

World of Ponycraft

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Chapter 1

"Pain...!"

The vast realm of Deepholm, the very elemental plane of Earth itself, came apart at the seams. Chained within the world's heart, a thunderous bellow of rage fueled fury shakes the foundations of that trackless pit, beaten out in time to the sound of pounding adamanatine hammers.

"Agony....!!"

Above the tortured plane, seas boiled and heaved, a vast swirling Maelstrom of magical destruction unleashed on an unsuspecting world. Tidal waves surged forth to obliterate coastlines, mountain ranges contracted and volcanoes sundered, earthquakes splitting open rifts to swallow villages and cities. The Cataclysm had at last come to a war torn world, and with it, a doom born on great black wings.

"My hatred burns through the cavernous deeps."

Creation sundered and cried as its Titan charged keeper broke free of his tormented bonds, once more loosed upon -

"Hey. Hey!"

"The world heaves with my -"

"Hey! Hey! Over here! HEY!! Neltharion!"

"...The world heaves with -"

"Neltharion the Earth-Warder! Don't pretend you can't hear me! Hey-y-y-y!"

"-with my torment... and...."

Pausing mid-monologue, the vast black leviathan that *PREFERRED* to be called 'Deathwing' these days paused, moments before unleashing an achievement spawning breath of fire on the candy coated landscape below. Great veined wings, wide enough to block out the sun, shifted to slow down the massive body and reorient it into a hover. Ingots of enchanted blood, like living pearls of lava, dripped down from the jagged wound that tore open his belly, only partly contained by plates of adamantium steel. A vast reptilian visage with a massive metal lower jaw, crowned by black horns the length of tournament field, /sighed.

'I know that voice...'

Slowly turning to his left, burning eyes zeroed in on a tiny, black, flying -

Oh, *great*. It was a -

'...pony.'

"Didn't you hear me?" the tiny creature asked, little pegasus-wings fluttering as it heedlessly zipped closer to the massive dragon's appropriately sized face. "Wow. Look at you! What the heck happened to you, Nelthy?"

Another /sigh. "**Luna.**"

"So you do remember me!" The little black alicorn gracefully landed on his snout. "Hey, hey! Notice anything different? Huh?"

"You're not trapped in the moon," the dark leviathan observed.

"Yep! Got paroled! And it felt like **you** just broke out of Deepholm," the tiny little pony-godling said, pointing an equally tiny hoof at him. "So what's goin' on?"

"... **I am unleashing a worldwide cataclysm,**" the dragon aspect rumbled. "**...among other things.**"

"Oh, that is so you!" Luna laughed and stamped a hoof on his nose playfully. "You should've seen sister's face when she felt the aftershocks!"

She was all like," and here, the little pony god squished her cheeks together and stuck out one big eye. "Luna, Luna! He always liked you, go get rid of him!" Eyes rolled and drifted over to the countryside below. "So are you going to deep breath Equestria or something?"

A giant claw scratched his obsidian-scaled snout near the unusually and vexingly friendly pony. Why was it so hard to hate (and thus squash) these damn ponies? Especially when they wavered between adorable and annoying? Curse the Titans for sticking the dragonflights with such a stupid weakness. He'd thought it harmless and even funny at the time they'd all been uplifted, thousands of years ago.

'Oh yeah, we're making some little ponies, too. To keep the flights from fighting. Neltharion, stop pulling Ysera's tail this instant!'

For millennia, the ponies had been a thorn in his side, promoting peace and friendship among the flights. Arranging for their native lands to get sealed up from the rest of Azaroth had been one of his better moves. Now that he was actually flying back over this pastel colored wasteland again, he was remembering how much he hated it all.

'Ugh.'

It was hard to concentrate with them around. All the more reason to keep the little monsters confined to one small Titan-warded corner of the world.

"I was only going to deep breath it a little," he lied, beady burning eyes straying to the side.

"Well, okay!" Luna agreed, swaying a bit as he snorted world destroying flame from nostrils larger than her body. "You always did like causing earthquakes and fires. Just don't kill anyone, alright?"

...

"Please?" Luna sing-songed, trotting in a circle on his snout, her black tail swaying back and forth.

"You know, Luna, I *am* the Dragon Aspect of Death now. Killing is sort of what I do. That and destroying, so..."

"You're not the Aspect of Death, you silly dragon! I know you're still the Earth Warder deep down inside."

How he wanted to just snap up this annoying little pony goddess.

Curse Norgannon and confound his little ponies!!

"What happened to that whole Nightmare Moon thing?" he asked, tilting his head enough she almost fell off. Ah, but she had wings too. Cute fluttery wings. Curse them.

"Just a phase!" Luna answered with a chipper tone that seemed only partly truthful. "I don't know what I was thinking. I mean, you know those Old Gods are crazy, right?"

"Hrm," he rumbled. **"Are they? Nightmare Moon."**

"You know they are. Or have you forgotten how they..." The little pony became stony silent for a few seconds, finally sniffing disdainfully. "This isn't the time or place to talk about that."

A dark cloud of ash wafted from Deathwing's nostrils. Maybe there was some hope for the little godling yet. But she was right. This wasn't the time or place.

"Luna -"

"Right, right!" she waved him off. "I'm staying with my sister," she said that with an 'ick' but cheerily continued. "We can catch up on stuff later! You can still do that thing with your breath, right? And not the killing thing. I mean the message-sending thing?" She leaned in close with a playful wink. "Call me."

Finally shaking her off his snout and taking a few flaps away from the annoying moon goddess, Deathwing gave a quick glance over his shoulder and deep breathed. Just a little. Just a little-little.

Twilight Sparkle [Stood in the Fire]
Rarity [Stood in the Fire]
Applejack [Stood in the Fire]
Fluttershy [Stood in the Fire]
Pinkie Pie [Stood in the Fire]

He didn't hear the indignant squeak of an achievement missing Rainbow Dash.

"Neltharion!! what did I just say!!"

Deathwing - "**It's Deathwing!!**" he reminded her.

Said dragon flew away, an evil grin on his face. Stupid pesky ponies. Even if he and his children couldn't kill them outright, there was a good chance the Twilights and the mortal races would. Then all would become ash and ruin, a fitting end to a flawed, insane world. True Death, at last, would reign supreme and unchallenged.

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World of Ponycraft

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Cataclysm Wrapup

- - - (1) - - -

A violet colored hoof inspected the carefully assembled artifact fragments. On the other side of the work desk, Twilight Sparkle was part way through her new copy of the Ecology and Zoology of the Green Hills of Stranglethorn. Of particular interest was the section on southern ferns. Tongue sticking out as she looked from one of the illustrations to one of the fragment shards, her eyes narrowed as she considered whether she had enough fragments. It was delicate, research intensive work, and it had been going slowly if smoothly... when a certain issue interrupted.

Now, that "certain issue" wasn't a sudden wall of lava and hellish flame engulfing everything for miles. That was a few weeks ago. No. This interruption was less deadly, and more plan old aggravating.

"...yeah, little man, I got the Star Ruby, *and* the Golden Draenite, but do you really need the two Nightstone? Do you know what the Nightstone market is like these days? Isabel Jones is already busting my balls with all these Presents to Lila she keeps needing help with. Come on, be a bro?"

Spike's voice answered the stranger. "Gee, I dunno. Us Dragons can be pretty picky."

"Don't bust my balls, bro. Can't you take one of these other gems instead?"

"Ehhh..."

"Okay, how about... Twilight Opal? Oh, or Dreadstone? I think I've still got one of those in here."

"You've got a - !! I, uh, I mean, alright, alright. I guess one Dreadstone and one Twilight Opal should be okay."

"You've got a deal, little dragon man!"

Twilight planted her face in the poor book, resisting the urge to hammer her head into the pages with her hoof. There was just no concentrating with Spike keeping the door open and haggling with somepony, shamelessly carrying on their transaction or quest or whatever in the middle of the doorway. The purple unicorn and town librarian made a mental note to look into having a dedicated soundproof reading room installed one of these days.

"Awesome, awesome, so, you'll tell all your friends that I helped you out?" the pony at the door asked, for the second time.

Twilight turned her head to see the tail end of the exchange: Spike had a small box full of gems, and the visitor pony was only now sort of looking past him, curiously, into the library. Underneath, he was a dark brown pony with a green mane, but he was also dressed fancifully in

intricate brown and turquoise mail armor-saddle that hummed with incredible magical power. Outside, a huge lightning infused wolf was sniffing a postbox and probably moments from urinating on it... with lightning.

"That's right!" Spike replied, giving a thumb's up. "I'll make sure my Dragonflight knows *all* about your good deeds! Don't sweat it!"

"Thanks again, man," the lightning infused pony (with lightning infused pet wolf) answered with a wide grin. "I really need that rep. Hey, who's the enpeecee in there anyway?"

"That's just Twilight Sparkle."

"Oh. TTYL little dragon man."

"TTYL!"

Twilight let out another agonized groan, but held back the urge to act just long enough for Spike to close the door. A long laundry list of nagging complaints - wait, no, they weren't nagging! They were completely legitimate! Anyway, she had a bunch of 'em, and Spike was about to be reminded of a few.

"Spike, what have I said about using that nasty verbal shorthand?" she asked, voice simmering.

The baby dragon shrugged. "What's the big deal? Everyone talks like this now."

"Not in this library. In here, we use proper Equestrian," she reminded him, lifting a hoof to better switch to lecture-mode. "That means no BRB or TTYL or L4G or whatever. I don't even know what an 'enpeecee' is, but I don't think I like it. If it is worth saying, it is worth saying properly."

"Okay, okay, geez..." Spike muttered, having heard it before.

"And we really need to talk about you hustling all the new ponies that come through town. Getting you free gems is *not* a quest."

"Hey, its *kind* of a quest," the baby dragon argued, flopping down on a throw pillow to enjoy his spoils. "At least I'm not asking them to get a book that's right next to me. Gem retrieval is a legitimate mission! If I had tokens or something to hand out, I'd be totally raking things in! In fact, that's not a bad idea... 'ponyville jewelcrafter tokens' ... or maybe ponyville tokens of conquest...?"

Twilight just frowned.

"Besides," he hastily added, before she could chide him. "I'm a growing dragon; the more magic I eat the more I can help out around here, and who knows? I *could* be related to this Ysera lady, or Alex-traz-ra or whatever her name is. You can't *not* know she's my mom."

"Just because we don't know doesn't mean we can't not know," Twilight argued, almost ready to off on a tangent about logics and rational deduction. "And don't try to distract me. If you're going to get poor ponies who don't know any better to bring you gems, you should at least have some real reward for them."

"What?" Spike whined. "Really?"

"Really," Twilight sternly replied, putting her hoof down.

"I guess we do have a lot of books I could hand out..."

"Don't even think about it mister!"

Spike just chortled, and stuck his little hand in the gem box, picking out a large violet gemstone. It was near circular and a lustrous shade of Twilight's own coat color. It also glowed with magic, like almost everything brought over from the new lands. Spike giddily flipped it from one hand to the next, playing with his food before indulging himself.

"Is that the Twilight Opal?" the similarly named pony librarian asked, relenting a bit at how happy her dragon apprentice looked. He was like a little brother, after all, and impossible to stay angry at. Unfortunately, it was also impossible to keep him inside and sheltered from all the new bad influences to be found outside.

"Yep!" Spike confirmed, catching the cut gemstone in two hands and licking it like a giant piece of candy. "Oh. Oh! That's good. That is good! Spellpower and Stamina. The Ebon Blade has some nice, nice cuts." He nibbled on the top of it, eyes watering up. "Oh yes. mmmm. soooooooooo good!"

Staring at her dragonkin companion, Twilight's eyes hooded in exasperation as he started to roll around in ecstasy. When he got to the sweet spot, he even started to purr.

"Oh, oh, that's right, you're just the tastiest little thing, aren't you?" Spike murmured softly as he nibbled. "I won't hurt you. I just want a little nibble. Just a little taste. In my mouth. Mmmmm."

And there he went, right off the pillow and across the floor.

"You're acting like Rarity's cat, you know? she asked, but he was lost in his own little world.

Twilight gave a resigned sigh. She could feel that that Opal wasn't even the most magical gem in that box of spoils. There was another one in there literally oozing uncut and untamed magic. She'd have to keep that out of Spike's hands before he gorged himself. He was already growing alarmingly fast over the last few weeks thanks to so many witless strangers accepting his quests for 'rep.' She was keeping a running count of the more potent gemstones he got his hands on, and teeth into, and usually inspected the packages before letting him go too wild on them. On the bright side, though, if he got too big, she could finally talk him into not riding on her back everywhere.

Back to the book!

And her archaeology!

Finding the illustration again, Twilight tried to imagine it in her mind's eye as it was in real life. Yet in doing so, her mind and imagination strayed, particularly to the adventure half of the book: massive forests, entire countries almost, full of feral animals and untamed weather! Battles against giant cats that could turn invisible and giant alligator beasts and tribal raptors and trolls. So many trolls, according to the book!

What strange lands lay beyond the borders of Equestria! The stories of ancient ruins and heroic archaeologists were even more amazing still! To think that there was so much history and lore out there, waiting to be uncovered? Fanciful illustrations in books were a good start, feeding her imagination and hunger for knowledge, but wouldn't it be amazing to see them with her own eyes? To plumb the secrets of Uldaman and Maraudon? To dig for alien relics in Outland, uncovering their secrets?

Resting her cheek against the cool wood of the reading desk, Twilight sighed dreamily. She was back in her pith helmet, hard at work in the famed Ironforge Hall of Explorers, home to the largest library in the world (except possibly for Dire Maul). She was surrounded by vague shapes, most of them were ponies, but a few were kind of indistinct 'humanoids' like she had seen so many pictures of. They could be found in Equestria, too, but most looked kind of alike, and her lucid dreams gradually morphed them into more familiar pony-like shapes and colors.

She was reconstructing a raptor skeleton from a collection of fossils painstakingly gathered from dig sites across the world while writing up her findings to send back to Equestria. The distant sounds of academic discourse and lectures were like music to her ears. It was ... wonderful. While reaching for a magnifying glass, her hoof paused, brushing accidentally against the hand of the heroic Harrison Jones - *Professor Harrison Jones* - earning an embarrassed, polite titter. Wasn't he looking for adventurers to join him in fabled Uldum? Oh, but she had so much work to do...! Surely he didn't need her help, did he?

"Mm. mm. oh, Mister Jones. I simply couldn't! What's that, you *need* me? I guess I *am* the only one who can translate those runes. Mm. mmm. Oh, Professor Jones, we *mustn't*..."

"Twilight!"

"I'm awake!" Twilight snapped up, wiping the drool from her chin, horn glowing as she quickly turned a few pages to give some fleeting semblance of reading - skimming - through her book. Of course, yelling 'I'm awake' really didn't do much to prove she hadn't been dozing off and daydreaming. Blinking rapidly and clearing her head, she saw Spike standing nearby, holding up a scroll.

"Is that-?"

"A letter from Princess Celestia," he confirmed. "I figured you'd want to know right away. Even though you were awake and totally not sleeping and dreaming about some guy."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." she drolly replied and magically plucked the scroll out of his hands. "For your information, it wasn't a dream about a guy, it was about science and magical study."

"Sure it was," Spike agreed with a too-large grin.

"I wonder if this is about my last letter?" Twilight wondered, ignoring the little gem-eating dragon and opening the scroll in the air. It seemed to glow with an inner light, a reflection of Celestia's majesty and beautiful penmanship. Probably there was also a subtle spell involved, infused in the paper and ink. She'd seen some enhanced vellum mentioned in a previous book on Inscription.

*To my Favorite Pupil,
Twilight Sparkle -*

I can tell from your recent letters that you've been doing very exhaustive research on the meaning of friendship in other lands. Your summation of guild membership statistics was very interesting. Very interesting indeed. In the future, however, you do not need to have Spike forward me an appendix and bibliography. Let's keep these letters short and to the point. Brevity can be a virtue sometimes, too.

Anyway, I have been thinking about your situation, and Equestria's situation, and I believe you are neglecting a valuable source of information. Since we have joined the Alliance and opened up a number of flight paths and shipping routes to other lands, it may be worthwhile to try and investigate friendship overseas by actually going overseas. There is no substitute for first hand experience.

*Oh, and one last thing, now that I think of it.
Before going anywhere dangerous, I would dearly like you to investigate something that has recently come to my attention. A number of*

adventurer and mercenary guilds have risen to prominence in Equestria of late, and one in particular stands out: the Knights of Luna. While I don't mind my sister having one of the most prominent private security guilds in the country openly idolizing her, I would like some information on them just to be in the safe side. They have a guild office in Ponyville, why don't you check for any mischief?

- Princess Celestia

PS: I've also been thinking about helping you and the other Elements of Harmony get a guild of your own started up. Your friends haven't joined one already, have they? I'm looking into getting some interested ponies. Oh, and some heirlooms. I'm sure Varian has a bunch lying around somewhere. As for a name, well, I think the 'Celestia Six' is a 'way cool' guild name, don't you? Or 'the Celestials.' Or 'Warriors of the Sun Goddess Celestia.' Something like that.

(other side)

Twilight stopped reading, and turned the unusually long letter around.

I just think 'Celestia' should definitely be in the title somewhere. That's all.

Good luck!

Twilight tried to keep a neutral, studied expression by the end. "Brevity as a virtue, much?" she wondered, but shrugged.

"Alright, Spike," she announced, magically rolling the scroll back up for later archiving. "Looks like we've got work to do!"

...silence.

"Spike?"

"mmmmmmm. Moonstone-yeah. It's a party in my mouth..."

Twilight hung her head sadly at the baby dragon rolling around on the floor. "...Spike."

- - -

Ponyville was, ironically, more crowded than ever before, despite Deathwing all but nuking it on his short little fly-over. Celestia, Luna and some others had hurried over and cast some sort of mass resurrection spell, miraculously bringing everyone back to life. Twilight hadn't even imagined that such powerful magics existed before that day but apparently the cat was out of the proverbial bag. It wasn't natural pony magic, she'd eventually learned, not that that bit of information explained how the two Princesses knew it.

Twilight didn't remember much immediately during or after (except for an odd voice in her head telling her she 'stood in fire'), but the town had taken days to extinguish all the flames and put out all the bits of nasty magma-spittle that had landed nearby. Normal rain, the first thing the surviving pegasus ponies thought to try, had an initial minimal effect... followed by an unexpected drawback. One none of them could have foreseen.

The rain made the fires angry.

Literally.

Little fire elementals fled from the downpour, abandoning buildings to directly attack ponies trying to put them out with pails of water. Fortunately, Celestia's Royal Guard had been on hand and the chaos had been contained. Dazed and confused, the town had just barely salvaged their homes and businesses before the influx began.

Swarms of strange ponies were the first to move in, setting up new shops and inns and halls. Hot on the heels of that lot had followed a much more peculiar breed: adventure loving ponies had flocked to the area to battle with elementals in the forests and fields and hills and fight off dangerous animals. Whereas most sane ponies would rightly flee danger, these ones actively sought it out, sometimes in small groups and sometimes by themselves. Eventually a separate billboard was put up to cater to their interests in the center of town, near the water fountain.

With these crazy ponies had come an influx of gold, and as the economy and construction entered a new boom, yet another wave of newcomers appeared: humanoids from distant lands arrived, walking casually into town. There were small ones, ones about the size of the average pony (often with long manes that covered their faces - beards they called them), and taller ones, too. Some were purple or even bluish in color, instead of pale or pinkish. Only one set of them walked on hooves, though even they were cloven and not exactly very pony-like.

News from Canterlot filtered down that these were members of the 'Alliance' Equestria had recently joined. The appearance of so many strange beings was unprecedented...

Luckily, they had come to Equestria with a lot of gold.

A LOT of gold, actually. Some of the new arrivals were insanely wealthy. Or lucky. Twilight had heard that Canterlot was host to even more of them, especially in the new Trade Section of the castle city where Celestia had ordered a new auction house constructed. Ponyville was comparatively pedestrian but still bustling with activity and new, oftentimes strange, faces.

Trotting down the street, Spike riding on her back, Twilight couldn't help but stare up at one of the tiny humanoids riding a woolly mammoth of some sort. Directly adjacent was a blue pony also on a mammoth mount. The two were chatting animatedly and ignoring the fact that everyone nearby had to go around or between their two huge pets/rides. A mechanical man riding on one side of one of the mammoth mounts turned his head to watch her with clockwork eyes.

'Weird.'

Others were flying around on even stranger creatures, drawn or captured or acquired from around the world. There was a purple skinned humanoid female hanging around near a mailbox, apparently asleep in the saddle of her proto-dragon. The sheer size of the red beast made it difficult for anyone else to get close to the mailbox. One caramel colored pony was inching close, only to jump back when the primitive dragon snorted curiously (or hungrily) in her (or was it his) direction. Yet the night elf rider

was clearly sound asleep and content to park her ride in the most inconvenient of places.

Twilight kept a wide berth from the creature, but it still turned an armored neck to her and huffed a trail of ashy yellow smoke. On her back, Spike waved cheerily.

"Hey there!" he exclaimed, leaning down to whisper in Twilight's ear. "I think she likes me."

"That was a she?" the librarian wondered. "How can you tell?"

"You couldn't?" Spike asked, sounding surprised. "Just look at her!"

She resisted the urge to tell him that most dragons looked pretty alike. At least to Ponies.

There were a few locals with horses, too. Twilight took note of one heavily armored and horned unicorn-like horse that she passed by. The war charger snorted and shook its head, but didn't seem to pay any attention to her in particular. It was, she mused, probably a bit like what Spike saw in that proto-dragon. There was certainly no mistaking the gender of that paladin's Charger, *that* was for sure!

Coughing and trying not to blush, Twilight continued on.

Only to stare at the sight of a pony riding a horse. A pony. Riding a horse. The light pink mare with a white mane in the saddle didn't even seem to note the bizarre juxtaposition of what she was doing. She was too busy rummaging around in her bags and pockets for something, holding a rather large two handed sword in her mouth as her hooves dug deep into a rucksack between her legs. The horse beneath her cantered along, not a care in the world.

"There's something you don't see every day," Spike remarked, and 'hmm'ed before correcting himself, "Actually, I guess you do see it every day, these days?"

"Hey, Twilight!" he suddenly said, ducking down again to get closer to her ear. "When are you gonna get a mount? Then you could ride it and I can ride on you!"

"You're five seconds from being bucked into a mailbox."

"Aw, come on, seriously," he continued laughing, knowing it was an empty threat. "Wouldn't you like a cool mount to ride on? Some of them even fly!"

"What's wrong with walking?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder. "Oh yeah, look who I'm talking to."

"But... I already have an epic mount," Spike replied, looking at her with doe eyes.

"I guess that's kind of a compliment," Twilight admitted with a small smile she made sure he couldn't see. "Just don't expect I'll ever wear a bit and bridle again. That was so not my cup of tea."

"So where is this place, anyway?" Spike asked after a minute of silent walking and riding.

"I thought it was around here somewhere," Twilight answered with a tired sigh. "Maybe we should ask a guard."

"It'll look like of silly. I mean, we've lived here for a year..."

"I know, but the directions we got were kind of vague."

Fortunately, there was a large contingent of Royal Guard around the town now. The stoic, armored Pegasi guarded the skies and entrances of the town, while Earth and Unicorn guards in similar royal armor patrolled around. There really wasn't much for them to do. Despite being rowdy the town was full of adventurer types who seemed incapable of theft. There was the occasional rogue practicing pick pocketing, but no serious crime.

The guards were mostly there to chase off the occasional predatory Horde attacker (or explorer).

"Hello, excuse me," Twilight spoke up, approaching one of a pair of stoic Earth pony guards. They somehow managed to look both alert and half asleep.

"Can I help you, Miss?" one asked, inclining his head in a polite nod.

"Yes, thank you. I was looking for something."

"Ah," the gruff royal guard replied and gave an unhappy snort. "You know, when I joined up I didn't think I'd be spending more time directing people around town than fighting." Still, he shook his head and resigned himself. "So what are you looking for, Miss? Profession trainers? Class trainers?"

"Actually, I was looking for a guild..." She leaned in a bit closer. "The, um, Knights of Luna?"

"Oh, those idiots," the guard said with a single amused laugh. "I know where their office is. Do you have a map?"

"I... kind of don't..."

With a long suffering sigh, the guard turned his head to fish into one of the packs tied to his saddle. Taking out a copy of the town map with his mouth, he held it out and let Twilight pick it up with her magic, unfurling and levitating it in the air. He pointed to a building on the piece of magical paper and it chimed, a magical yellow light forming a marker in response to the touch. The guild officer was in a new section of Ponyville near the new armorsmith and mining guild.

"Thank you very much," she said with a bow. She meant it, too, especially since the guard was letting her keep a copy of the map.

"We've got a bunch of them and I don't need it anyway," he explained, unconcerned by the loss. "It'll update itself with any new stuff you find, too. Keep safe, Miss."

Magically floating the map ahead of her for a while after excusing herself, Twilight rolled it back up once she was sure she knew where this building could be found. Spike helped tuck it into a pocket near her cutie

mark, and it was only a matter of minutes before she saw the armorsmith and mining guild. There were quite a few ponies and humanoids in and around the anvil and forge, some working and some chatting. One was busy making some sort of magical weapon, and his work sent vibrations of magical energy through the air as he hammered away.

Ducking past the busy metalworks, Twilight saw an alcove with a sign bearing a mysterious arcane symbol...

And under the symbol was a large plaque set into the wall listing guild lodgings and local officers. With pictures! Twilight facehoofed. So much for intrigue. There was even a welcome registry.

--

Ponyville Guild Lodging
Available Guilds
(officers in attendance)

1st Floor
Hoof Patrol
- (O) Ed
- (O) Edd

The P Team
- (O) Mister_P

Knights of Luna
- (GM) Giddy App
- (O) Elmersglue
- (O) Kneecaps

2nd Floor
Church of Derpy
- (O) N/A

VACANT
(check out our low low rates!)

--

"Another mystery solved," Spike declared, standing proudly on Twilight's back. "Their headquarters is cunningly hidden on the first floor."

"Very suspicious," she snarkily agreed. "Well, let's go in and see what they're up to."

Opening the door, she came face to face with the terror of a well maintained atrium and front desk. The place was basically an inn for guilds staying in town, and a friendly looking pony with light orange coloring waved as Twilight entered. Very intimidating, the not-so-secret lair of Luna's mercenaries. There was what looked like a saloon or cafeteria to one side, followed by a meeting hall. A cork board had a list of scheduled meetings and conferences being held, including such fascinating topics as:

- *Rusty's Birthday (plz sign up)*
- *Guest Seminar: Heroic Halfus*
(attdn mandatory all prog raiders! This means u Kali!)
- *Black Temple on Farm*
(We need some guys to farm Ashtongue Rep
Guildies Preferred, but Friends are good too)
- *Soloing for Fun and Profit!*

As expected, the helpful bubblegum-chewing filly at the front desk was more than happy to direct Twilight to where the Knights of Luna were staying and conducting their nefarious schemes and seminars. The whole mission was seeming increasingly mundane to Twilight Sparkle, but she didn't let it deter her. Celestia had personally requested she do this, and that made it important, no matter how routine everything seemed to be. She hadn't thought her original friendship finding mission would be anything major either, and it had lead to her finding her best friends. It had opened her eyes.

Besides, Princess Celestia wouldn't just troll ponies by giving them stupid missions to relieve her own thousand years of boredom! Every mission was super important and relevant!

Steeling her resolve with that faith in her godly mentor, Twilight nudged open the doors to the Knights personal facilities. She immediately entered a pleasant looking foyer with chairs and some books and a tray of snacks on a table.

'Oh! Cupcakes!'

She smelt more food in another room, where a group of ponies were gambling. Others were working or just lounging around. One was cooking in front of a fire, a large white chef's hat contrasting sharply with her magical robes. In fact, as Twilight watched, the priest pony was cooking at a furious pace! How was she doing that?

"Hey there, can I help you?" a voice interrupted, and Twilight saw a stallion in plate armor. His cutie mark was covered, but he'd etched a shield with two red circles on it over the barding that covered his flank. His helmet was off, and he seemed nice enough: blue eyes, chestnut colored body and mane. Standard Earth pony, basically. Just with a lot of very powerful and intimidating looking metal armor.

"I was wondering if..." Twilight tried to remember how she'd planned to talk herself into learning more about the supposedly suspicious guild. "If you could tell me about your guild?" she asked, lamely.

'Stupid! There's no way he'll-'

"Well, I'm not an officer, but what'doya want ta know?" the pony asked, tilting his head innocently. "Name's Ironside, by the way."

"Hey," Spike greeted, quickly shaking the stallion's outstretched hoof.

"Twilight Sparkle, pleased to meet you," she said, quickly composing herself.

Maybe this would be easier than she'd thought? In fact, maybe this was perfect! Even if this guy wasn't an officer, he looked experienced enough, and he seemed pretty friendly. Maybe if she used some Rarity-like charm, he'd spill the beans on any troublesome plots the guild could be involved in. Then again, she had no idea how Rarity manipulated stallions like she did. Something about batting eyes and, um... and... ah...

'Argh!'

"So," she began, as he walked her over to a corner of the lounge.
"The Knights of Luna."

"Yep. The ol' KoL."

"So what do you guys... do?" Twilight wondered. Honestly, she did. What did these guys do? Missions for Luna? Actually, that was a good question.

"Missions for Luna?" she tacked on.

Ironside chuckled at that. "No. That'd be kind of cool if we did, though. We're an independent progression guild. We just fight for Luna's honor and stuff."

Twilight cocked her head to the side, curious. "And what does that mean, exactly?"

"Well. We." Iron reached up to scratch behind his neck. "I guess we don't literally fight for her honor. We just like Luna and think it's a good name for a guild." He paused for a second, and added, "Well, Giddy is pretty crazy for her and stuff. But we all just like Luna and want to spread Luna Awareness."

"Luna Awareness?"

"Yep! Awareness of Luna."

Like that explained anything.

"Can you give me an example of Luna Awareness?" Twilight asked.

"Okay, sure," Iron agreed. "First thing is probably just spreading her name. So if you go in a battleground or you're crusading somewhere, people will see the 'Knights of Luna' banner and they'll go: 'oh, hey, Knights of Luna. Luna's pretty cool.' Or if they don't know who Luna is, they'll be all:

'hey, who's this Luna anyway?' And then we tell them. So it's a name recognition thing."

"Then," he added, finding a bit of a stride. "We try and do good deeds and heroic stuff for Luna, that's why we're fighting in her name. So she hears about what we're doing and she knows she's got ponies who are willing to fight for her." He smiled amiably. "Imagine she's all alone in the castle at night, tired from moving the moon or being the moon and all that, and there's no one around. Then she hears: oh, hey, the Knights of Luna just raided Blackwing Descent in her name! And sad-Luna becomes happy-Luna! That's what the Knights of Luna is basically about!"

Twilight wasn't quite sure what to say. This warrior pony sounded completely earnest. Was this guild really just about fighting some good fight all to make Luna happy? Or to inspire her or something?

"You don't..." She almost hesitated to bring it up now. Ironside was smiling at her so pleasantly. It felt like kicking a puppy. "What about the Nightmare Moon thing...?"

"What about it?" he asked. "Didn't you guys and the Elements of Harmony make her good again?"

Twilight blinked in surprised - so he knew who she was?

"I mean, one of you guys didn't mess with your friendship beam powers or anything, did you?" he chuckled and gave an eyes-closed grin. "We should try and support Luna and help her redeem herself, not blame her for what happened a thousand years ago!"

Twilight sighed, feeling terrible. This guy was just too sugary sweet to be involved in anything nefarious. Of course, that didn't mean his guild was entirely roses and flowers and happy-Luna-posters. Just that this one guy was apparently a heavily armored gumball. Twilight herself wanted Luna to be redeemed, too, though she didn't exactly think much about it. The Moon Princess had kind of dropped off the map since being de-nightmaremoonified, and hadn't even shown up at the Grand Gala. It was basically out of sight, out of mind.

"That's very nice of you to say," Twilight agreed, honestly. "I hope she's happy, too. I guess it is kind of easy to overlook her and all."

"Heheh!" Iron grinned even wider as he laughed. "We'll have you signed as a KoL member soon at this rate!"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," she replied, smiling back and playfully tapping him with her hoof. Of course he was covered in armor, so he probably didn't even feel it.

"So what do you do, anyway? Not the guild, just you?" she asked, suddenly curious about him personally, and what he did here. He seemed pretty devoted to 'Luna Awareness' and his job.

"Me? I'm just your usual meat shield prot warrior," Ironside explained, bashfully glancing down at his armored forehooves. "That means I'm the first guy to get in the mix with whatever bad guy we're up against. I take the hits, the healers keep me alive, and the deeps do the real damage." He looked back up, some pride entering his voice. "Mostly it's taunting, off tanking, and moving the fight around, but I do interrupts too. Counter magic stuff."

"Counter magic?"

"Shield Slam. A few stuns." He became bashful again and chuckled. "I'm pretty new, actually. I haven't been 85 for long. I made a few friends back during the Cataclysm and they speed-ran me up so I could help tank."

"What do you mean; you haven't been eighty-five for long?"

"That's just the ranking system everyone uses outside Equestria," the warrior explained. "Kinda like a power level or something. It's a magical measure of how much experience you have with your class."

Spike suddenly laughed, resting a hand on the back of her head. "Twilight, you read all those books and wrote all those reports and none of them mentioned level?"

"H-hey!" she objected, annoyed that Spike would mention both her ignorance of a topic and the fact that she was a studybug all in one

sentence, and in front of a stranger no less! "I knew! Just, I'd never looked too much into it!"

"Once you start training up your class, you'll develop a spell that lets you read other ponies - and other people - so you know their level and whether they're dangerous to you or not," Iron helpfully clarified. "That will come out as a sort of standardized number. People weaker than you or close to your level are readable, but really powerful types, like Celestia or Luna, can't be read on the normal scale."

"The last time I saw Luna, when we had our big KoL meetup at Canterlot, I tried to see if I could read her." He shrugged nonchalantly. "Just came back with a skull. So she's boss level. Kinda what you'd expect from a Moon Goddess and all."

"I see," Twilight said, filing away what she'd heard for later experimentation. "I'd heard even earth ponies can use non Equestrian magic..."

"A little. Like my hearth stone and magical items. The armor and weapons and trinkets are magic, too. Real basic stuff." Ironside gestured behind him. "If you want to know more about the guild, and you seem pretty curious, I could see if our GM is busy. Nothing like having an introduction to smooth things over, right?"

"Right!" she agreed. "Thanks."

"No problem!" He turned to lead her over to one of the back rooms. "We wouldn't even have Luna if it wasn't for you." Twilight blushed a bit at the praise, and he almost ended at that but quickly amended, "All you guys I mean!"

The three went through another mundane hall with wood panels. There was a moon motif here, with crescent moons on the ceiling, and a painting of Luna meeting the guild founders displayed on the wall. The Princess looked kind of funny, actually: she was the smallest one among the ponies in the picture, a lone unarmored filly surrounded by ponies in armor or elaborate robes. They were holding her up in the air, and she did seem pretty happy with all the attention.

Or adulation, rather.

'It's like... a fan club. A crazy mercenary fan club, but still.'

"Here we go," Ironside stopped at a door, and knocked before opening it a crack. "Hey, Giddy. You'll never guess who I've got here. Twilight Sparkle! The Element of Magic herself! She's got a few questions about KoL."

"Sure," a strange voice answered. It sounded deep, male, but echoing and pained. "I've got a couple minutes. Send her in."

Door opened, Twilight nearly jumped in fright at the sight of the pony inside. He was large, larger than even Ironside, who was himself a little smaller than Big Mac. Like Ironside, he wore plate armor and barding, colored a dark, dead green, with what looked to be bits of frozen crystal stuck in it. Spikes raised up from his shoulders, and horns curled under his neck. A nearby helmet, hanging from the wall, also sported horns and frightening glowing eyes under a skull motif. A deathly chill emanated from the room, like the cold of the grave.

This - Twilight had heard of this... condition.

"Twilight Sparkle," the death knight said, walking closer. His face was structurally pony-normal-enough, but the skin was pale and while he had blue eyes they were far removed from those of Ironside or a normal Earth Pony. They glowed with a chilly fire, like captured will-o-wisps, trails of energy rising like smoke from the black of his eyes around the pupils.

"This is Giddy App, our GM," Ironside said, helpfully sticking his head in between them. He then slipped a bit closer to Twilight and whispered, "I know, the name's kind of silly, but he's not an NBE."

Before the warrior could explain what an NBE was, he stepped outside.

Leaving her alone in the room with the undead -

"Pleasure to meet you!" Giddy App declared, smiling pleasantly.

Twilight heard Spike fall off her back, clearly also thrown by the friendly greeting. So much for suspense, too! Shaking her head slightly, she reached out and shook the death knight's hand. It was cold, lifeless, but strong.

Getting a better look, she also noticed wings the color of ice flattened against the side of his armor. So: he was a Pegasus, then? Probably the biggest one she had ever seen, and that included the Royal Guard Pegasi, who were already above average. He released her hoof and trotted easily back around to lean against his desk.

"And this must be Spike," he noted, and tossed something off the top of his table towards the baby dragon.

Rubbing his tail, still nursing the fall, Spike nonetheless caught what appeared to be a ring out of midair. There was a gem embedded in the gold circle.

"Hey! A bloodstone! Strength cut!!" The dragon licked his lips. He was stacking strength, stamina and spellpower. The classic dragon three. Most people didn't want to part with their red gems, though.

"I was going to vendor that old thing, but if you can get the gem out, it's all yours," Giddy said with a friendly grin. "Or you could DE it." He turned to Twilight. "You're lucky you've got a kid like that who can burn BOPs. Maelstrom Crystals are easy money these days."

"Anyway," he changed the topic. "What brings you to KoL? We're not recruiting any more pony mages or locks."

Twilight shook her head, reminding herself to stay focused. "I'm not here about recruitment. I'd just like to know more about why your guild is... so Luna-centric."

"That a problem?" Giddy asked, inclining his head slightly at the perceived threat. "You anti-Luna or something?"

"I'm not anti-Luna. I wasn't aware there was an 'anti-Luna,'" Twilight argued. "It's just strange that your guys are... well... kind of Luna loony."

"You want to know why?" Giddy App asked, glaring at the violet pony for a second. "I'll tell you **why**."

The death knight pony loomed over her, eyes aglow with power -

Before suddenly turning into smoldering blue hearts. "Because how can you NOT love Princess Luna?!"

He hopped over to a wall, where there was a picture of Luna; he unhooked it and held it up to his face. "Look at those soulful eyes! She was abandoned on the moon for a thousand years! She's just lonely and hurt, that's all!"

The death knight then bounced, Pinkie Pie-like, over to the other wall, where he snatched up a giant, jagged, two handed sword of doom. It looked like it was hewn from a haunted meteorite, forged in the blood of a dragon, and then set on FIRE.

Giddy App swung it around carelessly, hearts in his eyes bubbling around him.

"When I heard about her... and saw some pictures... I just knew I had to be the one to cheer her up! And what better way to show that I, that we I mean, that we care about her, than to throw her a party!"

Okay - way too Pinkie Pie like -

"And by that, I mean a slaughter party!" Giddy enthused; eyes briefly back to frightening normal. "We'll kill in her name! Horde! Faction Leaders! Raid Bosses! Instance Bosses! Rare Spawns! World Elites! Achievements! Realm Firsts!" He pointed the god-killing sword at a stunned Twilight Sparkle. "Like I said. We'll throw her a slaughter party."

On second thought, maybe *not* like Pinkie Pie.

"A. ha. ha." Nervous laughter punctuated her carefully side stepping away from the tip of the monstrous bladed weapon. "You certainly are... enthusiastic?"

"You have to be in this line of work." Ice cool again, switching from spring to winter in a heartbeat, the death knight sheathed the sword behind his back in the blink of an eye.

"And... Princess Luna appreciates your enthusiasm...?"

"She seemed to," was the dark response. ...that quickly lightened to a bashful. "I mean, she seemed pretty appreciative..." An icy hoof traced circled in the floor and the frightening death knight quickly started to giggle to himself.

By the time Twilight Sparkle finally left Giddy App's office, she wasn't sure whether she was frightened, confused, embarrassed, or even a little bit inspired. Mostly the first three. Knights of Luna was led by a murderous, undead version of a gender swapped Pinkie Pie. During their brief discussion, she had tried to focus on detecting the death knight's level, focusing on remember what she'd heard about it and read regarding innate Titan magics outside Equestria. She'd come up short on getting any details, but eventually she had been able to discern a faint number and name over the GM's name.

[85] Giddy App the Insane
<Knights of Luna>

His Title was '*The Insane*.'

That *probably* wasn't a good thing.

She and Spike bumped into Ironside back outside in the hall. He seemed as friendly as ever.

"Did you know...?" she almost blurted out the question, still frazzled by the encounter. "His name...?"

"I said Giddy wasn't a NBE," the warrior replied, leading her to the exit. "Oh, or did you mean his favorite title?"

"Is he, I mean, he's... insane?"

"Yep!" Ironside agreed without so much as a moment's hesitation. "Pretty impressive, huh? The other guys say he got it back when it required Shen'dralar rep, pre-Cataclysm. I can't imagine how long that must've taken."

Twilight's left eye twitched, wondering if she'd be best off filing everyone in this building under 'insane.' How on Equestria was being 'The Insane' impressive? She narrowed her eyes and gave Ironside a long stare, picking up his name and title.

[85] Ironside the Argent Champion
<Knights of Luna>

Well, that was... kind of normal at least. Strange but normal.

"What?" he asked, seeing her staring.

"Nothing," Twilight decided. On her back, she felt Spike fidget a bit.

"That guy... really likes Luna, doesn't he?" the dragon asked, looking back.

"Yep!" Iron confirmed. *Like it needed saying.*

"Oh, Ironside, I wanted to ask you something else," Twilight began, seeing him look at her questioningly. "You said before that Giddy wasn't NBE? What does that mean? NBE?"

"Heheh!" He laughed lightly and blinked at her frown. "Sorry! I didn't - I wasn't laughing at you. I'd just assumed you knew."

She stamped a hoof. "Well, what does it mean? Not everypony knows everything!"

"NBE means 'natural born equestrian,'" he explained, and nudged her gently with the side of his head. "You and me, in other words. Ponies."

"So, Giddy App isn't a pony?" Twilight asked, shaking her head. "He's a death knight, but he sure looked like a pony to me!"

"He race changed," Ironside clarified.

"He... race changed?" Spike and Twilight asked at the same time, one confused the other surprised.

"How do you think he had that title?" the warrior pony asked as the three entered the reception room of the guild hall. "There's no natural born Equestrian pony with an Insane or Flame Warden or Seeker title. Not yet anyway. There are only a few at level eighty five. Most of the high level ponies you see around you got race changes when the Cataclysm happened."

Amazingly, he didn't seem to understand just why Twilight hadn't noticed.

"I'm pretty sure Giddy App was a human, but he changed his name and race. A few others were night elves, but they switched for some druid related reason. Our primary mage was a draenei before she switched," he said. "All the officers are race changed. They walk like ponies and smell like ponies, but its easy to tell if you know what to look for."

"Mostly, they'll always try and use their hooves," he explained, holding up a hoof of his own for emphasis. "I guess it's because they're used to using their hands. Even unicorn ones will default to using their hooves instead of their horn. They also eat meat pretty often. I only eat it for the raid buffs, you know? But they're used to it every day. It's easier to polymorph the body than the brain I guess?"

"A permanent polymorph?" Twilight whispered. "Why would they do that to themselves?"

She could barely imagine becoming human or a night elf or anything else for more than a few seconds. Who would change their race entirely, permanently?

"They've all got their reasons," Ironside reasoned with an indifferent shrug. "You get used to it. Maybe they did it for the racials. Ponies have a slightly higher crit chance with spells and attacks, faster run speed, and some innate nature resistance. For some folks, that's all the reason they need."

"But that's... completely crazy...!" Twilight just didn't have any other way to describe it.

"They're ponies now, so does it matter how they were born?" the warrior asked. "Everyone out there in the rest of the world is used to this kind of thing. What matters is what you are, not what you used to be. I think it's kind of neat."

