mirrored vanity standing next to the alicorn's bed. It would serve her immediate needs. Rubbing the sleep from her blue-green eyes, Luna gazed into the looking glass. Just to make sure that she was looking at herself, the pony made some very silly, unprincess-like faces. Each one of them was repeated perfectly. Finally satisfied, the winged unicorn, let out a massive sigh and lowered her face into her hooves. There was one glaring fact that she just happened to overlook, however.

The pony in the mirror failed to do the same.

Chapter 7

A Promise is a Promise

"Come now, Luna, those faces weren't very lady-like."

A chill colder than a Windigo's breath shot down the alicorn's spine. *That voice... No...*

"Really now? You won't even look me in the eyes? But, my dear, it's been so long..."

Was it curiosity? Was it some kind of magic? Luna didn't know. She only knew that it was against her better judgment to look at the talking mirror. Still, she couldn't help herself. The pony looked up, straight into a pair of glowing eyes. The reflection of her face slowly twisted itself into the black visage of her former alter-ego. "Nightmare Moon..."

The black alicorn smiled. "That's all you have to say to me? For shame..."

If any expression was to be found upon Luna's face, it was one of calm composure. "You and I are no longer one. By what black magic have you returned?"

"I see that Celestia has been feeding you her typical lies. You and I will *always* be one and the same. You tasted evil, and you *liked* it."

Luna snorted angrily at the condescending mention of her sister. "I was *not* evil. That was jealousy. My mind was weak, and you took advantage of that. Nothing more!"

"Call it whatever you want, dear." Nightmare Moon calmly waved off Luna's retort. "But you mustn't be so modest. It was your magic that gave us this form. Excellent job, by the way; very...*evil*..."

"Jealousy and evil are not the same thing." Luna insisted.

Up until now, Nightmare Moon's expression had been peaceable enough.

But it was clear that her patience was wearing thin. Her eyes flashed brightly and Luna staggered backward, holding the side of her head. "Nnnh!" Whatever the black mare had done, it felt like her very mind had been split into pieces.

"Silence! Your stubborn ignorance is infuriating! I am just as much a part of you as the stars are a part of the night! We are like a coin; opposites, yet two halves of the same whole. No matter how much you want to be rid of me, it will never come to pass; you created me, and I am here to stay!"

The alicorn princess cracked an eye to glare at the entity taunting her. Only about half of what Nightmare Moon had just said had actually sunk in; thinking had become somewhat of a painful activity. "My...magic might have created you, but...only because you forced me... It was not of my own accord..."

"Deny it all you want, foal, but we are the same; you cannot exist without me. When ponies look at you, what do you think they see? It isn't what you think it is... Benevolent ruler? Hah! Everypony is afraid of you... You will never be viewed like your sister..."

"I don't need them to see me like Celestia... I will make everypony see me...for me..."

"Stubborn as ever, I see. Very well. Two can play at that game!" The same cyan glow issued forth from Nightmare Moon's eyes once again, and Luna collapsed onto the floor.

The attack had come so quickly that Luna had had no time to cry out. The explosion within her psyche had been crippling and she could feel a dark presence seeping through the small fragments of her mind, reaching outward, seeking purchase with its shadowy tendrils. It was suffocating to the point where the princess actually had trouble breathing. Her vision began waning; dark tentacles started growing from the edges of her sight. What little magic she could conjure would be of little use. Her mind was failing, steadily succumbing to Nightmare Moon's magic. *Nightmare Moon was right; I am e-*

A sharp, blaring alarm cut through the black cloud enveloping the princess' senses, restoring some of her free will. *The clock! Where did I*

leave it? Luna desperately searched the small part of her mind that was still available, trying to remember its location. *There!* A magic glow ripped the clock off of the nightstand and threw it into the mirror. The shattered glass exploded outward from the magical force that had slammed the clock into it. A wayward shard grazed the alicorn's cheek, and the shock from it snapped her from her trance. Finally freed from Nightmare Moon's spell, Luna could begin to recover. The first step to that recovery? The prompt loss of consciousness.

When Rarity had earlier said her mind was too busy to allow her any opportunity to sleep, she wasn't kidding. Sure, she had tried, but after seeing the state Rainbow Dash had been in, there wasn't the slightest chance. The white unicorn lay upon her bed, hooves crossed before her. She peered intently at a magically floating needle and thread through a small pair of glasses perched on the end of her muzzle. A sigh of frustration escaped her mouth as she watched the needle systematically work its way through the fabric. This was the third time, *tonight*, that she had missed a stitch. *Not again...* Rarity picked up a pair of sewing scissors and began undoing the mistake. *I certainly hope Twilight is doing all right... Poor dear... Stay strong...for all of us...*

The white unicorn looked from her work at a noise like someone turning over (and over) in their bed. "Spike, dear? Are you all right?"