Twilight didn't disagree, not aloud. It did seem weird to her, but there was a time when certain sexual orientations had been frowned on in Equestria. Everypony liked to think of themselves as living in a more enlightened, progressive time. She resolved to try and have an open mind. After all, everyone was entitled to live their lives and pursue -

"Well, well, well! If it isn't Twilight Sparkle!"

- and her train of thought derailed at the sound of that voice.

"Oh, hey there Trix," she heard Ironside remark.

Trixie. Wonderful. Just wonderful.

Twilight looked over and saw the baby blue pony that was Trixie the Great and Powerful. She was also sporting otherworldly attire: stark purple robes covered her shoulders and flanks, and black vestments trailed down over her shoulders. Curved purple and black cloth shifted around her upper arms as she trotted smugly over. The magician's hat she sported with the ensemble was off color, but at least familiar.

"Imagine running into you here," Trixie said with a haughty laugh.

"I live in this town," Twilight deadpanned.

"...imagine it anyway!" The other unicorn demanded, red faced at the snide remark. Waves crashed behind the two as they stood face to face, sparks clashing between them.

"I finally get a chance to pay you back for the humiliation heaped upon me," Trixie declared with an evil grin.

"I seem to remember you doing everything in your power to humiliate those around you," Twilight observed, sounding only half interested in the conversation. "Anyway, I need to get going-"

"Oh no you don't!" Trixie stood boldly between her and the door out. She chuckled darkly, closing her eyes and savoring the moment. "Because of you, Twilight Sparkle, I've seen Hell!"

"Because of you, I was mocked in Ponyville..."
(memories of her being laughed at in town came back, fueling her righteous anger)

"Driven out into the wilderness without a home..."
(memories of her kicking her worthless broken travel wagon)

"Forsaken and forced to live like a beast on the crudest fare..."
(memories of eating at a food stall in town instead of a fine restaurant)

"Living a broken shell of my former life..."
(memories of distracting the waiter and running instead of paying the bill)

"Forced into the most degrading and sickening of acts, just to survive..."
(memories of doing magic tricks at some foal's birthday party for money)

"But on that dark day, I swore I'd turn my life around and get revenge."
(memories of the Cataclysm, and staring up at the burning sky)

"Even if it was the last thing I ever did. I, Trixie, would have my revenge!" Her eyes snapped open, burning with an inner fire. "Revenge... on YOU, Twilight Sparkle!!"

- only to find she was ranting and pointing at empty space.

"HEY!" She yelled, whirling around and out the door to find Twilight saying goodbye to Ironside. Pointing an angry hoof, she stamped it hard on the ground. "Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to walk out while

someone's ranting at you?! The Great and Powerful Trixie demands you listen to her tale of adversity, struggle, heartbreak, and triumph!!"

"We don't actually have to do that, do we Twilight?" Spike asked, sounding scared.

"No, Spike," the bookish unicorn replied.

"You do! You do! You do!"

"Trix, what's this about?" Ironside asked, confused. "Didn't you want me to run you through Lower Maraudon today? Twilight here has to go back home. So I'll see her off and then we can head out."

"You're finally gonna run me through Maraudon?" She suddenly shot up to his side. "Orange and Purple wings, too? I've got quests there I need to finish!"

"NO!" She kneeled dramatically on the ground. "I want to go to Maraudon! I do! But I also want my revenge! Oh, cruel fate! Must I choose between them?!"

Ironside just stared dumbly at the spectacle and experience that was Trixie. "Huh?"

Twilight just reached back as Trixie suddenly blasted back up and got in her face.

"Since I don't have time to *completely* destroy you, I'll have to settle for something quicker and easier," the crazy unicorn decided with a 'te-heehee'. She jabbed a hoof into Twilight's chest, forcing her back a step. "I, Trixie, the Great and Powerful, challenge you to a duel!"

"I don't have any reason to want to fight you," Twilight dryly observed.

"That doesn't matter! Accept the duel!" Trixie backed off and pretended to cover a laugh with a hoof. "Unless you're afraid of me."

"Trying to goad me into a fight. Didn't you try this exact same thing before?"

"Just accept the stupid duel!"

"I don't think -" Ironside started to intervene, only for Trixie to pop up and force his mouth closed with her forehooves.

"You don't think Twilight has what it takes?" the blue unicorn asked, and forced his head up and down. "It's just a duel, right? No one gets hurt. Just an innocent little contest of magic." Pink eyes narrowed at their target. "After all, didn't you hear? Twilight Sparkle defeated an Ursa Minor. Surely she hasn't lost her edge, right?"

"Fine!" Twilight relented, growing more than a little annoyed. If Trixie wanted a duel, or whatever, then she'd get it. As for why Ironside's eyes were suddenly extremely wide and worried looking, well - who knew? He was probably just ashamed to have gotten involved in such a stupid mixup with Trixie making him look so silly.

"I accept the duel!" the librarian announced, stepping boldly forward.

"Hehehe!" Trixie just laughed, pushing Ironside back and out of the way. A magical standard appeared between the two mares, together with a numerical countdown. Noticing the duel in the middle of the street, other spectators were quick to back away.

"Oh, this-" Trixie said, suddenly taking on a rather ominous black aura as demonic armor snapped in place around her. "This is going to be fun."

A literal torrent of dark magic enveloped the light blue pony and void-like rifts in space cracked open at her feet. One of them widened, forming a nightmarish fissure that belched forth a red and black dog from the pits of hell. Hungry sucker tentacles, a savage toothy maw under an eyeless skull, and heavily muscled legs and paws covered in protruding bony spikes characterized the summoning of a demonic Felhunter.

Spike quickly hopped off Twilight and vanished.

Kicking herself for not doing so before, Twilight tried to 'scan' Trixie to get a sense of -

[42] Trixie (the great and powerful!)

"Go get her, Twilight!" Spike cheered from somewhere safe.

...

Fifteen seconds later he winced from behind the shelter of an armored stallion's legs.

'That had to hurt.'

...

The next thing Twilight remembered, aside from the brief but lingering memory of being drained of mana and pummeled flat into the ground, was staring up at the pixie-like face of a familiar baby dragon. *Hey, I remember you. ...Remember you jumping off my back and running for your life.* She tried to say something to that effect but words kind of hurt. Lousy painful words. Who needed them?

"Hey, Twilight? You don't need me to do CPR, do you?"

"NO!" She shot up. Words had their uses after all.

Blurrily regaining her senses through the fog of being pounded like pizza dough, Twilight did take note of two interesting things. Two things which stuck in her mind long after her wounds healed and her mana recovered. Two things that would be burned into her memory forever.

One was the Felhunter, one leg in the air while it licked itself. *Gross.*

The other was Trixie, her forelegs up in the air as she danced and wiggled her rear, dancing in pure joy. Dancing. Dancing pony. *Dancing Trixie.* Forever burned into her eyes. Somehow the fact that Trixie had all those clothes on made it even worse. Twilight Sparkle made a vow that day.

Never Forget.

"Trixie is victorious! T-R-I-X-I-E! Spell lock! Shadowbolt!" She hopped around and landed on all fours to poke Twilight on the nose. "You lose!"

"Okay!" She announced. "Ready to go now!"

And, without preamble, Trixie (TG&P) hopped onto what looked like a two person rocket and flew off. Watching her go, Spike could only shake his head sadly.

"Wow. I hate to say it, Twilight, but she totally schooled you."

"Ugh."

"She took you to the woodshed."

"Rgh."

"She beat you like a drum."

"..."

"Like a red headed step-"

"Spike."

"Okay, I'm done."

Chapter 2

Twilight Sparkle mewed in relief as the healing energy engulfed her, rapidly restoring strength and vitality to her worn and drained frame. Bruises and magical damage faded, lifting away from her coat like a misty haze. Warmth permeated her very core, bringing a pleasant shiver to the surface. Sadly, it wouldn't erase the shame of being so effortlessly taken out by Trixie, regardless of how 'Great and Powerful' the annoying bay blue mare claimed to be (nor would it erase the memory of that terrible Trixie-dance, a sight that would probably be with Twilight until the day she died).

"Um, Twilight?" a soft, shy voice inquired. "Are you... feeling better...?"

"Much better." She looked up to see a gold coated pegasus pony with a long pink mane: her friend Fluttershy. *When had she gotten back?* Clearly only recently: the soft spoken mare still had a traveling pack or two hooked up to her saddle. Light blue eyes inspected Twilight to make sure she was recovering and only then did the shy pony back away, keeping her head low and letting her mane fall over to conceal part of her face.

"Thanks," Twilight groaned, rubbing the side of her head. She was still completely mana-drained.

"I, um, saw your duel," Fluttershy said, Spike standing to her side. He must've found her and brought her over. "I'm sorry you lost so badly."

Twilight facefell - had it really been that bad? She hung her head and moaned pitifully. "What, does everyone know about it?"

"Trixie was goating in general chat, so..."

"She was what?"

"Um. Nothing." Fluttershy bit her lower lip and watched as Twilight got back on her feet, flexing her freshly restored legs. "Your mana is still very

low. Would you like some Goldthorn Tea? I'm not that great at making it, but... but it'll help..."

'*Goldthorn Tea?*' Twilight wondered, but nodded her head agreeably. "That sounds great, but, Fluttershy, were you the one who healed me?"

The normally quiet and reserved pony nodded her head.

Stepping out of the street and over to a nearby store overhang, Fluttershy quickly and easily retrieved some kindling from her bag and started a tiny campfire. It was just enough to heat up what looked to be some spring water and herbs. Curiously, no one seemed to bat an eye at some random pony starting a fire next to a rather flammable building. Within seconds, Fluttershy was handing her a mug of hot tea. Still a bit too weakened to exercise fine control with her unicorn telekinesis, Twilight carefully took it with her forehoof.

Taking an experimental sip from the inconspicuous brew, she was surprised by the sudden increase of energy she felt inside her. The tea was surprisingly good, though the taste was somewhat unfamiliar - definitely not an Equestria brand - but most amazing was the fact that Twilight felt her magical energy restore itself after only a few seconds of drinking. Sighing softly, she also noticed that Fluttershy had a new companion with her: a strange looking groundhog or something. The little brown critter stared at her with wide eyes.

"Thanks again for all the help," Twilight said, glancing back at the street where she'd been so handily taken down. No one seemed to be paying any attention anymore. Everyone was back to working at the forge or anvil at the armory nearby. The two mares sat in comfortable silence, when two strangers also started a duel, throwing down another one of those challenge flags.

Unlike the 'battle' with Trixie, this one actually took a while and went back and forth, as the two ponies jumped and clashed and tossed powerful magics around. It ended when one of them got stunned by some sort of ranged spell. The other one then charged in, dealing enough blows to force her opponent to concede.

"All this fighting," Fluttershy muttered softly and put down her own cup of tea. This time Twilight got a look at what her friend had used before. The yellow pony's hooves glowed and she reared up, moving them in a slow circle. It seemed a strange sight to Twilight, used to seeing magic projected from a unicorn's horn. Academically she knew pegasi and earth ponies could use foreign magic, but this was different than what she'd seen before.

Soft green and purple light enveloped the defeated duelist.

"TY!" the now rejuvenated pony said in more of that foreign shorthand that Spike was so enamored of.

"Um. 'np'," Fluttershy softly replied, sitting back down to finish her Goldthorn Tea.

For a few seconds, Twilight just watched her. "That was... druidic magic, wasn't it?" she asked.

Fluttershy quietly nodded, clearly a bit embarrassed.

"You've been gone for more than a week," the librarian pony continued. "I thought you were going to help evacuate animals from the forest fires?"

"I was. We, um, that is... the druids and dryads helping us said I was doing such a good job... catching the animals. They were scared, and a lot of them were hurt, so..." The pegasus pony seemed a bit reluctant to praise her own efforts, and certainly not loud enough that anyone would overhear and think her to be bragging. "Well, I didn't want to leave any injured critters behind. So I sort of asked if they could..."

She ducked low, almost hiding her head between her shoulders and her pink mane.

"I asked if they could teach me how to heal the animals, and maybe how to sneak around and catch them, and they said yes, so..." Fluttershy trailed off a bit. "...so some stuff happened."

"Is that where you picked up this little guy?" Spike asked, trying to pick up the strange ground squirrel. It nimbly darted away to hide under his owner's tail.

"Oh, yes. This is Danny," Fluttershy said, moving her tail enough for Spike to pick up the critter. "He's a prairie dog from... thunder bluff..."

"You went to Thunder Bluff?!" Twilight asked, amazed. "But that's Horde territory!"

"oh, n-no, I'd *never* go there," her timid friend admitted with a shake of her head. "I got him in Ratchet. In the Barrens. It's a, um, a long story."

One she clearly didn't want to dwell on, since she actually took the initiative and changed the topic. "So, Twilight... why were you fighting with Trixie? You don't even have a talent spec..."

"It isn't like I was looking for a fight," Twilight argued, putting down her now empty cup of tea. "She just came out of nowhere while I was in the guild hall over there. And then she just kept bothering me until I agreed to it."

"That wasn't very nice of her."

"No, I guess it wasn't," Twilight drolly agreed.

"So, um, you were going to join a guild...?"

"No, I was just investigating something. I've been reading up on the history of some of the new world we've been introduced to, and doing some archaeology," the purple unicorn sighed as she realized, "I've been kind of out of touch, I guess. This archaeology stuff is surprisingly addictive and there are some dig sites right outside town."

"It sounds like you've been very busy. Um, I was kind of wondering if..." Fluttershy trailed off, her eyes moving to find something to Twilight's right. There was a white stallion riding by on a turtle of all things while whistling to himself, and trailing behind the slow moving turtle mount was a small, black wolf-like puppy with two large canines set in his lower jaw. Twilight recognized the species as a worg. It was a worg puppy. Cute, too.

Fluttershy's eyes grew wide as saucers.

"A worg pup!" She squeaked, excited by the sight. "And a speckled northern sea turtle!"

In a flash, the shy pegasus zipped over to snatch up the puppy in a cuddling embrace. Predictably, the stallion on the sea turtle mount took the opportunity to ask for Fluttershy's number and ask her out on a date. Thus began The Cycle: Stallion asks Fluttershy out; Fluttershy becomes even shyer and more embarrassed by the attention; Stallion becomes even more interested; Fluttershy becomes even more embarrassed; repeat *ad nauseum*. Literally. It was kind of nauseating. This guy wasn't exactly subtle and poor Fluttershy seemed completely and innocently oblivious to his wanting to get in her saddle.

It took a while, but finally the pegasus escaped and headed back, blushing profusely.

"S-sorry..." she apologized, bowing her head, "I heard you can't get worg pups like that any more... I *really* wish I had one..."

Feeling a bit dejected, Fluttershy picked up her prairie dog from Spike and hugged it as she sat back down. Nuzzling it a bit, she turned her powder blue eyes on her unicorn friend. "Umm. Twilight. I was kind of wondering if, you... that is... if you wanted to come with me to the Darkmoon Faire? Sometime? I'd really like to get a Wood Frog, or maybe a Tree Frog..."

By this point her mutter had become almost a whisper. "And, um, maybe help me with some quests?"

"I'd be happy to help any way I can," Twilight assured her. "But as you saw back there, I'm kind of... out of shape."

"Oh, you're not out of shape, you just need to visit your trainer, you know?" Fluttershy then suggested, even more quietly, "And, um, maybe do something besides archaeology?"

"I've been telling her as much for days now!" Spike chimed in. "You'd think she'd have quit after the third lame worm fossil in a row!"

"I'm so close to getting something good!" Twilight objected. "I can feel it!"

"Face it; archaeology has ruined your life, Twilight."

"Never! Archaeology pays over time. You're just being impatient for free epics."

"Um," Fluttershy hesitantly interrupted the argument. "You should probably retrain anyway, Twilight. You haven't even filled out your talent tree."

"It wasn't like there was a big rush to... until today," the unicorn relented. "But since it seems I'm just a walking punching bag without it, I guess I may as well..."

- - -

Fizzle Boombox rather liked Equestria. The climate was nice, the colors were bright, and there was just so much new stuff to tinker with! Her twin flares of pink hair bobbed up and down as she worked, fiddling with her new arcanoplastic ponyfication transmogrifier. It was a simply ingenious bit of gnomish engineering! Oh so carefully, she slowly integrated the arcanite crystal matrix to the transformation buffer...

Only to lift a hammer and jam it in place with a resounding CLANG CLANG CLANG-

"WAAAAHH!!!"

Twilight watched, eyes half lidded, as the building they had been heading towards erupted in neon pink magical fire. Fluttershy was already hiding behind the unicorn's haunches, and she 'eeped' loudly as a pony-sized wrench crashed into the ground just a few feet away.

"AAAAAHHHHH!!!"

Followed by a small flaming meteorite that blasted up through the roof of the workshop, spun around in crazy circles, and then slammed back to earth with a resounding thud. For a few seconds, all was silent -

And then a tiny pink filly jumped out of the hole in the ground, fluttering around in zany spirals as pink and purple fire trailed behind. The pink blur ran and flew around and around and around until, at last, it crashed into a wall and then bounced into a barrel of collected rainwater. A cloud of steam rose up from the reaction within... and moments later, a soot covered hand dragged a small humanoid shape out of the rain barrel. Said blackened shape then proceeded to stomp around the side of the workshop - isolated from the rest of Ponyville for now obvious reasons - and back inside.

A second later, something else exploded, too.

"EUREKA!!!" a high pitched voice cried out. "Another leap forward! FOR SCIENCE!"

"Um... on second thought, maybe we should try and find another class trainer," Fluttershy whimpered.

A part of Twilight, the sane part, couldn't help but agree. Yet... another part of her had wanted to laugh maniacally and cheer 'for science!' as well. Obviously the insanity was contagious and spreading. To her side, the giant crashed wrench teetered and fell with another loud boom. Yep. She was definitely a few screws loose to be coming here for help.

You would have to be positively loony to expect -

"HI!" Pinkie Pie appeared out of nowhere, prompting another hoof-palm.

'I really need to watch this internal monologue thing,' Twilight realized.

"Hey, Fluttershy, haven't seen you in a while!" The hyperactive pink force of nature that was Pinkie Pie bounded over to look the pegasus pony eye to eye. "Where you off having dangerous adventures on the far ends of the world? Because that sounds like fun! I hope you remembered to laugh

at any monsters or zombies or giant spiders or giant spider zombies that you ran into, I don't think that does any actual dps, but it probably doesn't hurt either! Oh, do you have any recount tables I could use? Ponyville doesn't have any test dummies and I've been hoping to try some new things out!"

"I, um, I don't...I haven't done anything too interesting, so..."

"That's okay!" She leaned in conspiratorially. "I got the ear twitchy-twitch not too long ago. That means something exciting is going to happen soon." Pinkie bounced away, finally giving her two friends some space again. "So what's brought you guys out here to see Master Boombox?"

"I was hoping to get some class training," Twilight explained. "But, ah, 'Master Boombox' seems pretty busy, and I wouldn't want to interrupt."

"It was just a little explosion mixed with some transformation magic. Nothing serious!" Pinkie happily trotted over to the workshop, heedless of the ominous, incandescent arclight glowing from inside and illuminating the windows. "Come on in, I'll show you around!"

"We've come this far," Fluttershy reasoned.

Nodding, Twilight followed her party loving Earth pony friend into the gnomish workshop and laboratory. Arcane machinery pumped and gears and pistons whirled, occupying entire walls and rooms. Tools and tomes and flasks were strewn around in a chaotic mess that defied rational characterization, indeed, it spat in the eye of organization itself. Strange plans and blueprints hung here and there like tapestries.

Some more recent inventions had already been packaged in metal crates: high performance mechano-squirrel lubrication, weaponized salt shakers, smoke DE-detectors...

Not a lick of it made any damn sense.

A pair of oversized goggles popped up to fill Twilight's view.

"Hm-hm-hm! Unicorn pony." One of the goggle's lenses detached and 'zoomed' in on the surprised librarian. The pink haired gnome peered

even closer. "Innnnnn-teresting!" The zoom lens then turned on Spike. "Very interesting!" Finally she noticed Fluttershy and immediately jumped back. "A druid! Pinkamena!"

"He-ee-re!" Pinkie sing-songed as she erupted out of a random pile of broken robots, a strange electronic contraption on her head, part hat and part slowly turning satellite dish.

"Hide the mutagen samples! The Circle's onto us!!"

"Right away!" Pinkie Pie saluted before bouncing away, this time with spring assisted footwear.

"Um, you really shouldn't be mutating animals..." Fluttershy perked up, approaching the insane gnome now busily rummaging through a haphazard collection of lab equipment.

"Animals?" the gnome asked, whirling on the pegasus and sounding genuinely insulted. "My little pony, mutating animals is *goblin science*. And so last decade." She then struck a pose and pointed upwards. "In this lab, we mutate **robots!!**"

"How can you mutate a robot?" Twilight asked, raising an eyebrow. "That doesn't even make sense."

The gnome just chuckled. It was probably meant to be sinister, but it just came out as childish.

"Oh ye of little SCIENCE!!!" she declared, crossing her arms even as something else exploded in the back of the lab.

Pinkie Pie crash landed nearby covered in black soot.

"So who are you two, anyway?" she then asked, stepping over the blasted pink pony to pursue some other random impulse/experiment.

"They're two friends of mine!" Pinkie replied before Twilight could say 'we were just leaving.' Shaking off the ash and soot like a hyperactive wet dog, she popped up between the two mares. "Twilight Sparkle is a unicorn

and she works over at the library and she's one of Princess Celestia's personal students!"

"...favorite student actually..."

"And she got completely humiliated in a duel, so she wants to train up her class!"

"Does *everyone* have to know about that?!"

"And Fluttershy! She doesn't like to fly that much, unlike most pegasus ponies, but she's really great with animals and I think she's resto spec. So we've already got a healer!"

"...um, excuse me?"

"And this is Spike." Pinkie ended, her hoof flat on Spike's head.

"What? That's it?" the baby dragon pouted.

"Spike," Pinkie repeated, ruffling the scales on the top of his head. "He's the cute one. Like a mascot!"

"I want a better intro! And I'm no mascot!"

The sugary pink pony trotted over to where the gnome stood, tapping her foot expectantly. "Guys, this is Fizzle Boombox, Master Mage and Engineer! I'm supposed to call her Master Boombox, since I'm her temporary apprentice/unpaid intern but most visitors call her Fizzle or 'By the Light, that crazy gnome!'"

"That's enough time wasted on introductions, Pinkamena," Fizzle decided, lifting her goggles up to cover her forehead and hug the bangs of her similarly bright pink hair. The eyes beneath were a much more mundane brown. "Prepare the cupcake reintegration device. I will attend to your friends."

"Okey dokey, lokey!"

"So, you're here to have some retaining done?" Fizzle held out her hand and a voluminous tome appeared in a puff of smoke. "I see you haven't invested in any talent points. Why don't you pick a spec and I'll train you up. I'll even give you a discount, since you're a friend of my foolish apprentice."

Twilight blinked, and saw a picture of herself reflected in the first page of the arcane codex and instructional spell book. It quickly displayed her attendant level [31] and another numerical value called 'talent point pool.' There was also an outline of a fingered hand that morphed into a much more recognizable hoof-shape. Pressing her right forehoof to the outline, Twilight's head swam with possibilities and arcane knowledge wavering at the edge of consciousness.

"So I have to specialize... arcane, fire or frost?" she asked, sensing the book's desire to know her desires. The problem was that she didn't have them yet. She wanted to know anything and everything, pretty much. She hadn't much thought to discriminate.

"You should totally go frost!" Pinkie helpfully suggested while tinkering with some machine in the back of the room. "That way you and Rainbow Dash can start up an arena team!"

"Um, fire has the highest sustained dps," Fluttershy murmured. "I think. ...I mean... that's what I've heard."

"I have no idea what either of you are talking about," the confused unicorn muttered.

"Arcane is good for leveling these days," Spike said in her ear. "Good party utility."

"What in Equestria does party utility mean?" Twilight finally exclaimed. "Or dps for that manner?!" She frowned at the spell book that still had her hoof attached to the page. There was some handy text appearing to help her make up her mind. "Manipulates arcane energies, playing with the very fabric of time and space," she read it aloud. "Since setting fire to things or freezing them doesn't sound very pleasant, arcane it is!"

"Done," Fizzle agreed, eager to get back to her experiments. The gnomish mage trainer put her hand on the opposite page and a rush of knowledge erupted from the tome, up Twilight's foreleg and into her head. Her eyes glowed white hot as the basic spell casting information imprinted on her brain.

By the time she came back to her senses, Fluttershy was putting some sort of pouch back into her saddle bags. Twilight stared at her for a moment, blinking dumbly -

"Woah," she breathily realized. "I know polymorph."

"You'll need to practice to keep your skills sharp," the advice came from Fizzle, by now moved on from the mage training and focused back on critical matters of SCIENCE! She and Pinkie Pie had cleared the area around a peculiar device that spin and churned with magical energies.

"Teleportation manifold at one hundred Laforgeries!" Pinkie declared. "Let's do it!"

"Begin teleport!" her gnomish teacher ordered, laughing maniacally.

A massive blast of power accumulated within the device....

In the form of a cupcake.

"MORE POWER!!" Fizzle screamed, backlit by frightening dark energy. Generators squealed and steam blasted around the workshop. Tesla coils, there mostly for atmosphere (Twilight suspected) crackled and shot out bolts of lightning.

Pinkie pushed a conveniently placed lever forward. "I'm giving her all she's -"

SPLAT

The two engineers turned around, their faces covered in splattered cupcake goo.

"Mmm!" Pinkie wiped it off her face and into her mouth. "At least it still tastes good!"

"Subject remained edible after teleportation? We're making progress!" The pink haired gnome, master to the pink colored pony, quickly went around the back of the machine. "Perhaps a recalibration of the glucose transmogrification array? She just can't handle the sugar content as it is."

A giant hammer came out with which to perform the 'recalibrations.'

"This will take some time, Pinkamena." CLANG "You may as well take your little friends and enjoy the rest of your time off." CRACK "Tomorrow, we start large scale muffin integration trials!"

SPROING

"WAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

"Sure thing Master Boombox!" Pinkie saluted the now lit-on-fire gnome, even as she ran around in circles again. The party pony smiled at her friends and started to bounce out of the lab.

"Is she going to be alright?" Fluttershy asked, unsure whether to try a spell or something to help.

Pinkie shook her head. "Master gets set on fire a lot. I think she kind of likes it."

"Extinguisher 5000 to the rescue!" A spider like robot appeared and started hosing down the lab with foam. "DIE FIRE DIE! All fires shall be cleansed with fire!"

The three ponies took that as their cue to leave.

- - -

"Pinkie, I'm hesitant to ask, but why are you a student of that crazy... person back there?" Twilight had to catch herself from saying 'pony.' It was

a wider world, after all. She was sure she'd get used to the new vocabulary associated with it soon enough.

"I'm learning gnomish engineering," the now slightly-less-hyper pink Earth pony explained. She was walking alongside her friends as they headed back to town.

"I still work at Sugarcube Corner," she quickly continued, pre-empting Twilight's next question. "The engineering apprenticeship is just part time. I'm not getting paid or anything. I just help out a bit and Master Boombox teaches me. The cupcake we were teleporting came from my room."

"That doesn't explain why anyone would want to teleport a cupcake of all things," the unicorn pony observed.

"That's easy to answer!" Pinkie gleefully replied. "Mister Cake wants to be able to sell his pastries to other cities in the Alliance, like Ironforge or Darnassus or Stormwind, but Equestria is really far away from all those places! Really, really far away! If we had a teleporter, though, then we wouldn't have to pay a mage to open portals for us, or for any other high speed transport! It'd be really good for business!"

Pinkie smiled, having finished her technical explanation. "I have a reason or two myself."

"Engineers can make a lot of cute pets," Fluttershy said, raising her voice just enough to clearly hear. "Mechanical squirrels and chickens."

"And a bombling!" Pinkie agreed, bouncing in front of the two mares. "But," she cautioned. "It isn't just that. Engineering is... amazing. I can't wait until I'm a grand master!"

Twilight rolled her eyes. "More dangerous than amazing, if you ask me."

"I guess when you can fly or use magic it doesn't seem very necessary," Pinkie Pie observed in one of her rare moments of dry mannered lucidity, but she quickly shrugged and went back to sounding perfectly cheerful. "But the great thing about it is that anyone can be an

engineer if they just keep at it. I want... I'd like to be able to do things that I can't do as I am."

"What do you mean?" Fluttershy softly inquired. "You mean fly?"

"That's one of them!" Pinkie confirmed. Trotting around and starting to walk backwards, she took a moment to look upwards in memory. "Remember when that nasty old dragon set fire to Ponyville?" Of course they did, so she continued, "Not too long after Celestia and Luna resurrected everyone with that super cool megaspell, most of us had to sleep in tents and other shelters. Everypony was still trying to put out the fires."

"Ponies were so sad..." she said this with a pained expression, still distraught weeks later. "I wanted to throw a party or something to cheer them up, especially the little colts and fillies who couldn't go back to their homes yet. Something like an 'at least everyone's okay' party! Or a 'thanks for the rez, Princesses' party?"

Pinkie shook her head, trying to stay on topic. "Anyway, I didn't have any party stuff. I was going to try and make some up on the spot, but that was when one of the new Alliance people showed up. They'd come to help with the fire elementals."

The sugary pony's eyes got huge and watery as she remembered what came next. "You should've seen it, Twilight! He wasn't a pegasus, or even a pony, but he flew in on this machine - much better than the one I made to visit Dash! After talking to Celestia for a while, and agreeing to help with the fires, he saw all of us moping around. And I could see he loved to party too!"

"Next thing I knew, he'd thrown down this train set and a disco ball that got everyone dancing, and there was this pedestal thing with a dancing fire-girl in it, and firecrackers and these steam cars for the fillies and colts to play with and even a keg that refilled itself with some kind of frothy alcohol! And that wasn't it!" She took a deep breath, all but giddy again. "Food! He just took these feasts out of his bags! There were great feasts that made you big when you ate them, and ones that made you small, and chocolate cake with vanilla and strawberry filling! There was even food that made the saddest pony smile!"

Her misty eyes became suddenly serious. "It was... amazing."

Twilight and Fluttershy exchanged curious looks - neither had been present for the party in question. It seemed both strange and impressive, in Pinkie's words. The way she described it, he'd just thrown the entire party on a whim and completely out of the blue. Regardless of how much preparation beforehand had been actually involved, the sight had clearly affected their friend deeply.

"Imagine being able to make a party anywhere, any time?" Pinkie asked, still serious but fighting against the urge to squee in excitement at the possibility. "If I had what he had back at the Grand Galloping Gala, I'm sure I could've turned the whole thing around! Everyone would've had a super fun time! At least until the stampede hit, anyway."

"Um, yes, sorry about that..."

"Before he left, I talked to the guy," Pinkie drew her story to a close. "He said he'd gotten all the tricks he used from cooking and engineering and from seasonal events across the world." She bounced happily, her irrepressible 'eeeeee' finally escaping to give voice to her excitement. "That's what I want!"

"I want to perfect the art of partying!" she insisted. "To experience parties on every corner of the world! I want to celebrate Brewfest in Ironforge! I want to trick or treat in Outland! I want to have a spring fling for Noblegarden! I want to transform into a snowpony for Winter Veil! I want to meet the ghosts of ancient ponies at the Lunar Festival! I want to experience every form of party that exists and I want to share that with all my friends!"

Finally winding down, Pinkie Pie slowly caught her breath.

"I also want a motorcycle!" she cheered with a bounding 'wheee!!'

"Noblegarden does sound kind of fun," Fluttershy quietly agreed. "And, um, Children's Week, too, maybe."

"That's the spirit!" Pinkie enthused, but still managed to slow herself to a normal walk again next to the soft spoken pegasus. "But the down side is that these parties only happen once a year and we'll need to become stronger to complete all the achievements for them!" Her blue eyes narrowed in thought. "What we need is a tank."

Blue eyes narrowed as an idea – a crazy one as usual – entered her head. "Oh I know! Maybe I should go and try and become a Death Knight? Do you think the Lich King would let me join, huh, do ya do ya?!"

"I wouldn't recommend that," Twilight suggested. On her back, Spike gave a sign of relief.

"One crazy undead pony is more than enough," he agreed.

"Awww! I'm not really the warrior or paladin type," Pinkie admitted, a little sadly. "And Rainbow Dash doesn't care about pve."

Twilight gave her friend a curious look. "What does that mean?"

- - -

Near the center of the new section of town a pony could find the assorted Battlemaster Tents set around an open field. There were designated lanes for jousts and duels here, but the primary purpose of the area was recruiting. Battle mages from the various factional hotpots were joined by more traditional recruiters looking to hire mercenaries or adventurers to reinforce battlegrounds worldwide from Alterac to Wintergrasp.

The mages would then teleport the groups of fighters en masse to support the war against the Horde, ensuring that the most powerful mercenaries were used at the right time against the enemy's most powerful units. Functionally, this meant that battlegrounds were staggered affairs: each side would use troops of similar level to accomplish various objectives at various times. If level 80 mercenaries were being deployed by one side, they were immediately countered by other level 80s. If level 40s were being used, then level 40s would respond, saving their more powerful and experienced peers for when they were specifically required.

Given this, it was no surprise that there were many pvp-inclined ponies (and other Alliance members) hanging around awaiting their group's respective call to battle. Rather less likely, but still present none-the-less, were a trio of pint sized Crusaders, currently engaged in a somewhat one sided battle for survival.

"OH! They're simply adorable!!"

Apple Bloom groaned as the night elf woman cooed and picked her up right off her hooves. Despite being decked in ferocious looking plate armor and wielding a skull-shaped shield with burning eyes and a sword that seethed with pain enduing black magic she quickly reverted to dew-eyed adolescence at the sight of the three tiny fillies that had been trying to earn their cutie marks moments earlier. Cradling the little pony in her arm, she turned to her companion: a less amused human male wearing similar plate armor, and twin axes strapped to his back.

"I don't think she likes being picked up, Juri," he observed.

"Is'okay," Apple Bloom grumbled. "Ah can't say it's the first time this'as happened."

"Ah, well then, do you little..." the man searched for the word for a second. "Fillies need something?"

A cinnamon coated pegasus stood up on her hind legs, holding out a piece of paper in her mouth.

"Er e utie arrk Ruusaders," she said through her teeth and around the flyer. Getting the hint, the human picked it from her and saw it was a quest listing.

"Oh ho," he noted, and flipped it so his partner could read the note as well.

"We're helping ponies around town get their quests done," the yellow and red pony in the night elf's arms explained. "Were also helpin' anypony who wants to trade in tha old Marks of Honor fer Honor Points."

"Since we can't pvp yet," Scootaloo, the pegasus filly, added in.

“Well, aren’t you three helpful?” the night elf woman asked, finally letting Apple Bloom back down. “Does Quartermaster Hadrian know you’re out here?”

“He said we could help,” the third little filly spoke up, a white coated unicorn with a two-tone pink and purple mane. “When we’re done, we’ll get Honor Points of our own for helping fight the Horde!”

“Don’t you still have all those old Wintergrasp tokens, Michael?” the night elf woman warrior asked.

“Hm. I guess I do have a few in here somewhere,” the man replied, patting a pouch on his belt.

“And I still have some old Stone Keeper shards. Why don’t we trade them in?”

“I heard they’re enforcing a new Honor Cap. I bet that’s why they want us to trade in our old stuff.”

“Aw, but look at these cute little girls! Don’t you want to help them out?”

“Okay, okay, by the Light.”

Together, the three little fillies cheered, finally getting their first score of the afternoon. Passing out notices about quests in town wasn’t very exciting, though it did give the Crusaders a chance to get in touch with some interesting gossip. They’d been much more excited about earning some Honor Points – maybe they’d get pvp cutie marks? Then in a few years they could fight the big nasties that threatened Equestria and wear super cool armor with names like ‘battlemaster’ and ‘bloodthirsty gladiator’ that stacked lots of resilience!

Following Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo to the Quartermaster tent, the pair signed up to have their old pvp marks and other emblems turned in for new Honor Points. Not surprisingly, a lot of people (not ponies) were hoarding their old marks to convert into Conquest Points later, figuring it was easier to hit the new Honor Point cap than it was

to max out on Conquest Points. The Cutie Mark Crusaders didn't really understand the nuances of it, except that the ponies handing out the only honor points they could get were trying to get everyone to switch from some old system to a new one.

Quartermaster Hadrian was probably one of Celestia's Royal Guards in reassignment. He was a strongly built unicorn pony with a well groomed gray coat and close cropped mane – just the color scheme the Princess preferred among her unicorn guard. He wore functional body armor and other barding, but touches of gold and the Blazing Mark of Celestia on his helmet indicated higher station than would otherwise be expected. Seeing the night elf and human trading their old Wintergrasp marks in, he turned to smile down at the three little ponies he'd sent out on that errand.

"Not bad, fillies," he said in a gruff voice. His armored horn glowed faintly and a trio of silver coins drifted down for the Crusaders to snatch out of the air.

"So these are Honor Points?" Scootaloo asked, a bit confused at the strange looking bits.

"Those are just to record how many honor points you have," he informed them, and the coins glowed by themselves. "There you go. Hold them up and try and see for yourself."

Sitting on their haunches, the trio tried squeezing the coins or holding them up to the light or waving them in the air. Sweetie Belle figured it out first, holding it in a hoof and closing her eyes. She squeaked happily, seeing a number appear in the darkness of her mind's eye. Fifty Honor Points! She wasted no time telling her friends how to do the same, and soon they were running around celebrating – only to suddenly stop and check their flanks.

"Still no cutie mark?" Apple Bloom asked, dejected. "I thought for sure we had it this time."

"Aww. I really wanted a cool fighter cutie mark, too!" Scootaloo said with an unhappy huff. "Like a sword or a shield or a troll with a sword stuck in him! Or something!"

Sweetie Belle didn't seem quite as broken up about it, though. Still, curious, she looked up at Quartermaster Hadrian. His cutie mark was covered up by his armor, so they'd never gotten the chance to see it.

"Um, Mister Hadrian, sir," she tentatively asked. "What does a warrior's cutie mark look like?"

"Yeah!" her pegasus friend asked, eyes brightening.

Amused, Hadrian chuckled and rounded his station. With only a little effort, he lifted some of his armor's protective chainmail barding, allowing them to see his mark. It was a plain looking arrowhead with two marks arcing away from the tip and a small star at each end. The three fillies took it in, wondering what it meant. Almost everyone with barding also ended up covering their cutie mark, natural born equestrian or not.

"My skill was in enhancing ranged attacks," he explained. "Never did see much combat in Her Majesty's service. The years were very quiet." Seeing the trio about to ask for more details, he coughed and raised a hoof to shoo them along. "But that's a story for another time. Now run along. If you want to help the Alliance, come back tomorrow and I'll see if I can find something else for you to do."

"Yes, sir!" the little fillies playfully saluted and ran off.

Hadrian frowned a bit as they left – the last couple years *had* been quiet, but these days were completely different. Fillies and colts shouldn't have had to want to grow up to fight. It would be sad indeed if he lived and worked here long enough to see those three little crusaders grow up and actually have to go out and fight to protect the borders of Equestria from her new enemies. From what he'd seen and heard, many within the Horde had little mercy, even for young and innocent...

And how sad would it be if people were **still** fighting over Arathi Basin ten damn years from now?

...

Outside, the Crusaders had just caught sight of few familiar faces.

“Hey, look,” Sweetie Belle nudged Scootaloo, motioning towards the open front of the Battlemaster training grounds. Apple Bloom walked up a little close and peered off, catching sight of them too: it was Twilight Sparkle, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie. The soft spoken pegasus was the biggest surprise to take in, since she was supposed to still be out of town helping the druids with animal evacuation and resettlement.

“Ah wonder what they’re doin’ out here?” Apple Bloom asked, inclining her head in confusion. None of the older ponies were really the pvp type. Twilight was an occasionally energetic bookworm, Pinkie was hyper and often incomprehensible but not really a fighter, and Fluttershy. Well. Fluttershy. What more was there to say?

Turning to her friend, the Apple Orchard filly asked, “Ya think they’d be willin ta help out yer sister, Sweetie Belle?”

“I guess we could ask. They are her friends, but...” Sweetie Belle’s conviction wavered a little. “But Rarity said to get some fighter type ponies for the job. She said it was pretty dangerous.”

“I bet they’re here looking for Rainbow Dash!” Scootaloo guessed with sudden surety, looking to Apple Bloom for some anticipated agreement. They knew Dash was a fighter, and that she loved adventure, and had planned on asking her if she showed up.

“Oh, and maybe they’d help us with that other thing, too!” Sweetie Belle chirped.

Apple Bloom, seeing her friends had their mind made up, made up hers as well. “Ah guess it can’t hurt ta ask...”

It wasn’t so much that she didn’t want to go up to the three mares; it was that, in her view, if Rarity wanted her friends to help her out, then she would have just asked them herself. Trotting over, she saw Pinkie Pie was the first to spot them, pointing over in the young fillies direction. Before any of them could meet up, though, there was a flash of light to Apple Bloom’s left, and a crack like muted lightning. The groups paused, and almost immediately a large assembly of ponies and a few non-ponies came between them, exiting from the nearby teleportation portal. Most of them

looked dirty and bloodied, some badly enough that they were being helped towards nearby medical tents.

Scotaloo immediately directed her attention to the incoming group, looking for one face in particular. They hadn't seen Rainbow Dash all day, and it was one of the reasons they were out here, cutie mark crusading aside. Apple Bloom couldn't help but feel a bit nervous seeing so many ponies returning from an actual battle, the kind she'd only read about from Equestria's distant past. When her cousin Braeburn had written around the 'battle' he and the other settlers out west had with the buffalo, he had mentioned them using pies to stun the warriors attacking the town. Actual lethal combat had been little known since the wild steppe pony tribes of the east retreated, hundreds of years ago.

Apple Bloom wasn't sure she would've wanted a "pvp cutie mark" even if she'd gotten one, and she suspected Sweetie Belle felt the same way. Scotaloo wanted so badly to follow her idol, though –

"Dash!" Scotaloo cheered, finally catching sight of that distinct rainbow colored mane and tail.

And off she went, Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle trying to play catchup.

There was no doubt about it: that was Rainbow Dash emerging from the throng of returning fighters. Apple Bloom breathed a sigh of relief in seeing that she was walking properly and that she looked basically fine. The multicolored pegasus was wearing more combat barding, though it was lighter than that of many others and primarily made of linked mail and not solid plate. A silvery white cloak covered part of her back, tossed slightly out of the way as her powder blue wings flexed.

She was talking animatedly with another pegasus, a stallion with a mane of pitch black hair and a snow white coat, whiter even than Sweetie Belle or Rarity's. His eyes glowed with an inner golden light as he paused, gently nudging Dash and inclining his head their way. He'd obviously seen them and heard Scotaloo before Dash herself did. A moment later and she saw them, too, and her eyes lit up.

“Scoots!” she greeted, happily, flying over and catching the Cutie Mark Crusader that jumped at her, tiny wings buzzing.

“Hey there, you guys,” she then addressed to the other two fillies. The herd around them was rapidly thinning out with many ponies and non-ponies mounting up or otherwise taking to the air or heading out of town. Dash patted Scootaloo on the side with her wing a few times and then tucked it tightly in and up against her barding.

It was about then that she noticed a bright pink form approaching, along with some other familiar ponies.

“And you guys, too?” she asked, clearly a bit surprised.

“We got fifty Honor Points today!” Scootaloo announced, eager to impress her idol before she became too distracted. “How many did you get, huh, Dash? A lot I bet! Were you in Strand of the Ancients? Or Tol Barad?”

The chromatic pegasus smiled, scooting Scootaloo forward to make some room.

“Fifty Honor? That’s pretty good!” she said, nodding amiably. “I think I got...” she coughed, for once being a bit humble. “Maybe a hundred or so today.”

“So this is the Scootaloo I’ve heard about?” the male pegasus asked, lowering his head a bit to get closer to filly eye-level. “Keep up the good fight, kid.”

The little cinnamon colored filly gave him a much more wary look, weighing whether he was more competition for Dash’s attention. “You one of Dash’s friends or something?”

“Kinda,” he answered with a smile. “Mostly I just keep her alive when she caps a flag. Or when she suicidally dive bombs someone.”

“You mean you spend the whole battleground watching my back.”

The two pvpers laughed and Dash pointedly waited for the rest of her friends to hurry over. Another pony, this one a unicorn, nodded to the two

pegasi as she walked past, horn glowing to open a brief magical portal of her own. They all seemed pretty familiar with one another.

“You were gone all day,” Scootaloo complained, but kept her voice a bit more quiet. In fact, Dash had been gone for two days. The Crusaders were lucky they’d caught her coming back, even with them camping the battlemaster grounds for a good chunk of the afternoon.

“Sorry, kid,” the older mare replied with a cocky grin. “We got bumped around a lot today. Rough weather all around.”

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle exchanged looks. It was pretty obvious, even to a filly, that there was some other meaning behind Dash’s shorthand. She had been on weather duty after the Cataclysm with the rest of her Ponyville unit but she’d also been quick to join up for adventure further away. There was a lot of weather related destruction around the world, apparently, and ‘combat engineer’ pegasus units had been dispatched to help out their new allies in far away lands. Dash had come back to Ponyville a week later with a taste for the thrill of fighting.

“Heya, Dash!” Pinkie was the first to cheer as their small group got within speaking distance. “How was the bg?”

“AV went back and forth for hours!” Dash greeted her Earth pony friend with a playful hoof to the shoulder. She then smiled at her other friends, particularly zeroing in on Twilight. “And look who finally got her nose out of the books!”

“I happen to like the smell of books, that’s all,” Twilight said in her defense.

“Spike. Fluttershy.” Dash trotted back a step and gestured with a wing to the black and white pegasus standing nearby. “This is Blacklight. We’ve paired up for a few battlegrounds.”

“h-hello.” “Hi there!” “Nice to meet you.” “Hey man.”

Blacklight inclined his head. “Pleased to meet friends of Rainbow. I’ve heard a good deal about all of you.”

“And this is Scootaloo – well, you know that already – and Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom,” Dash quickly added, walking around near the Crusader trio. He nodded to the fillies as a group.

“It seems you have a lot of catching up to do, Rainbow,” Blacklight said, introductions done. He spread his wings and noiselessly rose up off his hooves. “Another time?”

She smiled up at him, flicking back her mane. “I’ll send you an invite later.”

With one last bit of respectful pleasantries, he swept up and accelerated into a streak of black against the sky.

“So!” Dash focused back on her friends around her. “Is something going on? Kinda’ a funny coincidence everyone running into me right out of a battleground like this.”

“It, um, has to do with... that thing I sent you before?” Fluttershy answered, nonetheless sounding pretty hesitant.

“Oh, that pve stuff?” Dash asked, scratching the back of her head.

“Well, it isn’t really pve...”

“Oh yeah!” Apple Bloom suddenly spoke up, remembering what the Crusaders had been talking about before. The adult ponies all turned their heads to stare at her, and she shrunk back a bit at the attention. Still, more assertive than most fillies her age, she continued anyway, “We wanted to ask you guys if ya wanted to do some quests!”

“Why are you three asking people about quests?” Spike asked, leaning forward on Twilight Sparkle’s head and using her ears to keep from falling off her back. “You better not be running a dailies racket too!”

“Spike!” Twilight warned, purple eyes looking up but not quite able to catch him.

“We’re not tricking people out of gems, if’n that’s what ya mean,” Apple Bloom scolded.

“It isn’t tricking anyone! It’s a legitimate quest!”

“You just called it a racket, Spike. That doesn’t make it sound very legitimate.”

“We’re just trying to help people around town,” Sweetie Belle explained, raising a hoof. “We wanted to ask you about helping my sister, too. She’s been working really hard.”

“Rarity needs help?” Twilight asked, forgetting Spike’s gem acquisition schemes for a moment.

Sweetie Belle nodded eagerly. “She asked us to send some ‘adventure loving types’ over to see her.”

“What quest level?” Dash asked, and blinked at the surprised looks shot her way. “What? I’m just curious.”

“Um. I think it was thirty?” Scootaloo replied, tapping her chin. “Yeah. Thirty. Thirty-something.”

“You’ll never get leveled types to accept a quest at thirty without rep involved,” Spike helpfully supplied. “Or, um, so I’ve heard.”

“What about you guys?” Dash asked, glancing over at Pinkie, Twilight and Fluttershy. “You have some pve you needed to do or what?”

“I’d just, you know...” Fluttershy murmured. “Like to visit the Darkmoon Faire. And get a wood frog. And maybe a pug puppy someday.”

Pinkie just giggled excitedly. “I want to get to level sixty before the Lunar Festival!”

“Celestia kind of suggested I try and learn more about friendship and other cultures,” Twilight explained, a little bashfully. “And, maybe look into some guild related things.”

“You guys should totally form a party!” Scootaloo declared.

“I’ve been saying that, too!” Pinkie agreed, but her face quickly fell. “But no one seemed surprised when I said it.”

“I wonder why?” Twilight asked.

“Let’s go see Rarity!” Sweetie Belle insisted. “If she needs what I think she needs, then maybe we’ll have something you can help us with, too!”

- - -

Rarity craned her neck painfully back and forth as she took a break from pulling together another bolt of mageweave. The fabric was simply a pain to work with, in every imaginable way. It was amazingly durable and the texture was just divine, and it soaked up enchantment magic like a sponge, but at the same time that made it difficult to work using telekinesis or any other form of magic. It resisted being cut or bundled, and it was a trail and a half to stitch. A small pile of warped needles were currently arranged in an artful sculpture that stood as a testament to the troublesome nature of the cloth she had to work with.

And from everything she’d seen and read, working with Frostweave and Embersilk was even worse!

These new fabrics and patterns were back breaking, but they were all that was in demand now among high class customers. Rarity sighed. Unless she wanted to fall back on producing generic products – an option she shuddered to consider – she needed to stay ahead of the curve. These days that meant working with foreign fabrics and Equestrian materials no one had even considered using before. Then there was all the work she needed to do to improve her jewelcrafting!

Competition overseas was already fierce, and Equestrian tailors from Stalliongrad to Canterlot were rushing to play catch up. It wasn’t enough for a dress to be stylish. It had to incorporate magic into the very materials: either for beautification or for combat purposes. There were ponies who wanted foreign styles and foreigners who wanted pony styles, but of course, enhanced under that outer layer. ‘I’d like it to look like that, but I’d also like to be able to take it into Deadmines.’

Letting out another tired breath, she finished with the last few bolts of mageweave. Once it was 'bound and wound' it would be treated enough to actually use, but the cloth itself was only the most basic ingredient in making a piece of functional and fashionable clothing...

A melodious chime immediately diverted her attention: the door!

"Just a mo-ment!" Rarity called, finishing up and trotting over to see who had graced her shop.

Seeing the group entering, her ears flattened in professional disappointment before rising again in personal delight. She doubted Twilight or Fluttershy, much less Rainbow Dash, had followed the Cutie Mark Crusaders to her shop to place a dress order or even to have a new belt put together. On the other hoof, it was always wonderful to see her friends again, and she'd missed Fluttershy at the last few visits to the Ponyville Spa.

"Hi there Rarity!" Pinkie cheerfully bounced over.

"I hope we're not intruding at a bad time...?" Fluttershy asked, voice quiet.

"Not at all! Any time is a good time for you to drop by, darling!" She motioned Twilight and Spike in, too. "Come in! Come in!" She just as quickly headed towards Sweetie Belle and her friends. "You three got back just in time. I just finished with your order a little while ago."

"Our tabards are ready?" Scootaloo fluttered briefly across the air as she cheered. "Let's see em! Let's see em!"

"Thanks again fer making them fer us," Apple Bloom said, excited enough to run forward but not to forget her manners.

"I know they came out just perfect!" Sweetie Belle seconded, with absolute faith in her sister's abilities.

"You guys have tabards?" Spike asked, raising a scaly eyebrow at the Crusaders.

“We sure do!” Scootaloo assured him. “Now that we’ve got a tabard, the Cutie Mark Crusaders is a genuine Guild!”

“What?” Spike asked. “No way. Guilds require a minimum of five members.”

“Just fer your information, Mister Doubting Dragon, we got us all tha signatures we needed, and we paid fer guild reg-reg... reg-is-tration, too,” Apple Bloom clearly struggled a bit with the word. But she managed it anyway and pointed dramatically at the little fire breather.

“We even saved up money to commission an official tabard,” Sweetie Belle informed him as she followed close behind her older sister.

“Here you fillies are,” Rarity declared, horn glowing as she levitated a trio of white and red tabards in the pony style, meaning worn side to side and not front to back. The Crusaders held still for just long enough to be fitted and have the new tabards draped over their sides. A neat folded clasp on the front secured it in place around each filly’s neck. A symbol etched into each side of the tabard was prominently displayed: a stylized flank and tail with curving lines moving out from and towards where a cutie mark would be.

Sweetie Belle got achievement [Represent]
Apple Bloom got achievement [Represent]
Scootaloo got achievement [Represent]

The three little ponies whooped and immediately started running around. The vestments took a moment to activate, and then glowing letters appeared in the air above them.

[2] Sweetie Belle
<Cutie Mark Crusaders>

[2] Apple Bloom
<Cutie Mark Crusaders>

[2] Scootaloo
<Cutie Mark Crusaders>

“Yay! We’re a Guild!” The hyper fillies congratulated themselves and zipped around, trying to grab the magical letters that floated over their heads, as if they could be shaken off by rolling around or buzzing through the air.

Spike took that opportunity to whisper in Twilight’s ear, “I don’t know how they got five signatures for their charter, but this guild thing can’t be that hard if those three did it.”

“Well, congratulations my little ponies!” Twilight offered, after giving Spike a small nod. She hadn’t forgotten Princess Celestia’s other not so subtle suggestions.

“So which one of you is the GM?” Rainbow Dash asked, walking around to where Rarity was looking on with a pleased smile for her younger sister.

“I am!” all three said at once. Then Apple Bloom spoke up, “My name is the one on the charter, but Sweetie Belle is our treasurer, and Scootaloo is our raid leader!”

The crusading fillies wore big smiles as they basked in their mutual achievement.

“That reminds me!” Apple Bloom said, looking up at the older ponies. “You should ask Rarity about her quest!”

Four pairs of pony eyes (plus one dragon pair) zeroed in on the fashionista.

“Oh, I couldn’t,” the pretty unicorn protested. “Really, mixing work and pleasure, there’s no need!”

“Come on, Rarity, you can tell us!” Pinkie Pie insisted, somehow appearing at the unicorn’s side. “Do you need us to bump someone off in Blackwind Descent?” she leaned in, turning conspiratorial. “Is it Nefarian? Maloriak? Did he steal your muffins, too?”

“What? Goodness no!” Rarity gasped. “Where do you even get these ideas?”

Pinkie bounced away. “Beats me!”

“Come on, we’re all curious, now,” Dash also insisted, much more rationally.

“That’s right,” Twilight spoke up. “We’d be happy to help out any way we can.”

Resisting the urge to give an un-ladylike sigh, Rarity bowed her head, defeated. “Alright. It wouldn’t hurt to explain.”

She trotted slowly over to one of her new mannequins, a tall non-pony with hooves in the shape of a female draenei – one of the new Alliance races. In this case, one even more foreign than the rest. Draenei were cloven hoofed humanoids not native to Azeroth, much less Equestria. A large ship full of them, called the Exodar, had crashed in northern Kalimdor several years ago. They had quickly become an exotic but important part of the Alliance.

This one was being fitted for a slim white dress.

“Business has been... somewhat complicated lately,” Rarity admitted, horn glowing as she anxiously fixed up part of the dress, making tiny adjustments with colored pins. “Most of my orders have been for clothing that is both fashionable and functional. Dungeon-ware I’ve heard it called.”

“Clothies,” Rainbow muttered under her breath. “So squishy.”

“Be that as it may,” Rarity continued, having clearly overheard the pegasus. “The sort of tailoring required is very new to Equestria. Aside from some of the guild member tailors coming and going through town, I may be the first pony to ever work with mageweave or runecloth.”

“But procuring the materials is extremely difficult,” she explained, head lowering sadly. “I’m barely breaking even on what I can sell, and becoming proficient requires experimentation. Trial and error. If I buy all of it from the auction house, I’ll go bankrupt. But if I don’t improve, I’ll be left behind...”

“So you need cloth to level your tailoring?” Pinkie summarized. “That’s not a problem! You get lots of Mageweave and Runecloth getting to level 60! And tons of Frostweave and Embersilk getting to 85!”

“You make it sound so easy,” Rarity countered with a frown. “Never mind all the icky fighting and tromping around and monster slaying and being splashed with unsavory poisons and diseases!”

“Um, so this quest you had was a daily to bring you some cloth?” Fluttershy delicately inquired.

“Actually...” Rarity hesitated here, but went ahead after a moment said, “While I do need more cloth in the long run, right now I really need some... ah, shall we say: exotic materials to finish my orders. Specifically a certain type of silk only found here in Equestria.”

“Silk?” Twilight asked.

“Magical spider silk to be exact,” Rarity told her with a grimace. “From Nightmareweb Spiders.” Seeing her friends recoil a bit, she hastily added, “I don’t much like it, but I just can’t find any acceptable substitute. This silk is the only one that will do!”

“But Rarity,” Fluttershy protested, raising her voice a bit. “N-Nightmareweb Spiders are very dangerous. And poisonous. And they only live in Evertree Forest around... *that* castle...”

“Princess Luna’s old castle, right?” Apple Bloom asked, the surprise on the older mares faces plain to see.

“How do you know about that?” Twilight carefully asked. On her back, Spike was listening closely as well.

“Lotsa ponies talk about it. Non-ponies, too.” Scootaloo was the first to explain, while Sweetie Belle shied away slightly, a bit more embarrassed than her friends at what they’d been sticking their noses into.

“They all know where the castle is,” the little pegasus continued, clearing believing that if something became common enough knowledge there was no shame in knowing about it, or talking about it for that matter.

“And we’ve heard the Royal Guard are hiring anypony they can to go out there and fight the Twilight Ponies.”

“Twilight Ponies?” Rainbow Dash asked, cocking her head to the side. “You mean Twilight Hammer Cultponies?”

Pinkie Pie made an unhappy, queasy face. “Oooh! I don’t like those guys! ...They’re cupcake haters.”

“If ya’ll are gonna go out there to help Rarity, maybe you could do some thing for us, too?” Apple Bloom asked, looking up at the adult ponies with wide, hopeful eyes. “We heard that there’s a record of how Princess Luna got her cutie mark somewhere in tha castle ruins!”

“A dwarf man was looking for it,” Sweetie Belle elaborated, speaking softly. “He said something about there being a disk, too. He said it would have a ‘record of the first cutie marks.’”

“If we can find out how the Princesses got their cutie marks, then maybe it’ll help us find out how to get ours!” Scootaloo enthused. She sidled up by her idol and looked up at Rainbow Dash. “Please say you’ll help us! We don’t have a lot of gold, but I bet the dwarf who wanted the disk will have some kind of cool reward for you!”

“Yeah!” Sweetie Belle and Apple Jack agreed in stereo. “So will you do it?”

The adults all stared at each other, collectively a bit dumbstruck by how well informed the three little fillies apparently were, but still weighing their options. A trek to Everfree Forest to the ruined castle of Nightmare Moon? Gathering Nightmareweb silk from pony-eating spiders? Fighting Twilight Cultponies? Finding a record of the First Cutie Marks?

Pinkie Pie was the first to speak. “So,” she asked, her voice perfectly level. “Party?”

Fluttershy delicately cleared her throat; little more than a squeak. “Um. I can heal. If that’s okay with everyone. Just please don’t roll if a pet drops.”

“I guess I am curious about trying out these new spells,” Twilight noted.

“I believe those cultponies probably have a lot of mageweave for bandages,” Rarity speculated. “Relieving them of some of their excess would only be good for Equestria as a whole.”

“I really hate being prot,” Dash admitted with a sick look, going so far as to stick her tongue out. “Can’t we just pick up Applejack so I can divine storm?”

“One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Yes. Yes. I do believe...” Pinkie Pie’s whole body vibrated with excitement, unable to contain it a moment more. “WE HAVE A PARTY!”

Chapter 3

Twilight couldn't help but look surprised seeing Pinkie Pie stop, having finally filled her saddlebags with all the necessary treats and "essentials" from Sugarcube Corner... and then promptly transform into a ghostly pink wolf with a puffy candy colored mane, like some kind of wild phantom poodle. Her bags vanished in a puff of magical smoke and, tail wagging, Pinkie Pie sat down and blissfully scratched behind her ear with a hindhoof - er - hindleg. It was just so random and sudden.

"So that's what her travel form looks like?" Spike said from her back, cracking off the edge of a gem as he indulged in a quick magic-burning snack.

Pinkie-Ghostwolf nodded enthusiastically, having clearly overheard.

With a crackle and another puff of elemental smoke, the pony returned, transforming back to normal, saddlebags and armor and all. Her attire was patchwork and makeshift, with bits and pieces thrown in; colors contrasting and clashing without a care in the world. Sticking her snout into one of the bags, Pinkie retrieved a large mace and put it on the ground before slipping her hooves into a pair of furry bracers bound by leather. Leather and other animal products weren't unusual in Equestria – especially in the colder months when many ponies outdoors preferred boots and coats – but these felt faintly magical.

Twilight took the brief pre-occupation of her friend to use one of her inspection spell-like abilities. Pinkie was swapping in and out some equipment, most of it identified as 'green' or uncommon by the Azerothian standard. Gaps were filled in with some common, 'white' gear, and surprisingly some engineer-specific googles that the party pony fitted snugly in place despite her unruly pink mane.

"Oh! Oh! Turn into a wolf again!" the excited voice belonged to one Apple Bloom. Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle had followed their sisters to the Ponyville bank, but Apple Bloom had remained behind to follow the unicorn

and Earth pony around as they prepared to head out. She seemed to have a particular interest in Pinke Pie, and when the party pony did anything unusual. Of course, Pinkie was always doing *something* unusual...

"Like this?" Pinkie asked, poofing back into an ethereal lupine again. She then hopped up, balancing on her back legs and swaying side to side.

"That's sooooo cool!" Apple Bloom edged a bit closer, tentatively poking the partly insubstantial wolf's tail. "Does it feel funny?"

Unable to answer, Pinkie had to settle for shaking her head.

She then leaned in and gave the filly a sloppy lick.

"Aw! Gross!" Apple Bloom gasped and fell back on her rump. Pinkie-Wolf's reaction was a vaguely snickering and mischievous 'he-he-he' – the sort of laugh you'd expect after flushing a pair of ducks out of a bush.

"What about us, Spike?" Twilight asked, looking over her shoulder at the baby dragon. "I assume we have everything on the checklist?"

"Supplies check. Bandages check," spike read from a quickly retrieved scroll. "Boots, check. Cloak, check. Binoculars, check. Camping equipment, check. Campfire kit, check. Bits, check. Maps, check. Spellbook, check... you should really get some glyphs, though..."

Soon satisfied that they were basically ready, Twilight allowed her attention to drift back to Pinkie and Apple Bloom. The filly was now riding the transformed pony, holding onto the pink mane and laughing as the ghostwolf ran around in zany circles.

"Wee! Yea! Ride 'em cowpony!" Only to get bucked off and onto her back. "Hey!"

Apple Bloom's eyes hooded at the sight of ghostwolf-Pinkie Pie nibbling at her side, behaving perhaps a little too canine-like for comfort. Then again, when you had an itch that needed scratching...

"Okay, everypony!" Twilight spoke up, getting the attention of the two Earth ponies. "Shall we go meet up with the others at the bank?"

Pinkie de-transformed again, if only to give a cheerful, "Okey dokey!"

The two trotted up to accompany the librarian as they headed to the west side of Ponyville near the town hall. Apple Bloom notably stuck to Pinkie's side, watching her with wide, curious eyes. Twilight couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the attention the little filly was giving her goofy friend.

"Hey, um, Pinkie Pie..." the Cutie Mark Crusader broached after a minute. "What's it like using magic?"

"You know, I use magic, too," Twilight reminded her.

"Unicorns are born using magic," Apple Bloom replied, taking a peek around Pinkie Pie's chest. "Even Sweetie Bell knows a little. Ya'll are probably used to it."

Pinkie giggled, seeing what was at the root of Apple Bloom's curiosity. "It isn't really using magic, silly! Shamans *channel* magic, they don't really *use* it."

"That's an interesting way of phrasing it," Twilight observed. "What's the difference?"

"Ummmmm." Pinkie tapped a hoof to her chin as she switched from walking to hopping.

"Ah! I know!" she suddenly exclaimed, smiling at Apple Bloom. "What most magic users do is like apple bucking. So the tree is basically like the source of magic. You give it a kick!" And here she kicked with her back legs, Applejack style. "And spells happen! That's the apples falling down."

"Earth Ponies can't really do that," she continued, returning to four legs. "We have to wait for the apples to fall or grab them without touching the tree."

Seeing Apple Bloom still grappling with the analogy, Pinkie Pie rolled her head back and forth, trying to explain it another way:

“Basically, we ask the elements to do what we want them to. Most of the time they listen because they’re our friends.”

“The elements are our friends?” Apple Bloom asked, she clearly kind of got the idea, but only in part.

“Sure they are!” Pinkie’s grin grew even wider. “Think about sitting in front of a warm fire with some freshly baked muffins, or drinking cold water after a long day! Where would apples grow if we didn’t have the earth and the dirt and rocks? What would we breathe without air? When all these things come together, that’s what gives us life. You see?”

“But fire can burn ponies, too,” Apple Bloom argued. “And ya can’t breathe in water, and rocks can hurt if’n ya get hit by one.”

“Well, not every element is your friend,” the party pony admitted. “Most don’t care and a lot of them are kind of mean. Especially the really big, old ones that remember when there were no ponies around. The trick is to find some nice ones and make friends.”

“And that’s what you did?” Twilight asked, intrigued. “I’ve read about Shamans learning to commune with the elements.”

“Commune with the elements?” Pinkie asked, tilting her head cutely in would-be confusion. “I guess you could do that.”

“You didn’t?” the unicorn asked, and sighed. “Let me guess...”

“I just held a big party for them!” Pinkie confirmed what her studious friend had been thinking and pirouetted in midair with a happy bounce. “And I made them like me! Now I’ve got Rocky, and Sparky, and Gassy and Splashy and they’re my elemental buddies and we’ll be friends forever and we’re going to have all kind of adventures and we’ll go to Molten Core and the Skywall and the Abyssal Maw and Stonecore and - !”

“Do ya think Ah could become a Shaman?” Apple Bloom cautiously asked, ducking her head at the spinning pink force of nature to avoid being blindsided by her impossibly puffed tail.

“Do you want to be a Shaman?” Pinkie asked, popping up beside the filly. “Once you pick a class, you’re stuck with it, you know. Stuck with it...”

“Forever,” Twilight finished with faux ominousness, pre-empting the wacky pony and rather amused by having done so.

“I was going to say: until Blizzard allows class changes,” Pinkie corrected, to Apple Bloom and Twilight’s confusion. “But since that probably won’t happen-” She gave Apple Bloom a playful poke. “Forever! So, do you want to be a Shaman?”

“...Ah dunno,” the little filly demurred. “Ah just want mah cutie mark, but since only Earth Ponies can be Shaman, Ah wouldn’t be able to get mah mark with Scootallo and Sweetie Belle.” The thought of getting her mark doing something her friends couldn’t even participate in clearly elicited some mixed feelings in the pint sized Crusader. “Why did you decide to be a Shaman anyway, Pinkie Pie?”

Glancing away for a moment, the older pony hesitated to answer right away.

“I had... a feeling,” she finally said, and shook her head furiously. “Anyway. We’re at the bank! Let’s get this party started, slow-pokey-heads!”

Transforming again, she raced ahead faster than Twilight could follow. Pinkie was quick in her normal pony form, but as a ghostwolf, she was just a peppermint blur. Following her at a more sedate pace, Twilight, Apple bloom and Spike (lazily riding his epic unicorn mount) trotted up the steps of the small bank. Inside they could see Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy, already ready. Rarity was still at the counter, fussily picking out a dress and jewelry to wear.

“This shield is so terrible,” Dash muttered, loud enough for her Twilight to hear even before she got too close. “If I have to go prot, I could use stam much more than str. I heard there’s a cool shield in Sunken Temple.”

“Um. Well. Maybe a new shield will drop in the castle. Maybe.”

“Yeah, maybe. Being ret is so much more fun, though!”

As Twilight approached, the pair greeted her and beckoned her over. Dash’s barding didn’t seem to have changed much, meaning she was going to go prot with what she had on her, basically. There was a prominent band around her right foreleg, however. Twilight’s identify/inspect spell helpfully marked it as an uncommon ‘ring’ with a lot of stamina on it.

Fluttershy was changed into an exotic ensemble: feathers curved back over her haunches and shoulders and lush greens and browns gave the impression of a forest in miniature growing protectively over her. A gnarled wooden staff was strapped to her back. Ironically, she looked to be the most prepared and well equipped of them all, and Twilight felt a bit self conscious in how under geared she was. This, despite scrounging around for any useful magical artifacts in storage that were worth dusting off.

“You ready?” Dash asked, eager to get going. Not even waiting for an answer, she turned to address the still bank-bound Rarity. “Come on already! How hard is it to throw on a cloak and a few rings?”

“I simply can not bear to go out with such a mis-matched ensemble!” the fashion conscious unicorn protested, swapping on and off a cloak while making up her mind. She’d settled on a white dress with deep blue trim, matching slippers for her hooves, and silvery rings around her forelegs. These were identified as self made by Twilight’s inspection spell, a result of Rarity’s skill in jewelcrafting.

“This will just have to do,” she lamented, turning around in a circle and affixing a silver clasp near the base of her tail. Facing her friends, she nodded, for the most part satisfied with how she looked. “I brought my jewelcrafting and tailoring equipment with me as well. I can make some mageweave bags for us with a few more bolts of cloth.”

“Oh, you don’t have to...” Fluttershy began.

“Really, it’s no problem at all!” she declared with a refined laugh. “And you, especially-” She pointed at Twilight. “Could really use some new saddlebags, dear. I also have some ideas for a divine new dress and cloak

you can wear, all enchanted to boost intelligence. Oh, I *do* hope I have enough Vision Dust...!"

"Aw, come on!" Dash moaned, lowering her head in exhaustion. "Who's organizing this run anyway?"

To no one's surprise, the mares all turned to Twilight Sparkle.

"Um, I guess me?" the unicorn wondered, quickly catching herself and turning more confident. Organization was what she was known for after all. "I mean, sure! I'll do it!"

"Oh, good!" Rarity slowly walked up, as they formed a small circle in the bank. "Fluttershy, would you pass party lead to Twilight?"

"Okay," the soft spoke pegasus blinked. Twilight felt a strange power wash over her.

"So what next?" Twilight asked looking around at her friends. Only Applejack was missing. "This is my first time doing this, after all."

"Do we have a designated de-enchanter?" Rarity inquired.

"That'd be me!" Spike answered, raising his hand. "...I think."

"You think?" she asked, narrowing her eyes a bit. "Have you de-enchanted before, Spike?"

"Well, um," he coughed, sitting back on Twilight's saddle and tucking one foot in behind one of her bags. "Usually I eat what I de-enchant. But it shouldn't be too hard. I just have to, you know, not swallow."

For some reason, Pinkie giggled uncontrollably at that, softly tapping a hoof against the ground.

"Why don't you try de-enchanting something?" Rarity asked, horn glowing as she levitated a ring out of one of her bags. Twilight ducked her head to the side slightly to let her assistant reach forward and pick it out of the air.

He looked from the ring to the jewelcrafter and tailor. "Are you sure?"

"The enchantment on that ring came out all wrong. Spirit and strength? Useless!" Rarity insisted he go ahead. "I was going to vendor it anyway."

All eyes on him, even Twilight's, Spike couldn't help but blush under his scales. "Right. Right. No pressure."

Opening his mouth, he held the ring up close to his teeth and inhaled slowly. He could taste the magic in the ring and felt his body respond, wanting to burn it from the material prison it was encased in. Briefly closing his mouth to wipe it with the back of his hand, he took a few more measured breaths and held the ring up as if to take a bite out of it.

'Come on, Spike! Concentrate!' Eyes snapping open, he felt a peculiar energy form around his tongue, and in one breath he expelled it. The ring in his hand vibrated violently, resisting his countermagic -

And then, with an audible snap, the ring came apart, turning into a pile of dust.

"Ah!" Twilight and Rarity gasped at the same time. Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy leaned in, 'ooing.' Even Rainbow Dash looked impressed, though she expressed it with a somewhat smug 'hmf.' After only a moment, the still present Cutie Mark Crusaders joined in too.

"Way to go, Spike!" Apple Bloom cheered.

"Wow! How'd you do that?" Scootaloo asked, leaning against Twilight's leg.

"Was that Dragon Magic?" Sweetie Belle reached up, jostling his leg and almost causing him to spill the dust. "Can we learn to do that?"

"That was very impressive, Spike," Rarity's praise gave the baby dragon cause to swell with pride. A telekinetic glow plucked the small pile of dust from his hand.

"I don't get it," Dash said, eyeing the Vision Dust he'd created. "How can Spike DE something without leveling enchanting?"

"Giddy App said I could do it, too," he pointed out. "And he was level 85," he added, just to make sure Dash knew that fact.

"It must be a racial," Fluttershy suggested. "Like Everyman for Himself?"

"Seems pretty OP, but whatever," the brash pegasus decided, shrugging. "So we have a designated DE. I guess I'm stuck tanking until we rope Applejack into this party as a new meatshield."

"And Fluttershy is healing," Twilight continued, taking out the guard's map she'd been given earlier in the day. "The rest of us will be 'damage and crowd control.'"

"DPS and CC," Spike provided.

"Yes. That." She still refused to slip into the shorthand the others had picked up. "As party lead, I'll handle any rolls over drops. We'll be using a 'free for all' system I read about, except for uncommons. You're all familiar with those loot rules?"

The others nodded. It was pretty much standard.

"The Castle of the Sisters... Princess Luna's castle ruins... are here." Twilight highlighted a point on her map with a twinkle. No one was checking their maps, but if they had been, there would have been a reciprocal ping on them too. "It took us a full day of travel to get there the first time. We're leaving late, but I think we can make it in about eight hours on hoof."

"If only I had a Crusader Aura," Rainbow Dash frowned.

"Fluttershy and I have travel forms. You want us to scout ahead and stuff?"

"That's a good idea." Twilight highlighted a patch through the woods. "We can take a path close to what we used before. The only problem is the

bridge, but we'll cross that when we get to it. If we can't get across there, then we'll have to circle around from the south."

She rolled up the map and tucked it back into her bags.

"Sound good to everyone?"

Various words of agreement followed, and Twilight smiled inwardly. She tried not to let it show, but she was finding herself start to get excited. Despite the fact that they'd be headed back through the Everfree Forest again, they had a known destination and some solid objectives. Apple Bloom had also told them that there was supposed to be a group of Royal Guards somewhere out there near the castle and that they were the ones requesting help from local mercenaries. The only piece missing was Applejack.

She allowed a small smirk to grace her muzzle. "Let's get our last member and head out."

- - -

"Now what the hay is all this?"

They found Applejack out in the fields, for once not apple bucking. She was currently engrossed in the rather exciting part of her job called 'inventory.' Overlooking a hill by the south field of Sweet Apple Acres, the peach colored mare had a pencil in her mouth and a clipboard tied around her neck. A series of boxes were marked off on a piece of paper along with assorted notes and progress reports on the growth of various fields.

Seeing her friends heading up the hill, she'd waved to them warmly only to frown a bit after seeing how they were dressed. Many of them she hadn't seen much of over the last few weeks: only Twilight and Rarity had stayed in the town after the Cataclysm. Now all of them were heading her way, and strange attire aside there was no mistaking the packed saddlebags they all wore.

Apple Bloom and her two friends raced ahead of the older ponies like a hyperactive school of fish.

Hence her question before: just what was going on here?

“Hi there, Applejack!” Pinkie was the first to call out, raising a hoof excitedly. “Want to come with us on a dangerous adventure? We’ve got four rezzers in case you die! So you can pick between Redemption or Revive or Resurrection or Ancestral Spirit! I think Ancestral Spirit is the best myself, but I’ve only been killed a few times so I haven’t experienced all of them yet!”

Dash chuckled at that. “I gotta get her into a battleground one of these days...”

“W-what?” the farmer girl could only ask.

“They’re headed to Nightmare Moon’s Castle to get us a record of the First Cutie Mark!” Sweetie Belle explained.

“And to fight evil Twilight Cult Ponies!” Scootaloo chimed in.

Apple Bloom handily tried to fill in the rest with a rapid fire explanation, “And to get cloth and xp and world drops and-”

“Woah nelly! Slow down a mite,” Applejack cut her little sister short and tucked the pencil in her mouth to a cloth loop on the side of her clipboard. “An start from the beginnin’ why don’tcha? There some kidna emergency or somethin’?”

Leading the party of ponies, Twilight Sparkle came ahead and did just that. Applejack listened while her friend outlined the various reasons they had for going out. There were quests for Ponyville, a job they’d somehow ended up taking for the Cutie Mark Crusaders, Rarity’s problems at the Carousel Boutique with improving her tailoring and getting access to rare cloth and some kind of spider silk, Pinkie Pie’s desire to get levels in time for the Lunar Festival, and Fluttershy’s interest in the Darkmoon Faire and finding some rare pets to rescue. Taking it all in, the only one who didn’t seem to have a concrete objective in heading out was Twilight Sparkle herself, though she did claim to be interested in the possibility of there being archaeology finds near the castle ruins.

“So lemme see if’n Ah got this straight,” she said, after Twilight finished her story. “Ya’ll want to trot, happy as you please, right across Everfree forest?”

The five out of six Elements of Harmony nodded, more or less.

“The same Everfree forest we nearly got killed goin’ through before?” she asked. “The one that’s fulla all them manticores and cockatrices and monsters ‘a every sort imaginable?”

Again, they nodded, eagerly even. Well, except Fluttershy, who cringed a bit.

“Then ya’ll want to go fight some nasty ponies tha’ worship beings ‘a pure darkness an’ evil?”

More nods.

“*And then* ya wanna take their treasures and root around them dangerous ruins fer all sorts ‘a ancient loot?”

“Pretty much!” Pinkie confirmed. “Should be fun!”

“Can’t be any more dangerous than when Princess Celestia sent us after that dragon,” Dash argued, and nudged her fellow pegasus. “Right, Fluttershy?”

Whatever the pink maned flyer said in response to that was too low to be heard.

“There’ll be lots of go-o-ld!” Spike spoke up, wagging his scaly eyebrows.

“Gold?” Applejack’s businesswoman-senses started tingling.

“Gold,” the little dragon confirmed. “I mean, haven’t you seen some of these adventurer types around town? They’ve got thousands of gold coins on them. What was the exchange rate to bits again?”

“Twenty-one point five to one,” Applejack and Rarity both answered in unison. The two blinked, and Rarity couched politely.

“Gold,” Spike simply reiterated.

Gold was a very strong incentive, callous as that sounded. The farm was in a bit of a tough spot at the moment. A lot of their stock had been wiped out by rampaging fire elementals, requiring reseeding and replanting. They’d hired a pair of druids to help with that and the new trees were off to a great start, but there wasn’t much to do besides care for the growing trees and wait for them to flower again.

Up on the north fields, which had escaped unharmed, they’d just finished bucking the ripe apples. Normally, the farm operated on a rotation schedule anyway (with a staggered harvest over Spring and Fall), dependant on the pollination efforts of the nearby Honeycomb Family Farm’s many bee colonies. These were having trouble post-Cataclysm, and there was some concern over how much the pegasus ponies could do to keep the climate stable.

Not to criticize her beloved Apples, but they could be finicky crops and all the trees on the farm belonged to three well bred and well studied species. They were fast growing, needing only 15 weeks to mature compared to 17 for most apples, but they also required more Chill Hours than normal. Apple family records were very specific on the ideal being between 1200 and 1700 Chill Hours, and with reports of an Equestria-wide warming trend, there were potentially some looming environmental concerns ahead.

As a whole, then, not only were things looking out of sorts, for the first time in generations, farmers were also suffering from market saturation in Ponyville. There were just too many foreign foodstuffs coming into Equestria. After going over the books, she’d become convinced that the only way to pay off rebuilding the devastated fields by next quarter was to improve their export revenues. Applejack was not keen on taking out a new loan, especially in the post-Cataclysm financial market.

To that end, she’d toyed with selling apples outside Equestria. A few ‘market research focus groups’ (as the gnome had called them) had confirmed that non-ponies liked the species of apples grown at Sweet

Apple, and the brand name itself had wide ranging appeal. Inside Equestria, there were dozens of other apple farms, but outside, the only major competitors were in Elwynn Forest and a few small outfits in Darnassus. The gnome had suggested looking for 'investors' to help them expand, but Applejack was weary of 'incorporating' the family farm outside the clan.

On the other hoof, if she raised the capital herself...

Plus, it would be helping Equestria and her friends! It would just *also* be helping the farm. That was, if there was gold to be made from the venture. It could be good advertising, too. What had the gnome said: 'build the brand?' Improving her 'reputation' overseas with allied nations would be doing just that.

Closing her eyes, Applejack imagined arriving in a vast city of stone parapets and streaming flags. Walking past giant stone statues that saluted her with raised forelegs, she could hear the cheering of grateful hundreds – no, thousands! Welcoming her. And there, up ahead, she could see Celestia and other less detailed figures, humanoids, awaiting her as well. They were all standing together on a dais, and Applejack stopped just short of them, bowing her head...

~

"Oh, King Wrynn, this is the valiant and industrious mare I told you about," Celestia mentioned, whispering but loud enough to be heard.

"Of course. Applejack of Equestria!" A somewhat hazy and indistinct human figure next to the Princess announced in a deep voice. "I have heard much of her exploits."

"As have I," a shorter figure said, stroking a rich mane - er... beard... that grew from his chin. "She is much beloved in Ironforge."

"They speak of her in Darnassus as well," a tall, regal figure next to Celestia said in an authoritative female voice. "She has done much for our people."

Two others (Applejack was less sure how to imagine them) nodded in approval.

“Arise, Applejack,” the tall humanoid declared, holding out a hoof – er hand. “You are known to all of us for your great deeds! Be known henceforth as Ambassador Applejack! Exalted of the Alliance!”

“Your Highnesses,” Applejack addressed them with a courteous but simple bow. “Ah’ve come to share with ya the finest fruits of Equestria! Hard work. Honesty. Good healthy livin’ – That’s what Sweet Apple Acres believes in. I grew these just fer ya’ll and ah’d be honored if’n ya tried ‘em.”

A basket full of perfect, flawless apples appeared (somehow) right in front of the Alliance leaders. Apples appeared in their hooves (hands, too) and as one they bit down. For a few seconds, there was only silence. Then
-

“These are... DELICIOUS!” the human King roared. “I believe they would make a most wonderful cider!”

“They would, yer highness!” Applejack readily agreed.

“I have never had such a succulent treat,” The tall night elf ... er: princess? Priestess? Applejack forgot. Princess sounded right.

“Nor have I!” exclaimed the dwarf lord.

“Well, they are the finest in Equestria,” Celestia bragged, sending a conspiratorial wink her subject’s way.

~

Rocking back on her haunches, Applejack blinked, slowly coming out of her daydream.

Her friends were still staring at her. All except one....

“That was a fun dream!” Pinkie Pie jumped out from behind her. “So you want Rep, huh?”

“Applejack?” Twilight asked, cocking her head to the side.

Apple green eyes narrowed.

“...I’m in.”

- - -

The last, quick stop before they entered Everfree Forest was Fluttershy’s House, to set their hearthstones. Twilight had offered to let them use the Library for that purpose, but since they needed to check in on her animals there anyway it made for a convenient location. It was close to the forest, well stocked, and along Mailmare Doo’s usual route in case anyone needed to use the mailbox. It was there that the Cutie Mark Crusaders also went their own way, taking out hearthstones of their own.

“Take care, sis!” “Be careful!” “Come back with lots of loot!”

And with three magical teleportation circles and a flash of like, the busy little fillies were gone.

“At this rate, they’ll have a guild bank before you even have a guild name,” Spike couldn’t help but observe with a little laugh.

“You know, it isn’t a competition!” Twilight argued, giving her perennial rider a little shake for emphasis.

‘Not that we should be competing with a bunch of fillies anyway.’

The exchange seemed to have gotten some attention, however.

“What isn’t a competition?” Rainbow Dash asked, already heading towards the forest. Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy had already headed in using their ghost wolf and feral kitty forms respectively, letting Rainbow Dash, Rarity and Applejack form a rough party carrying most of their gear.

“Nothing important,” Twilight replied, catching up.

Dash made a thoughtful noise at that, which quickly morphed into a smirk and a snort. "Actually, I always kinda figured most everything is a competition in one way or another. You can't always win of course, but you're always trying to be better at something than someone, right?"

"As long as one strives for excellence," Rarity agreed, inclining her head towards the pegasus as she walked. "But it is rather unseemly to treat life like a contest. It is... more like a pageant."

"You mean a chance to show off?"

"Thee you go, putting things is the most crass light possible."

"A pageant IS a contest..."

"No, a pageant is a *show*. There is a difference between..."

Twilight and Applejack shared a glance and collectively rolled their eyes. Even with Pinkie Pie's chatter cut off by her travel form, it seemed they wouldn't lack for background noise.

Everfree, meanwhile, was just the same as always. Parts of it had been set ablaze by Deathwing weeks ago, but it had recovered more quickly than the areas that relied on ponies to stop wildfires and maintain meticulous grasslands. Everfree, like a giant tangle of weeds, was resilient and hard to get rid of, to the point where ponykind had long since given up and decided to just live with the blemish next door.

Everfree grew all around them in a haphazard maze of tress and shrubs, lacking any sense or order or symmetry. That alone made it frightening and offensive to pony sensibilities. The canopy of leaves above had, over the centuries, grown so thick that neither the sun nor the moon could entirely pierce the gloom that ruled over the cursed forest. No animals dared to approach the party of ponies, either. The inhabitants of this place, so used to living in fear, shied away from any possible threat. Occasionally a rustle of branches and leaves could be heard, but for the most part the band of mares was either ignored or avoided by the forest at large.

As they walked onward, sometimes chatting sometimes in silence, Twilight reflected on what she had read of other lands. Contrary to what ponies had thought, pre-Cataclysm, most of the world was “wild” like Everfree. Forests and Swamps grew in vast untamed stretches that covered whole regions. Humans and other races cleared some of these areas for farmland, and logged others for wood, but made no effort to create human (or pony) friendly forests. No one bothered to try and control the weather year round, even though she had read about spells that could do so over small areas. The night elves tended to their forest homes, according to a travel book she’d gotten a copy of, but what they did was mostly ‘preservation’ and not actual ‘alteration.’

From an outsider’s perspective, Everfree was probably more ‘normal’ than the ordered lands ponies created for themselves, full of neatly organized trees, tame ‘wildlife’ and choreographed seasonal weather. Continuing deeper into the wilderness, Twilight Sparkle tried to imagine when – and if – all of Equestria had been like Everfree. It must have been at some point, before ponies settled down in large numbers and started to re-organize and... and ponify... things. What had those early primitive ponies thought, back then? Were they just defending themselves from the dangers of the wild? Why bother taming the wildlife?

‘Maybe I’m just over thinking things?’ she wondered, and looked up to try and see the sky. It was dark, fast approaching her namesake. Celestia’s sun was likely to already be sinking under the horizon, making its slow circuit around the world to illuminate other lands. Luna’s moon would already be out, somewhere, basking in the fading glow of her sister.

Applejack slowed and glanced over her shoulder, as if sensing Twilight’s thoughts. “Ya think we should take ah break, sugarcube?”