The little dragon continued tossing and turning in his small bed, murmuring in a nearly unintelligible manner. "No... N-nagh! No...Twil - Twilight...!" Suddenly the dragonling sat bolt upright, causing Rarity to jump. "Aaah!" He looked around in a panic, tightly clutching a stuffed pony.

"Are you all right, Spike?" the unicorn asked. "It looked as if you were having quite the nightmare."

"H-huh!?" The dragon jumped at the voice and hugged the toy tighter against him. After a second of staring at the violet-maned pony, he glanced down at the stuffed one in his arms. "I-I'm fine!" he quickly stammered, hiding the pony behind his back. "Yup! Just fine! No nightmares here!" This might have been more convincing if he hadn't been blushing hotly.

Rarity let out a relieved sigh. "Good, because I'm simply terrified."

"Never fear, milady! I'll protect you!" Spike proclaimed, giving a brave salute...and forgetting the stuffed pony in his grasp. It gave a small squeak as it hit the side of his head.

The unicorn couldn't help but give a small laugh as the dragon began blushing again. "It's quite all right, dear. You don't have to hide anything."

"But I'm not!" Spike insisted.

The pony raised an eyebrow and affixed him with a disbelieving look. "Come now, darling; do you really think I've never seen Sweetie Belle have a nightmare? It's nothing new to me. Besides, with what happened today, I hardly think anypony could blame you for having one."

The purple-scaled dragonling sat down heavily. "Why...why did they do that? Why did they take Twilight?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea, Spike. Sometimes things just happen."

"But *why* do they happen? Twilight hasn't done anything to deserve this."

"I...don't have the answer to that. But you shouldn't worry about it; the princesses are working to find a solution. I wouldn't be surprised if they have something figured out by tomorrow. Try and go back to sleep, dear."

"Hmph..." The dragon snorted, blowing a small puff of green-tinged smoke from his nostrils. "I wish I could. I can't stop thinking about whether or not Twilight's okay."

"I'm sure she's fine. Twilight would never let herself be outsmarted by some ruffian. She's much too smart for that."

Just as Rarity had seen through his facade earlier, so too did Spike see through hers now. "Don't tell me not to worry when you haven't slept *at all* for the same reason. I can see it in your eyes."

Slightly taken aback, the white pony looked to a mirror across the room and winced. Even at this distance, it was jokingly obvious that a night

without sleep didn't help one's complexion. "Eughh... Perhaps you're right. I look simply dreadful. Anyway, back to what you said, Spike. Yes, I *am* worried. Not only for Twilight, but for Fluttershy and Applejack as well. We couldn't have picked a more inopportune time to have left them behind. No sooner had the Princess sent her guards after Philomena than Canterlot's weather teams reported a storm building directly in their path. I fear that they never reached Ponyville..." Rarity's careful magic removed the glasses from her snout for a moment, so she could rub her tired eyes. She sighed with fatigue. "Something tells me that the two of them are in great danger."

"What do you suppose it is?" Spike asked, leaning upon the end of the pony's bed.

"I'm afraid I don't know. I couldn't even tell you why it's troubling me."

Spike let his face fall into the downy comforter. "Darn. I could have used some good news to put my mind at ease." he mumbled around his mouthful of bedding. His mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and activity. It bears no explanation that Twilight was first on his mind. Like Rarity, something inside him kept telling him that his friend was *not* okay. He sighed and looked up. "What's that?"

"Oh, this?" Rarity held up the lavender fleece that the young dragon was pointing at. "It's a little something that..." She paused for an instant at the thought of her close friend before continuing. "It's a little something that Twilight asked me to work on. She told me that you were in need of a new blanket."

"Ooh! That looks awesome." Spike proclaimed, reaching for the fabric.

The magic holding the blanket quickly pulled it away from the dragon's outstretched claw. "Heavens, no. I would hardly call this 'awesome.' If anything, I would call it quite the opposite. I've had a terrible lack of inspiration lately; I've had no idea what to do with this project."

"I don't understand. It's just a blanket. It doesn't have to be fancy."

"I shouldn't expect you to understand, dear. It's just something that I, as an artist of sorts, have to struggle with. Besides, just because it's called a *blanket* doesn't mean it has to *be* blank."