“We’re making good time.” Twilight double checked her map and the six small glowing dots that moved slowly across it. “Bu-ut, since we don’t know what’s waiting for us at the castle ruins, I think we should rest up and have a go at it tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds good to me; I’m absolutely famished!” Rarity gracefully spun around to walk backwards for a few steps. “Now if only there was a clean spot somewhere in this dirty forest. A nice field of freshly cut grass perhaps?”

“The ground cover is full of ticks. Um... so you wouldn’t want to sleep in it.”

The soft spoken correction came from the brush nearby, which parted silently to reveal a golden feline with bright pink eyes. The leopard moved so quietly, so invisibly, that it all but shimmered into view as it crept forward. A mane of soft pink hair curled gracefully back down its neck, and faint blue streaks, like tattoos, occupied the sides of the face and the corners of the eyes: two arches, connecting , facing inward towards the nose, with an extra streak over the brow. It was the shape of a butterfly, half of it to the left of the face and half to the right.

Fluttershy was already morphing out of her kitty form, allowing her to speak: her paws turning back into hooves and her mane lengthening and falling forward to cover part of her face. Her saddlebags appeared from underneath her formerly feline coat, and a quartet of vicious canines retreated into the corners of her mouth. A long, solid gold tail became thinner and morphed into pink before flaring and filling out.

“Ticks?” Rarity asked, not particularly distracted by the transformation and focused more on the disgusting little monsters in the forest that they couldn’t see. “How disgusting!” She took a step back from her pegasus friend. “You don’t have any, do you? You and Pinkie have been tramping in and out of the bushes all day!”

“N-no. I don’t.” Fluttershy replied in a small voice. “I know how to get them to leave me alone.”

“Is there anywhere nearby we can set up for the night?” Twilight asked, trying to get them focused again.

“Nearby isn’t good,” the nature loving flyer told her with a concerned expression. “There are a few manticores hunting close to here.”

“Manticores?” Twilight asked. “Why haven’t they attacked us?”

“Pinkie Pie and I scared one off. The others smell us, but know we’re too dangerous to attack.”

The bookish unicorn raised an eyebrow at that, curious. "What do you mean?"

"We're stronger now than we were a year ago," Rainbow Dash reminded her with a meaningful look on her face. "Plus, Fluttershy and Pinkie are higher level and tougher than anyone here except me."

"They are?" Twilight couldn't help but ask.

"I don't know where they got it, but both of them have some solid pve gear for their level," Dash explained.

Fluttershy, shrinking visibly at the attention and comparative praise, muttered something too quietly to be heard. Then, mustering her determination a bit, reminding herself that she was – after all – around her closest friends, she perked up.

"The manticore from before only attacked us because it was hurt," she said, more eager to defend predatory wildlife than herself. At least verbally. "Still, we shouldn't set up camp here or try to tempt one of them. Pinkie Pie and I found a better place, near the top of a hill."

"Sounds perfect." Twilight trusted Fluttershy's judgment when it came to moving around in Everfree. Even before becoming a druid, she had more experience in the forest than anyone except Zecora. Pinkie Pie – well, less so, but she'd clearly been doing fine so far helping Fluttershy scout ahead and trail-blaze.

Fluttershy remained in her normal pony form as she led them through a thinner section of forest off the trail they'd been following. Many of the thicker knots of plants seemed to part for them, and before long they were headed up a slight incline. At the top of the small hill, they could see Pinkie Pie also in her pony form, setting up a small camp.

Twilight could also see why this small hilltop was mostly clear of trees: there were a few decrepit stone foundations sticking out of the earth. Taking in a lay of the land, she figured it may once have been the foundation of a wood and stone tower in ages past. According to the old records, Ponyville and other Earth pony villages had once built palisades for protection. Most had fallen into ruin and never been replaced in the pre-

modern eras. Hundreds of years ago, this could once have been part of a guard post. Since then, it may have been used as a camp site by forest gatherers looking for rare herbs or mushrooms.

A strange looking... thing also greeted them as they approached.

It was stuck in the ground, like a large wooden peg, but the body was coiled and brightly colored. Festive, even. Bright blue streamers wafted up along its sides, announcing its presence. Above those floated an orb, very much like a disembodied eye, which watched them, unblinking but not with any malice. After a few seconds, in fact, the blue eye ignored them and returned to looking at the nearby forest.

"A sentry ward," Spike explained. "Pinkie Pie's I guess?"

She had also set up a circle of rocks near the stone foundations and put together some kindling.

Pinkie herself quickly dropped one more log nearby, but not in the fire pit, and headed over.

"What'ya think?" she asked, all smiles. "Not bad for such short notice, huh? Once we get a fire going we can make smores and cook hotdogs and tell ghost stories!"

Applejack couldn't hide her grimace, as impressed as everyone was with the partly setup campsite. "You don't actually eat those things, do you?"

"What? Smores?" Pinkie asked, clueless. Her head tilted almost sixty degrees. "What's wrong with smores?"

The apple farmer heaved a sigh at her friend's zaniness and opted not to press.

Before too long, they'd set up the rest of the camp. Someone had started up a small fire, and yes, they had immediately wet their pallet by making smores and marshmallows. If Pinkie had actually brought any hot dogs, she hadn't cooked or eaten them while the others were around. Despite being deep in Everfree, Twilight felt remarkably at ease with her

friends nearby. Perhaps it was because they were stronger than they had been a year ago? Maybe it was simply that, after being in the forest a few times now, she'd gotten sort of used to it.

While everyone else relaxed and unwound on their various sleeping mats and rolls, Twilight took some time to explore the foundations of the old tower a bit more closely. She didn't really expect to find much. Even in Everfree, ruins like this had been picked over by generations of looters and scavengers, both pony and otherwise. Rarity's gem location spell quickly confirmed that there was nothing valuable nearby. You never found any gems in Everfree anyway, and everyone knew that fact. This just verified it.

Even if there wasn't any gold or gems to be found, the ruins themselves still had archaeological value. Spike was soon asleep, so Twilight used her magic to work alone by the light of the fire. She could hear her friends talking more quietly now and didn't need to stray very far. She measured and sketched out what she could see of the stone structure. Some of it had sunken, absorbed by the earth below, but most was still above ground. After a while, she began to wonder if the "hill" itself was too symmetrical to be natural. Another archaeology-specific spell indicated that the ground was packed in layers.

Sitting down and taking out one of her books, she skimmed through, looking for a certain entry –

Packed Earth Mounds: cross-referenced with Early-Dynasty Burial Mounds. Fascinated, Twilight stood back up and decided to try her hand at a little surveying. Setting up the proper spells and inducements, she finally staked down a survey post. Swiveling the head around, she let it come to a stop. A gem inlaid into the magical dowsing scope glowed yellow.

'Close!'

That was a surprise. She hadn't expected the spells to find anything of value at all!

Taking a dozen careful steps forward, in the direction indicated by the survey tools, she tried again. This time, the scope pointed in another direction and glowed green. Concentrating enough that it silenced her internal whoop of excitement, Twilight took a few more steps and tried

again. The scope pointed in the opposite direction as before, but was still green. She'd overshot the target a bit!

Horn glowing, the studious unicorn retraced her steps and carefully started digging. She didn't dare use her hooves – if there was something delicate down there then she'd risk damaging it like that. Instead, she telekinetically parted the earth, layer by layer. Soon she hit loose earth, packed with many small, uniform stones. Parting them, careful to pile them up to the side, she soon hit what looked like another piece of buried stone foundation.

A small frown creased her brows at the find... but then as she wiped away more of the dirt, she saw a symbol etched into the stone. Taking out a cloth and brush, she cleaned it and removed what had to be centuries of dirt. The symbol quickly became more distinct, but it still wasn't one she recognized. It wasn't from the Ancient Equestrian phonetic or the modern alphanumeric system.

Setting up a bright glow-light of her own to help her see, she peered down at the etching. It was rough, but definitely pony-made, and it must have meant something. But what?

"What'chall doin' over ere?" a familiar voice asked, as Applejack and Rainbow Dash came by to investigate. Rarity and Fluttershy were still by the fire, but Pinkie Pie was conspicuously craning her neck and looking over in Twilight's direction from her spot by the fire.

"Aw man, Arch?" Dash asked, shaking her head sadly. "I tell ya, that's stuff is such a waste of time!"

Ignoring that one comment, Twilight pointed towards the symbol in the stone she'd unearthed. "Does that look like anything to you?"

"I'll tell you what it doesn't look like. Zin'rokh, Destroyer of Worlds." Dash gazed longingly at the sky. "Oh, how I would love to have that sword...!"

Again ignoring the Ret Pally, Twilight looked to Applejack. The farmer seemed to be at least looking closely at the stone. She lowered down on her front legs, craned her neck, and then stood back up.

“Ah’d say it looks a bit like a tree,” she finally replied.

“Great. Someone carved a picture of a tree into some old rock.” Dash didn’t sound impressed. “It’s probably some ancient grafitti or something.”

Growing a bit bolder, and taking advantage of Twilight’s silence as she pondered the mystery, Applejack reached down and knocked on the stone with her hoof. Twilight immediately gasped at the possible damage this was doing, but then she and Applejack stopped, realizing something. The apple farmer knocked again, and nodded. They’d both heard it.

“It’s hollow?” Twilight asked, and quickly started clearing more and more dirt away from the sides. She soon uncovered what was around the square stone: four slabs of rock, cut (mostly) square, and overlapping on the sides. Together it looked like they formed a rough cube. The stone with the mark was just a cover put on top.

Ah!

“I think this is a cist,” she realized, circling around to the other side.

Rainbow Dash, still hovering nearby, came closer to see for herself. “A what?”

“A cist,” Twilight informed her. “A sort of burial pit, dug into the earth. I thought this hill was kind of suspicious. I think the whole thing is a burial mound of some sort.”

“So this is a grave?” the pegasus asked, pointing down at the capstone.

Twilight nodded, excited by her discovery and allowing it to show on her face. “I think so!”

“Well, that’s interestin’ and all,” Applejack observed, backing away a bit. “But now that ya know that, doya really think ya should be pokin’ around it like this?”

"I would like to investigate it more closely," Twilight admitted, giving the cist another look. "But I guess I don't want to be disrespectful." Remembering something, she looked up at Dash with bright, violet eyes. "Of course! You're a paladin, right?"

"Um. Yeah." The pegasus replied. "Duh. So what?"

"So," the unicorn answered. "You can open this up without spiritually disturbing anything inside."

"Woah! Wait a second!" She held up her front hooves, both of them, in a warding gesture. "First of all, I'm a Retribution Paladin, not a Holy Paladin. Second, I was only shown pegasus rites. We've always cremated our dead and then scattered the ashes; we don't bury them. There's no way this-" she gestured to the grave. "Is a pegasus."

Twilight frowned at being so easily rebuked. She did want to investigate her first real, honest-to-Celestia archaeology find...! But she didn't want to disturb any of the buried dead. Most of the time the deceased had long since passed on and didn't care what happened to their mortal remains, but every so often legitimate archaeological investigation would be mistaken for tomb robbing (of all things!) and that could lead to trouble. Restless spirits could be created or let loose, or tomb guardians woken up. She'd heard stories about unicorns in older eras enchanting their sacred mortuaries to protect the magical remains within.

"I'll do it!" a bubbly voice chirped, and Pinkie Pie was already straddling the cist with her hooves in the air. She struck a dramatic pose... only to fall onto all fours and knock at the grave's capstone.

"Hey there! Anyone home? Mind if we poke around a bit?" the party pony cocked her head to the side, as if hearing some unspoken reply. "Huh? What's wrong? We wouldn't do anything like that!"

Drawing back a bit, she frowned, and then turned on the stone marker with a pout, big eyes and all.

"Oh, come on, please? Pretty please? With cherries and whipped cream and hot sauce on top?" Again, her expression changed, and she

drew back. "You... you don't know what whipped cream is? Or hot sauce? Wow, that sucks! I wish I could give you some."

She abruptly giggled, still carrying on her one-sided conversation.

"No, silly! Here!" she jumped over to where Twilight stood, perplexed by just how far her friend was taking things. Pinkie poked her in the chest. "This is Twilight Sparkle. She loves books and learning new things. See now? We're all friends! So you don't mind if she...?" The pink pony's eyes widened and she smiled. "Hey, thanks!"

"Okay," she said, finally addressing someone living. Twilight in this case. "You can go ahead and pop the top."

"Did you just..." Applejack searched for the words for a moment. "Yer just pullin our tails, right, sugarcube? Ya didn't just talk to some dead pony, didya?"

"I dunno," Pinkie's reply was frustratingly evasive. "Maybe."

"If we have permission, then," Twilight ventured, and her horn glowed as she lifted. The capstone shed a layer of loose, sandy dirt, and shook as it pulled out of a hidden wedge in the walls around it. The cist was built well, and had held up against the elements for a long time. Levitating the capstone away, Twilight moved it off to the side and set it down, careful to keep it from chipping or breaking.

There was disappointingly little inside, but then that made sense. Pony bodies didn't survive forever and even bones would disintegrate after centuries. The little tomb she'd found had been tight, but not airtight, and the Everfree forest was damp with lots of insect and plantlife. The floor of the burial pit was dark with accumulated detritus and dirt.

Moving some of it around, brushing it away with an archaeology spell, she caught a hint of dirty white: bone! So there were some remains left. Moving side by side, she soon found a few other artifacts, laid to rest with the pony inside.

Picking one out, Twilight brought it up to her face for a closer look. Applejack and even Dash were clustered close by, and Rarity and

Fluttershy had also been drawn over, all of them curious to see what had been unearthed just a couple feet from where they had made camp. Dash, in particular, had tried to look disinterested but soon her rust colored eyes widened with wonder as she looked around inside the ancient grave. Maybe she was hoping there'd be some ancient and powerful artifact inside?

Twilight focused on what she considered the most interesting of the artifacts. It was a small sculpture of a pony. She was clearly female and very pregnant, sitting on her haunches, and with what looked like a rod in her mouth. Part of it was chipped or broken, as was part of her mane. The whole thing was made of clay, to Rarity's disappointment, but most fascinating of all was that this pregnant unicorn mare had wings. They looked like wings, anyway. The sculpture was somewhat crude.

"Oooh! An Earthmother figure?" Pinkie inquired, leaning over Twilight's shoulder.

The unicorn was a bit surprised to hear her friend's guess. She'd been thinking something similar.

"Do you mean the Tauren Earthmother, or the actual one?" Twilight asked. This was something a shaman would know.

"Ummm!" Pinkie sat back, scratching her head. "I'm not sure. I've heard about the Earthmother, but I think that was the Elemental one. I don't think she looks like that."

"It's an alicorn," Applejack reminded them of the obvious, pointing with her nose but not getting too close. "Like Princess Celestia." She coughed and quickly added, "Or Princess Luna."

"Maybe there used to be more of them?" Fluttershy suggested.

"You don't suppose this guy here was one, too?" Dash wondered, and reached down to try and find some evidence of wings or a horn in the skeleton below.

“Ah! Do be careful!” Rarity thankfully caught the pegasus’s hoof before it could do any damage. “Anything you touch is likely to crumble to dust.”

“Oh. Oh yeah.” Rainbow pulled her foreleg back and out of the burial pit. “Sorry.”

“If it is an alicorn...!” Twilight set the ‘earthmother’ figurine down close by and brushed away some of the dirt where she thought the skull to be. Bit by bit, she uncovered more of the skeleton. The curve of the skull became clearer, but as it did so, it also became clear that there was no horn.

“Even if it broke off, there’d be some sign of it,” she finally realized. The skull was, as far as she could tell, perfectly smooth around the forehead. This was either a pegasus or Earth pony. Probably the latter, though finding delicate wing bones in any condition would be surprising. Pegasus shoulders were markedly distinct, though, and those would be prominent.

“So much fer findin’ Princess Celestia’s grandma,” Applejack observed, both disappointed and a little relieved.

There wasn’t much else to be found: some arrowheads, a mess of beads that could once have been part of a necklace or other charm, and what looked to be a shell, once polished clean. That was a small surprise. Shells would have to have come from a large body of water, or even the ocean, and there was nothing like that for miles. Even the Ponyville Lake, which as far as she knew didn’t have any clams, was a day’s unimpeded travel at a good canter. It must have come from the ocean. Twilight resolved to try and identify the species later, once she got back home.

Lastly, she’d found, buried next to the ancient pony, what looked to be a small skeleton. She’d assumed it to be a rat at first, but Fluttershy had quickly identified it as the remains of a rabbit. Given the position it was in, it had either been buried under the pony or with it. A pet, perhaps?

Simply fascinating!

She took notes long into the night, including sketches and other observations. Gradually her friends went to sleep, all except Pinkie Pie,

who sat silently a few hooves away. Eventually Twilight finished, slowly lowered the capstone back in place, and covered the grave again. She kept the alicorn figure, the shell, and two of the arrowheads. She was tempted to take everything she'd unearthed, but decided that what she had was more than enough.

It was her first archaeology find! Her first academic discovery!

Pinkie Pie helped move enough dirt to cover it up again and when that was done, she closed her eyes. Grass started to grow, swiftly covering up the disturbed cist and returning it to a natural state. In a few minutes, it was as if no one had dug there at all. Throughout it all, she normally hyperactive pink pony acted unusually sedate and somber.

Then, all done, she gave Twilight a big grin and trotted off to her sleeping bag.

Twilight wasn't far behind. Already, this little expedition of theirs had been more than she'd ever imagined! She'd forgotten all about the dangers and worries of camping deep in Everfree forest, her spirits riding high. Who knew what tomorrow would bring?

- - -

The next morning they approached the castle ruins.

They weren't alone, either. Just like the Cutie Mark Crusaders had indicated, there was a small detachment of Royal Guard camped a short distance from the ledge that separated the castle from the forest nearby. The bridge that normally spanned the chasm had been cut, preventing anyone but pegasus ponies from crossing. Celestia's guardsponies had set up a cordon around the area, and their camp was fortified by stakes and magical wards.

No sooner had the six mares caught sight of it, than they saw the guards come under attack. Black pony shapes swooped in from above, harrying the other pegasus fliers in such numbers that many were also free to molest the unicorns and Earth pony guards on the ground. Other dark ponies rushed the perimeter, climbing over stakes and suppressing magical

defense wards with dark magics. They swarmed into the harried Royal Guards, producing a wild melee.

Immediately, Twilight's friends turned to her for direction.

She could only stand there, stunned by what she saw. It took a moment for the situation to sink in, and with it, for her to notice that everyone was looking at her. Even Applejack and Rainbow Dash, the ones she'd expected to be the first to rush in, were waiting for her to say something. In fact, those two still looked eager, and their impatience was clearly growing behind their narrowed eyes.

'I'm the party leader, right?' she remembered, and nodded to herself.

"Ah. Okay!" Twilight thought quickly, planning out what they had to do. "Dash. Help the pegasus guards clear the air. Fluttershy, help her and heal the other flyers. Rarity, Pinkie Pie, you're with me. We're going to take out the enemy unicorns. I think they're suppressing the guardian spells, and we need them back up. Applejack, you need to stick close and protect us. Spike, when we start using spells; I need you to find someplace safe so you can watch our backs. Got it?"

A chorus of acknowledgment followed -

"Then let's go!" Twilight yelled, and they broke into a full run.

Within moments, the Elements of Harmony dove into the battle.

Chapter 4

Before leaving Ponyville, Twilight had brought a few books on traditional Equestria fighting and one or two on leadership. She'd planned to at least take some private notes for herself before getting into any sort of serious dustup. Normally, she'd have done much of it last night, but, as usual, archaeology had gotten in the way. It was too late now; the Royal Guards down below were under attack and study guides (and crib notes) would have to wait for later.

'We'll just have to wing it!'

Up above, Rainbow Dash was already flying at top speed to introduce herself to the "Fiendish Pegasi" who were circling in the sky. She seemed to be enjoying herself, given the loud and somewhat inappropriate battle cry she unleashed as she switched battle auras. Fluttershy couldn't keep pace, but she did hover at a safe distance and rear up, her forelegs glowing green. A tumbling figure of gold and white was her target, and it quickly righted itself and stopped its fall as the rejuvenation spell took effect.

Trusting in those two to keep the air safe, Twilight Sparkle narrowed her eyes, concentrated on the mass of ponies up ahead. She pointedly ignored the melee of Earth ponies, looking, looking – there! There was a reddish glow coming from a pony in black robes. She wasn't sure, but it seemed likely to be one of the unicorns suppressing the nearby defense wards.

A skull appeared over the Dark Unicorn's head. Oblivious to the marking (visible only to Twilight's party anyway), the magic user focused on suppressing the nearby wards. It was her job, after all. She didn't pay much attention to the ragtag bunch of ponies that ran in from the Everfree forest. That was someone else's problem anyway, right? Right!

Twilight Sparkle braced herself, horn glowing a fearsome shade of amethyst, and unleashed her first wave of Arcane Missiles. Violet projectiles erupted from her horn like shooting stars, crossing the distance of roughly forty yards in less than a second. A hoof-full of them slammed

home into the distracted Dark Unicorn, blasting away bits of cloak and hood and kicking up dust from the force of the impact.

Concentration unbroken, the evil pony craned her neck to look over in the direction of the attack.

“Mage armor! Mage armor!” Spike’s yelling was frantic.

‘Oh nuts. I knew I forgot something!’

Her body jerked as the Dark Unicorn cursed her. It felt like a knife being wedged between her ribs, going deeper and deeper, the agony intensifying as it separated and pushed back bone. Twilight blinked in pain, stumbling back, and then saw a dark mass of vile power filling her vision. Oddly, it was something she recognized. This was the spell Trixie had used on her. A “shadowbolt” she had called it.

It broke against a bubble-like shield of light.

“Just a moment, darling.” She heard Rarity say, and a healing energy helped to counteract the Dark Unicorn’s curse. It didn’t dispel it, however, meaning it was still sending lances of agony into its victim. Remembering something from her spellbook, Twilight forced her eyes open.

“I can dispel curses,” she muttered. She and Fluttershy both could.

Focusing on the incantation taught to her, Twilight felt it form and then shoot out from her forehead. The energy washed away the curse of Agony before it could reach its full duration and she breathed a sigh of relief. She knew the spells, and the spell mechanics, but knowledge was clearly only part of what made an effective mage. Experience and real life combat would have to fill in the gaps.

The Dark Unicorn, meanwhile, was facing the three ponies at range, an ugly sneer on her muzzle. Her horn was still glowing red as she suppressed the nearby magical sentries, but there was apparently energy to spare when it came to her casting. Black tainted the red glow a second before another Shadowbolt Volley vomited forth, the coils of black energy zeroing in on Twilight and her friends.

There was no avoiding them – the shadowbolts would home in on their targets – so they just had to be taken and healed through. Rarity raised another beautiful shield of light, but not to protect herself. Instead, it covered Applejack's flank. There was a crazed Earth pony in tattered robes heading towards her, a wicked blade between his teeth.

Applejack didn't shirk from the sight, or the confrontation. Instead, she charged forward with a rebel yell of "Ye-haw!" slamming right into the Twilight Zealot and stunning him. She then grappled with the madpony, snout to snout, ignoring the shadowbolt that tried to come in and hit her from behind.

Twilight quickly cast another set of arcane missiles, and saw Pinkie Pie drop a new totem out of the corner of her eye. With Rarity handling backup healing, his totem glowed a wild and untamed blue, fizzling like a roman candle and filling everyone with magical and spiritual energy. Charged by the sight and feel of it, Twilight built up power for a larger and more powerful spell. The air around her crackled and split as she fired off an Arcane Barrage.

The lance of energetic purple magic slammed into the side of the Dark Unicorn, for the first time causing her to stumble.

"Twilight! Mage Armor!"

'Oh. Oh yeah.'

She quickly corrected her earlier oversight, but not before getting tagged with another Curse of Agony. She felt it "tick" once, but sheathed in an invisible, protective cocoon of Mage Armor it was much easier to deal with. Rarity was keeping them all up, despite the damage, and Twilight quickly dispelled the Curse on herself. About to attack again, she paused, feeling a similar energy clinging to her friends. Fluttershy had to be out of range supporting Dash.

Twilight realized, then, that Pinkie Pie and Rarity had been hit by Curses of Agony, too. The thought of her friends in pain angered Twilight far more than when she, herself, had been the target of the evil spellwork. Summoning up her Remove Curse counterspell, Twilight burned the vile magic from her friends.

To her left, Pinkie Pie stamped her hooves, and an arc of lightning reached out like an ethereal bridge, hitting the Dark Unicorn square in the chest. This proved to be the final blow, as she finally fell back and to the side, kicking with her legs and then becoming briefly engulfed in a cloud of noxious smoke. Twilight could see traces of the pony the Dark Unicorn may once have been: a teal color beneath the cloud of black, dyed by her willing partnership with evil powers.

There was little time to think about it. One of the magical wards, formerly suppressed, lit up like a Winter Solstice charm. It began to pulse and crackle. Moving forward, Twilight identified and marked another Dark Unicorn. She had been watching the fight before, and quickly started casting curses and shadowbolts. It seemed the act of suppressing the Royal Guard's wards also kept the casters from moving, since she could do little more than pivot slightly and face her attackers. An enraged yell came from Twilight's right, where Applejack was struggling with the Twilight Pony Zealot she had engaged.

He was wounded from the dust up with her and the Royal Guard, and whether it was pure adrenalin or dark magic, he was actually growing larger! To say nothing of angrier! Lost in a battle fury, the speed of his attacks increased, forcing Rarity to divert more attention to keeping Applejack up and in his hooves. Twilight could see Pinkie Pie, her blue eyes shooting from the Unicorn they had just engaged over to where Applejack was fighting. She looked torn about what to do.

"My target!" Twilight yelled. "Pinkie! MY target!"

"Oh!" The bubbly shaman quickly narrowed her eyes at the Dark Unicorn barraging them with shadow magic. "Okey dokey!"

She puckered her lips, as if to blow the evil unicorn a kiss –

And the Shadowbolt Volley the unicorn had been casting was interrupted by a shearing blast of wind. Twilight followed the interrupt up with a series of Arcane Missiles, a whole half dozen of them. The Dark Unicorn snarled and tried to attack again, but between Pinkie's interrupts and Twilight's curse dispels, there was little she could do to turn the tide of battle. Soon the Enraged Twilight Zealot was down, and Rarity joined in. The three

quickly burned the unicorn down, and she collapsed softly under the barrage.

Instantly, the two Royal Guard wards blazed bright as bonfires, linking themselves together with a yellowish beam of light and then discharging it upwards into the air. A Fiendish Pegasus fell from the sky, shortly afterward, struck down by the bolt of yellow lightning. With their air cover rapidly dwindling, the Twilight ponies on the ground started to fear for their lives more than they feared the displeasure of their leaders. Despite one remaining Dark Unicorn urging them on, the wounded Zealots who had yet to Enrage started to break off and fall back. Seeing their partners do so, others fled outright.

A few, the most badly wounded, roared in fury and enraged, growing larger and angrier as they kicked and slashed at anyone close by. The Royal Guards quickly brought the berserkers down, and armored pegasi gave chase as the Twilight Cultists routed. Rarity, breathing heavily, nonetheless managed to spend the rest of her energy on healing spells, mending the worst of the wounded guardsponies. She was soon completely exhausted, and fall back on her rear, not even sparing the breath to express her dislike of sitting on the dusty ground.

Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy soon landed, along with another white pegasus in Royal Guard barding. The chromatic flyer had a big smile on her face, and a few scuff marks to show for her trouble, but her spirits were clearly high. Fluttershy, like Rarity, looked much more tired, and the pink maned pegasus let out a weary sigh as she relaxed down onto the ground.

"Everyone okay?" Twilight asked.

"I just need a moment," Rarity said, slowly nodding her head.

Fluttershy just gave a quiet sigh.

"Hey, Pinkie," Dash spoke up, poking her friend with a hoof. "Let's check the bodies; see if anything good dropped."

If either of them showed concern for what they'd done, taking out the Cultist ponies, they didn't show it.

“Wait for me!” Pinkie sounded enthusiastic, even, but then she sounded enthusiastic about almost everything. The pair immediately started towards the first fallen Dark Unicorn. Twilight frowned a bit, but recognized the practicality. These were enemies of Equestria, after all, and the Royal Guard wouldn’t have treated them any differently, especially given that they were in the middle of attacking Celestia’s hand picked stallions. Either Dash and Pinkie would loot them, or the Royal Guard would.

Speaking of the Guard...

“Nice of you to mares drop by!” A voice called out, and a pair of waterskins floated over to Rarity and Fluttershy. Both quickly recognized the water as enchanted, and started drinking. The source was a unicorn Guardpony wearing the Household Gold.

Princess Celestia, many believed, had certain tastes in stallions, and she required uniformity within her Personal Guard. They were the only standing, professional force within Equestria, though some towns had police and militias. Their colors and dress were instantly recognizable.

The various legs of the Household were color coded. All of Her Majesty’s pegasus and earth pony guards had uniform antique-white coats, regulation cut manes, and blue eyes. Her unicorn guards were all slate gray. Each was the finest male specimen, recruited from the best stock, of impeccable breeding and from the most prominent families in Equestria. They were magically altered to uniform colors and appearance, given training as a secret facility beneath Canterlot, and assigned to the Royal Household. Those who desired advancement traditionally forsook family and friends, devoting themselves entirely to the Princess. Some proved their commitment by undergoing voluntary gelding.

Privately, Twilight did consider it a little... peculiar, but the organization of the Royal Household was a relic of ancient times. Many ponies took great comfort in its conformity, and many families were proud to have their sons serve Her Majesty. They had been more than busy since the Cataclysm, fanning out to secure the borders and interests of Equestria as a whole.

The gray pegasus approached Twilight, identifying her as the leader of her little group. He inclined his head politely. “Twilight Sparkle,” he said, pronouncing her first name Twai-Light. “This is a surprise!”

Twilight blinked, as she tried to remember if she had met this pony before, and then noticed Spike near her side. She'd almost forgotten about him, but it was safe enough now to come out.

"I didn't catch your name," she replied. "But you seem to know me?"

"All Guards have been briefed on the Elements of Harmony," he primly informed her, straight laced and humorless. "I was also one of your guards back in Canterlot."

Not that she would recognize them, since they all looked alike... but she didn't say so.

"Captain Morning Star," he introduced himself, and wasted no further time on pleasantries. "Are you here to have a go at these Cultist bastards?"

Twilight nodded. "We have some things we'd like to do in the castle ruins, too."

"The whole place is crawling with the vilest ponies I've ever had the displeasure to run into." He glanced back at the castle, separated from the armed camp by the gorge and broken bridge. "Twilight Ponies aren't the worst of it, either. They cut the bridge when we first arrived, and they've got enough pegasi to run a damned airshow. There's no easy way to cross unless we thin their numbers."

It sounded like he had an idea of what needed to be done, but...

"So you've got a quest or something you need us to do?" Spike asked, before Twilight could phrase her response. It was blunt, but it got the point across.

Morning Star nodded, eyes moving to the dragon and then back to the librarian. "If you can thin the numbers of Twilight ponies on this side, I can free up enough of my colts to escort you across. The old bridge is out of commission, but we can set up a new one."

That made sense. And it would get them across. "How much is 'thinning their numbers?'"

“All the Twilight ponies carry marks of station on them. Since I doubt you’d be fine with collecting ears...” And here he saw the grimace on her face at the barbaric practice. “If you can bring me ten Marks of any type, I’ll divert some of my colts to set up a new bridge. I’ll throw in some gold as well.”

“I guess that’s reasonable,” Twilight agreed. She felt a rustle in her saddle, and levitated out her interactive map. It had helpfully recorded the new quest.

~

[34] Rites of Passage

Objectives:

Bring 10 Marks of Twilight to Captain Morning Star at Morning Star’s Camp

You will need:

[Mark of Twilight] x10

Notes:

“If you can bring me ten Marks of any type, I’ll divert some of my colts to set up a new bridge.”

~

“Wow,” Spike couldn’t help but remark. “That is one handy map, huh, Twilight?”

“Yes. It is very convenient,” she admitted, and coughed. Best not to think too much about that. She faced the Royal Guard Captain. “We’ll be back with the Marks.”

“Looking forward to it, Miss Sparkle.” He smiled, though it was a sharp, soldier’s smile. “You and your friends are free to use our camp as a base of operations.”

He then dipped his head to her with a “ma’am” and headed back to his brothers in arms. There were a few wounded laid out on mats, looked over by a unicorn priest, distinguishable from his comrades only by a vestment that fell forward around his shoulders. While she’d been talking to the Captain, it looked like the rest of her group had headed off to do their own things.

Fluttershy and Rarity were both talking to a guard pony near a pair of large crates. It soon became clear that they were stocking up on enchanted water. They had burned through their mana pretty quickly before, even with Pinkie Pie's mana replenishing totem out. The pink pony and Rainbow Dash, meanwhile, were a short distance away selling vendor trash for gold. Applejack was at the far end of the camp, looking across the gorge at the castle beyond.

It wasn't too different than when they'd come here before. The biggest change was that it was far from deserted. Fires and lights burned within the ruins, accompanied by ghostly shapes flitting about. A flock of evil pegasi perched in the nearby trees and on top of crumbling parapets. There had to be at least a dozen of them out in the open. It was a pretty major commitment of forces, actually. Twilight also sort of wondered just where all these cultist ponies came from. Not Ponyville, as far as she knew.

Before long, her friends started to converge back around her.

"Oh! Oh! Twilight! I just picked up a super easy quest!" Pinkie Pie took that moment to appear, plopping down in front of them with Rainbow Dash a few hooves behind. "All we have to do is come back here with three pristine manticore tails and maybe one other little thing and we'll get our pick of some super cool make-you-drool rare gear!"

"Three 'pristine manticore tails?'" Twilight made sure she sounded as skeptical as she felt. "Why would you need those?"

"Oh, it's terrible," Fluttershy answered, peeking out from behind her pink mane. "Some of those mean ponies have been corrupting and enslaving local manticores. Some of the Guardponies were poisoned."

"They need the tails to make an antidote," Rarity added in. "I also accepted the quest," she informed the party lead. "It would be rude to not help out, especially since we were in the area anyway. And it *is* only three manticore tails. How long could it possibly take for all six of us to gather three tails?"

"Oh boy," Dash groaned for some reason. "I know where this is going."

"I guess it doesn't sound too hard," Twilight conceded. "Share the quest?"

- - -

Three pristine manticore tails. Just three.

Rainbow Dash wanted to scream as they searched the tenth dead 'Corrupted Manticore' and, mysteriously, failed to find a "pristine manticore tail." Instead the tail was, like so many others, imperfect in some minor, stupid way. In this case, it was a "twisted manticore tail." So far they had four twisted tails, three warped tails, two blighted tails, and only *one* Celestia damned pristine manticore tail.

And it was starting to piss her off!!

"Oh dear. Another bad one?" Fluttershy muttered, standing in contrast to Dash's seething form. Her entire body was vibrating and she had to stamp the ground to keep from flying into a tirade of invectives.

"This." Dash growled. "Is why. I hate. PVE!!"

...

"Finally!! FINALLY!!"

Dash gave a sigh of relief as she bent down to examine the last manticore's tail. Sure enough it wasn't just in good condition, or even mint condition, it was in pristine condition! Like more than a dozen times before, Fluttershy cringed and closed her eyes as Dash cut the tail off at the base.

The dead manticore jerked slightly, but it was a relatively small specimen. They all were. Probably a juvenile or something. It was easy to pick them out from the normal manticore population that stayed in the woods. These had been driven mad by some kind of dark magic and hungrily prowled around just out of sight of the Royal Guard encampment. They were beyond even Fluttershy's attempts to tame or console (or stare down) and attacked ferociously on sight. It didn't make it any easier for the poor druid pegasus to see them killed, though.

"What kind of awful ponies would use such terrible magic on poor, defenseless creatures?" Fluttershy was staring at the corpse now, her

indignation rising. Not that most ponies would notice that fact given her quiet, serene tone of voice.

“Defenseless creatures? You kiddin’ me?” Dash draped the heavy manticore tail over her back and spat a few times to get the taste out of her mouth. Even the juvenile ones were as big as a pony and not possessed of the most pleasant temperament.

“They’re defenseless against magic,” Fluttershy argued and transformed quickly into her kitty form.

Dash watched her go with something akin to shock. Was it just her imagination, or was Fluttershy genuinely pissed? Cutting off a conversation like that? She wasn’t raging, but she sure wasn’t amused by the quest they’d undertaken. Dash quickly followed her friend, and corrected herself: it wasn’t the quest. It was the people who had made these animals so hostile in the first place.

They caught up with the rest of the group nearby. The area was basically strewn with corrupt manticores that they’d put down. There was a single “pristine tail” on Pinkie’s back and another on Twilight’s. Rarity had outright refused to carry “a bloody trophy” (in her own words) and they’d kept Applejack free since she was the only thing between the softer mares and the angry monsters. They’d split up into two smaller teams when it became clear that the simple task of collecting “three tails” was going to be a lot harder than expected. Or at least a lot more tedious.

Only “three pristine tails” her perfect, rainbow covered flank!

At least it was over.

Back at the camp, the medical pony examined one of the tails. “Hrm.” He didn’t sound too happy with the selection. “This manticore tail, here. Are you mares sure this is pristine enough?”

“YES!!” Dash growled. Her friends all gave her a look that seemed to say, ‘thank you.’

“Well, I *guess* I can make antivenom from these,” the Guardpony decided after a few picky seconds. His horn glowed, and he floated out a not

insubstantial amount of gold. Not bits. Gold coins. Twilight took it from him and put the reward in one of her bags, to divide up later.

“Now, just one last thing...” the medic began.

Dash groaned, pawing agitatedly at the ground.

“Our scouts have identified the source of the Corrupted Manticores,” he explained, nervously backing away from the angry pegasus filly. “One of the cultists, of course. We believe she’s using some sort of alchemy to enslave and enrage the local wildlife, probably to weaken us here for another attack. We overheard a name, too.”

The Royal Guardpony narrowed his eyes, repeating the name with equal measures contempt and dread.

“Catnip,” he said.

“Catnip?” Twilight repeated.

“Catnip,” the medic repeated, completely serious. “You should be able to find her in the Twilight Camp to the south. She also has a pet manticore named Sniffles.”

“Sniffles.”

“...Sniffles.”

Twilight tilted her head in distaste. “This quest sounds kind of-”

Before she could finish that sentence, however, the Guardpony retrieved a pair of golden bracers. These weren’t plain old metal, or even enchanted uncommon bracers. These were rares, identified as “blue.” He had ones for spellcasting that thrummed with Intelligence-enhancing spells and some plate ones that greatly boosted strength and stamina.

It raised a good counterargument. Rainbow Dash couldn’t help but eye them. No resilience, of course, but they would be good for battlegrounds, too. Better than what she currently had. AND they did still have that quest to retrieve ten Marks of Twilight...

The Royal Guard raised an eyebrow, knowing he had the fillies hooked.

“Catnip and Sniffles it is,” Twilight decided.

- - -

“Ah can’t believe we keep getting’ sent on these side quests,” Applejack said, peeking out from the thick bushes to spy on the Twilight encampment.

“I can’t believe these quests keep sending us to the same places,” Twilight popped her head out of the bushes nearby.

“I can’t believe none of you have played an RPG before!” Pinkie appeared next, jack-in-the-box-like.

“This isn’t a game, you know,” Rarity slowly stuck her head out of the bushes, careful not to get twigs and leaves and other nastiness in her perfect mane.

“I think I see her,” Fluttershy’s voice was quiet, but determined, and they all looked down at where she, too, had stuck her head out from the brush. The pegasus had been in her own particular sort of bad mood the entire trek south as they followed the tracks left behind by the routing Cultists. Twilight was a little unnerved by the intensity in her demure friend, but she’d been using her cat-form to avoid any sort of conversation. The book loving unicorn figured it was convenient in that respect.

“There.” Fluttershy pointed.

Near the rear of the camp was a large non-pony form. It was another manticore, an adult, kept leashed and prowling back and forth next to a large tent made of animal hides. A smaller cloaked shape was close by, but swiftly ducked into the crude shelter. Black braziers burned with unnatural green fire all around the compound, feeding an otherworldly haze that blanketed the area, even in the middle of the afternoon. All around the camp were more of the wild trees and bushes of Everfree forest.

Twilight counted at least ten ponies in the enemy camp. There were also a couple cages set up near one of the tents. It was hard to be sure, but it

looked like there were ponies trapped inside. The only upside of the situation was that there were only two “Fiendish Pegasi” on watch. They were currently sitting on a black cloud over the camp, but only half heartedly paying attention to their surroundings.

“Thoughts, anypony?”

“How about I round ‘em up and you guys aoe?”

A half dozen faces graced Rainbow Dash with a hooded stare.

“I was kidding!” she protested. “Really? Mostly kidding!” Shrinking back into the bush, she rolled her eyes. “I guess we need some crowd control or something lame like that.”

“We can not fight all of them at once,” Rarity was the first to leave Dash and refocus on the challenge ahead. “But perhaps we can lure a group away and deal with them separately from the rest?”

“How do you know we won’t end up alerting-”

“Aggroing,” Spike corrected.

“-the entire group?” Twilight finished.

“I – I can pull the two pegasi with faerie fire,” Fluttershy suggested, giving her leader a determined stare.

“And after you pull them, you,” Dash pointed to Twilight. “Can knock one of them out of the air with polymorph. I’ll get the other one.”

“And if we pull the whole group?” Twilight asked, still a bit unsure of the merits of the plan as proposed.

“Then everyone run for your lives!” Pinkie giggled, and gave the studious unicorn a hug. “Don’t worry, Twilight, I’ll rez you if you die!”

“That is SO reassuring.” She sighed, having no other real options. “Okay. We’ll give it a try. Marking them now.”

“CC target should be a green triangle,” Dash suggested.

“I thought CC was the blue square?” Rarity asked.

“Um. I believe the kill order is usually skull, X, and CC is the yellow star. But anything is fine, really.”

“No! Use the orange nipple!”

Dash flushed and shook her head fiercely. “D-don’t call it that! It’s a circle!”

“It’s a nipple! Look at it!”

“Oh my, it does look a little like-”

“Star is first CC, then square,” Twilight informed them, hurriedly cutting off that little debate before it went too far. Spike was present, after all. Not that... well, not that dragons had nipples or anything. Argh! Just where were her thoughts taking her now?!

Pinkie sounded disappointed, but agreed, “Okey dokey lokey. We’ll save the nipple for later.”

“The circle!”

“Dash,” Twilight raised her voice slightly. It was time to get this started.
“You take skull.”

“Will do.” The pegasus paladin put her game face back on.

Twilight nodded, and her eyes fell on their druid.

“Whenever you’re ready, Fluttershy.”

- - -

“Faerie Fire! What the Pony Hell?! I hate Faerie Fire!”

“It was that druid over there! Get ‘er!!”

Sunflower was her name, and she was a Fiendish Pegasus.

Now, she didn't really think of herself as Fiendish, per-say. As a filly, she had enjoyed playing pranks and having harmless fun like that. There was nothing remarkably 'fiendish' about her childhood or her upbringing. She had two normal parents who had moved from Cloudsdale to Fillydelphia and then to a small hamlet called, ironically, Hamlet. Unlike most towns, it wasn't important enough to be a pun.

She'd grown up, gotten her cutie mark, and started working in a flower shop. Flowers were her love and her special skill, after all. She and her brother, Wildflower, had grown a large field of them behind the house after father died and mother retired. They were both adequate flyers, but didn't have much in the way of many pegasi's natural brashness and aggression. They didn't really want to chase clouds for a living or manipulate weather or take up traditional fields of pegasus employ. The flower shop was plenty. At some point, which she kept putting off, Sunflower had expected to find a nice stallion and raise a standard 2.7 foals.

Then a fire elemental had come through town, burning her flowers and her shop.

Insurance didn't cover fire elementals, since they weren't "naturally occurring fires" and basically no one had even heard of them before the Cataclysm. She and her brother lost everything. Even the townspeople in Hamlet couldn't help, since their livelihoods had gone up in smoke, too. Wildflower moved back to Cloudsdale to work in a cloud factory. Sunflower had drifted.

A few sordid parties (and a couple less than reputable stallions) later, she'd ended up as part of what was once the Twilight Hammer Clan, now the Twilight Cult. You kind of knew a religious organization wasn't on the up-and-up when it called itself a damn cult. Sunflower didn't care. Society had screwed her over. She had nothing. Why didn't she deserve a little payback? One thing about the Twilight Cult... it certainly had plans for payback! Against the Elementals that had ruined her life, against the world as a whole, against everyone and everything everywhere!

And, wow – that did sound like of Fiendish.

'Maybe I am a Fiendish Pegasus?'

Oh well. There'd be time to think about that later. First, they'd squash the stupid little druid that had tagged her. Freakin Faerie Fire. Stupid druids! Maybe she had some money on her. She'd have to distract her partner so she got dibs on whatever the tree-hugger dropped. The less competition for loot, the better!

Swooping down, Sunflower was only a few hooves from her prey when suddenly her hooves turned into, well, they turned into hooves. But the wrong kind! And why was she so fluffy? Where were her wings? What the F-

'Celestia's glowing shits!' Polymorph! She hated Polymorph, too!!

Her angry cry came out as a pitiful "bbbbbaaaaaa!!" and then Sunflower tumbled helplessly into the bushes.

- - -

Rainbow Dash slammed the shield strapped to her left foreleg into the side of the dizzy Fiendish Pegasus stallion. She'd hit him with Hammer of Justice, the holy spell stunning him for a precious few seconds, but long enough to let her get an easy bead on him. She was a much more offense minded pony than most prot paladins, but she had enough training to do the job if need be. Mostly, it was a matter of smashing someone with a big piece of metal called a shield, occasionally smiting them, and building up stacks for various Holy Power abilities. You also hit the guy with something heavy from time to time, like a mace. It did the job, but it wasn't as much fun as chasing someone down with a huge sword.

Dash's body shook as she slammed the Fiendish Pegasus into a tree, branches shaking and leaves falling all around them. A normal pegasus would have been smeared by the impact, but these Twilight Culponies were a lot stronger than they looked. They were all elite, and this pegasus was no exception. He tucked in his hind legs and tried to kick her off, barely hurt by the impact she'd delivered.

'So annoying!' Dash couldn't help but think, shifting her position. One of his hooves missed, and the other just managed to graze her midsection. It wasn't enough to dislodge her.

With the mace strapped to her other hoof, she slammed it into the Fiendish pegasus's side and followed up with another shield slam. Wings flapping, she pushed him into the tree again and then forced him down towards the ground. His own wings flared out, resisting her. He was a strong guy, but she was already going at full speed, her tail slashing back and forth in a rainbow colored blur. He couldn't stop her from forcing him down to the forest floor.

As soon as he was down, roots reached up from the base of the tree, entangling his hindlegs.

Snarling and cursing, the Fiendish Pegasus redoubled his efforts to either get free or shake off the filly attacking him. Bladed hooves battered down on Dash's shield and one struck her soundly on the head, mitigated by her coifed mail helm. Still, she felt a cut and a bruise form, only to quickly vanish as a familiar nature-based healing spell suffused her body. Driving home another Crusader Strike with her mace, Dash ducked, charged her shield with Holy Power... and unleashed it all in one full power Shield of the Righteous.

The metal hit home, fortified and enhanced by a cascade of Celestia's Fury given form. Thin lances of light projected from where the shield hit the Fiendish Pegasus, directing Her Power into the evil pony. This clearly hurt him far more than any traditional bludgeoning. Perhaps it even reminded him of the land and people he had betrayed? Evil, nasty pony. It sickened Dash to see a fellow pegasus fall so far from Celestia's blue sky.

Not that Rainbow was particularly religious, despite being a paladin. She wasn't particularly fervent or zealous, and she sure as Heck didn't have any plans to proselytize. What she did have was a strong sense of justice and right and wrong: there was good and there was evil. They were those who flew alongside their friends and family, no matter what came, and then there were those loyal to only themselves. Hence why she was no Holy Paladin and only went Prot when she had to. She was Retribution. At heart, she wanted to show the cruel and nasty bad guys of the world just how wrong they were.

And how awesome she was, of course. That too!

Besides, Paladins with Crusader Aura got a 20% increase to speed!

Blasts of lightning and arcane energy arched around Dash's sides, hitting her dazed opponent. He continued to struggle, kicking and cursing and slashing at her, and she hammered him with her shield again. Fire was already starting to consume his cultist's cloak from Pinkie Pie's Flame Shock, and as a focused arcane barrage hit, an Earth Shock finished the job. Slammed back and into the tree behind him, bark splintered and a crack raced up along the old oak's side, testament to the amount of damage inflicted on the Cultist pegasus.

All that was left now was to deal with the polymorphed enemy.

Without waiting for permission to break the crowd control, Dash summoned up more of her inner light. A multi-colored glow enveloped her shield, and as she held it up, she released it to bring justice down on the heads of the wicked. The Avenger's Shield needed only to be let free. The rainbow colored shield of holy power shot out, zeroing in on the sheep that was spinning around in circles, trying to find some way to escape the forest. Rarity and Pinkie Pie had it cornered, and Twilight was cutting off the way it had come. The holy shield could bounce to multiple targets worthy of righteous punishment, but it struck only the polymorphed pegasus.

The damage dispelled the transformative magic, much to one pony's surprise.

"Hey!" Twilight yelled.

"Gotta keep up!" Dash yelled, charging the stunned pegasus. She knew she had to keep the other mare from getting airborne.

"AH! Wait! I surrender!"

Dash's shield stopped, inches from the cringing cultist. Likewise, Pinkie and Rarity stopped casting. Notably, Fluttershy didn't. Roots uncoiled from within the earth, wrapping around the Fiendish Pegasus and ensnaring her. All eyes turned to Twilight.

“They can do that?” the bookish unicorn asked, a bit thrown. She blinked, composing herself and walking up to the trapped pegasus. “Ah. Of course they can. So, you surrender?”

“It doesn’t look like I have much choice,” Sunflower growled.

Twilight smirked, looming over the cultist. “Okay. Since you’re our prisoner, then you won’t mind answering some questions?”

“Ha! To Pony Hell with that!”

“Pinkie?” Twilight asked, calmly. “I guess she’s all yours.”

Sunflower shivered as a pair of pink colored forelegs draped over her shoulders. Dark eyes turned to see an impossibly puffed pink mane attached to an impossibly widely grinning pony with an impossibly unhinged look in her bright blue eyes. The crazy pony giggled like a schoolfilly, nuzzling the cultist’s face.

The Fiendish Pegasus sneered. “I’m not afraid of...!”

Pinkie Pie cut her short by whispering in her ear.

“What?” Sunflower gasped, recoiling. “You wouldn’t!” Pinkie Pie just smiled and whispered more. “No! No! That’s disgusting! Not my cutie mark! Aw. AWWW. AWWWWWWW!!!!”

Pinkie Pie just giggled again. “And that’s how you make my super special brand of Cupc...”

“Don’t even say it!!” Sunflower yelled, shaking her head, tears in her eyes. “I’ll talk! Just get this psycho away from me!”

She scrambled away, all but cowering at Twilight’s hooves.

“Y-you’re not right in the head, lady!” Sunflower pointed at the shaman, Pinkie’s head now cutely tilted to the side. “I’ve met a lot of crazy ponies, but you’re just plain nuts!”

Pinkie gave a dismissive wave. "You need to grow some thicker skin, you silly cult filly."

"You just keep your crazy recipes to yourself!" Sunflower cowered, slipping behind Twilight's legs.

"What the hay did you tell her?" Rainbow Dash gave the pink one a strange look.

"Nothing much!" Pinkie replied. "Just a little something I read in a fanfic!"

"What." The pegasus deadpanned.

"Anyway," Twilight interrupted. "You!" she poked the cultist. "Tell us what you know."

"About what?" Sunflower asked, still eyeing the crazy pink shammy only a few yards away.

"You can start with what your leaders are doing here..."

- - -

Sunflower had spilled more than just the beans. She'd kicked over the whole dinner spread. Twilight Sparkle had no idea what on Equestria Pinkie had said to spook the cultist, but she'd answered every question posed to her and then fled, screaming, into the forest. Every time she seemed to consider lying or just not answering, Pinkie had mouthed an unspoken word that quickly sent fresh terrors into the evil pegasus.

Bolstered by the new information, they continued their attack on the Cultist Encampment. Amazingly, no one seemed to care or notice that their pegasus scouts were gone. With no air cover, they'd used Fluttershy's "bait and switch" Faerie Fire trick a second time to lure out a small group of four that was out of sight of the others. They predictably and helpfully charged into the forest to cut down or capture the "cute pegasus" (as one of them had said) and ran right into the Elements of Harmony.

"It's a TRAP!!" One of them yelled. Twilight privately labeled him Captain Obvious.

They didn't know it, but they'd all been marked for targets. The Unicorn, aka Captain Obvious, was the most dangerous of the bunch. With Applejack and Rainbow Dash keeping the three Zealots occupied, along with a fourth earth pony identified as a "Twilight Torturer," she, Pinkie and Rarity were free to burn down the Dark Unicorn. He used the same spells as the ones attacking the Royal Guard base: A party-wide Curse of Agony and a Shadowbolt Volley. Since his spells hurt everyone nearby, he had to be taken out first.

This was complicated by the fact that the 'Twilight Torturer' would occasionally stop beating on Applejack and raise his hooves to cast a spell. Since he was an earth pony, this in and of itself was a bit strange, but it quickly became clear just what he was doing. A flash of dirty black light hit the Dark Unicorn, for the second time in the engagement, healing him and keeping him up and casting.

"Whahahaha!" the Dark Unicorn chortled, casting another Shadowbolt Volley. "I am invincible!!"

"Oh, you're invincible?" the Twilight Torturer asked, ducking Applejack's hoof. "I guess I can stop healing you, then?"

"Y-you know what I meant." The evil cultist spared a glance over at his comrade. "Please don't stop healing me."

"Can SOMEONE please CC this guy?!" Dash yelled.

"CC?" the Dark Unicorn asked, and squeaked as he turned into a sheep.

"Aw, crap!" The Twilight Torturer cursed as everyone's attention suddenly turned to him. Arcane missiles curved over Applejack's head, buffeting him.

"WHAHAHA!" Another shadowbolt volley. "I'm BACK!"

"What the hay!!"

"Who broke my poly?"

"It wasn't me..."

“Of course it wasn’t you, darling.”

“Oops. Sorry. Accidentally used Consecrate.”

The glowing rainbow circle of holy fire at Dash’s feet was proof enough. Clicking her tongue in annoyance, Twilight used polymorph again, but this time on the Twilight Torturer. He got off one last curse before turning into a harmless sheep. They then went back to burning the Dark Unicorn.

“I need healssss!!” the villainous caster roared, finally collapsing, evil black smoke escaping from within his cursed robes.

“So much for the invincible Captain Obvious,” Twilight quipped, remarking their targets. There was still about thirty seconds left on her polymorph, and Applejack was going a good job not hitting it. This was important, since even a little bit of damage would break the spell and free the Twilight Torturer. The transformed pony in question wasn’t making the job any easier, either, since he was all but begging to be kicked in the face the way he was rubbing up against Applejack’s leg.

They switched to the “X” target, focusing their magic to take the Zealot down. He predictably enraged near death, but hardly got to do much before falling. Dash only had one more Earth pony fighting her, and he was the next to get taken down. Near falling, he did manage to get in a nasty hit that split Dash’s lip, but Fluttershy’s healing kept the Pegasus up and the wound stitched closed in seconds. By then the second Zealot had also fallen.

Twilight’s polymorph expired, but just as quickly she re-cast, turning the Torturer back into a sheep.

“FFFUUUUUU-”

He didn’t seem happy about it, either.

The third Zealot came next, falling just like his two cultist brothers. Rarity and Fluttershy topped Dash and Applejack off, keeping them in near perfect fighting condition, and then without warning – again – Dash used her Avenger Shield to break the sheep. Unlike with Sunflower the ‘fiendish

Pegasus,' the Twilight Torturer didn't even try to surrender. He snarled in inarticulate fury and switched targets to the colorful paladin, trying to stab at her with poison tipped hooves. It wasn't long before a torrent of arcane energy, elemental lightning, and a few well timed physical blows took him down, too.

Finally, the six mares stood alone, breathing heavily, but victorious.

"WHO-HOO!!" Pinkie Pie was the first to speak, bouncing around madly and cheering. "Our first serious big group pull! We should have a party to celebrate!"

"Wow." Spike peeked out from the bushes, looking genuinely impressed. "You guys did it." He coughed into his hand. "I mean, I never doubted you for a second!"

"I wish we didn't have to hurt them, but..." Fluttershy didn't finish that thought. Instead she and Rarity both sat down to drink and replenish their mana again.

"All this fighting is *most* unladylike," the pretty unicorn muttered but left it at that.

"Heh. That was pretty cool, actually," Dash commented. "Let's see what dropped!"

Twilight agreed, lowering herself to check the nearest body. "Just don't alert-"

"Aggro," Spike corrected. Again.

"-any nearby enemies," she finished.

It turned out the Twilight Cultists were pretty well off. Each one carried a small purse of foreign gold on them, along with a stock of mageweave cloth. They'd agreed to pool the cloth they recovered and give it to Rarity later, and Twilight was keeping track of the gold they picked up to divide it up evenly later.

“Hey, Twilight!” Dash tossed her head, throwing a small object through the air. “Catch.”

She did so, seizing the shape in a telekinetic field. It hovered closer, and she saw it was a wand of some sort, colored a metallic dark red. Shadows danced across its surface.

“Meteorite Wand of the Fireflash,” she identified it. She didn’t have a wand currently, so really anything would be better than nothing. It appeared that this one not only increased intellect and spellpower, it also boosted the speed with which she could cast and the change to cause extra damage. All she had to do was wear it, though if actively invoked it could also fire small bolts of shadow magic. Twilight tucked it into her belt, under her saddlebags.

“We found a key on the Torturer pony, too,” Dash added. “Probably for one of the cages.”

While her friends finished cleaning up, Twilight took a moment to examine the Dark Unicom, aka Captain Obvious. The darkness that had been etched into his body had mostly started drifting away, leaving patches of brown, his natural color, underneath. According to what they’d heard from Sunflower, all the “anointed” were blessed with the “dark skin,” granting them power. It could never be removed. It was a symbol of devotion to the Twilight Cult in Equestria.

Twilight wondered why this particular unicorn had ended up here, deep in Everfree, and now – not to mince words – dead. What could have compelled him to turn to dark and evil powers? She wondered if he had ever attended the Magic Academy at Canterlot, or in any other major city. If this had been a year ago, would she have run into him at a library or seminar somewhere?

It wasn’t that she felt guilty for doing what she did... the Twilight Cult were enemies of Equestria. Enemies of the very land itself. They would kill and torture her if given the chance, she was sure of it. Even Sunflower, cowed as she had been, was tainted by evil. So it wasn’t guilt. It was just sadness and curiosity for a life wasted.

“Twilight?” Spike asked, brushing by her back leg.

“Oh, Spike?” she turned around and, on impulse, hugged him. He squirmed, annoyed and uncomfortable. “You shouldn’t have to see this.”

He looked up at her, confused. “See what?”

A bit struck by the question, she wasn’t even sure how to respond.

“Hey, Twilight,” Rainbow Dash’s brash voice cut short any introspection. “Mark for the next pull!”

“Okay!” Keeping Spike back, Twilight Sparkle steeled herself and trotted ahead. There was another group of Cultists on the other wised of the camp. Remarkably, they hadn’t noticed the furious battle (or looting) of their fellows. Twilight easily identified and marked the two Twilight Torturers in that group. There was no unicorn, but the healers would have to be taken out first now that everyone knew what they could do. She put a star on one, her polymorph target, and a skull on the other. “X” went up on a zealot, and so did the blue square.

The six mares pulled, just like before. Fluttershy used Faerie Fire on the skull target, Dash used Avenger’s Shield to get their attention when they ran in. Twilight polymorphed the second healer. Applejack charged, rushing headlong into melee. This fight went much smoother than the one before. The Torturer got off two flash heals on himself, using some sort of dark mending, but couldn’t keep up with Twilight and Pinkie’s barrage.

He went down, and the Zealots followed, unable to get healing while Dash and Applejack were constantly backed up by Rarity and Fluttershy. It went like clockwork. When the last Enraged Zealot fell, Dash tagged the sheep and they burned down the remaining Torturer. It all went very smoothly. Just as Planned. She was proud of that fact, too. It had been more than a year since they worked together against Nightmare Moon, but their individual skills were all starting mesh again.

While the others went over the fallen, her interactive map chimed; taking it out, Twilight saw it indicating a quest was complete.

[34] Rites of Passage (COMPLETE)
[Mark of Twilight] x10 (10/10)

That was good. They could technically head back, but there was one other thing to take care of.

Actually, make that two things. Twilight turned over the key she'd lifted from the fallen Twilight Torturer. Like Dash had guessed before, it probably opened one of the cages with ponies inside. Freeing any captives definitely had priority, but all the cages were near the large manticore by the central tent. That just left -

"They're all dead? How disappointing!" Catnip trotted out of the tent, unconcerned by the defeat of her guards and fellow cultists outside. She was a proud looking unicorn mare, and by the look of her she had to be maybe a decade older than anyone of Twilight's friends. Like the other cultponies, her coat was stained with black but she had bright orange eyes, slitted, like a feline's. Her attire was also finer than that of the others, with backward curling flares over her shoulders and haunches. Seeing the six fillies who had dared to attack her, she smiled a mouth full of sharpened teeth.

"Sniffles!" she commanded, her horn burning with black and green fire. "Attend to mommy!"

With a roar, the chained Manticore was released. It ran up to the evil mare and snarled at her.

"Them, baby," she admonished the huge predator, and pointed over in Twilight's direction. "You want to eat them."

A dark pall shrouded the manticore's face and it whirled to bear its teeth. Claws extended and it crept forward, trying to pick out a victim from among the Elements of Harmony. It was no exaggeration to note that "Sniffles" was at least twice the size of the manticores they had fought before. It was even larger than the one that they had encountered a year ago, and there was no thorn to remove from its paw to pacify it. Foam built up in the corners of its mouth and its eyes glazed over.

Fluttershy stepped forward, standing tall and unbowed.

“Why are you doing this?” she yelled, though no one would call it very loud. It was yelling by Fluttershy standards.

“Doing what?” Catnip asked, and her horn glowed, commanding her pet to hold back a moment. “I happen to be doing quite a few things.”

“Why did you corrupt all those poor animals?” Fluttershy asked, though it sounded more like a demand for some - any - rational answer. Anything to make sense of what she had seen and been forced to do. “What did they ever do to you?”

Catnip lowered her head and laughed, brazenly. “What did they do?” she repeated, between chuckles. “What kind of a stupid question is that?” She fixed the druid with a frenzied look. “They were there! Isn’t that enough! The Master said: ‘do something bout those Royal Guards, why don’t you, Catnip?’ I saw all those precious little kitties in the forest, and I thought: Aren’t I lucky? Isn’t this lucky? I can serve the master AND find a new pet or two!”

She patted the thrashing, scorpion-tail of the manticore.

“Oos-a-woosie-boozy? You’re a woosie-boosie!” she cooed, eyes glowing. “I sent the smaller ones to nibble on those nosy Royal Guard, but I kept my widdo Sniffles for myself. Isn’t he precious? Ooo wuv your mama, don’t you, baby? Yes, ooo do!”

Her grin widened as she glared at Fluttershy. “You’re just jealous I have one and you don’t! Manticores are such great pets! My last one lived a whole three weeks! That’s a record for me!”

Fluttershy’s left eye twitched.

“That’s...” The timid pegasus pawed the ground with a hoof and shook her head, unable to hold herself back any longer. “That’s all I can stand.” A greenish glow wrapped, wreath-like around her hooves. “I just can’t stand any more.”

Her eyes snapped back up, and a veritable forest of thorny roots blasted out of the ground, creating a helix around Catnip. The dark pony reared in

surprise, looking left to right, and then the whole mass constricted, engulfing her.

“Holy...!” Dash muttered.

“Sorry,” Fluttershy whispered, eyes narrowed in concentration. “I think I lost my temper.”

An angry scream split the air and dark magic immediately started to try and burn out through the entangling roots. Catnip was still trapped, but Sniffles was not so hindered. With his “mommy” unable to hold him back, he charged forward. There could have been an army of ponies led by Celestia herself and the enraged beast would have still charged right for the thick of them. Spittle fell from its jaws as it opened its mouth wide.

The manticore plowed face first into the wall that was a charging Applejack. The tough farmpony reared up herself, slamming both of her front hooves into the leonine chest of the manticore. She angled one foreleg up and into the creature’s neck to keep it from biting her, and deftly snaked a rope around the beast’s snout to try and muzzle it. Applejack had otherworldly skill with a lasso, but she was too close, all but wrestling with the creature, and it bit down on the rope instead, getting it tangled in between its daggerlike teeth.

“Ah little help?” she asked, and a second later Dash also hit home, right behind her Avenger’s Shield.

The rainbow colored blur nearly knocked the huge beast back, but thickly muscled back legs dug into the ground. A head-sized paw reached around, batting at Dash’s head and then trying to rake with blood red claws. The paladin’s shield came up, deflecting the attack. She was forced back a step soon after, as the manticore’s huge tail struck, a stinger as long as a pony’s ear trying to find the pegasus pony’s eye.

“Wo-ho-ho!” Dash laughed, and delivered a Crusader Strike to the manticore’s face. “That was pretty close!”

Pinkie Pie’s totems were already down, and her shocks were striking home. Fire lit up the manticore’s fur and it snarled in ever deepening alchemical fury. This was followed by a bolt of elemental lightning that singed flesh and

convulsed muscle. Still, the creature fought without a care. It reared, barely feeling Twilight's trio of Arcane Missiles, and Pounced. Just like that, Dash found herself on her back. Luckily, Applejack was quick to see her friend in trouble.

"Over here, ya mangy furball!" she yelled, slamming into its side.

Amazingly, the Taunt worked on the savage manticore, and it turned its attention from the prone pegasus to the tasty looking Applejack. More lightly armored than Dash, Applejack had to rely on her speed, and that only served her for so long. She backed up, avoided a strike from the creature's tail, and was too slow to prevent it from biting into her left foreleg. She hissed loudly in pain and tried to shake the creature off, but it lifted her off her hooves.

"I've got you!" Rarity yelled, and a plane of light formed to Applejack's right, deflecting the tail again, and that deadly stinger. The Power word: Shield quickly expanded into a bubble, forcing the manticore to release its prey. The magnolia colored unicorn clapped her hooves together and braced herself on all fours, horn blazing a pure, celestial white. With Fluttershy still stuck ensnaring Catnip, all the group's healing fell on her flanks.

Applejack fell, but stopped short of the ground, caught in a levitate spell.

Sniffles roared again, and sensing a moment's weakness, Twilight tried to cast polymorph. The spell hit, but the power of the beast was too much, and it repulsed the magic before it could force a transformation. The manticore whirled around in a circle, found Applejack again, and Pounced. The levitate spell was broken by the force of the jump, and the apple farmer was immediately knocked down.

Rainbow Dash repaid her friend, taunting the creature a second time, this time with Hand of Reckoning. A hoof shaped mark, cut of pure light, burned into the muscled shoulder of the manticore forcing it to divert its attention back to the once pinned pegasus. With a warcry, Dash slammed her shield into its face, sending a lone canine tooth spinning through the air.

"You can not keep me constrained forever!" Catnip bellowed from within Fluttershy's thorny prison. "Sniffles! Free mommy! Come!"

Against the monster's better judgment, it quickly abandoned its fight with the light blue paladin pony and turned to free its master. Black wings extended, to propel it forward.

"Hand of Justice!" Dash yelled from behind it, summoning down a hammer of light that stunned the beast. "Twilight! Slow!"

"Right!" the brilliant unicorn concentrated, and cast the requested spell. The stunned manticore, forced to head towards the cocooned Catnip, also became slowed. Its wings were unable to lift it into the air as they ineffectually flapped, and what would have been a run was reduced to a slow power-walk.

"Weeee! Time for an Earthbind totem!" Pinkie bounced, end over end, somehow managing to drop a solid totem in the path of the manticore. It looked like three rocks with a party hat on top, and four streamers on the sides. It pulsed, and the ground below the manticore's feet turned soft and sticky, like tar.

Twilight, meanwhile, kept casting.

Her Arcane Barrage slammed into the side of the distracted beast, and then Pinkie Pie detonated her Flame Shocks with an Earth spell. Nature damage rippled along the manticore's hide, and it snarled angrily. Still, it obeyed Catnip's command and slowly continued towards her.

"RRRAAAH!" The trapped unicorn finally screamed. "Sniffles! Kill them and be quick about it!"

Freed from the compulsion to head towards its master, notably when it was just a few yards away, the manticore experienced just a brief moment of lucidity. Just enough to give a half-lidded "are you kidding me? I was almost there" look. Then, reverting back to its maddened state, it turned around to find Fluttershy and ran right back into Rainbow Dash.

By the time it Pounced on her a second time, it was bleeding and burning. Applejack taunted it again before it could impale the pinned pegasus, and finally the cumulative injuries, physical and magical, started to take its toll. It had been bombarded by enough magic to kill half a dozen smaller

manticores, and even the dark alchemical energies that coursed through its veins had a limit.

Of course, Catnip took that as her cue to finally break free.

“ENOUGH!!” she roared, even louder than her pet. Fluttershy fell back, tumbling, and her prison of thorns disintegrated. In its place, Catnip hovered off the ground, her eyes completely lost in a bonfire of bright orange.

And then Sniffles Enraged.

“Dash!” Twilight yelled, frantic.

The pegasus didn’t even need to be told what to do. “On it!”

“Everyone else with me!” she ordered, and hammered the enraged mantichore monstrosity with arcane blasts. Applejack held firm throughout it all, holding the beast in place while the rest of her group finished it off. A Regrowth spell from Fluttershy hit just after the creature’s stinger finally found flesh, opening a cut on her side. It saved her life, and Rarity used another Power Word to keep her up long enough for the wounds to close up.

“Sparky!” Pinkie Pie thrust a hoof forward, dropping a different fire totem. “I choose you!”

From the tiny, sparking firecracker emerged a being of fire twice the height of a pony. It briefly took on a humanoid shape before falling forward and morphing into a huge stallion of pure elemental flame. It charged right into the Enraged Mantichore, and then, topping herself, Pinkie Pie did something even crazier.

“I’ve been waiting to use this!” She giggled and pumped her hoof at the sky. “PARTY TIME!!”

Abruptly, Twilight lurched; was it her imagination, or was she growing larger? It wasn’t just her, either. Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie herself, even Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash, they all grew a few sizes. And, Twilight realized, she felt stronger, too! Her spells became clearer and easier to

cast. A blastwave of heat and magic shot away from Twilight's hooves as she unleashed a blast of arcane energy larger than any before. Under this Heroism-enhanced assault, the Enraged Manticore, the terrifying Beast known only as "Sniffles," finally succumbed. It gave one last parting roar, reared up on its hind legs, and toppled like a hewn tree.

"What? Sniffles?! Nooooooooo!"

It seemed Catnip had noticed the death of her beloved feline.

"You're all terrible ponies!!" she howled from behind Dash's shield. "I'll kill you and make you into kitty litter!!"

"Now that!" Pinkie summoned up a new lightning bolt. "Is a crazy cat lady!"

Knocking the paladin away with an inferno of shadow and fire, Catnip closed her eyes and started to cast a spell. The ground around her burned with runes that slowly lifted off the ground and started to move. Lines swirled around her and connected into an arcane array.

"She's going to resurrect that stupid cat!" Dash yelled, hooves cutting into the ground as she stopped herself.

"Using Counterspell!" Twilight announced, even as she made the proper arcane incantation.

Catnip winced as the interrupt hit, forcibly breaking her train of thought faster than a herd of rampaging buffalo. She held her head in her hooves, dizzy and blinded by the attack. Dash hit her again, and she hurled an angry curse at the Paladin. Despite being a caster, and having no armor to speak of, Catnip was a lot tougher than she looked, as befitted an elite boss. Twilight doubted she would have lasted more than a second or two with Rainbow Dash hammering her, Applejack wailing on her from behind, and two other ponies blasting away at range.

Catnip tried to cast a Shadowbolt Volley, but Applejack pummeled her on her horn.

“Get away from me!” she snarled, using her knockback spell again to blast Dash away. Applejack, standing behind her, was less affected. Still, there was enough space for Catnip to try her resurrection spell again.

This time, both Wind Shear and Counterspell hit, interrupting her.

“I’ve had just about enough of you little ponies!” Catnip levitated out two vials of some sort of potion and threw it at whoever caught her eye. Seeing the projectiles heading their way, Fluttershy and Pinkie jumped to the side. The vials cracked open, all but exploded, when they hit the ground, releasing noxious clouds of black gas.

“Stand still! Don’t avoid them!” The insane unicorn screamed, pushing Applejack away with one foreleg while levitating out more poison vials. “Don’t you know how hard these were to make!? Aren’t you curious what’ll happen if they hit you?!”

She managed to toss two more before the unending attacks finally knocked her off her hooves.

They had the added benefit of causing her poison vials to break open on the ground below her. Applejack hastily backed off, covering her mouth, and Dash did the same. The pool of vile poison spread around the evil unicorn as she thrashed and cursed, and soon Catnip vanished within the dark cloud... only to emerge moments later, stumbling and shambling, her horn sputtering as she tried to cast some last second, life saving spell.

“Confound you... little... ponies...” She fell forward, barely able to hold herself up with her front legs. “Master... I...” Catnip glared up at Twilight, her orange eyes growing dim. “I can’t think of any... good last words!”

And then, with a gurgle, she fell, face first into the dirt.

Chapter 5

“Praise Celestia! I knew somepony would come for us!”

The frantic gray pegasus colt all but collapsed into Applejack’s arms after being released from the Twilight Cultist’s cage. His blue eyes were wide and bloodshot, darting left and right as if expecting to be attacked from the shadows. His condition was hardly unique; all the captured ponies were in bad shape. They had been left dehydrated, half-starved and chained up. Applejack kept from boggling at the brutal mix of rope and steel that kept the pegasus she had freed from even flexing his wings.

Emotionally and physically broken, he sobbed and fell to the ground, crying into his hooves.

There had been a total of six cages in the Twilight Cult encampment but only four surviving ponies. Two cages had been empty, the others had contained two earth ponies, a pegasus and a young unicorn, barely older than Sweetie Belle. Applejack and Twilight had immediately gone to work freeing the captives while Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy handled the bodies of the fallen cultponies responsible. Rarity had been sent to check out the tents to make sure there were no other enemies lurking around and, of course, to search for any more clues as to what the Twilight Cult was doing in Everfree Forest.

Lowering herself down, Applejack held a waterskin between her teeth. She hadn’t purchased any enchanted water, like Fluttershy and Rarity had. This was just good, clean water from a river, boiled to remove any impurities. Opening his mouth, the wounded pegasus greedily sucked at the waterskin, trying to slake his thirst. The Cultists had kept him weak and he winced as he tried to move his wings.

Applejack glared at the cruel contraption on his back and called over her shoulder, “Twilight! Ah think ah need a bit a help with this one here!”

“Be right there!” The party leader replied, just finished checking in on the young unicorn filly. She cantered over and frowned at what she saw. Violet eyes darkened with determination and her horn glowed as she worked her magic. The wounded pegasus grimaced, flinching, as the metal braces on his wings shook and finally snapped. The locks on it weren’t nearly as heavy or tough as the ones on the cages.

“Celestia’s Light,” he felt the bindings fall away. Light gray wings tentatively stretched, but given the look of pain on the young stallion’s face, it didn’t seem like he’d be flying anytime soon. His head and expression fell for a moment, but then, as if taking determination from his rescuers, he at least forced himself to stand back up.

“Thank you. Thank you all,” he gasped, looking at Applejack and then Twilight.

“Are ya sure ya can walk?” Applejack asked, seeing the way he wobbled.

“Yes. Yes. There are others worse off than me.” The pegasus dipped his head to the two mares. “My name is Ice Breaker. I owe you my life.”

“Do you know anything about what happened here?” Twilight asked, glad to have found someone composed. The other ponies hadn’t been able to fill in much about their captivity.

“I’d be happy to help, but I’m... I’m not entirely sure what these madponies were doing,” Ice Breaker admitted, brows drawing down into a frown. “I was on vacation with some friends from the weatherworks. We’d stopped to rest on a cloud and watch some fillies playing in a lake...” Suddenly conscious of whom he was telling this to, he had the presence of mind to blush and sound embarrassed. “They saw us and said we should come down, but when we did, these other ponies jumped us from behind! I think they were pegasi, too. Next thing I knew they had these hoods over us and when I woke up I was in that cage.”

He pointed over at the castle. “Everyone else I came here with was taken over there. I don’t know what happened to my friends...” He deflated and motioned to the fallen manticores and the dead cultpony, Catnip. “But

the one pony who managed to pick their lock and escape ended up food for that animal. Thank Celestia you ponies got here when you did.”

“That lake where ya got captured,” Applejack asked, giving him a supportive nudge. “Where was it?”

“I guess we... were between Ponyville and Canterlot?” Ice Breaker guessed. “It was in the countryside off the flightpaths.”

“Don’t worry,” Twilight assured him, pacing a comforting hoof on his shoulder. “You’re safe now. There’s a group of Royal Guards nearby. We’ll escort you all there and they’ll take care of you.”

Ice Breaker nodded weakly. “Thank you so much...” He glanced up, realizing he didn’t know the names of his rescuers.

“This is Applejack, and I’m Twilight Sparkle,” the amethyst unicorn introduced herself and her friend. She quickly did the same for the others she had come alongside. Two of the names, Ice Breaker remembered.

“Rainbow Dash? You mean Rainbow Cr- ” he caught himself. “I can’t believe that’s her. And Fluttershy? The model? Wow. I got saved by celebrities.” Ice Breaker shook his head in disbelief. “Still. I can’t thank you all enough.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it none,” Applejack assured him. “Why don’t ya help the others? We’ll be headin’ out soon.”

Near the center of the battleground, Fluttershy was carefully arranging all the noxious bottles of Catnip’s poison she could find. There were quite a few left on the evil pony’s corpse, and the pegasus had made a small pile of them some distance from the center of the camp and where Sniffles had fallen. Since the end of the fight, she had been determined to see a real end to it, which in her mind included the destruction of the source of the wildlife corruption itself. It wasn’t enough that Catnip herself was gone. As long as her alchemical toxins remained, they were a danger to the animal life in the forest.

Drawing a circle around the poison bottles with a hoof, Fluttershy dipped her nose into a small pouch strapped to her left front leg. She

retrieved a small seed and placed it on top of the poison vials before backing away. Applejack watched, intrigued, as her quiet friend closed her eyes and muttered some sort of prayer or incantation. The enchanted seed became enveloped in whirling green light and began to grow, roots breaking open and drinking up Catnip's poisonous brew. The power of nature – Applejack assumed, anyway – consumed the toxins, and within moments a small tree had grown in their place. Tiny yellow and pink flowers sprouted from the leaves of the little tree, and Fluttershy opened her eyes, smiling with satisfaction for a job well done.

It reminded the farmer of the druids she had hired to help restock the farm after the Cataclysm.

Druid magic.

Of course, all that magic hooey was just different shades of mumbo jumbo on her opinion. She'd heard stories about the differences between unicorn magic and pegasus magic and what mages did and shamans and druids and all the rest. It all seemed to just be making mountains of molehills. Magic, Applejack believed, was magic. She didn't have a problem with it, since she could hardly understand it in the first place, but it was still strange to witness sometimes: like watching some little seed become a tree in the time it would take to eat an apple. So strange.

Not too long after, Rarity emerged from Catnip's tent, levitating a box and several items.

Applejack assumed the former to be full of the evil pony's misbegotten gold and, sure enough, once opened the assembled mares had found a small treasure trove of plundered items. The gold would be divided up later, and Applejack was already calculating what she would be able to do with it on the farm. There were also a hooffull of magical items, some more potent than others. These rare items, 'blues,' Dash had called them, were soon the last order of business to take care of.

One of them, Twilight identified as "Catnip's Pendant of the Champion."

"That means it makes you stronger, tougher, and gives you faster reflexes so dodging attacks is easier," she explained, hoof in the air as if

giving an informative lecture. “According to what I read in Brannigan’s Big Book of Leadership, this sort of item should go to the group’s ‘tank.’”

“So either’a us, right?” Applejack asked, turning to Rainbow Dash.

“Yeah,” the pegasus agreed. “So do you...? I mean, I’ll pass if you really want it.”

“Ah don’t rightly know if I’d say I really want it,” Applejack demurred. “Ah suppose ah could use it, though.”

“Do you *need* it or *want* it?”

“Ah dunno. You ya *need* it or do ya *want* it?”

“Come on already!” Pinkie Pie bounced up and down impatiently. “I wanna get to the shammy loot! Just need roll for it!”

The paladin and warrior turned to Twilight.

“Ah! A chance to use my slash-roll spell!” Twilight happily clapped her hooves together. “Okay! Ready?”

“Yep.” “Go ahead, sugarcube.”

Twilight motioned for them to hold out their hooves and then concentrated. A set of rapidly cycling numbers appeared over Applejack’s front hoof, and she saw, over Dash’s as well. The impulsive pegasus grinned, and the numbers suddenly ticked down and stopped.

> 38 (1-100)

“Aw!” Dash groaned. “Thirty eight?!”

Applejack, not wanting to be too far behind, focused on the numbers running over her hoof... and just like that, the Random Number Generator spell activated. A handful of numbers flew by at a decreasing pace, until...

> 100 (1-100)

Applejack is [Needy]

“Hey!” she complained. “Ah ain’t Needy!”

“First time I’ve seen someone get that,” Dash commented with something akin to awe. And a little bit of jealousy.

“Um. Congratulations,” Fluttershy muttered.

“Oh! Achievements are fun!” Pinkie Pie cast the spell on herself and started randomly making numbers.

> 27 (1-100)
> 43 (1-100)
> 18 (1-100)
> 77 (1-100)
> 259 (1-500)
> 100 (100-100)

“Would you please stop that?!” Dash elbowed her hyperactive earth pony friend. “Geez!”

“Awww! But RNG is fun!”

“Yeah, until it screws you over.” She bowed amiably to Applejack. “Congrats.”

A second later, and the farmpony felt the pendant around her neck. At least it wasn’t some gaudy, fru-fru piece of jewelry. It looked to be etched iron or steel without a single gemstone or bit of finery to it. No sooner was it in place, than the magic within identified its owner and Applejack felt a flood of strength and vitality course through her. Stomping a hoof, she tried to test just how much it had enhanced.

“Next, we have...” Twilight levitated up a leather and iron collar with a single inlaid gemstone. “According to the identify spell, this is ‘Sniffles Collar of the Invoker.’”

“Then why wasn’t Sniffles wearing it?” Pinkie asked. “Whatever! Rolling!”

> 7 (1-100)

Only to suddenly slump, disheartened by the super low roll.

“RNG! Why must you make Gummy cry!” she wailed.

“If you want that unsightly thing, you’re welcome to it,” Rarity observed, turning up her nose.

Twilight got ready to roll; since it was a good neckpiece for an arcane mage, according to Spike anyway. He was giving her a less than subtle thumbs up. In the middle of doing so, however, a watery eyed Pinkie Pie was suddenly inches away, looking up at her like she was about to kick a puppy... and then kick a kitten into a puppy.

“I... I can’t do it!” Twilight hung her head. “I’ll pass, too.”

“You guys are the best!” Pinkie shot right up into the air like a rocket, only to pop up behind Twilight and wrap the unicorn in a crushing hug. “Thankyouthankyouthankyou!” With a poof she caught a dodging Rarity and repeated the full-body-hug-of-doom. “Thankyouthankyouthankyou!”

She cartwheeled past wearing her new blue neckpiece.

“The last thing is this.” Twilight levitated the final piece of rare item loot. “A ‘Lunar Ritualist’s Dagger.’”

This one didn’t have a suffix like the other two items, and it clearly wasn’t meant to be kept anywhere near the neck. Twilight had found it in Catnip’s robes, and as the name implied, it was a magical dagger of some sort. The material was dark and the energies powerful, but not necessarily malicious. On one side there was the ancient Equestrian pictograph for “light” and on the other “shadow.” According to her guidebook, this was a good weapon for a mage, warlock or priest, notably a shadowpriest, thanks to the spellpower, intelligence and stamina it granted its wielder. It also seemed to provide some resistance to shadow magic.

“Rarity,” Twilight asked, seeing the other unicorn weighing her options. “Do you...?”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t dream of it,” she answered, waving a dismissive hoof. “I believe Fluttershy and I are both waiting for a staff to drop, isn’t that right?”

The timid druid nodded haltingly. “Yes.”

“I guess I’ll take it then!” She smiled at her friend. “Thanks, Rarity!”

Twilight touched the hilt of the dagger, and felt its power augment her own. Sheathing it, she remembered Trixie having similar equipment with her when Twilight had “dueled” with her back in Ponyville. It was no wonder she had won so easily. Not only was Trixie several levels advanced in comparison, she had been going with her guild in adventures, gathering powerful artifacts and equipment to enhance her magic!

“**Still** waiting for a good pally drop,” Dash said with a grunt. Seeing her friends staring at her, Equestria’s fastest pegasus shrugged. “What? Is it so bad I want a giant warhammer with a skull on it that shoots rainbows when I swing it?”

“...”

“No,” she concluded, rose colored eyes narrowing. “No, there’s nothing strange about that at all.”

- - -

When they got back to Morning Star’s Camp, one of several interesting things happened.

First, the six Elements of Harmony handed over the ponies they had saved from the Twilight Encampment. The Royal Guard had gladly taken them in, settling them in the middle of the camp and giving them food and water and thorough medical attention. Captain Morning Star had even rewarded the six fillies for brining the civilians back; an unnecessary gesture on his part, but one he insisted on going through: ‘counts as a quest’ he said.

They had then been free to hand in the rest of their finished quests. The guard medicpony had thanked them for defeating Catnip and Sniffles and told them that no further animal attacks had occurred since collecting the manticore tails earlier. The forest to the north was clear, and now so was the south, with the cultists in full retreat. He'd awarded each of the young mares with their choice in bracer, suited to their class, along with some gold for their trouble and a restorative magical potion.

At the same time, Twilight had just handed over the Ten Marks to Captain Morning Star for '[34] Rites of Passage' when a bright light briefly shrouded her, forming a small pillar that reached a couple yards into the sky.

"Grats!" Pinkie popped in, giving Twilight another impromptu hug. "One more step towards level 85!"

"What? I just leveled?" Twilight asked, looking down at her herself. She didn't feel that different. Maybe a little stronger. A tad smarter. Maybe her mana pool was just a teeny bit bigger?

Checking her spellbook, Twilight confirmed that she had a new talent point to spend.

'Neat!'

One of the things she was now powerful enough to learn was called 'Presence of Mind' allowing her to use any spell with an ordinary cast time instantly, every two minutes. That meant no incantation or drawing of power. The first spell used after she entered a 'clearcasting' state could be performed on demand and without interruption. That definitely sounded useful. Checking the alternatives anyway, she went back to 'Presence of Mind' and decided to add it to her arsenal. Selecting it with her mind, she felt the spellwork written in her book by Fizzle Boombox begin to unravel. Finding her powerful enough to master the technique, the words shot through the air, down Twilight's horn, and straight into her mind.

Knocked onto her backside with a 'thump!' Twilight shook her head, dizzily.

“That was one of Master Boombox’s spells, alright!” Pinkie confirmed. “It isn’t a Boombox spell if it doesn’t explode!”

Morning Star took that moment to interrupt. “This side of the chasm is clear, as far as I can see. I’ve already tasked some of my colts to prepare a replacement bridge; one that the Twilights won’t be able to knock out.”

He dropped the Marks of Twilight into a pouch, attached to his armored saddle.