The little dragon shrugged. "Whatever." His curiosity had the better of him however, and he couldn't help but watch as Rarity went to work again. He hopped up onto the bed to get a better view.

No response came from the unicorn; her attention was focused on the edge of the fabric and the needle pulling a dark purple thread through it. "Spike, be a dear and fetch me another spool of this color thread, would you?"

"Of course!" He pushed himself off the bed and jogged over to the diamond-marked saddlebags. The spool of thread greeted him as he lifted their flap. Grabbing the requested item, he returned to the bed. "What's it for?"

The jewel-marked pony carefully stuck the violet thread through the eye of her needle before answering. "I'm using it to hem the edges of the blanket. We can't have any frayed edges, now can we?"

"I guess not..." Honestly, Spike wasn't overly interested in the intricacies of needlework and his attention span quickly waned, as did his ability to stay awake. Within the hour he was fast asleep again, using a certain pony's flank as a pillow.

The night progressed in this manner for several hours. It turns out that all Rarity needed to stimulate the creative juices was an hour of heavy thought. Stitch by stitch, the blanket began taking shape. "There we are! Finished at last!" The unicorn released her hold on the needle and held up the completed product. The square piece of fabric now sported a handsome spiral stitching around its edge, while the lower right corner was dominated by a very familiar design; a large, six-pointed magenta star, surrounded by five smaller white stars.

A glance at the available clock revealed sunrise to be roughly forty-five minutes away. The nearby mirror revealed Rarity's mane to be somewhat less than well-kept. With one fluid motion, the mare replaced herself under the dragon's head with an actual pillow and pulled the finished blanket over him. Smiling, she lightly touched her muzzle to his small head before slipping off the bed. A fine-bristled brush appeared from her pink saddlebags and floated over to the mirror. An unkempt mane is a travesty

of the highest degree when looking to meet with royalty. Repeated strokes of the brush through her violet curls soon had everything in order however. "Ah! Much better!" she proclaimed. The white pony tiptoed to the door, taking care to make as little noise as possible.

"Good morning, Miss Rarity." The pegasus guard stationed at her door greeted her warmly. "Is there something I might assist you with?"

"Indeed. Earlier tonight, Princess Luna asked me if I wished to join her in her study. Might you be able to direct me to her chambers?"

"Yes and no." he responded at length. "I do know where Her Highness' chambers are located, but it would be against my orders to let you roam the palace unsupervised. The safety of you and your friends is priority number one."

"Ah yes, that's right. If it isn't too much of an imposition then, might you be able to take me there instead?"

"Think nothing of it. It would be my pleasure. Follow me."

Perhaps it was just her fatigue, but Rarity thought the palace to be oddly quiet, even for the early morning. "It's terribly quiet, isn't it?" she asked, attempting to break the monotonous clicking of hooves upon marble.

"I agree. Something seems off. Something about the atmosphere feels...apprehensive." After numerous hallways and flights of stairs, the pair of ponies entered the palace's royal wing. Roughly halfway down the hallway, another pegasus guard stood at attention. "Lieutenant Jet Stream!"

The pony turned to face the new visitors. "At ease, soldier. What can I do for you, Miss Rarity?"

"Do you know if Princess Luna is still awake?" Rarity inquired. "Earlier tonight, she extended an offer to me to help her with her studies."

"I see. As far as I know, she's still awake. Let me check." Jet Stream turned briskly and raised a hoof. Just as he knocked, a tremendous crash, akin to glass breaking, caused all three of the ponies to jump.

"What in Equestria was *that!?*" the white mare gasped, her heart pounding inside her chest.

There was no time for a verbal answer. Jet stream spun around to forcefully introduce his hooves to the door with a mighty kick. Such an action was unnecessary to open an unlocked door, but no less effective. His heart nearly leapt from his chest at the sight. An instant later, he was at the alicorn's side. "Princess Luna, your Majesty! Breeze, fetch the infirmary staff! Quickly!"

"Yes, sir!" The guard behind Rarity was gone in the blink of an eye.

The look upon the Element of Generosity's face as she walked into the room said everything that was on her mind. Mirror shards and clockwork pieces littered the ground around the two ponies. "Celestia above... What happened in here...?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. But we haven't the time to look into that now. It is clear that an attack was made upon Her Majesty Luna. Her sister must be informed immediately."

"Shall I run next door and fetch her?"

"Negative. Her Majesty Celestia left the palace earlier tonight."

"Left?" Rarity repeated. "Left for where?" Her blue eyes widened with shock as Jet Stream explained.

"The escorts sent with General Headwind to locate your friends have returned, lacking a chariot. It fell from the sky somewhere over the Everfree Forest."

Oh no... I knew something was wrong... "Do you know anything else?" the mare asked hopefully.

"Regrettably, I do not. As we speak, the Princess is leading a search party for them. Regardless, she must be brought up to speed. How, though?"

The thought-laden silence was stifling. Finally, the unicorn's eyes lit up.
"Spike! That's it!"

"Beg pardon, Miss Rarity?"

"Twilight Sparkle's assistant and our good friend." the mare explained.
"He could send the Princess a message for us! I'll go wake him!" Without waiting, she quickly made for the door.

"Hold on, Miss Rarity. Allow me to escort you back to your room."

"What about the Princess?" The Element of Generosity glanced past the lieutenant to the unconscious alicorn.

"Her Majesty was found unconscious in her bedchambers. Whether or not it was an attempt on her life remains to be seen. Either way, she is not in a condition to rule. Canterlot law dictates that if either of the Royal Sisters is deemed unfit to rule, for whatever reason, any and all duties will be deferred to the able sister. If both sisters are unable to rule, duties are passed down through the military hierarchy to the currently acting General, which, at the moment, happens to be me. I am placing the royal city on lockdown; nopony will be entering, nopony will be leaving until further notice. As I do not know if Princess Luna's attacker is still within the palace premises, the safety of the Elements of Harmony is now more important than ever."

The sprint back to the mare's room seemed to take an eternity. The very air was thick and oppressive; almost saturated with evil. Tonight was not a night for doors to be opened gently, either, and the following crash roused Spike from his slumber instantly. He shot upright, as if forced by a spring, clutching his blanket in fright, just as Rarity's magic tried to yank it off of him. The result was quite comical, with the baby dragon dangling, wide-eyed, from the blanket suspended before the white pony's muzzle.

"Aaah! What is it!? What's going on!?" he babbled nonsensically.

"Spike, darling! Quickly! We must send a message to the Princess!"

Oddly enough, the dragonling remained attached to the blanket while he continued his rapid-fire questions. "H-hunh? Why? For what? Besides, I

thought Celestia was here anyway..."

The unicorn shook her head, fighting to reclaim her lost breath (and wishing for a glass of water). "No..." she wheezed. "She went out to look for...Fluttershy and Applejack..."

Jet Stream took over the conversation as Rarity excused herself to track down a drink of water. "Their chariot went down over the Everfree Forest, but that is not important at the moment. Something has happened concerning Her Excellency's sister, and it is imperative that we contact her as soon as possible. Would you assist us, Master Spike?"

"Imperative, huh? You got it! Need a letter sent? I'm your dragon!" In the space of a few seconds, he had produced a quill and parchment. "Let me have it!"

"As you wish." the lieutenant replied. "I do hope that you'll pardon the impromptu letter, your Majesty, but a matter of the utmost importance has arisen. I have discovered your sister unconscious, yet alive, within her chambers, surrounded by broken glass, with a bleeding cut upon her cheek. Proper medical procedures have been taken, and, as per Canterlot law, I have assumed temporary rule in your absence. I will also be placing the city under lockdown until such a time as you see fit to say otherwise. I await your swift return. Sincerely, Lieutenant General Jet Stream."

"E-A-M... Got it!"

The pegasus stallion bowed his head in gratitude. "You have my thanks, Master Spike, and I am in your debt. Would you be so kind as to send it?"

Spike's claws were a blur as he twirled the parchment into a roll. "Way ahead of you." The iron hinges of the window, stiff from years of little use, creaked at its outward movement. A wisp of sparkling green flame curled out onto the night air, headed for the sea of trees that was the Everfree Forest.

"There is nothing more we can do; it is out of our hooves now." Jet Stream remarked flatly. "Miss Rarity, Master Spike, if you'll excuse me, I must see to the lockdown preparations. I will have a guard posted back at your door within five minutes. Until Her Majesty Celestia says otherwise,

you and your friends shall be under constant protective surveillance. I apologize for the extreme measures, but luck favors the prepared, as they say."

Rarity nodded respectfully. "Of course."

"Wow..." Spike let out his held breath after the lieutenant had left. "That letter sounded serious... Things aren't looking too good right now, are they?"

The mare let out a long sigh, and the dragon saw that beautiful, confident gleam in her blue eyes fade as she did so. "No...they're not. This is far worse than anything that we've ever had to deal with in the past, and things will continue to get worse. I can feel it inside me, and it...troubles me deeply..."

"If it helps, I'll always be right here." Spike promised quietly.