“Now, when you cross-”

“More quests!?” Pinkie appeared nose to nose with the dour unicorn guard. Bright blues eyes bugged out, a sharp contrast to the Captain’s half lidded stare.

“Um. Yes.” A hoof came up to push Pinkie Pie back and onto her rump. “If you’d let me finish-”

“Please,” Twilight prompted, cutting him off again. “Oops. Sorry.”

Morning Star groaned. “Okay. One more time. When you cross over to the castle side of the chasm, we have identified several things you may want to be aware of.”

“First,” he began. “You’ll find more cultists carrying Marks of Station. The lower orders will have Marks of Twilight, which I’ll be happy to accept in groups of ten. Higher ranked cultists will have Marks of Command, which you can redeem for items here. Her Majesty has placed a bounty on all Twilight Cultists within Equestria, and we just received some new equipment to exchange for Marks...”

“Oh! OH!” Pinkie held up her arm, waving it frantically. “Over here! Oh! I’ve got a question! Over here!”

Morning Star’s half lidded stare remained unmoved.

“OH OH OH!!” Pinkie Pie waved her hoof in his face. “Pick me! Question! Question!”

“THIS ISN’T A CLASSROOM!!” He bellowed, blowing the Pink pony’s hair back. Facehoofing, he sighed. “Miss Pie. What is it?”

Pinkie Pie shook her head, hair puffing back out.

“Why can’t we get the upgrades and new equipment now, and hand in the Marks later?” she asked, leaning in to pout. “Don’t you trust us, Mister Guardpony?”

Staring at her, he lifted a hoof to slowly and gently push her back again and out of his face.

“I’d love to, but rules are rules. We don’t take IOUs.”

“Aww!”

“Anyway,” he continued. “As I was saying. Please bring back Marks of Twilight in groups of ten for a reward in gold. Marks of Command can be redeemed individually for pieces of armor. Additionally, if you defeat a very high ranking Cultist, he or she may be carrying a Mark of Domination. If you bring it to me, I’ll be happy to exchange it for one of our most powerful weapons.”

“Oh! Corrupted Ashbringer?!”

“... No. We don’t have one of those.”

Twilight cleared her throat, sparing the dour Guard from more of Pinkie’s strange questions. “We’ll bring back any Marks we find, Captain.”

“Good,” he inclined his head to her in thanks. “We also have intelligence on the castle side of the chasm. Take a look at this.” He used his unicorn magic to levitate out a new map and hold it up for Twilight and Pinkie to see.

“Here,” and part of the map glowed. “Is where we will erect the bridge. Once you get across, you will be in the area identified as the ‘Courtyard.’ Twilight cultists have been seen there erecting fortifications. They know their camps have been taken out and they’re getting ready for

an attack. My colts will escort you across the bridge and begin attacking the cultists. With your help, we should be able to secure the Courtyard.”

“The bad news,” Morning Star continued, with a slight crinkling of his blue eyes. “Is that we have also identified the leader of the Pegasi guarding the Courtyard. He is a former Royal Guard who now goes by the name Blood Diver.”

“He came up with the name himself?” Pinkie asked.

“I can only assume so.” Morning Star made a gold star in the Courtyard on the map. “Since the bridge will be our only way across the gorge, we will secure it and the Courtyard while you do what you need to do elsewhere in the castle...”

While the Captain explained this, Rarity and Applejack sat down nearby and they in turn were soon followed by Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy. Everyone had taken care of their business around the camp and were now listening in on what had to be done next.

“...directly to the west of the Courtyard is the Cloister. Most of the roof has fallen in, but we’ve seen lights moving around under the remaining overhangs. You’ve already been to the Chapel of the Elements of Harmony, north of the Courtyard. There is also an area to the East, right here, that we have identified as a crypt or mausoleum.”

“Ooh, creepy!”

“Pardon,” Rarity spoke up. “But what is a mausoleum doing at Princess Luna’s old castle?”

“I can answer that!” Twilight happily answered, prompting the Captain to raise an inquisitive eyebrow.

“You see,” the bookworm and history buff happily explained, “Long before it was abandoned, the Castle of the Two Sisters was also a Summer Retreat and Monastery. Details are sketchy, but at some point Princess Luna moved out of Canterlot and decided to raise the moon from here, year-round. The Lunar Court and her personal guards also moved with her,

and those ponies brought their servants with them. A Mausoleum would be required as the population of unicorns within the castle increased.”

“That is correct,” Captain Morning Star confirmed and nickered as the rest of the story piqued his own sense of honor. “The Tombs below the castle have remained undisturbed for a thousand years. Until recently... that is. Not too long before we arrived, these Twilight Cultists greedily broken open the Mausoleum to plunder the riches within. Now ghosts and other enraged spirits are leaving the crypts below to attack the living on the surface.”

“Ghastly!” Rarity gasped, recoiling. “Defiling a tomb like that? What were they thinking!”

Fluttershy shook her head sadly.

Even Pinkie Pie frowned, uncharacteristically.

“Well, we already knew these guys were bad ponies,” Dash reminded them with a scowl of her own. “So no big surprise that they’d do something like this.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to go into that tomb and put those spirits to rest,” Morning Star continued. “But it would make the surface more secure and keep our flanks safe as we push into the rest of the castle. One of our scouts also indicated a colony of large spiders in that area, so watch out for them if you head into the crypts.”

He highlighted an area west of the Courtyard and Cloister.

“Finally, we have the Her Majesty’s Tower Observatory. This is the most intact area within the castle ruins, and we believe it to be the center of Twilight Cult activity. To defeat them in Everfree Forest, we need to take them out in there and stop whatever they’re doing. When you and your friends are ready, Miss Sparkle, speak to me again and we will reconstruct a bridge across the chasm and escort you across to attack the Courtyard.”

- - -

“Ah don’t much like the look’a what they’re doin’ out there,” Applejack said, hearing Twilight approach. She had her back to the Royal Guard camp as she looked out, across the gorge. Only an apple’s throw away laid the other side, partly shrouded in dark fog.

She’d come lightly equipped, but after the fights before and after picking up some spending coin, she’d exchanged a few bits for some extra barding armor. It looked like it had seen better days but it was better than what she’d come with. It wasn’t a rare item of mystic power, but the silver and steel Guardpony barding would turn aside a hoof or horn or claw. Her left foreleg, that not too long ago had been bitten and poisoned by the largest manticore she had ever seen, was now healed and lightly wrapped in white mageweave bandages. Edged steel ran up from her hooves to her elbows. She’d exchanged her hat for a plain Guardpony helmet as well.

Applejack was as ready as she ever would be, but still she couldn’t help but frown at what was on the other side of the gorge.

“Out there?” Twilight repeated, asking.

“You mean at the castle?” Spike guessed.

The young dragon also taken a few minutes to wander around and see what was what. He’d reported back and identified which among the earth pony Royal Guard had offered to repair damaged equipment and which was willing to trade items found on the battlefield. One of them even seemed willing to buy junk, like bits of damaged armor and tattered cloth... for some reason.

Applejack nodded at the pair of them. “Ya’ll remember what was in there before?”

“I remember it being basically empty.” Twilight took a moment to think back to that day. Confronting Nightmare Moon had been foremost on her mind at the time, so she hadn’t gotten a great look around, but she couldn’t recall much of note. “Unless you mean the Elements of Harmony?”

“There was that,” Applejack admitted, “But that ain’t what ah was talkin’ about. I guess ya didn’t see it last time? Over yonder there.” She pointed with a hoof to one particular area, by the castle ruins.

Twilight didn't see it. "What?"

"That there tower, tha Observatory ah mean."

Twilight saw it. There were only two areas left in the ruins: as the Captain had described, there was the chapel, where the Elements of Harmony had been kept last time (or the stone replicas of them anyway), and a crumbling tower directly adjacent. The Lunar Observatory. Twilight recognized it as where Nightmare Moon had teleported her before. Her friends must have navigated their way up while Twilight and the corrupted Princess squared off. It was pretty smashed and overgrown, but still more intact than any other structure.

"There more than just'a staircase leadin up," Applejack clarified, her tone concerned. "There was ah door leadin' down, too. Some kinda big, locked wine cellar. But I reckon those ponies over there ain't come all this way ta look fer millennia old vintage. They're here fer somethin' big."

"Something buried beneath the Observatory?" Twilight asked, tapping a hoof to her chin.

"Could be." The plain spoken warrior adjusted her steel and silver helm. "Won't rightly know till we go over and have a look see."

Twilight agreed and spent a few long seconds watching the other side.

There was no going back now. They were headed for another fight.

"Are you two ready?" Rarity asked, softly moving up on them from behind. She sounded worried, herself, but determined. "If you don't mind, Fluttershy and myself will be behind instead of in front. I don't much like the look of things over there; most unwelcoming."

"I'll go round up Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie," Twilight offered. "I don't know what could be taking so long that they need to hang out around the mailbox..."

The unicorn went off to check on their distracted paladin and shaman, taking Spike with her. Applejack remained where she was, and Rarity joined her, though she neatly unfolded a cloth to sit on. Captain Morning Star was standing with two other royal Guard unicorns, waiting for everyone to get ready to cross. Surprisingly, the atmosphere wasn't particularly tense. To a stallion, the Royal Guards seemed eager to have another crack at the cultists across the way.

Since they had a few minutes, Rarity produced a few bolts of mageweave, and started sewing. Applejack paid it little mind at first. She'd seen Rarity at work before. This time, there was no mannequin, and no beautiful threads and fabrics and gems and other high culture accoutrements. Rarity was making good on her word earlier and making a mageweave bag. It was, Applejack thought, the first time she had seen her fashion conscious friend make anything simple and practical.

Rarity was economical in her use of the magical cloth. Pieces floated in the air and the unicorn hummed softly to herself while she worked. Strips of cloth wound around and around, coming together from the bottom even as they coiled up like a pair of snakes. Black thread sewed it all together, and the magical fabric absorbed the stitching and melted together. Applejack could sort of see how it would look when it was finished: a plain, alabaster white and gold pouch. Functional. Efficient. "Pretty" in that way.

Supposedly, the magic within would allow it to hold more than its actual volume.

"Applejack?" Rarity asked, though her eyes never left her concert of cloth and thread.

The farmgirl craned her neck. "Yep?"

"I've never seen you fight like you did earlier today."

That wasn't an unexpected observation. Applejack replied by noting, "Ah've never seen ya heal a pony before, neither."

"I never seriously bothered before today." The dress-maker admitted, eyeing her near finished mageweave bag and moving it slightly to check one of the angles. "I'm glad I remembered how to do it at all."

“Ya always struck me as more a mage type, like Twilight back there.” Applejack saw a bemused expression on the white unicorn’s face.

“Really?” she asked.

“Sure. Showin’ off with all that fancy blastin’ and bright magic...”

“So you think I’m a show-off?” Rarity sounded offended, but not really angry. Instead, she smiled. “Don’t answer that.”

“An’ here Ah was hopin’ for a chance to yell, ‘Ah... am... Rarity!!’ at the top’ah mah lungs.”

Rarity had the grace and dignity to blush at her behavior, but not to shrink from it. “In my defense, I did look absolutely fabulous in those wings. And I do enjoy turning heads.”

Applejack chuckled and went back to staring at the castle.

“But...” Rarity continued. “I was never like Twilight. I could never just read about a spell and do it by virtue of simply wanting to do it. My magic is in the details. The aesthetics. The beauty. Sadly, I imagine I wouldn’t be the most powerful mage... though I like to think I could be the most elegant.”

Applejack didn’t dispute any of what she heard.

“On the other hoof.” Rarity finished the bag, floated it down in front of her companion. “Applejack the Barbarian? Defender of apples everywhere? That, I can see. Here you go, darling, what do you think?”

“Ya made this fer me?” The farmer and part-time prot warrior stared at the bag that floated down into her hooves. She only realized then that the golden color enchanted into the bag was the same as her hair. There was even a small red apple design sewn into the flap, between a pair of metal buttons. No ostentatious gems or filigree or anything.

The businesspony in Applejack also knew magical bags weren’t exactly cheap –

“Ah can’t...”

Rarity just speared her with a level look. “Applejack. You know me by now, don’t you?”

The apple farmer nodded and lowered her head. “Thank’ya kindly, Rarity. Ah like it.”

“Now for Twilight’s!” The tailor artisan started afresh on a second bag. “But if you’d like to share, Applejack, I wouldn’t mind knowing where you learned to fight so...” she paused, searching for just the right word. “So tenaciously?”

“Ah suppose ah can tell ya. Plus, ah’m curious why ya’ll became a priest.”

“Fair enough,” Rarity agreed. “My own story isn’t terribly interesting, sad to say.”

“Ah’right. Lesse, it was a while back...”

- - -

Earth pony technology was an eclectic mix of ponypower, machinery, and just a bit of magic. Sometimes, the form that magic took was elbow grease. Now, Sweet Apple Acres wasn’t just in the business of piling apples in carts, despite that being the image that outsiders had of the operation as a whole. It was one the Apple family even encouraged, since it promoted a lively, homey sales pitch: that the apples were straight from the tree, to the cart, to the customer.

Sometimes this was true, but the entire operation was far more complex. From the start, planting and harvesting and restocking were all staggered to get the most out of the growing seasons. Tons of apples were stored on-site at the farm, graded and sorted and separated. These had to be kept fresh with magical machinery until their optimal sale date, which varied by the type of apple and the type of product. While Pegasi handled rainfall, and there was minimal irrigation required, and the area around Ponyville was perfect apple orchard climate...

That also meant that there were plenty of apple-eating insects and other pests, not to mention the ever present threat of harvest devastating diseases or fungi. Earth pony technology and ingenuity was required. Sweet Apple Acres only sprayed once a year, to destroy tree-killing burrowsprites, and they hired unicorns to cast disease prevention spells four times yearly. Most of the harvesting and maintenance of the fields was done with pure good old fashioned ponypower.

Where ponypower alone could not keep pace was in production.

Sweet Apple Acres sold all manner of Apple related products, from Apple Jam to Apple Pies to Apple Fritters to Apple Sauce. Even the 'bad apples' not deemed fit for pony consumption were used, either to feed the livestock or to crush oil from the seeds or to make vinegar. Apple alcohols were another specialty, and wine and other spirits were sold as far as Manehattan. Most of the year, Applejack worried less about 'apple bucking' and more about running the family run factory that was a modern Equestrian Farm.

With all that setting established, Applejack had been outside a barn repairing the Sweet Apple Acre's "Granny's Own" "Old Fashioned" Apple Sauce canning machine when the end of the freakin' world came down around her hooves. A blast of heat like the mouth of a volcano had swept under the machine, and for a moment, she had been afraid the canning machine would collapse on top of her, burying her beneath a tone of metal and wood.

Dropping her tools in a panic, she'd scrambled out from under the machine. Two seconds after getting her legs out, and a second after telling for her brother to find out what the hay was happening... she'd died.

Applejack died.

The last thing she'd seen was an entire field of apple trees disappearing behind a pyroplastic wall of fire and black ash. There hadn't been time to curse, scream or pray. Her life failed to flash before her eyes; instead she was treated to the sight of the barn to her left ceasing to be. It seemed as if the entire half of the farm she was facing had been dipped

into a volcanic caldera. Then the force and the fire washed over her like a tidal wave, and she died.

That had been Applejack's experience with Deathwing and the Cataclysm.

Of course, it wasn't the end. Or else how would she be sitting next to ya, Rarity, gabbin' about what happened. So hold onto yer horses n' humans, wouldya? Whatda'ya think this is, tha end'a tha story? Just go back'ta makin' that bag and listen.

~

"Your narrative is slipping, dear. Proper Equestrian, please."

~

Right.

Anyhow...

Anyway. That vast wave of fire wasn't the end. Soon after Deathwing deep breathed Ponyville and the surrounding area, the Sister Princesses Celestia and Luna had arrived. Together, they performed a mass resurrection spell that restored the recently slain, though it exhausted their magical reserves in the process. What few knew was that Equestria was soon to have an influx of visitors. Also, what few knew was that there was a range component to the Mass Resurrection.

Sweet Apple Acres had not been within the Resurrection Window.

Thus, the first thing Applejack felt was the loving embrace of a pair of goblin Jumper Cables. To be specific, the Jumper Cables attachment included within the standard Gnomish Army Knife. These were often jokingly referred to as "nipple jumper cables" or just "nipple clamps" by those who used them. They were not the most pleasant way to return to the world of the living. Also, the nickname was, sadly, quite accurate.

"WHAT THE HAY N OATS?!!?"

Had been her first words.

~

"I must remember to request Pinkie not try and resurrect me with this method."

"Ya can say that again. Now, where was ah?"

~

"Ouch. Please tell meh these ain't what thay look like." Applejack sat up, looking from her singed chest to the figure standing over her. She'd expected the blur to turn into a pony, but it was refusing to do so. The strange figure pressed a button on the side of some strange device, and the clamps detached and rolled up, like measuring tape.

"Ah, well, it worked after all. Fer once. The lass lives." The strange creature spoke in a strange accent as it turned around. "Ya are a lass, aren't ya?"

It took a few seconds for her to realize:

- A. She was alive, somehow.
- B. She felt like she'd been struck by lightning... in all the wrong places.
- C. This thing was asking if she was a she?

"Ah... Of course Ah'm a filly!" she yelled. "What the hay are ya! What are ya doin' here?!"

The creature chuckled, amused, broad back moving beneath barding the likes of which Applejack had never seen before. The ... not-pony... stood effortlessly on hind legs, lacking either a tail or a mane. It was covered in cloth and leather and glittering metal. Plates of the stuff covered the back and the shoulders and forelegs, except the creature's forelegs were strange. They ended in digits, like Spike's "hands." These, too, were wrapped in leather and mail and steel. The creature was taller than a pony, but not by a great deal, and it was built as solidly and stoutly as a barrel.

“Ya just stay back an’ outta the way, wouldn’t ya lass?” the creature asked. “Ah gots business ta take care of.”

It slung what looked like a shovel to the side and then back to rest it over its – and it sounded like a he, so – his shoulder. Applejack shook her head, trying to clear her obviously warped vision. It looked almost like that massive shovel was an axe, except the two heads of it were huge and glowing with bits of fire.

“W-what?” she asked, but wasn’t even sure herself of the question.

The creature, a dwarf she would later learn, ignored her and charged into the still raging infernos that blazed across Sweet Apple Acres. The surreal sight of her precious farmland aflame turned slowly to indignation and shock and then back to confusion. It couldn’t have been more than a few seconds, but it could well have also been a half hour or more, before she remembered the rest of the farm and her family. Whirling around, she’d turned to see the family house intact. Not long after, she remembered, before dying, that Apple Bloom was in school, and Big Macintosh and Granny were in town, selling some fresh pastries. Her quiet older brother always did have a quiet knack for getting fillies to buy from him.

Dazed, but alive, she’d watched what she’d expected to be the end of Sweet Apple Acres; burned to the ground on her watch after six hundred years of family owned prosperity. Yet, that hadn’t happened. Instead, things got weirder.

The pegasus ponies made it rain...

But the fires that threatened to devour her family farm hadn’t gone out. Some of them did, yes, but others got bigger and angrier. They pulled away from scorched trees and farmland, forming into twisting, burning shapes, like your mannequins Rarity.

~

“Your narrative, Applejack.”

~

Oops.

Well, some of the shapes were pony-like, and some were non-ponies. They swept up what was left of the timber and started tromping around in the rain. A few actually turned up at the clouds, shaking their hooves in anger, and started throwing balls of fire into the sky. Not fans of pegasus weatherworking, those fire elementals. Others decided that if it rained, then that meant they would fight in the shade.

~

"Oh, that's good."

"Thank ya"

~

The dwarf charged right into them before they could reach the other barns or the house. If one started to head off in another direction, he would just holler at it, or throw an axe, and it would immediately turn to deal with the crazy creature. You wouldn't think an axe or a hammer would be that useful against a being of pure fire and ash, but through all the yelling and swinging and thundering as he stomped the ground, this one strange being rounded up and destroyed every elemental that arose from the ashes of Sweet Apple Acres.

A few royal Guardponies flew by, saw the creature at work, and kept going. Big Mac and Granny returned, watched the fight with confusion and properly slack jaws, and then they'd picked her up and reminder her that this wasn't the time to be sitting on her duff. There were fields to check, damage to evaluate, losses to calculate, and still a few fires to put out.

Hours later, that damn creature was still fighting, cursing and hollering and beating down any elemental that emerged from the broken and burned and now muddy earth. Big Mac had tried to approach him at some point only to be driven off. It was the first time in years that Applejack had seen her brother with what looked like a tanned hide, the flat of a rather hot axe having found his flank and sent him scurrying.

The mad dwarf was still out there the next day.

Applejack woke up, looked out the bathroom window, and saw him forcing something sharp into the burning maw of a stone giant with burning cuffs and infernal writing across its body. The dwarf had been in the middle of a tirade regarding the elemental monster's family lineage. Amazingly, the battles never strayed into the remaining farmland and the dwarf never left the battered and cursed half of the property. When there was nothing four or five times his size to kill, the stout humanoid would stomp around, demanding that something – anything – come out and fight it.

Apple Bloom returned home on the second day. Before then, she had been kept with all her classmates in the town. Applejack had visited her there and tried to keep her calm about the situation on the farm. She hadn't mentioned the insane dwarf.

Once she learned about him however, Apple Bloom being Apple Bloom, she had immediately tried to chat up the strange creature that had claimed their southern fields as a personal battleground. Applejack and Big Mac had been forced to keep a constant eye on her. Even if the creature wasn't inclined to give the little filly a tanning like he had a certain big red stallion, he was clearly a few apples short of a bushel. Not to mention the fact that those fields had been crawling with monsters made out of living flame.

Finally, blessedly, on the third day, Applejack was able to wake up without the sound of fighting or shouting outside. The south fields were clear: not a fire elemental in sight. Also, not a single standing tree in sight, but she'd had days to accept that fact. The pegasus ponies were still keeping rain pouring down every couple hours to finish rooting out any hiding fire-critters.

Investigating, she'd found the creature sitting in one of the empty barns, one gauntleted hand resting on Apple Bloom's head. On the verge of yelling her lungs out, Applejack stopped. The fact of the matter was that she had expected something silly like this to happen, and thus she had had a few days to get ready for it. The predictable thing would have been to overreact, scream, try and grab Apple Bloom, all that good stuff. Problem was that the last few days of craziness had worn down her desire to act predictably.

Instead, she just stared at the dwarf gently patting her little sister, like one would a small dog.

“Aye,” he finally said, lifting his mailed hand to point at her. “Yer a funny breed’a pony, ain’tya?”

~

“Don’t laugh!”

“So sorry, Applejack, but the image is just too amusing.”

“A funny breed of pony. That’s you alright!”

“Shut it, ya crash happy pegasus.”

“Hey! I don’t crash that often!”

~

In the end, they’d skipped right to tolerating the strange dwarf. After three days of fighting in the fields, even he was exhausted. His weapons were near broken. His armor half melted. He was covered in magical bandages, thanks to some skill in first aid, but clearly not about to go anywhere for at least a little while.

It may have been a mistake to give him whiskey.

“Aye, that’s the stuff! More, lass! You’ve got more?” The seemingly invincible dwarf stumbled around the barn, an entire cast of alcohol under one arm. “Where’s me mug? Who took me mug? Show yerself ye scoundrels! Yer mother was a troll if ever I saw one, and not a pretty troll neither!”

It may also have been a mistake to bring him food.

“Now this hits the spot!” The dwarf declared, throwing an empty pie pan across the barn before digging into a handful of apple fritters. “But where’s the meat, lass? The meat? Don’t ya got any mutton ‘er chops ‘er

leg'a'lamb 'er whole turkeys? Ach, it's been forever since I had me a good pork shank! Weren't there a swine'er two round ere somewhere?"

It may have been a mistake not to hide the rest of the alcohol, once he drank all the whiskey.

"Wa-hahaha! I knew ya was hidin' more ah this down home moonshine!" Again with the stumbling, except this time he managed to catch her hooves as she tried to get him to sit back down. Within moments, she was in the air as he gaily stung her back and forth. "Yer a good lass! A silly pony, but a good lass! I tell ya what, I'll show ya how we brew things in Dun Morogh!"

~

"Ha! Silly pony."

"OH! Are we having flashbacks? Can I help?!"

~

Suddenly Pinkie Pie was there!

"It isn't a Ponyville party without Pinkie Pie!" She yelled, grabbing the dwarf's barrel of apple liquor and finishing it in one gulp. She then crushed the barrel against her forehead somehow. "Let's get drunk and hit the town and do things we'll regret!"

"I like ya, pony!" the warrior declared, without a doubt in his mind. "Pink pony is the best pony!"

~

"Pinkie Pie! This is mah story and I'll thank ya to stay out of it! That weren't what happened at all!"

~

And then Rainbow Dash, *the coolest pony*, showed up.

"I have arrived," she announced, as rainbow colored fireworks framed her superb silhouette against the front of the barn. Her tail majestically caught the wind, a cascade of colors unique to all of Equestria. Throwing back her head, her equally awesome mane caught the dying rays of sunlight, reflecting a coruscating prism of light. An arrogant smirk, well earned by countless victories in the air, crossed her face as she swept her eyes over the stunned ponies in attendance.

"Oh my gosh! It's Rainbow Dash!" Storm Front, Captain of the Wonderbolts, gasped. He was immediately knocked back, struck by love at first sight, for the mare before him was -

~

"Are you two quite finished?"

"The Ballad of Rainbow Dash has only begun!"

"None'a that happened!!"

~

Despite drinking enough spirits to knock out half the Apple Clan, and despite eating enough food to choke a dragon, the dwarf was still alive and kicking by the next day. At some point over the night, he'd come up with some way to repair his armor and weapons. They were arranged along a wall, and the layers of metal and leather were hanging from a wooden post. For the first time, she saw the creature that lay beneath: pale, coatless skin, marked by old scars. Celestia knew what the lower half of him looked like or why he had so much hair coming down from around his mouth.

"Ah assume you'll be leavin' us soon?" she asked, standing at the entrance of the barn. And no, there wasn't any dramatic wind or fireworks or 'light from a sunset' or whatever. So shut yer yap.

"Aye," he replied in that strange accent. Picking up a large block of metal, a shield, he examined the edges for nicks or cracks. "Got places ta go. Thing's ta fight."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that. This creature had done so much, but was also so damn strange.

"Why?" Applejack finally asked. "Why'd ya save me? Why'd ya fight back there?"

"Cause I wanted ta. That's all, lass."

Incredulous, she shook her head. It had to be a lie. A cover up. "So ya just walk around doing what ya want, is that it?"

"Actually," he replied, smiling behind his beard. "I fly around. On me griffin."

"Ah... ah don't even know what ta say ta that," she admitted.

This was not anything like she had expected. There was no 'learning to trust the strange intruder' phase. There wasn't even a 'learning to like or tolerate him' phase. He wasn't a free loader, what with saving her life and the farm and whatnot, but he hadn't said one word about his past or his reasons for much of anything. She didn't know a thing about him. It wasn't even so much that she trusted him in any real way, just that she knew there was nothing to do about him being there, so the best thing was to be neighborly.

It was like having a small, fat little dragon living next door.

~

"That wasn't a crack about my weight was it? That's just baby fat!"

~

"You promised you'd show me how you made alcohol where you come from." She wasn't sure why she'd said it. Not at the time. Later, she would note that it was part of a calculated master plan to keep him around so she could learn how to fight for three days straight against monsters attacking the farm. Yes. Master plan. Applejack was known for master plans! What are you laughing at?

Regardless, the words came out, and there was nothing to do about them then.

“Did I?” the dwarf wondered. “Ah. Aye. Aye. I guess I did.”

His hands came together in a resolute ‘clap.’

“If that’s what I said, then that’s what I’ll hafta do!” The dwarf walked over and slapped her heartily on the side, knocking the pony over entirely. “I hope yer ready, lass! My family ain’t called Thunderbrew fer nothin’!”

Applejack groaned from her impression in a pile of broken crates. For some reason, only one word could be found to express her enthusiasm.

“Yay.”

~

Fluttershy said nothing, but did stick her lower lip out a bit.

~

The art of making Dwarven liquor, Applejack soon learned, was something of a religion. A crackpot, loony religion! In no time flat, the dwarf had pulled together a ton of scrap metal and built a crude still. It looked for all of Equestria like it was a bomb. Or even several bombs, all patched together with rivets. She couldn’t quite imagine how, but it worked.

Apples went in.

Something slightly drinkable came out.

Big Mac loved the stuff. Applejack could barely finish a shot and a half without hitting the floor, and she was named after an alcoholic beverage. The dwarf refused to water it down, and if anything, kept tinkering to get the still to produce even more concentrated murder-water. Then Granny Smith found out, demanded a drink, and proclaimed the schnapps “quite good.” A couple shots later, and the dwarf whose name she still didn’t know agreed to teach her how to fight.

Later, he changed the offer to teach Granny Smith's granddaughter to fight.

Later still, he amended that to mean that he'd teach "the bigger lass, I guess. Not tha wee tiny one."

To Apple Bloom's disappointment. "But what if Ah'm supposed'ta have a Mountain King cutie mark?"

Celestia forbid.

"Ya gota such dainty little hooves, lass!" The dwarf had declared, after kneeling down to inspect her more closely. It was the first and only time Applejack could remember anyone had ever saying something so patently untrue to her, straight to her face and without blinking. Applejack was a working pony. An Earth pony. Her hooves were hardly 'dainty' or 'little' and she knew it.

"Now ah know yer makin' funna me," she'd angrily told him, pulling back her hoof from his hand. "All ya been doin' is pokin' and proddin' and drinkin' – that there brew is Apple Family property, ya know? What with it bein' grown on our farm, from our apples, in a still made outta our old machines."

"Aye. Aye. Don't get yer saddles in a bunch!" the dwarf scratched his beard, and the chin buried deep within it.

Angrily pawing the ground, Applejack strongly considered head butting the loon.

"Nawh, I ain't seen mucha how ya ponies fight," he said, finally getting serious. "Them ponies Celestia had, they fought with these wee horseboots. Looks ta me like some paddin' an some metal on tha outside, plus a cuttin' edge around the bottom n' along tha side. But I also looked around 'ere and what did I see, but some tools with handles and the like. I just can't figure whether ya ponies want ta put things in yer hooves 'er in yer mouths?"

"So!" he decided, laughing heartily. "We'll just hav'ta do some experimentin ta see what works for ya!"

And so they did.

Thunderbrew was patient, as long as there was a drink waiting somewhere close by. The hardest part was the start: how to get a pony to use a sword, or a sword and shield? A lance or spear, the dwarf suggested, made the most sense for a pony. Like little cavalry, he had said, but then had to describe what cavalry was. Needless to say, Applejack had drawn the line at any attempts to ride her around.

Other weapons were more complicated. In a melee, ponies were typically taught one thing: Buck with the hind legs. That was basically what ninety nine percent of ponies knew when it came to self defense: buck with the hind legs. It wasn't as if there was a systematic approach to self defense that was widely practiced among ponykind, either. Any forms of pony 'martial arts' that may once have existed had long since been relegated to the dark ages of their history.

No: for the average Earth pony, even for the average pegasus or unicorn, the instinctive response to a threat was to turn one hundred and eighty degrees, look crudely over your shoulder with poor one-eyed depth perception, raise your hindquarters, and kick back with all you had. This would be followed by the time honored secret technique of running for your bloody life in some random direction. Sometimes while screaming. Othertimes while cursing. Either one was as good as the other, really.

Applejack had to be trained not to do that.

Why had been aptly demonstrated. The one play fight where she had tried the move, Thunderbrew had simply avoided the kick and hit her on the rump with the stick he was wielding in place of an axe. Unbalanced on just two legs, she'd fallen flat on her face and into the hay. To add insult to injured pride, she'd had a red line tanned onto her cutie mark. Now she knew how Big Mac had felt, back on that day a week ago.

"Donna turn yer back on tha enemy," he lectured, nudging her with the stick until she rolled over. "Ya ain't gonna do much good if ya ain't braced properly neither."

So no bucking with the hind legs.

Instead, she had to meet the enemy, face the enemy, grapple with the enemy. That, she learned, was the essence of “tanking” – of being a protection specced warrior. A warrior could not flee. A warrior could not turn her back. Where a mage could teleport away or turn invisible, or a rogue vanish, or a hunter play dead, a warrior would die. There was no point thinking about ‘how can I run away.’ Every fight was do or die. The only objective was to walk away afterwards, not back, but forwards and over the body of your beaten enemy.

First, she learned to use her front hooves to grapple, to pin, to slash, to blind, to pummel, to slam. He made hoof-blades for her, like the Royal Guards had... though made of simple steel. Ponies were not large animals. He trained her to always expect to fight things larger than she herself was. He told her never to be afraid just because she was physically overmatched. ‘Defensive stance’ he called it. Applejack learned it. She wouldn’t be easily knocked down.

Harder than that, was the training to use weapons with her mouth. Swords and axes and maces were not designed to be swing around by the teeth. Ponies were, by necessity, handy with things in their mouth. However, this was usually because of the need for fine control, not because they needed to swing a warhammer around for minutes on end.

“There be benefits to both,” Thunderbrew had mused, while she practiced, swinging a heavy metal rod by her mouth to the left and right. She was also balanced on an unsteady bar on top of a bale of hay.

So she learned both. War with the hooves. Weapons strapped to forelegs. A pony had trouble standing upright for too long, unless that pony was Pinkie Pie – yes, you finally got a mention, don’t interrupt – so she had to usually either grapple with an opponent and use them for balance, or keep on three legs. That was when the weapon-in-mouth technique was required. Learning when to trade dexterity for balance was something experience alone could teach.

Messing up was likely to get you bucked with the hind legs. And no one enjoyed that.

“Taunt!” the dwarf roared, and she roared back. “Battle Shout! Demoralizin’ Shout! Intimidatin’ Shout!”

“Charge! Again! Again!” He knocked her back and waited impatiently for her to get ack up. “Nah, lass, up ‘ere! Aim fer the chest!” He pounded a fist against his upper torso. “Again! Charge! Ya ain’t gonna be much’uva warrior if ya can’t Charge ‘er Intercept!”

Finally, days later, Applejack hit the floor, snorting a few strands of hay away from her nose.

“Aye, lass. Aye. That was... good. Ya got spirit ‘n potential.” Thunderbrew kneeled down in front of her, and picked up one of her hooves. “These are still a bit soft, but I’ll give ‘em time.”

She blushed, angrily. “Mah hooves ain’t soft.”

“Lass,” he replied, seriously. “They are.” He let her go and stood up, a veritable wall of dwarf. “I’ve taught ya all I can. Ain’t nothin’ else I can pass on. Not ‘less ya get stronger. Not ‘less ya get tougher. But yer a warrior, now, and ya know what ya need ta know ta defend yerself and yer family. That’s a right good start, I think.”

Black, sober eyes stared down at her.

“If ya ever find yerself in Ironforge, not far from the great gates is a small village called Kharanos. Ya tell em there, that Grim Thunderbrew sent ya. They’ll treat ya right, and they’ll tell ya how ta find me again.”

He turned around, and all she could see was his back: an expanse of muscle and metal, just like before. The old waraxe came up to rest on his pauldrons. This time, unlike before, he deigned to take one last look at her over his shoulder at her.

“I’ll be waitin fer ya, lass.”

- - -

“And *that* is tha story,” Applejack concluded. “Absolutely no Pinkie Pie an’ no Rainbow Dash.”

“My version would’ve had more parties but yours was good too!” The rose colored shaman was actually sitting still. She grew introspective for a second. “I guess you never know what you’ll learn from making new friends!”

“That would make a good letter to the Princess!” Twilight realized, turning to her assistant. “Spike! Remember to write it down somewhere!”

“We’re still doing that?” he asked, deadpan.

“It was a lovely story, Applejack,” Rarity complimented. “Thank you for sharing it with me.”

“And me!” Pinkie added.

“And me,” Fluttershy’s voice was soft, as usual.

“And us,” Twilight spoke for herself and Spike, the latter frowning as he wrote down yet another in a long line of ‘life lessons’ committed to paper and posterity.

“I guess it was alright, despite not having any racing or Wonderbolts or Rainbooms,” Dash admitted after a moment. She gave Applejack a wink. “I knew you’d learned to fight somehow, but I didn’t know you were so hardcore. I still think my paladin origin story, ‘the Ballad of Rainbow Dash,’ is just a *little* bit cooler, though.”

“That’s not half as cool as my shaman origin story: Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy’s Bogus Adventure!”

“Um, I don’t remember having a bogus adventure...”

Ignoring the two jokers and the innocent pegasus caught between them, Applejack faced the tailoring unicorn who had prompted the story in the first place. “Ah guess ah’ll have to hear yer bit another time, huh?”

“But of course,” Rarity readily agreed. “Though, as I said, you may find it rather mundane. Everyone!” She floated out five finished bags, each

one unique. "Before we head out, I made a mageweave bag for each of you, personalized to your unique looks and attire. I do hope you like them!"

Twilight smiled as her friends gushed over their new bags. Her own was beautiful, with dark blue color interspersed with stars. Canis Minor even had the right number of stars on it! Rarity had remembered! And here she'd thought the combination montage and song hadn't sunk in! Soon the Elements of Harmony were ready and raring to go.

As they headed towards Captain morning Star, Applejack seemed to think of something. "Hey, sugarcube," she asked, facing their party leader. "What was takin' ya'll so long over by the mailbox, anyhoo?"

"Oh, that." The violet unicorn rolled her eyes.

"I was just checking my mail!" Dash insisted. "Perfectly normal for a mare to check her mail from time to time!"

"Not suspicious at all," Pinkie nodded vigorously. "As for me, I was just sending some stuff to my alt!"

"Sugar, you both are just too random."

"What?" Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash asked in concert, looking at the other. "Us?" They pointed at her at the exact same time. "No we're not!"

"Okay, everypony," Twilight spoke up, forstalling any more hijinks. "We ready to head across and do this?"

"Ready check!" Pinkie enthused. "I'm ready and good to go!"

"Same here," Dash replied.

Fluttershy nodded. "Y-yes."

Rarity. "As ready as ever."

Applejack stepped up to the front; to lead the charge and meet the enemy head on. Captain Morning Star, having waited patiently, was now

anxiously flexing his neck. All he was waiting for was for Twilight to say the word and start the main event.

“Ah’m ready, too.”

“Then!” Twilight faced the Captain, her best friends standing behind her. “We’re all ready. Let’s take that castle!”

Chapter 6

It was a strange thing, to be forgotten for a thousand years.

It also led to some interesting rumors and misunderstandings when, after said millennium, you were expected to return and fulfill certain roles in society. For Princess Luna the matter was not so much one of culture shock, it was just simply the world had learned to get by without her. Token efforts and ceremony that had been commonplace in a forgotten era was now seen as strange, alien, or at best archaic. A thousand years ago, her reign over the Equestrian night had been mundane. Uncelebrated and unappreciated, but mundane. Not so in the modern Equestria. Not so in Canterlot, seeped as it was in the Light of the Sun.

Contrary to popular belief, and some courtly rumor, she did not wake up at dusk and go to sleep at dawn; she was not a Pony Nosferatu who recoiled or burned in the light. Her typical itinerary was to wake up several hours before the moon was scheduled to rise over Equestria, calmly eat breakfast, and then see to her duties in a timely and efficient manner without need for rush or anxiety.

After dutifully seeing to her appointed rounds, she would retire an hour or two after her sister awoke and brought the sun to its seat above. She did not live in constant darkness, nor was she a ghost, flightily moving from place to place while others slept. Her itinerary was a matter of public record, and like her beloved sister Princess, she traveled under escort. There was no secret to her coming and going, and for what little it was worth, she held an open court for any to attend... not that anypony choose to.

Her popularity, she had seen over the last year, remained roughly the same as always. Pony society and norms had changed, "progressed" as some called it, in quite a few ways, but not in many ways Luna found terribly endearing. She had spent her first few months of freedom reading about the worldly developments that had occurred over the last thousand years, the better to be aware of changes in etiquette and procedure.

Half a year after her return, she and her sister had "jointly" announced the return of the Lunar Court, and that The Princess, Luna, would again assume "near full" responsibility for the night sky in Equestria. There had even been a fireworks display. A historical society had performed a Classic Ritual of the Moon in her honor as well, though Luna had been too polite to point out how inaccurate their recreation had been.

The old ways, it seemed, were dead and buried.

Why dig them back up?

Instead, Luna drank tea and finished her grape leaf salad, the only pony present at the banquet table. The food was excellent, as always. A pair of servants stood a discrete and proper distance away, ready to tend to her needs; one of them, an elderly mare with a coal black coat, carried a tray of sweets as the next and final course. Four of the Royal Guard stood at attention at the room's cardinal points, blue eyes alert but disinterested. They may as well have been statues.

The paintings and frescoes on the walls were better company. At least they were mildly entertaining. So much of Canterlot had been rebuilt over the last thousand years, the city was unrecognizable. The old walls of the old palace had been bare, except for constellations, faceless statues, and inlaid geometric shapes to tantalize the eye. At some point, picturesque scenes had become vogue, with fanciful renditions of olden times – all quite inaccurate – and everywhere, the Glory of the Sun repeated in paint and oil.

Setting aside her plate, Luna closed her eyes and felt the tug of the Moon on her soul. It was always there, day or night. It had a Name. *Elune*.

The wizened servant left the tray of sweets for the Princess to pick at. Luna had never possessed a sweet tooth; nor did she feel the need to indulge herself with sugar cubes or salt lick. She left the processed pastries, preferring slices of fruit. They were, of course, fresh and delicious; the finest one could acquire in Equestria. Cleaning her palate with two small spoonfuls of mint ice cream, she signaled that she was finished with her late afternoon "breakfast" and that she would be continuing according to her posted schedule.

The guards promptly detached from their posts to escort her, two in front, two in back, as she made the same trip through the palace halls as she had the day before and the day before and the day before. It was late and she could hear voices, see the ponies chatting in other rooms or in balconies overlooking terraces and squares. Many were already tired and yawning, exhausted from playing courtly games from dawn to dusk. They would not be awake and active for much longer.

Unexpectedly, Luna soon noticed four Royal Guards rounding a corner, blocking her normal route; they fanned out without a word, clearing the area for their escort. Celestia rounded the corner, her face lighting up as she saw who she had, not so coincidentally, run into. Tall and regal with a mane and tail that flowed and shined like a captured aurora, the elder of the Princesses smiled amiably and trotted up to her younger sister.

"Luna! I was hoping to run into you." Which meant, of course, that she had planned to run into her. It was Luna's experience that her sister rarely hoped for things that didn't, mysteriously, also happen. "I have a little surprise for you!" she added, teasingly.

"A surprise?" the Moon Princess inquired, shying away a bit.

"A delightful one. Please. This way. You'll love it!" Her tone was light and airy, as if she didn't have a care in the world. It was an impression that couldn't be further from the truth. Seeing her little sister's hesitation, Celestia glanced back, behind her pearly white wings. "Is something the matter? This isn't a bad time, is it? I can postpone the surprise, but..."

"This isn't a bad time, no," Luna replied, keeping her voice soft.

"Good," Celestia assured her, sharing another luminescent smile; the kind that turned stallions to putty in her hooves and that made mares want to practice for hours to vainly try and emulate her; to try and recreate even a fraction of their Princess' radiance. Luna had lived longer than Pony civilization. She had never managed the feat and had long since given up trying.

"This way, if you please!" her sister continued, urging along their guards. The stallions responded immediately, and Luna – the smallest of the group by a hoof – keep pace at a brisk trot.

Celestia led them, or her rather, to a large balcony overlooking a marble plaza flanked by walls of ivy. Motioning Luna forward, she flowingly stepped to the side, letting her small sister see what was below. At first, Luna didn't quite see it. There was nothing really peculiar to be seen. Only after a few moments, did she realize that it was the guardsponies below that she was supposed to be observing. They were training; some in their armor and some without.

There were pegasus guard detachments making aerial passes as each other in mock duels, only to circle up and around to dive down on would-be enemies below. Unicorn guards stood back, casting magical attacks that slammed into shields, either in front of themselves or others. Well muscled Earth pony guards, meanwhile, sparred with hooves and imported blades. It was no wild melee either. Luna was quick to note that these were coordinated displays meant to impress.

She arched an eyebrow at her elder sibling. "Big Sister?"

"I have thought about your request from a few weeks ago," Celestia explained, watching the stallions below with one imperial indigo eye. "You have been very patient and understanding and you've made due without raising a word of complaint since, but... perhaps you were right. Especially in light of our new conflicts with the Horde and... other threats. I've looked into the matter, and decided that it was time you reinstated a guard of your own."

"Really?" Luna asked, genuinely surprised. She couldn't help but wonder if she was being jerked around by the tail. "You mean it?"

She'd requested her own guards simply because it was more efficient to have ponies who were accustomed to the same hours she kept. Cycling in and out Celestia's sun loving guardponies wasn't working out. Most were exhausted halfway through their assignment rotations. They would never do for full time security or for enforcing her dictates during her ruling hours.

"I do," Celestia warmly replied. "I know you've been hoping to visit Darnassus and the Temple of Elune there. You will need proper retainers for the trip." She coughed politely, and raised her voice to address the warriors below. "If you could present yourselves, gentlecolts?"

Immediately, every pony below stopped, turned, and saluted. "Yes! Princess!"

Within moments, they had arranged into four neat squares, officers in front and divided by brotherhood. Like tri-color flags, unicorns on the right, pegasi on the left, earth ponies between. Armor flashed over their not-yet-uniform coats and manes. As one, they stomped their right front hooves in salute and gazed up at their Princesses.

"These are some of our finest new recruits," Celestia said, one eye hidden by her flowing mane, the other narrowing slightly as she evaluated her sister's reaction. "Pick any twenty you like, plus a master-at-hooves. They'll be the core of your new Night Guard."

- - -

Fluttershy squeaked and covered her head as another one-ton block of stone flew by, crashing into the magical shield around them. The masonry projectile split on impact, mere hoof-lengths away, falling away and down into the dark abyss below. Even though she could fly, when she wasn't scared out of her wits, that sort of drop was nothing something she even wanted to contemplate.

The unicorn guardpony to her left showed no such hesitation as he continued pressing forward, horn glowing and trailing radiant white fire. There were three of them, one to Fluttershy's left, another on the opposite side of the bridge guarding Rarity, and Captain Morning Star in the middle, behind Rainbow Dash and Applejack. They were each projecting magical defense shields to ward off incoming Twilight Cultist attacks. They were also helping to keep the bridge stable.

Fluttershy glanced down at the matrix of energy and stone that was the so called "bridge." When Morning Star had mentioned his colts "putting up a new bridge" she had imagined then using ropes and planks. That was probably a bit silly. The Cultists defending the castle were expecting an

attack, and would never just let someone rope up a rickety new bridge like the old one.

The guards instead used their magic to construct an entirely new structure out of arcane energy connecting the two sides of the gorge. Enchanted stone was floated into place as a series of mid-air anchors. Bit by bit, the bridge was extended, and now they were almost to the other side. This activity had not gone un-noticed or un-appreciated by the evil ponies squatting and scheming within the castle ruins.

More Fiendish Pegasi had attacked, swooping down to try and slash and spear the unicorns while they built the arcane bridge. Then, after the first section went up, they used their cultist unicorns to hurl heavy stones and blocks of rubble. One of the Guardponies, caught unprepared, would have fallen to his death if Dash hadn't been fast enough to jump down after him and pull him to safety. The cultponies seemed to have an unending supply of stone to throw at the bridge builders, and now they were close enough that Dark Unicorns were racing forward to cast volleys of shadowbolts.

'Oh dear, oh no, what if I get knocked off the edge? 'Fluttershy couldn't help but wonder, fighting the urge to tremble. 'What if I get squashed by a rock? Or hit by one of those mean cultist pegasi? What if the magic holding the bridge up fails?'

Life, it went without saying, was hard when you had an overactive and treacherous imagination.

Fluttershy couldn't help but see herself getting splattered or crushed or falling, screaming, into the dark abyss below, her wings freezing up at the worst possible time. Heights did not suit her in the least, and it was an almost unfathomably long way down. On a good day, she'd have been hard pressed to overcome that fact, but now there were dozens of very mean ponies out there out to do rather unkind things to her. She wanted to help her friends so badly, and she wanted to help heal the damage done to the world with her new talents, but danger was something she doubted she would ever get used to.

'Why does everything have to be so gosh darned scary?' she wondered, eyes widening as she saw through the arcane energy of the bridge beneath her hooves. Her wings tightened up and her legs wobbled.

"Just a little longer!" Morning Star yelled, fixing one of the enchanted stone blocks into place. Arcane energy swirled around it, marking the marble with intricate designs and runes. Two other blocks, one to the left and one to the right, were also being fixed into place.

Fluttershy reeled as two volleys of shadowbolts hit from both sides and almost at the same time, the shadowy energy wounding her friends, the nearby guards, and even the flying pegasi overhead. Closing her eyes, she offered a quick prayer to nature; when her eyes reopened, the world was shrouded by a greenish haze. The Emerald Dream. Strange, far off shapes produced an alien horizon. Fluttershy was careful not to delve too deeply into the Dream, or too far from her friends, for much of the Other World was still under the thrall of the Nightmare. Focus. She needed to focus.

A familiar shudder of fear passed through her, swamped by determination.

Calling on the natural powers of regrowth and rejuvenation, she pleaded for the Dream to open itself to her friends and lend their bodies aid. Dark energy was expelled from wounds, and scars quickly faded as empowered healing processes restored lost vitality. The invocation of such power was not without a cost, however, and Fluttershy felt her inner reserves start to flag a bit.

"We're almost there!" she heard Dash yell. "I can fly across!"

"You'll be out of range of healing!" Twilight yelled back over the dim of the battle. "Pinkie Pie! Focus target X!"

"Sure thing!"

"As soon as the bridge activates, Applejack, Dash, finish off square and circle!"

"Nipple!"

"Pinkie! For the last time, it's a circle, not nipple!!"

Embarrassing slang for certain party marks aside, Twilight's orders weren't debated. Applejack and Dash hunkered down behind their shields, though it did little against the magical onslaught being tossed their way. Twilight and Pinkie directed arcane fire and elemental fury down on the closest Dark Unicorn, marked with an X. Fire and nature elemental shocks ripped apart her dark robes, but she still kept casting. A counterspell interrupted her moments before her next shadowbolt volley could be completed, and finally, after a barrage of arcane missiles, the Dark Unicorn mare fell, cursing in tongues.

The other two Dark Unicorns, seeing their comrade fall, didn't seem to care to rethink their strategy. Tumbling blocks of stone flew over their heads, thrown by their kin in the rear. They continued to form a magical vanguard, blasting everyone and everything in range with dark void magic. A guardpony pegasus overhead cried out at the last volley hit. He fell from the sky, unable to fly, but Rarity quickly caught him in a Levitate spell, turning a doomed tumble into the abyss into a gentle glide back to the safe side of the chasm.

"None can defy the will of Cho'Gall!" One of the Dark Unicorns screamed. "Your bones will be made into kindling! Your-" He stumbled, silenced.

"Oops! Wind Shear! Sorry!" Pinkie giggled, summoning up another elemental lightning bolt.

"DONE!" Morning Star cried. "Anchors are in place. Extending the bridge!"

The three blocks of stone glowed and wrapped themselves in protective energy. Magically frozen in midair, they burned brightly and from grooves in each one, a line of blue light extended. These speared the other side of the chasm, and from that impact point, solid stone grew out and up. Rainbow Dash was already across by the time the final section of the bridge materialized, plowing into the Dark Unicorn to their left. Applejack, meanwhile, had charged across the gap and slammed into the talkative unicorn Pinkie Pie had interrupted just moments before.

"Celestial dog!" he cried, jamming a hoof into the mare's face. "You dare to-?"

"Eyup!" Applejack answered with a grin, pummeling him and interrupting another spellcast. After a few seconds of melee, both Dark Unicorns were down for the count.

"Move! Move! Move!" Morning Star yelled, and Earth pony guards surged around him, across the now complete bridge. Pegasi continued to battle and swarm in the air, some crashing and entangling into grappling, scuffling swirls of feathers, fury and steel.

Evaluating the situation, Twilight galloped forward, pirouetting around as she marked targets in midair. Unable to ping them, she had to point with a hoof and trust in her friends to be watching her for their next set of targets. Fluttershy followed close, wings flapping as she kept a few inches above the magical bridge underhoof. Now that it was in place, it was supposed to be nearly indestructible. They had managed to cross; now they just had to keep from being swamped by insane cultists.

A polymorphed pegasus fell out of the sky, bearing a skull marker –

"I got this one!" Rainbow Dash yelled, rushing forward and leading with an Avenger's Shield. The sheep turned back into a Fiendish Pegasi, and the group started taking it down. Twilight must have planned to clear the air again, while the Earth pony guards finally got a chance to do their job. It made sense, Fluttershy supposed. The Pegasus guards had been fighting all this time and many were hurt.

"X! Incoming!"

Another polymorphed pegasus fell, this time picked up by Applejack.

With only two physical damage dealing enemies at a time to deal with, Fluttershy made the decision to conserve her magical energies as best she could. Rarity would probably be doing the same, and Pinkie Pie's nearby mana totem was helping to restore spent energy. A quick Swiftmend on Dash kept her in top shape as the fiendish Pegasus she had

been holding down finally stopped thrashing. Soon the skies began to clear, as more Pegasus Guards than Cultists flew overhead.

One white bodied guard flew low, dipping his wings in thanks, a maneuver all pegasi learned in school. Dash waved to him, and it looked like she was only barely able to stop herself from taking off to follow him as he slammed into and past another Fiendish Pegasi high overhead. Fluttershy looked around, turning in a circle, her heart racing. For once, they weren't being hit by spells or curses or having giant boulders thrown at them. The rush of adrenalin in her system, and the proximity of her friends, had kept her indulging in her first impulse: also known as 'bolting and hiding.' Now that the immediate danger seemed to have passed, replaced by the promise of future danger, she was feeling the urge again.

She quashed it.

"Everyone okay?" Twilight asked, gathering them closer. "Everyone get ready. We still haven't see that Blood Diver pony we were warned about."

Dash laughed, dismissively throwing back her mane as she laughed. "I bet he ran like a scared little chicken when he saw us coming!"

"What's wrong with little chickens?" Fluttershy muttered, just enough for the other pegasus to hear her. "If you were small and defenseless, you'd run too."

"I do hate to interrupt," Rarity spoke up, a worried note to her tone of voice. "But I believe that is him up there."

She pointed.

"Oh, oh dear," Fluttershy whispered, hiding behind her mane.

Why did all these 'boss' types have to be so scary?

A dark, deep laugh filled the air. "What have we here? What cute little fillies!!"

Black wings, twice the normal size, flapped as the bladed form of Blood Diver hovered in the air. Morning Star had called him a 'former Royal Guard' but he was a far cry from the uniform white pegasi that flew above in their golden armor. His body was dyed black with blood red marks and streaks that became more concentrated and bubble-like around his face and eyes. Great hooked scythes curved around his forelegs and a spiked bit and bridle adorned his lower jaw. Every piece of barding he wore had something jagged sticking out of it, and in height alone, he rivaled or maybe even surpassed Celestia herself. Shadowmagic wafted from his wings as he flapped them, lending a demonic air contrasted by the otherwise normal blue eyes studying his prey.

"Let me see," he continued in a deep rumble. "Which of you should I cut up first? The pink one? The purple one? The white one? How nice of you to color code yourselves for me."

"Why don'tya try me on fer size, ya big galoot!" Applejack taunted, bracing herself in a defensive stance. "Come on!"

The huge pegasus smiled, a vicious grin full of triangular teeth. "You, then. The orange one."

- and blasted down towards the warrior. Fluttershy was already casting a preemptive regrowth spell, having attuned herself to the ebb and flow of life force in those around her. She felt that link shudder as Blood Diver slammed a bladed hoof into Applejack's shielded side. The edge was deflected, but the force of the blow alone was enough to break or dislocate a pony's arm. Whatever evil magic this insane pegasus had acquired, it had made him immensely strong.

"Ya'll ain't so tough! Is that ah'll ya got!?" Applejack was forced back, her hooves digging into the ground. Blood Diver slammed both front hooves into her, grabbed onto her barding, and head butted her. The blow was partly blunted by one of Rarity's Power Word: Shield spells, but Blood Diver was merciless in pressing his advantage home. He hardly seemed to notice when Rainbow Dash, mace between her teeth, bludgeoned him in the back of the head and then brought down a Judgment spell to boot.

He hardly seemed concerned when Pinkie Pie detonated a elemental fire spell that engulfed half his body. He hardly flinched when a quartet of

arcane bolts buried into his flank before exploding like magical grenades. He ignored the seemingly marginal damage and concentrated in trying to pound the apple farmer into a fine paste. It was all two healers could do to keep their friend alive.

"Dash! Taunt off!" Twilight yelled, seeing the problems Rarity and Fluttershy were having. Applejack was taking an incredible beating, kept up only by flash healing and shielding. Fluttershy could see her friend's reasoning. Applejack and Rainbow Dash had needed to exchange tanking duties on Sniffles during the fight with Catnip. Maybe something like that would work here, too.

"Taunting!" Dash complied, branding the side of the insane Cultist Pegasus with her Hand of Reckoning. A blazing hoof of pure light caused the evil pony to spin, in great pain but not otherwise hurt.

"I'll pick my teeth with your wings!!" Blood Diver roared, whirling on her from the same spot. His ebon wings swept back and started to vibrate.

"Twiiii-light-" Pinkie yelled.

The unicorn mage was in the middle of a lengthy cast, her horn swirling with three different colors. "Just a moment!"

"Twilight! Twilight! Twilight!!" Pinkie was frantically pointing at the ground.

Stretching out behind Rainbow Dash, the ground was starting to tremble and glow. Twilight, caught up in her spellworking, was standing close to the strange phenomenon. Lifting a hoof away from the rumbling, glowing ground, she stared, dumbstruck.

"What the... ooff!"

Her question was interrupted by a pink blur, knocking her aside and out of the way.

A moment later and a tempest of wind, a literal maelstrom of black fire and feathers shot past, leaving a deep gouge on the ground. Twilight and Pinkie continued to roll away from the attack, preventing them from

taking any damage. Fluttershy, having once seen something similar, raised her voice.

"Um. Dash." She cried, but clearly no one heard. "Dash, maybe you should..."

"Face him away from us, darling! Away from us!" Rarity yelled. "Oh dear! Not another one!"

"One more time!" Blood Diver snarled, snapping one of his wings out. Black energy congealed into a cone of feather-blades that fired away from him, catching Dash as she tried to face him in another direction. Applejack was on his back, trying to keep him in a choke hold, but he knocked her off with his other huge wing, this one no longer vibrating with built up energy. Fluttershy concentrated on keeping her pegasus friend up. That 'black wing wave' had caught Dash's right side, and she was stumbling back, bleeding.

"Horse-feathers!" Dash tried a last ditch protection spell. "Divine P-!"

"Die!" the Cultist chortled, producing a black X with his blades. "Die! Die! Die!"

Weakened as Dash was from the feather barrage, there was no healing through it –

Fluttershy gasped, feeling the disturbance in the Emerald Dream as her friend spun through the air and fell, hitting the dirt. The rainbow-maned pegasus bounced, once, giving a single strangled cry. Blood Diver immediately turned, having forgotten about the downed paladin, and laid into Applejack with his scythe-hooves. They were still wet with blood.

"WHAHAHA!" He chortled, tongue lolling out and dribbling. "One down!"

"He killed Dashie!" Pinkie Pie pointed, accusingly, at the evil boss pony.

"You... bastard!" Twilight snarled, getting back onto her hooves, eyes wide and terrified. "You BASTARD! DASH!" The unicorn forgot all about her magic, and made as if to run towards her fallen friend. "DASH!"

Amazingly, Pinkie Pie popped up and stood in her way.

"This isn't pin the tail on the pegasus, Twilight! You don't wanna get that close," the pink pony reminded her, mercurially switching from mirthful in the face of danger to determined and unflappable. The violet unicorn came up short, a stunned look on her face as her memories from a 'party leadership' book warred with her natural grief and shock and fear.

"We've got a battle-rattle-hate-to-tattle rez," the pink shaman explained with a grim smile. "Remember?"

Twilight did; she turned to Fluttershy, a question on her lips -

The druid was already almost done casting.

"B-rez incoming," Fluttershy squeaked, hoping she was heard for once. Fishing a maple seed out of her bags, she blew gently between her lips, letting nature's wind carry it to Dash's prone form. The pegasus was still, and didn't flinch as the seed touched her side, found a wound, and entered.

"Rebirth," she whispered, the ritual complete. Just another second or two was all she needed – this was a gift nature did not bestow easily or often. Fluttershy's eyes burned bright green, and the power of the Emerald Dream flooded into her... and into her fallen friend.

"AAAAA!" Rainbow Dash shot back up, rosy eyes wide. "AAAGH! I... I hate losing, but I hate dying even more! I'll get you for that, you big jerk!"

"Eeergh. I forgot about the druid," Blood Diver growled, seeing the in-combat resurrection. "No matter. I'll crush you fillies one by one!" He laughed, kicking off the ground and taking to the air even as Dash tried to barrel into him. Black feathered wings propelled him higher and higher, building up more and more dark power –

Fluttershy saw it, not with her eyes, but within the flow of magic.

"Twitchy Twitch!" Pinkie Pie chirped from somewhere close by. "Something's gonna fall! I wonder what it is? Or where it'll land?"

"EEP!" Scrambling away, Fluttershy jumped, just as a titanic crash hit the ground where she had been standing. A corona of dust lifted up and away from the impact site, revealing Blood Diver, his bladed front hooves buried in a crater.

"I missed?" He looked up, frowning. Rearing up, her crossed the sickle-blades attached to his forelegs, the sharpened steel making a distinct 'ting-ting!' sound. One was still covered in crimson, and the other hungered for the same. He spared the frightened druid a hungry, mad look, and then grinned viciously and headed back for Applejack.

Fluttershy breathed a sigh of relief and got back up.

This was scary! They were in trouble! Her legs started to wobble again as her training and rational mind quailed, shocked silent and pushed aside by her urge to freeze up or flee or hide. They were doing something wrong. Even before getting hit by that feather barrage, Rainbow Dash's health had dropped too quickly for their healing to keep up. If Blood Diver could do that to the pegasus paladin, then he could do the same to Applejack... and if anyone else died, there wouldn't be a combat resurrection available via Regrowth!

'This isn't good. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared!' Fluttershy shakily got off another heal as Applejack crashed into the oversized cultist pegasus. Sparks flew as she tried to block his furious strikes.

'I'm scared but...'

'But...!'

Fluttershy's eyes narrowed, just a fraction. *'I see it. I see it. There!'*

But she was also the most experienced of them all when it came to pve, and party battles. After being abandoned after that disaster at Razorfen in the Barrens, she had been forced to make her way back to Equestria by herself. As a healer trapped in enemy territory, that had meant the safest thing was to follow along with or team up with other groups. Very few turned down a willing healer. It also meant she had been dragged

along by her temporary companions onto dozens of dangerous side quests and other adventures. It was the only way to get back home.

And now, after all that, she wasn't going to fail again.

This wasn't going to be like Razorfen!

"Twilight!" She yelled, raising her voice loud enough to be heard over the din of battle. "Applejack! You have to keep moving him!"

"What?" the warrior yelled back, glancing from around Blood Diver's side. "What'daya mean?"

"Of course!" Twilight, now that she knew what to look for, realized it, too. The longer Blood Diver was kept in place, the faster his attacks became; he frenzied when he wasn't being moved!

"Applejack!" Their unicorn leader came up with a plan. "Keep backing up! When he uses his wings, you have to get out of the way! And keep facing him away from us!"

"But ah'll get dazed!"

"That doesn't matter!"

"R-right!" the apple farmer confirmed, already backstepping as she tried to tank Blood Diver's furious assault. "You got it, Twi!"

Applejack was immediately proven right in one respect. The moment she started backing away, she got dazed, clocked on the side of the head as her much larger enemy sidestepped and overshot her. It slowed her down, but with heals up, she was able to keep fighting. Forced to follow her, however, Blood Diver's frenzied attacks became much slower and more manageable. He had to advance with three legs on the ground, like any other pony, leaving him with only one sickle-blade to attack with.

Fluttershy cast another rejuvenation spell, but saw Rarity's flash of light do the job a half-second before her own nature spell hit. After a second or two, the golden pegasus healer even allowed herself a moment to catch her breath, calm her nerves, and conserve her mana. She had

guessed right. With Applejack moving Blood Diver, healing was much more manageable.

"Just die already!!" Blood Diver howled, his black wings vibrating with an audible drone.

Applejack nimbly sidestepped, avoiding the cone of destruction unleashed by Blood Diver's left wing as it shot forward. Feathers infused with shadow magic and pegasus wind currents became dark crescents of death. The nature of the cone attack made it much harder to avoid at range than in melee, but as long as he was facing away from the five other ponies in the party, that didn't really matter.

"DIE!" Blood Diver screamed, surging forward his right wing to produce an identical cone of destruction. Again, Applejack noticed the attack coming and jumped to the right. The 'black wing wave' missed entirely.

Frustrated and disgusted with how he hadn't been able to kill the armored cowpony, Blood Diver let loose an angry roar and took to the sky again. He soon vanished into a cloud of dark smoke up above, disappearing amid the many dueling and fighting pegasi.

"I'm going Ret!" Dash announced, tossing down her shield and mace and reaching back to grab a larger sword of foreign design. No sooner was it in her mouth, however, than she noticed the tug of targeting energy directed down at her.

"Dash!" Twilight yelled, before Fluttershy could open her mouth.

"Yeah! I know!" She said it as she moved, shooting off in a rainbow colored flash. Instead of being content with just dodging the dive attack, however, she blasted off towards where the Royal Guards were fighting the Earth pony zealots and cultponies. She hovered over a group of them clustered together, turned around, and shook her behind up at the sky.

"Oh," one of the cultists on the ground looked up. "This is gonna suck-"

"RRRRRAAAGGGGHHH!!!"

A rainbow blur shot away at the last millisecond. Just like before, when Blood Diver had tried to crush her, Fluttershy saw a ring of smoke tumble up from the impact point made by the huge pegasus. The concept of friendly-fire didn't seem to mean much to the big jerk. He'd just flattened four of his own ponies.

Rainbow Dash got the achievement [Look Out Below!]
Applejack got the achievement [Look Out Below!]
Pinkie Pie got the achievement [Look Out Below!]
Twilight Sparkle got the achievement [Look Out Below!]
Fluttershy got the achievement [Look Out Below!]
Rarity got the achievement [Look Out Below!]

"Who-hoo! Achievement Spam!" Dash cheered, triumphantly swirling around like a missile on a sugar high.

"I'll rip you apart with my bare hooves!!" Blood Diver emerged, callously tossing aside one of the cultist ponies he'd impaled on his sickle-blades. Like a stampeding buffalo, he bulled right past a pair of embattled Royal Guards, insane blue eyes now bloodshot and focused entirely on the ponies that had so humiliated him... by not dying like they should have. Applejack interposed herself between him and the rest of her party, charging right into his side with a grunt.

"Come on, ya scruffy lookin' varimt!" she yelled into his chest, hammering a hoof into his face. "Let's get back ta our square dance!"

"Whose scruffy lookin?!" Blood Diver roared, once again taunted to perfection into focusing on the party's apple buckin' tank.

The fight was, as everyone realized by this point, entirely dependant on Applejack. As long as she kept him facing away and moving, and as long as she side stepped his cone attacks, then things were looking good. Fluttershy saw Rarity switch to Shadow from Discipline. There was no point having two healers up for this fight. If Applejack made a mistake, she'd be killed no matter what anyone else tried to do. Fluttershy took a few tentative steps forward, to keep the warrior in range of her healing.

Everyone else, meanwhile, focused on the slowly but steadily weakening Blood Diver. Rainbow Dash's strikes were much more telling with the big human-made claymore enhanced by her retribution talents. One Crusader Strike scored soundly, ripping off a line of the enemy pegasus's barding and robes. A follow up judgment brought down a lance of Holy Light to punish the wicked pegasus. Pinkie and Twilight continued their magical bombardment, and now, friendly shadow magic entered the fray as well. It all came together into a perfect storm of magical and physical dps.

The only one not doing actual damage was Fluttershy, and she was content with that. A quick look over to her side, and she saw that Rarity's form was now obscured by a dark, ominous shadow, making her appear almost translucent. The colors of her eyes had inverted, leaving frightening white pupils within pools of pitch black. Her mouth moved as she chanted words with no sounds, wracking and dooming the mind of her target. Fluttershy knew about shadow priests, but had never seen one in action before. They resembled warlocks somewhat, and seeing her friend as one was...

Well, it was scary. Just like a lot of things! Scary!

Blood Diver shook his upper body as a Mind Blast trapped his head within a corona of dark energy. He tried, again, to hit Applejack with his two wing-blasts, and again she dodged them without taking damage. Badly mauled by the six mares, he roared, spittle running down his chin, and took off for one more dive.

Unfortunately for him, by this point everyone knew what to look out for. Pinkie Pie's tail twitched furiously, hard enough to shake her entire rear, helicopter-like, into the air. She bounded away as the huge pegasus came down, missing her by a good margin. Emerging more slowly from the crater he had punched in the earth, the oversized pegasus cultist was immediately met by more and more attacks. Fluttershy found herself silently hoping he would cry uncle or surrender or even fly away. He didn't have to fight to the death. Dash would probably want to chase him if he tried to escape, if only to get revenge for his killing her before, but he could make it. Probably.

'Why? Why won't you just give up?' she wondered, seeing him laugh and charge, madly, back into Applejack. *'Why are you making us do this to you?'*

The group knew how to fight him. He was almost done for. Finally, seeing him near collapse, Fluttershy ran forward, unable to just watch him fall - like Catnip had - without at least getting some answers.

"You can give up if you want!" she cried. "We don't have to kill you! Please, you-"

"Give up?" Blood Diver snarled, looking back at her even as he fought on against Applejack and Rainbow Dash. He smiled, and spat the spiked bit out of his mouth with enough force it tore free and hit the ground. Instead of saying more, or explaining himself, he just laughed, deep and loud... and went back to the fight, scoring a painful slash that nearly caught Applejack's eye.

Fluttershy reared, summoned nature's power, and healed it.

No matter how pointless it was to keep fighting, the huge pegasus continued. Finally, he fell forward, not in an attack, but in a slump, nearly burying Applejack under his sheer, muscular mass. He'd been blasted and burned and shocked and cursed and slashed, and finally, all that was catching up to him. One foreleg raised, weakly, to land just one more bloody blow, but it fell limply to the ground.

Applejack shifted under the huge pegasus stallion, dropping him onto his back, but not roughly. Fluttershy, despite imagined terrors of him lashing out at her with one last dying attack, rushed forward to be closer. She could feel it; see it. He was still breathing. He was still, just barely, alive. Applejack had lowered her guard only slightly, and Dash was crouched and inching forward, still wary.

Fluttershy raised a hoof, without even thinking about what she was doing, to try and heal him -

Only to have her magic rebuffed. Rejected.

Blood Diver was still laughing, even as he died. "Save it. Druid. ...Save it."

"Why didn't you give up?" Fluttershy asked again.

"There's... no point... telling you that," he managed to say, and coughed up black blood. "You." He turned his blue eyes to Rainbow Dash. "See to... my body." He laughed again, relaxing.

"Celestia..." he scoffed. "...'Princess'... you..."

That last word, his last, evoked a few last dying laughs and then he was gone.

Seeing him fall, the other Cultists in the Courtyard panicked and ran or flew as fast as their legs or wings could take them. Numerous Royal Guards pursued, particularly among the pegasi detachment, but the rest stopped at the order to secure the area. Unicorns quickly began erecting defensive wards and stone barricades. The six friends from Ponyville remained around the defeated pegasus boss's corpse.

"You gonna do what he asked?" Pinkie Pie asked, breaking the silence. She was looking at Dash, her expression even as she held back the urge to celebrate their victory.

The chromatic paladin frowned down at the dead body.

"Um, if you don't want to..." Fluttershy began. Maybe one of the guardponies could give last rites?

"He asked me, so I guess I gotta," Dash replied, scratching her mane and grinning as she came to a decision. "That's part of my job, now. I can't just say, 'Nah! Find someone else!' Even if I kind of want to."

"He-he!" Pinkie Pie grinned, giving the pegasus a little nudge with her cheek. "He sure did tear into you back there! Maybe that means he liked you?"

Dash's ears twitched and her wings preened. "Yeah right! Why am I always the one who gets beaten up in these things, anyway!?"

"If this adventuring business is anything like in the movies, the colorful pony is always the first one to end up in trouble," Rarity observed, her mind elsewhere as she levitated out a wax-coated seal from within the fallen Blood Diver's armor. "Ah ha! This must be that 'Mark of Command' that Captain Morning Star spoke of. Tacky looking thing if you ask me."

She floated it over to Twilight, letting the other unicorn take up the loot distribution. The mage looked around, making sure the area was safe, and signaled for Spike to cross the bridge and join them with a magical light-flare. No doubt he was unhappy about always being kept back and out of danger, but they were all in agreement that it couldn't be helped. He was a dragon, but still little more than a baby one, and the thought of anything happening to him was something none of the ponies present wanted to consider.

"It looks like the area is clear, so..."

Twilight's magic ran up and down the fallen pegasus, finding and identifying any potential magic or gold worth salvaging. Like the other Twilight Cultists, Blood Diver had a pouch full of foreign mint. He also had some items of his own that stood out.

One of the sickle blades he had used was bent and broken, but the other was intact. With a little force, it detached, proving it had a handle as well. The sickle was actually more like a sword, slightly curved and still very sharp, with two jagged sections midway up the blade. Unlike imported swords, this one had a bite-bit instead of a hand-grip and guard, making it easier for a pony to use in his or her mouth.

"The identify spell says this is 'Highdiver's Hoofblade,'" Twilight stated with a 'hmm.'

"Highdiver?" Applejack asked, and green eyes fell on the pony they'd defeated. "Ya can't mean this fella?"

"Captain Morning Star did say Blood Diver was a name he gave himself," Twilight confirmed.

"Hold up. I know that name!" Dash interrupted, sounding upset. "This pony..." Her expression became upset, then disappointed, as she glared down at the cultist pegasus. "Highdiver. He won the Young Flyer's Competition when I was just a little filly. The one right before I got my cutie mark. But... he wasn't huge like this. He was a little big, but normal sized for a stallion."

Her eyes narrowed, accusingly.

"What happened to him?" she asked. No one had an answer.

"I'll see if there's anything else," Twilight hastily replied, using the search and identify spell again. "Here!" She found and levitated out a small item, remarkably intact despite the fierce battle. It looked like a pocket watch in a sturdy metal case.

"Compass of the Fallen Scout," the unicorn stated, her identify spell imprinting the knowledge of the item left on it by its previous owner. "It has a lot of stamina, so I think this is a tanking trinket? Probably also a compass."

"There's something else, too," she continued, concentrating a bit more. Her magic soon picked out one last thing of note, but it wasn't a piece of armor or weaponry. It was a roll of paper, now slightly stained by blood, and wrapped with string. Finding something written immediately caught Twilight's attention, and she put the sword and trinket down to carefully unravel what she had found.

"Ooooooh!" Pinkie groused, leaning over her shoulder. "You usually only find important stuff on bosses! Like recipes. Or schematics! Or plans! Or patterns! Or designs!! Dibs on any schematics! Or any candy related recipes! I've heard these cultist ponies have really mind blowing brownies!"

"Now, don't crowd her, Pink!" Applejack scolded the hyperactive shaman, as curious as anypony but not about to crowd Twilight to satisfy her curiosity. "We'll find out when we find out."

"I can't imagine why this brute would have any jewelcrafting designs or tailoring patterns," Rarity spoke up, now that the topic was out there. "Ah, but if he does..."

"I don't think it's anything like that. It isn't just one note," Twilight told them, undoing the string and letting the papers separate in the air. She unrolled them, noting that one had been wrapped in an extra layer of parchment to protect it. Bringing them to eye level, she started to skim and read.

"This one is... a note from someone calling himself Voidhorn..."

Blood Diver,

You are to continue to oversee the defense of the surface while we delve into the Mysteries Below. Work has continued slowly, and we require more slaves to continue excavation. There is no getting around this. The Princess has no doubt heard of our attempts to alleviate the labor shortage, and will be sending her guards to investigate the ponynappings. They will soon end up here. Hold them at bay, kill them if you wish, but we must have fresh bodies for the work ahead! So long as the slaves get through, I don't care what you do or how you do it. Take Catnip with you. Her little pet has taken to urinating in the most inconvenient places and I detest manticores. Disgusting creatures, shedding everywhere! My eyes water just thinking about it.

Ambassador Mo'grog should be arriving soon as well. Extend to him every courtesy, and whatever you do, do not stare at the wrong head when it speaks. Politely welcome him to the castle and send him below. I will deal with him as I did the others.

Lastly. DESTROY THIS LETTER WHEN YOU FINISH READING IT. I can not repeat this enough. No one destroys these things. They just leave them for idiots to read when they die. How hard is it to toss it in a fire or throw it off a cliff or, I don't know, just crumple it up and eat it or something. Do not just tuck it into a pocket and forget about it! I don't want any damned mercenary types finding this and thinking: "Oh, hey, I think we should go kill this Voidhorn pony, I bet he had lots of gold and loot." That is about the last thing I need right now.

Your Friendly Overseer and Exalted High Priest,
Voidhorn

The six mares exchanged half-lidded stares.

"OH!" Pinkie Pie suddenly yelped, bouncing straight up. "Twilight! That reminds me! I still have that letter you sent me before, saying you had a 'treasure trove' of books in your library!" She started patting herself down. "Where did I put that?"

"...as for the rest," Twilight continued, rolling that note up. The second paper was the one safely wrapped up to preserve it. There was a second note inside, this one wrapped in gold string. It must have been important.

"Found it!" Pinkie Pie announced, and tucked the paper back away. "...I'll take care of it later..."

Twilight finished looking over the note, and her expression fell.

"These are..." she hesitated, but saw all her friends watching her intently. Fluttershy inched a bit closer to try and see for herself. Twilight sighed. "These are orders from Princess Celestia, with her own signature. From... a year ago."

"A year?" Dash asked, "Before the Cataclysm even. I guess he was a Royal Guard back then?"

"That's right," Celestia's student confirmed, eyes moving as she re-read the scroll. "The orders are to report for duty on the border, as part of the Cartography and Exploration Society of the Royal Guard. She expresses her thanks for all his hard work, that she is honored to have ponies that are willing to part from their families to serve Equestria... and here, at the bottom, she hopes to see him in Canterlot again when he returns..." She paused, re-reading it a third time. "After ten years."

"Ten years!" Dash asked, surprised. "Why so long? And what's a Guardpony doing with, uh... cartography? That's making maps, right?"

"It is," Rarity answered, pondering the question herself. "I can only assume he was sent to map something on the border?"

"Um, maybe Captain Morning Star would know?" Fluttershy quietly suggested. "He is a Royal Guard, too. That's just a suggestion, though. I wouldn't want to pester him."

"That's a good idea," Twilight agreed. "We'll head over and get some answers."

Her friends agreed, and they quickly settled on the gear to distribute. Applejack took the "Compass of the Fallen Scout" as a trinket, further boosting her stamina and providing a chance to absorb damage, and Dash took the deadly "Highdiver's Hoofblade." On him, it was a one hooved weapon, but a regular sized pegasus couldn't hope to wield it strapped to a foreleg. It would be her new Retribution weapon; an improvement over the older foreign made "claymore" despite being, effectively, the same sort of big killer sword.

Captain Morning Star was waiting for them in the middle of the forward camp.

"You're back," he said, in lieu of a warm greeting. Still, he raised a hoof in 'hello' as the six mares approached. "That was good work taking care of Blood Diver. Without him, we have the enemy pegasi on the wing. Did you find a Mark of Command on him?"

No sooner were the words out of the unicorn's mouth, than a light engulfed Applejack and Rarity. They had both gained a level. Twilight joined her friends in congratulating them, and stealthily took out her interactive magical map. As expected, it was showing a quest completed: [35] "One Small Step For Ponies (1)"

Odd - what did the (1) mean?

"Now that the Courtyard is secure," Morning Star continued, bringing up the follow-up quest. "We need to push into the Chapel and then the Observatory. Be on the lookout for Royal Guards fighting Cultists. I've ordered my colts to help you out if they meet you in the field. Our goal is nothing less than to completely dismantle the Twilight Cult in Everfree Forest. Come back to me with anything you find."

And there it went: [35] "One Small Step For Ponies (2)"

"This map is the most amazing thing I've seen yet," Spike said, having crossed the arcane bridge with some trepidation and avoided the various fallen pegasi and other cultponies that remained in the courtyard. He didn't seem particularly concerned by any of it, despite his young age. He was wearing a new bag over his shoulder, like a backpack. It was a gift from Rarity: a new enchanter-only bag, more spacious than a normal mageweave bag, but only able to contain de-enchanted materials.

"Excuse me," Fluttershy spoke up, meowing a bit when the serious faced Royal Captain faced her.

"Yes?"

"I, uh... I was wondering if..."

"What's this Cartography Society Group thing?" Rainbow Dash demanded, making up for the timid pegasus's apprehension.

"The Royal Cartography Society? What does that have to do with anything?" the Captain asked, and listened intently as Twilight explained what they had found. He hadn't shown any surprise at hearing that Blood Diver was actually Highdiver, or that he had been sent to Equestria's borders. They all waited for him to shed some light on what may have happened.

"How many of you have been outside Equestria?" he asked after a long pause.

"We have," Dash answered, pointing to herself and then to Fluttershy.

"Did you actually leave the country, or did you just use a mage portal?" Morning Star asked, guessing it was the latter.

"Well, just the mage portal," the paladin admitted. "What does that matter?"

Fluttershy kept quiet. She had seen a certain something when she came back home. Captain Morning Star noticed this, but didn't draw attention to the druid. His eyes hardened.

"As far back as our records go, the borders of Greater Equestria have been fixed and impassible," he explained. "There are no settlements out there, and all travel is discouraged. The area is like Everfree Forest. The weather is wild and uncontrollable and monsters and barbaric griffin tribes make it hostile to ponylife. Most dragons roost near the mountainous border areas, too. As a result, very few ponies visit the border, and we prefer it that way."

He frowned and hesitated, but ultimately relented on telling them the truth.

"If you keep going north anyway, you will eventually encounter strange... structures. The land is marked by ancient magic. Old magic. Beyond anything ponies have ever used." He glanced at Fluttershy, guessing at what she had seen when she crossed that land. "Before the Cataclysm, that magic prevented ponies or other lesser creatures from leaving or entering Equestria. A few adult dragons have been observed coming and going, but in a thousand years, no pony was ever able to cross. We were not even able to see what was on the other side of the border."

"At the time... the barrier that encircled Equestria was called the Sun Wall," he said, stiffening. "A bright light would prevent anything from breaching it, no matter how high or how low. It could not be flown over or dug under, and it reflected the world back like a giant mirror. Royal Guards posted to the border are there primarily to keep order among the griffin tribes and to investigate any dragon crossings."

"So the Cartography and Exploration Society," Twilight speculated. "Was just a cover up to keep anyone from going to the border? And sending ponies there for a decade... was to make sure they wouldn't spill the secret?"

"Correct," Morning Star primly replied. "Though rotation assignments are a political and not military matter. As you may have realized, all maps published within Equestria bear the seal of the Royal Cartography and Exploration Society, including the one you took out a minute ago, Miss Sparkle. They all designate areas safe to settle in, and areas to avoid. I

assume Her Majesty did not believe the border regions to ever be safe enough for pony settlement."

"It was all... um... destroyed..." Fluttershy muttered behind her pink mane.

"What was?" Rarity asked.

"The border areas. The Sun Wall," she explained softly. "When I flew over the border, everything was destroyed."

"Also correct," The Captain answered. "During the Cataclysm, Deathwing shattered the Sun Wall. We don't know how, exactly. When the magic came apart, it did so with a bang. The entire area is a wasteland. I would not recommend a visit."

"Fluttershy, you physically crossed the border?" Twilight asked, amazed.

"I didn't have a choice," the shy druid replied.

"That doesn't explain why Highdiver went from being a guard there to... to becoming that!" Rainbow Dash pointed accusingly back at the fallen cultist, far larger than any normal stallion. "It doesn't explain why he joined up with these evil ponies!"

Captain Morning Star shook his head slowly. "I don't know. Sometimes there are no answers."

"That doesn't mean there wasn't a reason!" Dash snapped back. She turned around and trotted back to the corpse. "You guys go do whatever with that Mark we got. I'll take care of this."

The Royal Guard watched her go, and faced Twilight. "Miss Sparkle." He held out a hoof. "The Mark of Command, if you please. We have class specific shoulders and headpieces available in exchange..."

- - -

She stood over the fallen pegasus, head held high.

Rainbow Dash extended a hoof, reaching for the Holy Light within, seeking the Light without. Why had she been asked to do this? She wasn't Holy. It wasn't fair to ask her to do things Holy Paladins were supposed to do. Her resolve, unsteady, reflected in her ability to wield the Light. It refused to aid her or bend to her wavering will.

Piqued that her own powers would be giving her trouble, Dash thrust her hoof out again. The will and the fire were there within her. It was easy to call on the Light's Grace when she was racing across a battleground carrying a flag or chasing down an enemy or diving down into a group of bad guys. It was easy to feel Righteous and Zealous when fighting for a just cause or in defense of her friends. It was easy to fight.

It was a lot harder to forgive.

She reached out again, an inner glow radiating from her hoof. She knew what to do. She had been taught what to do. The dead pegasus lay before her, the earthly remains of Highdiver. His sunset red and orange coat and mane were visible now, as the dark malaise that had empowered and corrupted him began to flake off. Somewhere within him was a spark of redemptive holy light. Somewhere within him was a pony who had basked in the sunlight.

Rainbow Dash was just the worst possible paladin to ask to find that spark and draw it out.

'You killed me,' she couldn't help but think, angrily. *'You actually killed me!'*

And yet, she was alive, thanks to her friends. And Highdiver was dead.

'You killed me. If it wasn't for Fluttershy...'

She gritted her teeth, feeling angry again.

'Maybe Celestia would forgive you, but why should I?'

Wincing at her own thoughts, Rainbow Dash tried again. There had to be a spark of goodness in there somewhere, no matter how deeply buried. Celestia's Light fell on all, sinner and sinned. It judged, but it also forgave. She had to Be the Holy Light. She had to want to save this cursed and damned pegasus, this bloodthirsty cultist that had cut her down without a moment of hesitation or remorse. It was a lot easier to say than do.

Her foreleg lowered and she felt the heat from the other fires nearby. The Royal Guard unicorns were burning the other fallen pegasi. As a bare minimum, that was what was required. Ashes would scatter, returning to the winds to fly one last time. Why should the worst of them, the one that had led his wingponies to their doom, what right did he have to ask for last rites?

"I can't... do it..." she realized, almost painfully.

Staring at the body, she saw a Royal Guardpony approach, levitating a magical torch. It would consume the fallen pegasi as thoroughly as any crematory on Cloudsdale. She could always just trot away, say she had done what she was supposed to do, or at least shrug and say she'd run out of time. Or some other excuse. The magical fire would do the rest. Her friends wouldn't blame her.

"Give her a moment, if you please," a voice cut in, and Dash lowered her head as Rarity trotted up close by. The guard acquiesced, moving on.

A few silent seconds passed before Dash noticed the fashion loving unicorn was back in her Discipline spec, and without the shadowform from before. She was silent, too, despite the fact that Dash had expected to either be berated for taking too long. They didn't have all day, after all, and their next stop was the one Rarity most needed. The Nightmareweb Spiders were around the crypts. Of all her friends, the pegasus would have expected this one to be in a hurry to get there and acquire the silk she needed. Instead, Rarity just stood there.

Huffing, Dash reached out with the Light and tried again.