The pretty white pony smiled softly and gave a small laugh. She extended a foreleg around the dragon and gently pulled him to her side in a friendly hug. "I wouldn't have it any other way." she murmured, lightly kissing the top of his head. "Thank you, Spike..."

"Y'all bring her back here this instant!"

Applejack's angry shouts echoed down the stone hallway, finally reaching Twilight's ears. The filthy strip of cloth shoved into her mouth prevented any understandable speech, so her reply sounded something like this: "*Mmmmmhhhmm! Mmm!*" The corded loop around her neck dug painfully into her skin with her frantic escape efforts. "*Mmmhh!*"

From somewhere in the darkness caused by her unwanted blindfold, Twilight heard a voice rife with irritation. "Damnit! We put that in your mouth so you would stay quiet! *Shut up!*"

The helpless mare let out a muffled scream as a hard hoof collided with her cheek. "*Mmmphmm!*"

"Didn't you hear me!? Or do you want more!? I said *quiet!*"

The next blow hit Twilight in the other side of her mouth. This time she remained silent for fear of another blow. The acrid flavor of the blood seeping into her already foul-tasting gag helped a little bit too. She wanted so badly to spit it out, but any attempt to do so would probably result in another slap. She had two choices: Swallow the disgusting fluid, or end up choking on it instead. She had a hard enough time breathing around the gag as it was, but she wasn't ready to give up just yet, so swallowing it was. A small whimper was her answer to its revolting aftertaste.

"That's better... Now move it!"

Blind, mute, and unable to escape, the mare had no choice but to continue stumbling in the direction she had been shoved. After who knows how long, she received a yank on her collar, telling her to stop.

"Are you sure this is the back door? I don't see anything but a wall."

"And that, Charger, is why Nightshade didn't make you second in command. The switch is...right here."

The switch must have been some kind of chain, as Twilight recognized the sound of metal on stone almost immediately. It was *what* the switch had triggered that baffled her. The very stones under her hooves started vibrating with a rapid frequency. *What was that?* Another shove put her thoughts on hold and her hooves into motion again. She hadn't taken but one step before kicking a staircase and falling flat onto it. Stone steps aren't very comfortable, but Twilight just wanted to lay there. Whoever was holding her leash obviously disagreed with that option and continued their tugging.

"C'mon, get your sorry flank moving!"

Have you ever tried walking up the stairs, in the dark, while wearing a blindfold? Neither had Twilight, but her captors insisted she keep up with their quick pace. Just when the unicorn had lost count of how many times she'd stubbed a hoof on the next stair, she felt something different underneath them. Grass... The clean scent of the rain-soaked forest was a welcome reprieve from the musty dungeon air. Twilight had never missed

the sound of rustling leaves so much.

The tranquil lull of leaves brushing past one another was startlingly silenced by a thundering voice. "*Enough! Not an inch closer!*"

The lavender pony's ears perked up at the voice. *Princess Celestia!?* The shock in the voices of her leaders revealed that they too recognized the booming voice.

"That's not good..."

"Then pick your mouth off the ground and let's get a move on! We're not that far from the hideout-"

"You four there, halt!"

That sounded like a Canterlot guard! Twilight thought hopefully.

"That fifth pony with you; the unicorn. Why is she gagged and on a lead? What is her name?"

Not surprisingly, no answer was given, so Twilight decided to voice her opinion. "Mmh-mmmph-mmmh!"

"Twilight? Miss Twilight Sparkle?"

"*Mmmmhphmm!*" The unicorn screamed as loud as she could through her gag to let the guard know he had gotten it right. The end result wasn't very loud, but the urgency within her stifled voice was answer enough.

"Release her at once!" the guard demanded. "Under direct order from Her Majesty Princess Celestia, release the unicorn immediately!"

"Your Princess holds no jurisdiction over the Everfree Forest; her words carry no authority here!"

"I say again, release your captive! We have been cleared to use lethal force, and if you do not comply, we will be forced to take action."

"Take your action then!"

A gust of wind slapped Twilight's face as pegasi on both sides flew into battle. *This is my chance!* The purple pony jerked to the side, liberating the rope from the one pony holding it, and was away like a shot.

"Hey!"

Courageous though her flight was, fate had laid other plans. Blindfolds have their name for a reason, and Twilight was quickly reminded why. She charged blindly into a springy, low-hanging branch. As it whipped back into place, it carried the unicorn off her hooves and knocked the back of her head against an exposed root. She was sent off into the dark silence of unconsciousness by an equally dark promise.

"*That...* was the worst possible thing you could have tried. You *will* regret that decision, I can promise you that..."