'I forgive you,' she thought, reaching out for that lost spark of light. 'I'll forgive you. I will. Just do something. Reach out to me. Show me where you are.'

The Light Within her was strong. She'd been told as much, so it wasn't just her being boastful, either. Her instructors had told her she had great potential as a paladin. She loved the Light and she Believed in herself and what she was doing. She wasn't Afraid of the dark places the Light would require her to go; to cleanse. Even Paladins of the Silver Hand had seen Celestia's Light in her. Why? Why was this one thing so hard?

Again and again she tried, and again and again she failed.

"I know!" she said, turning to the waiting Rarity. "I'm trying, okay? I've almost got it!"

"I never said to rush yourself," the other pony replied, closing her eyes.

"You were thinking it, I bet," Dash grumbled, and stomped her hoof in frustration. Blanching at having to ask for help, the rainbow pegasus tried to be coy. "Maybe if... we both do it it'll go faster?" she suggested.

"I doubt that will work," Rarity replied with a shake of her head. Facing the paladin, she frowned prettily. "I think I can guess what your problem is, but I don't think I can really help with it."

"And what do you think my problem is?" Dash asked, hotly. "Please, tell me how I'm messing up!"

"Sometimes, you have to give something up to get something back," the Element of Generosity told her.

"Give something up?" Dash scoffed and glared at the fallen pegasus. "I'm supposed to give something up AND forgive this big jerk, even after what he did?" She turned her red eyes to Rarity. "Give me one good reason why."

Rarity shrugged. "I can't."

"What kind of answer is that?" Dash dismissed it, and tried again to demand that the Light bend to her will. Commanding the power within her

wasn't that hard, but it failed to produce results in others. No matter how hard she tried.

Slumping down onto her stomach, she shook her head; it was impossible.

Next to her, another pegasus pony, a colt, groaned. His foreleg was cut, a long of red stretching almost from hoof to elbow, bisected by another horizontal cut, forming a cross. He was in obvious pain, and finally lay down in a more dignified fashion, tucking his legs under him. Holding up his free hoof, he began to summon the Light to heal himself -

"No!" A voice commanded, stopping him. "Rainbow Dash must do it." Heavy boots sounded against the marble floor as their instructor circled them. "Healing oneself is easy. Healing others is not. The Light exists in all things, and it pierces the deepest darkness. It is conceit to believe only in the Light Within Oneself."

"Maybe she just can't do it?" she colt asked with a snigger, only to wince in pain. "Come on already, Dash! Just heal me already!"

"I've been trying!" she yelled back, forcing herself back up onto her hooves. "Maybe if you weren't such a jerk-flank then I'd have done it already!"

"No!" the instructor's voice boomed again. "Sympathy is irrelevant to the issue of salvation. The Light will Save. The Light Alone will Redeem. We are merely conduits for it."

He paced, the sound of his boots distinct in her memory.

"A great man, the Lightbringer himself, once said this: 'The Light is Grace.' For all our pride, we do not deserve it, no matter our race or station or birth or breeding. No human or dwarf or elf or pegasus is without flaw. The Light shines into and through these flaws; the Light Loves. The Light Punishes. The Light Smites. The Light Shields. The Light Forgives. The Light ...Loves. It loves us because we strive to be worthy and we seek to assist others. It loves and flows through us, as paladins, because we try and because we believe. Every day. Prove yourselves worthy of basking in the Light you worship!"

The boots stopped pacing.

"No matter how swift you are, no matter how fleet of foot or hoof or wing... no matter how powerfully you wield a mace or sword, no matter how strong your faith in yourself... a paladin who can not heal others, a paladin who can not see the Light in others.. is no paladin at all!"

Rainbow Dash looked down to her right foreleg, where a cross shaped cut had been healed. She had not healed it herself. Her partner had, and while it had taken longer than he preferred, she had returned the favor. That was how she had learned the pony version of 'Lay on Hands.' Even if he *had* been a jerk-flank. Even if she hadn't liked him. Even if she was only there because the instructors wanted all new pegasus paladins to know "the full range of spells, holy or otherwise."

She had done it.

'The Light's Grace... Celestia's Light. Her Forgiveness. I am a channel.'

Taking a deep breath, she reached back and picked her new sword out from its sheath on her back. Drawing it out with her mouth, she placed it on the body she had looted it from.

'If you want to feel Her Light one last time... I'll do what I have to do. I'm not doing this for a new weapon. That isn't why I came here. Well... it kind of is, but it isn't the only reason! I bet She'd say: redeeming a pony is more important than any amount of gold or any cool new sword. Right?'

Thrusting out a light blue hoof, Dash channeled the Light through her.

'So just believe me already! Yeah! You killed me..! But I forgive you, because I stand in the Light! And I want you to stand in it, too!'

Rainbow Dash smirked at her own words - they had been pretty cool, at least in her own mind - and she didn't falter when nothing happened. It took a moment, a single long second, and then something bright echoed within the body of the dead cultpony. Her Light felt it, reciprocated, willing,

and the two merged and flooded into the shadows. A faint pair of wings emerged in the whiteness, flickering... almost invisible...

Opening her eyes, she saw the body of Highdiver, purified, and burning in a pyre of holy fire.

Faster than even the magical flame, the pale bonfire consumed the earthly remains. Instead of smoke, pure white ash caught the wind, billowing away and crackling. It felt good, and a pit in her stomach seemed to lighten. Rainbow Dash sniffed, and wiped a few embarrassing tears from her cheeks. This must have been what the instructors had talked about before. Redemption, not just for one's allies, but of the sinful as well.

She felt something warm brush up against her and saw Rarity, still quietly watching and waiting. She had understood what was missing after all. Generosity. Redemption and Forgiveness was Generosity. It was the Grace given to them by the Light. Rarity, of all ponies, had understood that.

As the last few embers that had been Highdiver returned to the sky, Dash sucked in a breath.

To her surprise, the sword she had won - and willingly sacrificed - was still intact! Flawless and undamaged, despite the holy fire consuming all the scraps of armor and barding and cloth that had once been on the pegasus's body. The sword survived. Dash reached for it, better to test the heat with a hoof than her lips. Amazingly, it was cool to the touch.

She picked it up, examining it.

It had the same name, 'Highdiver's Hoofblade' but it felt lighter. Better. Cleaner. There was something else, too: an unearthly glow from within the steel. An enchant!

"Crusader?" she heard the name. "I guess that fits!"

Stepping away from Rarity, seeing the other mare's grin, Dash blushed a bit.

"I knew I just needed a little time to get it!" she assured the fashionista with a wide grin. "Thanks, Rarity... for waiting and... stuff..."

Rarity's smile became more playful. "Actually, I originally just came over to show you my new circlet!" She pointed to the beautiful gold and platinum headpiece she had gotten in exchange for the Mark of Command. "Isn't it simply divine? It matches my eyes, too!"

Dash's expression fell into one of disbelief. "That... that was why you came over?"

"You don't think it's a good enough reason?" the pretty white unicorn asked, sounding genuinely confused. She turned around to head back to the others, a smile on her face. "Oh well! Come along then! We have silk to gather and nasty ghosts to... well, bust!"

The pegasus paladin sighed, rolling her eyes, but followed along.

Rarity continued to fiddle, getting the circlet just right around her horn. "I just wish this had some gem sockets..."

Seeing all her friends waiting for her, Dash lowered her head to hide her smile. They were all ready to head out, but not a one of them said a word at having to wait. They didn't need to. They all understood that she had something to do, and had been willing to trust in her to do it. Feeling better than she had in days, Dash took point alongside Applejack.

'I guess if there is a pve group I'd be a part of, this would be it... and it is fun to be with my best friends out here!'

She looked up, shading her eyes against the gradually setting sun in the sky.

- - -

Princess Celestia waited as her little sister demurred over having to pick her own guard, a brooding silence eventually giving way to wary excitement over her upcoming trip and her regaining her old responsibilities. Luna was a smart filly. Even with much of her memories of Nightmare Moon and the distant past either sealed or erased, she was as intelligent and cunning as one would expect from an eternal Aspect.

Seeing her with her little forelegs up on the edge of the balcony, though, she looked so young! Celestia wondered if she would start looking her age within another few years, or whether it would be another hundred or thousand? Or would she return to normal when all her memories and powers came back?

There was so much to consider. So much to plan for.

"Big Sister," Luna said, after watching the assembled guards and picking out a few that caught her eye. One of those sharp green eyes settled on the sun Princess. "Is this really alright?"

Celestia smiled, reassuringly. "Whatever do you mean?"

"These ponies," Luna replied, looking back down without pretense. "They signed up to be your guards, didn't they? Not mine. They're all looking up at you. ...not me."

"We're standing next to each other."

"I can tell the difference." Luna sighed, closing her eyes as she did so. "Maybe this isn't a good idea."

"Luna." Celestia lowered her head to speak to her sister in more hushed tones. "These young stallions wish to serve Equestria, not me."

The iris blue alicorn scoffed. "You *are* Equestria."

"That's where you're wrong," the elder sister added a bit of authority to her voice, to make sure Luna was listening; so she knew that this was important. "Some of my guards may sign up to protect the sun that warms them, or that feeds the crops their families grow, but I know others join to defend their land, their people, their homes and their loved ones. Equestria is all these things. It is them. It is me." She tried to nuzzle her forlorn sister, but Luna recoiled a bit. "And it is you."

"Your night sky brings them rest and peace," Celestia continued, trying to get through to her only sibling. "Equestria would not survive with my Light alone in the sky."

Luna knew this, academically. She knew it spiritually. But emotionally? Green eyes narrowed, glanced down guiltily, and then hid behind lavender eyelids.

"I know," she eventually said, relenting, but her voice was still tinged by sadness and doubt. "But...still..."

Luna's jaw set, stubbornly.

Celestia sighed very softly, and motioned down with one gold-gilded hoof. She had to do it twice to make sure Luna was following and not just looking away.

"That stallion down there. Third regiment, on the left, front row," the Sun Princess said. Her target was a tan coated pegasus. "His name is Dead Weight. Not the best flyer, but very strong, or so I hear. His family makes horseshoes in Cloudsdale."

"That unicorn there. First regiment, on the right, back row," she continued. "His name is Bullhorn. He came from an orphanage in Manehattan."

Luna's ears perked up; Celestia could tell she was wary, but interested in where this was going.

"Can you guess what other stallions here are from Manehattan?" the regal Princess asked, glad to have her little sister's attention again. "That one," she pointed, down to the front, to a dignified but well built pony with an orange-blond mane. "Regiment Two's master of hooves. His name is Marrs Orange. His family is one of the wealthiest in eastern Equestria."

"The fruit moguls?" Luna asked, and gave her sister a calculating, suspicious look. "How... do I know you aren't making this up?"

"I guess I could be," Celestia admitted, still smiling amiably. "Do you think I am?"

Luna pursed her lips, but eventually smiled back, though it was a shy, small smile, laced with lingering nervousness. She pointed down at the guard ranks. "That one. Regiment Two, third row, second from right."

"That one?" She seemed to be referring to a large Earth pony.
"Bricks. Construction workers. Ponyville."

"To his right?"

"Gold Rush. His family is Canterlot Nobility. He's the youngest son of-
"

"Two spaces to the left."

"Bread Basket. Farmers. Stalliongrad."

"To his left, the row behind?"

Celestia indulged her sister, as she asked ever more quickly, probably hoping to catch a stutter or other indication that her sister didn't know each and every would-be guardpony down below. It was typical of her inquisitive and skeptical nature. Like Twilight, Luna didn't easily just 'believe' what she had been told, not without evidence. This wasn't a poor trait to have, in Celestia's opinion. Skepticism was healthy and warranted in a leader. Sometimes, however, it was taken too far.

"You know every pony down there," the Moon Princess eventually realized, not so much surprised by that fact as she was slightly confused. "All eighty four of them. Their backgrounds, too. ...Why?"

She had been expecting this question minutes ago.

"Because," Celestia explained, "Every colt who enters my guard is beloved. I make a point to know their names, and to know the families who will miss them when they leave home." She looked out over her loyal subjects, extending her smile to them. "If I could, I would return all of them home, alive and better for their time in my household. When I see the faces of some of these stallions, I remember their fathers. And their grandfathers. And their grandfather's grandfathers."

"Some..." she said, more softly. Sadly. "Some do not return to me." Celestia briefly closed her eyes, feeling the weight of years lost and orders

given; sons never returned to their farms and homes. Orphans who would never become fathers. All for the Equestria of which she was but a part.

"The least I can do is to know who I am sending into danger."

Luna was staring up at her, green eyes wide. Finally, she looked away, contemplative.

"I see," she said, thinking. "It has been a long time, Big Sister, since..." She nodded to herself as she stared down at the assembled guards. "I'll do the same. My ponies may start off as yours, but I'll love them just like you do. I'll honor their service to Equestria."

She raised a hoof high over the balcony, gilded in moontouched silver.

"PRESENT!" The four older, master-at-hoof ponies demanded.

"HAIL! PRINCESS LUNA!" The eighty guards-in-training saluted in unison, stomping their hooves in a single, sharp battle-chorus. Celestia ducked her head slightly, seeing a genuine smile on her normally dour sister's face.

Looking up at her own setting sun, the Princess Aspect felt a slight shiver.

The cold air, perhaps.

Chapter 7

Despite it being a few hours from sunset, the Defiled Crypts seemed to be pervaded by a supernatural, haunted haze. Sunlight dimmed and shadows lengthened, casting a pall on the grounds surrounding the ancient mausoleum. The Everfree forest was foreboding even at the best of times beneath its all encompassing canopy, but this one section put everything else they had seen to shame. Entering the unnatural darkness, the sky above her head growing overcast and indistinct, Twilight Sparkle couldn't help but repress a shiver. It was cold here, too, enough to make the hairs on her coat stand on end.

"Ah, the undead!" Rainbow Dash broke the mood with a laugh, boldly walking ahead with Applejack. "I can practically smell 'em! This is a perfect opportunity to use Exorcism! Or Turn Undead! I can't wait!"

"You've fought.... these things before?" Twilight asked. Her first impulse had been to say 'ghosts' but the term was just so darn supernatural. Nevermind that they were real. Nevermind that they *were* ghosts. Almost any term was better.

"Ah. Well. No, not really," The pegasus paladin admitted, shrugging under her armored barding. "Only practice stuff back when I was learning. But I know all the tricks! I'm ready and good to go!"

"Aren't there undead fellas out in those battlegrounds ya been in?" Applejack inquired, motioning for them to head towards a nearby stone path.

"Forsaken are kinda special undead," Dash replied, but followed it up with a long 'hmm.'

"Special?"

"Yeah. Ah. Special." The pegasus paused, trying to remember. "Something about Sylvanias? I don't really remember the details. Just that things like Holy Wrath don't stun them like normal zombies."

"I've always wanted to fight zombies!" Pinkie chimed in and stuck out one foreleg, holding it like a cannon. "I'd blast em and blast em! Cha-chuk! Cha-chuk! Who's a pony and a half? I'm a pony and a half!"

She rolled along the ground, jumping back up to aim at another pack of invisible zombies. "But they'd keep coming, so that's when you circle strafe, circle strafe! Run to a wall to get a better gun and then POW POW POW you blow them to bits! But then more come out and you're out of ammo but, hey! What's that on the ground in the next room?"

"A chainsaw, the great communicator!" Her arm started to shake and shoot smoke as she ran up to Fluttershy. "VRRRR BRRRRRR!"

"Eee!" Her tree-loving friend cowered before the mighty pinkiesaw.

Dash arched an eyebrow at the loony pony. "That's not how you deal with zombies, Pinkie."

"It is when the zombies have shotguns!" Pinkie bounced over Fluttershy and onto the other side of the stone pathway. "But since there's no chainsaws around, what'daya wanna do about all the ghosties and ghoulies? Besides laugh at 'em?"

"We'll have to fight them, clearly," Rarity answered with a melancholy muse. "At least until we can get to the root of the problem within the mausoleum itself."

"Priests and paladins both have special spells to use against undead," Twilight remembered from her last-minute prep reading. "Rarity, Rainbow, I don't suppose you could teach me any of them? According to the notes in my spellbook, things like polymorph won't work on undead."

"Um..."

"I *am* sorry, Twilight, but that simply isn't possible," Rarity explained, seeing Dash wasn't quite sure how to give their bookworm leader the news. "What Rainbow Dash and I use aren't spells you can learn as a mage."

"I learned your gem finding spell pretty quickly," Twilight reminded her. "I know you use Holy spells, but that doesn't mean I can't learn them."

At this, Dash spoke up. "Actually, it does. Even though she's a unicorn, Rarity here can't use the kind of spells you learned either."

"It isn't about you or me specifically. The Holy Light is somewhat... exclusive in how it operates," the fashionista explained. "You have to forsake virtually all other magics to wield it. Arcane magic is merely a safe, domesticated form of Fel magic after all. I believe some innate magic, like elemental spells, may not be rejected... it doesn't interfere with my finding gems or my levitation, for example. But you either wield it alone or not at all."

"So I'll never be able to learn any of your Holy spells? No matter how much I study them?" Twilight frowned at that news. "That doesn't seem fair." She turned to the one other possibility left, "What about nature spells?"

"Sorry, Twilight," Fluttershy replied, but didn't say more.

"Don't worry, I'm still here!" Pinkie turned around and trotted backwards without missing a step. "I'll teach you how to make friends with the elements! All you have to do is race change to Earth Pony!"

"Oh, Celestia, did I tell ya who I saw the other day?" Applejack asked, looking back over her shoulder. "Doctor Whooves. Went up and turned himself human. Strangest thing I've ever seen. A pony turnin' into a human."

"Where'd *he* get the money to race change?" Rarity asked, surprised.

"Beats me! Must have some friends in high places ah guess."

"Hey! Check it out!" Dash yelled, motioning to the open yard ahead. The stone road they were on intersected with the broken remains of a

statue; the horned head lay on the ground, split in half, and part of a rearing body remained on the pedestal, one wing still mostly intact. It vaguely resembled Nightmare Moon, and from the look of it, it was made of bronze and assembled in sections - those sections now having fallen apart. It was almost onyx-dark, despite the vines and moss that had taken to growing on it. The stone path circling it was mostly worn away, but it seemed to become a visible depression of grass and cobblestones that circled the ancient statue.

Adding an exclamation point to the already creepy atmosphere of the darkened, chilly-as-the-grave forest around them, the statue and the trees and bushes nearby were all festooned with a macabre carnival of thick spider webs. The gossamer threads stuck to almost everything, and they weren't white like normal silk either, they were black as the night and shimmered like finely spun threads of oil.

Fluttershy gasped, as she saw the first body, hanging from the webs. The pony was wrapped tightly enough that her face could almost be seen, frozen in horror. The pegasus, probably a cultist, was long dead: her body cavity was shriveled and drained, leaving a mummified corpse behind. There were two others within an apple's throw of the fallen statue, also spun up and hanging from branches.

Up ahead, the ground skittered with tiny black shapes.

"Ah yes, the pony eating spiders," Rarity was the first to speak, albeit with a demure grimace. "Lovely."

"They're so small!" Dash scoffed, ready to run ahead. "I'll just pop Divine Protection and round em up with consecrate!"

Fluttershy bit her friend's tail, keeping her from rushing in.

"Hey!" The pally pegasus fell back on her hooves, wings still flapping. "What?"

The timid druid let Dash go, and stood up a little taller. "Um. Please don't just rush in. Those are only Nightmareweb hatchlings. Not... um... adults."

"Those're just baby spiders?" Applejack asked. "So...?"

"That's an adult right there." Fluttershy raised a shaking hoof to point just to the left of the statue.

Her friends all craned their necks and stared, but couldn't see it.

"I don't see it," Pinkie said with a sad moue. "Oh! Oh! Actually, I do!"

"You do?" Twilight couldn't see anything at all unusual. Just bushes and webs and the broken statue.

"Yep!" Pinkie Pie nodded vigorously and smiled. "It's invisible!"

"Invisible?" the unicorn asked, doubtful.

"Actually, yes, Nightmareweb adults are invisible," Fluttershy explained in a soft voice. "This one is half on the web and half off."

"Ah... Ah still don't see it," Applejack tilted her head but soon gave up. "Are ya sure there's somethin' there?"

"Oh um, yes," Fluttershy replied. "I'm sure. I can sense animals. That one out there is watching us. She's just waiting for somepony to get closer so she can use her webs. She's... hungry."

The fate of the three dead ponies hanging from trees entered everypony's mind at that moment.

Rarity visibly shuddered. "Well. I did hear they were dangerous..."

"Very dangerous." Fluttershy took that as an opening to expound on her knowledge of nature and wildlife. "Nightmareweb Spiders often work cooperatively to bring down larger prey, tangling it in webs and then using poison to paralyze it. Only a few drops in the bloodstream produces intense pain, followed by immobility. They then take turns sucking the juices out of-"

"Darling, please, no more," Rarity pleaded, stopping her pegasus friend.

"Oh. Um. sorry..."

"So they're invisible and they're poisonous," Twilight summarized what they knew, minus the more grizzly details and feeding habits. "And they can attack in groups?"

Fluttershy nodded, eyes darting guiltily to the side.

"You're our animal expert here." Dash tucked her wings back against her side, momentarily reigned in. "How should we handle this?"

"Maybe ya could use that stare of yers ta scare em off?" Applejack suggested.

"I can't really control it like that," Fluttershy demurred, rubbing the top of her right forehoof with her left. "I don't even know if it would work on things like these spiders. Most animals are just scared or protective of their territory. They don't *want* to attack anypony. These are pony-eaters by nature."

"So no stare?" Twilight asked, a little upset by not having it to fall back on. It had worked on a dragon and a cockatrice, but then, the dragon had been sentient and defending its home and treasure; the cockatrice, well, she didn't know about that one. Those were just animals, weren't they?

Fluttershy shook her head sadly. "I could try, but..."

"If they're pony-eaters, and those three chumps up in the trees point to them being just that, then how do we put these critters down?" Dash asked, growing a bit impatient.

"I - um. I guess..." Fluttershy stuttered, retreating at all the pressure on her.

"Take your time," Twilight added, leaning down.

The shy druid nodded once and took a deep, steadying breath. Drawing strength from it, she stood up straight and approached the front of

their little formation, between Dash and Applejack. A brief shaft of light broke through the haunting haze overhead, but only for a second or two. A cool breeze ruffled manes and caused one of the hanging corpses to slowly spin in a lazy circle.

"I think... um..." Fluttershy finally said. "Twilight. Could you give me party assist, please?"

"Oh. Sure! Right." Twilight bit her lip, recalling what she'd learned about the marking and leadership spells. It took a second or two, but she remembered how to extend the privileges to another party member.

A star appeared in thin air, next to the statue.

Beneath it, marked by Fluttershy, was the adult Nightmareweb Spider, identified as an 'Ambusher.' With the mark magically floating over it, the other mares could see what their pegasus friend had seen. The shape was invisible, thanks to some innate magic, but the eight long, segmented legs rippled enough to make out in the haze. The body was bulbous, with a large abdomen, small core, and large head studded with beady, reflective eyes. Two cruel barbs hung from under the head: hooked fangs long enough to be daggers or small swords.

"Ah suppose it's too late ta suggest we skip this place fer later?" Applejack joked, letting out a breath she'd been holding. "I ain't never seen somethin that nasty before."

"What do these things eat to get that big?" Dash couldn't help but ask. The spider was larger than she was!

"They eat..." Fluttershy began to explain, but caught herself. "Well, you know. Um, yes, anyway. We also need to do something about the hatchlings. They'll try to attack anypony that gets close. I can use Remove Corruption to dispel poison, and um... Dash.... you have Cleanse, don't you?"

"Yep!" the other pegasus confirmed, "I only just got it the other day."

"I think... I mean, if I remember right..." Fluttershy swallowed, taking another deep breath. "The venom takes several seconds to paralyze a

pony our size. We have to remove it before then. I think we should kite the adult away from the statue, or maybe polymorph it, and use area spells to, um... you know... the hatchlings. If somepony gets stuck in webs, she'll probably need help getting out."

"Everypony got that?" Twilight asked, making sure she got nods and other affirmatives. "We'll go with Fluttershy's plan. Applejack, you get the hatchlings. I'll polymorph the Ambusher."

As the group took their positions, Twilight was silently thankful they had Fluttershy to detect and mark the invisible Nightmareweb Ambushers. Just running into a pack of these things and then getting attacked out of nowhere by their hungry mother was a recipe for trouble, if not disaster.

Applejack began by charging into the mass of small spiders by the statue and stomping her hooves, creating a powerful thunderclap. The voracious little pony-eaters immediately swarmed around the warrior, crawling over each other to reach her. It looked absolutely nightmarish to Twilight, standing a safe distance away. The mere thought of having ten or twenty of those little terrors crawling up her legs, over her face, along her cutie mark, all biting and leaving sticky webs...

She shuddered; horrible!

A surge of arcane magic, and the killer arachnid puffed into a far less threatening sheep before it could respond to the nearby disturbance. As soon as that was done, the unicorn mage powered up a new spell: Blink. It was very similar to the old unicorn teleportation spell, but much faster and easier to use. The limitation was that it always moved a caster a set distance and in a set direction.

BAMF!

In the literal blink of an eye, she was a foot in the air, right next to Applejack. As gravity reasserted itself, Twilight brought together a tight knot of arcane energy and directed it into herself. Her coat and mane glowed a fierce violet-pink, and the moment her hooves hit the ground, she released the pent up energy! This was no magic missile. The arcane explosion blasted outwards in every direction, tearing into the pack of small spiders but leaving Applejack, mere inches away, completely unharmed.

Pinkie Pie bounced through the air, spinning like a top. "Magma Totem! Magma Totem!" She sang. "Show 'em what ya got!"

A festive looking firecracker spun away from the carnation-pink shaman, unleashing gouts of volcanic fire in one steady pulse after another. Everything not protected by personal association to the elemental Earth Pony instantly caught flame. This included the swarm of spiders crawling all over the hunkered down Applejack - miraculously, the magical flames greedily consumed the poisonous arachnids but left the pony unscathed.

Twilight was already unloading another arcane explosion. The spell was very fast: simply conjure, shape, release! Even inexperienced as she was, it was simple to do, over and over again. As long as Applejack kept the little spiders on her and off her two area-of-effect-spamming allies ("holding aggro: Spike had called it) then they could take the skittering beasts down. With one final explosion, the vile spiders collectively turned to ash.

"That was not fun!" Applejack exclaimed from beneath her shield. Nonetheless, she knew what had to come next. Nature magic coursed through her, cleansing and purifying the venomous poisons injected by the Nightmareweb hatchlings.

Without another word of complaint, she took the fight to the sheeped adult.

The magic holding the polymorph together broke, and the huge Ambusher spider returned to form. It immediately lunged for the warrior pony that had so rudely crashed into it. Hairy, segmented legs lifted to try and batter at the apple farmer and killer fangs scraped hungrily against Applejack's shield. Meeting unexpected resistance from its prey, the huge spider chittered and spat the poison instead, catching Applejack in the face. She cried out, blinded and in pain -

Fluttershy's magic swirled around the warriors face, dispelling the poison.

Rainbow Dash, waiting to pick up the big spider in case crowd control broke early, finally rushed in. The sword in her mouth shone with brilliant, holy light that crackled like lightning around the trail of rainbow light she left behind. Her blow hit like the wrath of Celestia herself, easily clipping off one of the Nightmareweb Spider's legs and cutting a gash into its hairy hide. Pinkie Pie channeled bolts of lightning in an almost steady stream, causing the beast to rear up high on five legs.

Then, abruptly, the head ducked down, and a web of sticky goo shot from the spinnerets on its rear. Fluttershy only had time to squeak in surprise and shock as she became engulfed and literally cocooned by spider silk. Twilight could see her thrashing, vainly, to escape... unable to cast spells or even move. Or even breathe, the unicorn realized.

She immediately switched targets to her trapped friend. Gauging the distance, Twilight knew she was too far away for an arcane explosion to reach, so rather than run or blink - and risk overshooting - she formed arcane missiles. She bolts shot from her horn, impacting and stripping away the webs while carefully leaving Fluttershy unaffected. Avoiding friendly fire was the most important thing, even though Twilight knew her friend would be able to heal herself. The idea of actually hurting the kind hearted pegasus, even by accident or even to save her life, was unimaginable.

Rarity picked up heals and Dash used Cleanse while Fluttershy was incapacitated, and after a few seconds, enough of the cocoon had been burned and blasted away that she could escape. Still covered by draping bits of thread, Fluttershy paid it no mind and went back to her healing. The Nightmareweb Ambusher got off one last web spray before dying. Rarity gave a distressed sound as she ended up entangled and cocooned by the fallen predator.

They were able to blast her out easily enough, but the damage had already been done.

"My mane! Oh! Oh!" The unicorn was spinning in circles, one hoof still tangled in the sticky mess that was her once perfect coiffure. "I can't - Oh! This is just - "

Dash didn't help matters by laughing like a schoolfilly. "This is priceless! Pinkie Pie! We gotta get some of this stuff for pranks later!"

"This is not funny!!" Rarity composed herself enough to yell, red faced. "I have a thousand bits worth of silk in my mane!" Her left hoof tried to get out from the mess, but only made the whole tangle worse. "And I can't - Aah! This is most unpleasant!"

Fluttershy quietly transformed into a cat and then back into a pony, shapeshifting out of the webs that had remained stuck to her. The magic somehow disentangled the mess left in her own hair, leaving it as pristine and perfectly smooth as always. Rarity could only gawk at the pegasus's skill.

"That. That is not fair," she announced with a pout. Finally, she tore her hoof free.

"Disgusting," she reiterated, but ignored what couldn't be undone. Vexed, she approached the fallen spider and lowered her head. Her horn glowed fiercely, energy collecting at the tip.

A slender spool floated out of her bags over to the Nightmareweb Spider's spinnerets. Most of the webs used in the area were too interlaced or tangled to use as proper thread. Instead, Rarity had a spell - or perhaps the spools themselves had spells within them - to collect the silk from the spider directly. Long lines of it emerged from a reservoir of liquid goo, wrapping around the magical spool faster and faster. Then, all at once, the silk threads snapped tight around the wooden knob.

A white seal covered the now filled spool of thread with an audible snap.

"One down," Rarity announced, wiping sticky silk from her eyelashes. "Nine to go."

- - -

Twenty one hoof-picked stallions stood at attention in the empty chamber that passed for the Lunar Court. Four Royal Guards, stationed silently to flank the entrance and antechamber doors, watched their would-

be brothers with something akin to ambivalence. Guards were famed for their unflappability, especially when on watch. To Princess Luna's practiced eye, they seemed one muscle twitch from pouncing, though at what, she couldn't be sure.

She sat on her throne, taking in the unaltered faces of the ponies she had gathered. Though, to be more exact, Celestia had gathered them - Luna had merely accepted twenty of that pre-determined crop. A suspicious side of her couldn't help but dryly observe that, if her sister wanted to plant her own ponies among the new Night Guard, then this would be how to do it. Were any of the stallions standing before her secretly Royal Guards planted as new recruits? How many of those eighty four hadn't just signed up to defend Celestia, how many were Celestia's colts already?

Luna screwed her eyes shut, trying not to think like that. That was how she had gotten in trouble before. That was how she had caused trouble before. She couldn't think like that any more! Her mind raced back to what her sister had said, and she remembered her vow.

"I'll do the same," she had said, "My ponies may start off as yours, but I'll love them just like you do. I'll honor their service to Equestria."

Yes.

'They won't betray me,' she told herself. 'They won't be able to.'

"Gentlecolts," she spoke up, her voice a but too soft. In the back rows, a few pairs of ears twitched to hear her.

"Gentlecolts," Luna said more loudly, more forcefully. More regally. The assembled would-be Guardsponies all heard her this time, and assumed rigid postures. Marrs Orange was at their head as her chosen Master of Hooves. He stomped, once, and signaled. The ranks of ponies lowered their heads in a practiced bow.

"Please. Please, there's no need for that here," Luna told them, slowly descending from her throne. The sound of her gilded horseshoes against the black marble echoed in the otherwise empty hall. It was an irony there: this was the same Canterlot throne she had fled from, more

than a thousand years ago. It, alone, remained the same when so much else in the castle had been remodeled and rebuilt. The rest of the throne room was tile and fresco: new and polished.

The twin Thrones were placed, east and west, back to back; the royal chambers set north to south. Like pole and antipole, positive and negative, except that ponies gravitated to the warmth and light of the Eastern Throne to bask in the radiance of the sun. The Western Throne was a relic. If Luna was lucky, then she'd receive word that some students had visited during the day while she slept, as part of a historical field trip.

"I have no interest in supplication," she continued, stepping down until she was on the same level as them. Raising her head high, she waited for the stallions to raise their heads so she could look them in the eyes.

When the last of them stood tall, she began to trot parallel to them.

"First, gentlecolts, let me thank you for your service to Equestria." Her eyes softened, and she bowed her head, just slightly. "Thank you. All of you. From the bottom of my heart."

Luna blinked, and cool green eyes lifted to pass over their ranks.

"Second," she said, slowly pacing again. "I thank you for your patience. I have been thinking for some time of what to say to you before I accept your vows and dye you in my colors. So much has changed. There is not a one of you versed in the Old Ways. Even the old organization of the Decurio has fallen out of favor. What can I say that could possibly resonate with you?"

She paused, and her wings flapped, once, to carry her upwards. She alighted softly back on the base of her dais. At the least, she had everyone's attention. It felt good. Heady, even. Luna resisted the urge to smile or smirk.

"Two thousand years ago," she began, giving them some perspective. "Your ancestors lived in walled camps. The land as you knew it was still not completely tame. Ponies labored hard under my sister's sun, in constant war with the wild elements.... and they feared predators under my moon light. In those dark nights, fathers feared for their colts and fillies,

that they be taken in their sleep. The Night Guard were created, not just to protect me, but to stand watch in the night. To remain alert in the dark places of Equestria, so that their brothers and sisters could sleep without fear."

Luna took a deep breath, as if feeling the passage of time. "I saw how, over the generations, ponies forgot about the dangers that lurked in the shadows. They forgot about the Night Watch that guarded them while they slept, naked, under the stars. My Guard dwindled, too, as the threats retreated into forests like Everfree and Wolf's Wood."

Letting that sink in, she paused briefly.

"All I will ask of you, my ponies, is that you serve as those Night Guards served. You will sleep while others play. You will watch while others sleep. You will serve in darkness, and be sent to dark places. Do your job well, and no pony will know of the sacrifices you make so that others may doze on a hill or nap in a tree." Her wings started to spread, angling low. "I have explained what I expect from you. Any who wish to leave may do so. All those that remain... pegasus, unicorn, Earth pony. Say your vows. Say them, and I shall dye you in my colors and bind you to me."

None of the twenty one moved, save to keep their heads high. The four Royal Guards, however, nickered and backed away. The room had grown dark, shadows creeping up walls and obscuring newly restored frescoes. Two of them scraped bladed hooves against the tiled floor, barely able to conceal their anxiety. The shadows pooled around them, not wanting to get too close.

"You four," Luna said, turning her head to address the pair near her personal chamber doors. Her eyes were a collage of shifting green, pupils slit. "Leave."

Despite the situation, the Celestia's four guards stood, stamped their right forehooves in salute, and hastily headed out the doors they were supposed to guard. Luna was now alone with the twenty one. Her chosen twenty one. They were still Celestia's, but they would become hers. In time.

"We serve Equestria!" Marrs Orange barked out the vow.

"We serve Equestria!" his twenty subordinated immediately repeated.

"Hear my vow, Oh Princess!" he announced, leading the group. "My eyes close and I entrust myself to you! When next I see, my service shall begin! I am the blade and the barding, the rod and the plow! In the Light of the Sun. In the Light of the Moon. We submit ourselves! Brothers! Guards! Your Princess stands before you! Sal-lute!"

The twenty stomped and raised a hoof to their Princess.

"We submit ourselves!" they echoed, tendrils of shadow curling up their legs and across their flanks. "As Brothers! As Guards!"

"I serve in the darkness and stand guard in the night," Luna told them, remembering the old words; passing them on. "This night. All nights. Death alone shall release me."

"I serve in the darkness and stand guard in the night!" The guards echoed, their voices reverberating within the throne room. The light of the Moon, the light of Elune, engulfed the room, and the shadows constricted, leaving time for only the final verse of the vow.

"Death alone shall release me!"

And then Luna's shadow embraced them.

- - -

"Ah never thought ah'd actually have'ta say this, but I'm gettin' pretty sick'n tired ah all these giant spiders tryin' ya eat me."

The area around the crypts was now almost completely clear. The pulls had gotten steadily more difficult as they marked and drew the stealthy Nightmareweb Ambushers and swarms of hatchlings out from their myriad of hiding places. Currently, one was polymorphed and another one sleeping, thanks to Fluttershy's quick use of a Hibernate spell.

A literal carpet of vile spider hatchlings lay around Twilight and Pinkie Pie's hooves, and even the pink party pony was sticking out her tongue in disgust. Everyone but Fluttershy and Applejack were also covered in

strands of sticky silk from being cocooned, some once, some multiple times. In the last fight, Pinkie had been webbed up two times in a row, much to her bubbly annoyance.

"You may have webbed *me* up, but my fire totem fights on!" she had yelled, managing to somehow squeeze her mouth out through the silky prison. "Avenge me fire totem!"

They were down to the last two, now.

"Break the hibernate first!" Twilight ordered, already casting. Three Ambushers at once was a little tough, but as long as their crowd control held, they could handle it. The important thing was to separate the adults from the hatchlings, so the area of effect spells didn't break polymorph or hibernate. Applejack ended up getting bitten by the second Ambusher, as a huge, hairy leg knocked her off balance for a moment, but Fluttershy's healing was top notch. Rarity had gone back to shadowform to help deal damage, and the giant pony-eating spider was soon put down. Not a minute later, the third also fell, as a rainbow blur crashed into it from above.

"Hahaha!" Dash laughed, triumphantly pulling her new sword free from the fallen spider's head. "Do we rule or what?!"

"Ah'm just glad that's over with," Applejack backed away from the dead arachnid and wiped the sweat from her brow. "Bein' poisoned over and over ain't mah idea of a good time."

While Rarity quickly went to work harvesting the last three spools of silk she needed, Twilight noticed something of particular interest to her. The area was safe as far as they could tell, and her archaeology spell was tingling! Of particular interest was the fallen statue. Getting closer, she lowered herself down enough to inspect the base.

It seemed to be very old bronze, quite dark, in the minimalist style...

The inquisitive unicorn was about to put down her surveying gear, when a huge segmented leg arched over her shoulder from behind.

"AAAAHHH!!" Jumping nearly out of her skin, Twilight's screech sent a flock of bats into the air, squeaking in protest over the sudden and

unwanted noise pollution. Even at the Royal Guard camp, ponies stopped to angle their ears towards the noise coming from the crypts.

Falling on her rump, Twilight turned shakily towards the giant spider leg -

Currently held in the mouth of a pink pony.

"Gotcha! Gotcha!" Pinkie Pie chortled, spitting the hairy leg out of her mouth. "Ugh! Gross! But totally worth it! You should'a seen your face, Twilight! you were all like, 'oh, what's this, a dig site I can poke around?' And then I was like 'Hehehe! This is gonna be good!' And you went-" And here she took a deep breath, clearly planning to repeat the scream from moments before.

Only to get a hoof in her mouth instead.

"I was there, Pinkie Pie. It was very funny." Twilight removed her hoof from Pinkie Pie's pie hole. "You nearly scared the life out of me."

"You can turn people into zombies by scaring them?!" The shaman's eyes widened into huge blue saucers. "I never knew! I'm so sorry!"

"Uh. You. I." At a momentarily loss for words, Twilight just hung her head. "Nevermind. Just watch my back while I search for anything interesting. And please, no more freak outs?"

"Pinkie Pie swear!" the zany shaman crossed her chest and ended the pledge with a hoof in her eye.

Wracked by one last shudder - uggggh giant pony-eating spiders! - Twilight went back to the statue and the archaeology site she had identified. Just like before, with the cist she had found in the Everfree forest, she brought out her survey equipment. The dig site here was smaller, so she was already pretty close to anything of note. Following the magical archaeology gear, her eyes lit up as she found a suspiciously upturned cobblestone.

In fact, now that she got a closer look at it, the "cobblestone" wasn't really a cobblestone. It was cut and uniform in size. It was more like a

hexagonal tile. Using a spell to clean it off, and a brush in her mouth to finish the job, Twilight confirmed that it was bronze, too. Like the statue. There was stone underneath the "cobblestone" as a sort of foundation, and the bronze had been affixed on top of it.

'Strange,' Twilight thought, bringing the metallic cobblestone up to her eye to get a closer look. There was a copper detailing within the bronze hexagon.

'Just like that statue!' she realized. The rearing mare could only have been Luna, what with there only being two winged unicorns and all. The detailing there had also been with copper, and the eyes had been inlaid with glassy obsidian. Sadly, any actual valuables like gemstones or silver had been forcibly stripped from the statue centuries ago.

Copper detailed bronze was a strange material to use as tile or in place of stone for a walkway. It must have cost a fortune to have so many of the little hexagonal tiles made, and for what? So that ponies could walk on them? Most of the tiles were buried in dirt and grass, despite being built on a solid bed of stone, probably pumice.

Inlaid on the tile was... a letter? A symbol maybe? Or was it another pictograph?

"Looks like a cutie mark!" Pinkie Pie, instead of watching for other killer spiders, opted instead to stretch her neck like a giraffe to peer over Twilight's shoulder. "An hour glass cutie mark just like Doctor Whooves used to have!"

"Pinkie Pie," Twilight lectured, amused by leap of logic her friend had taken. "An hour glass shape can mean almost anything. It is very similar to the letter 'H', for example, especially when written in ancient Equestrian alphanumerics or in stylized script. It was also associated with the afterlife and the concept of impermanence. Since this is a graveyard, it makes sense that superstitious ponies would add 'powerful symbols' to pieces of masonry or construction as..."

"What about this one?" Pinkie suddenly held up another tile, pried loose. Twilight sighed patiently and levitated it close, cleaning it off with magic and her brush.

"It looks like... three or four... circles?" Actually, they looked sort of like bubbles.

That... didn't correspond to any known icons or pictographs or letters that she knew of.

Raising an eyebrow, entertaining Pinkie's theory, Twilight took another look around. She also remembered the "tree" symbol they had found on the Earth pony grave in the forest. No names. Modern graves had names. Unicorn Mausoleums had rosters of the interred. Even pegasi kept rolls of those "returned to the wind." An individual Earth pony grave would have a name on a stele. The unicorn crypts here should have lists carved in stone near the entrances.

Finding another loose tile, she pried it up and cleaned it off.

There was another strange symbol on it, inlaid in copper: a four pointed star with a slash above and below. Twilight wracked her mind, trying to recall any arcane or mundane symbolism that it could be related to. Nothing. Nothing came to mind at all! Was it possible? Could each of these tiles have a different cutie mark on them?

There had to be... hundreds around Luna's statue.

"Fin-ished!" Rarity announced, over by the fallen spiders.

~

[34] A Sticky Situation (COMPLETE)

Objectives:

Bring 10 Spools of Nightmareweb Silk to Rarity

You will need:

[Nightmareweb Silk] x10 (10/10)

Notes:

"I don't much like it, but I just can't find any acceptable substitute. This silk is the only one that will do!"

~

Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy both bathed in a pillar of light as they gained a level.

"How nice," the latter quietly said.

With a loud whoop, Pinkie Pie jumped over and threw something to the ground at their feet. The red smoke flare, modified to be more pink than crimson, bathed the surprised pegasus in a colorful cloud, surprising her long enough for Pinkie to grab her hooves and transform into a ghost wolf. She immediately started to dance. Dragged along for the ride, Fluttershy mewed and finally gave in, turning into her druid-kitty form and dancing along.

Tongue lolling, the loony shaman then started to sing a Pinkie Pie song... which only came out as "who roo woof grrr whoo!!"

What with her being a wolf and all.

"Was there anything else on those spiders?" Twilight asked, trotting up to Rarity, Applejack and Rainbow Dash. The trio were staying a discrete distance from the enthusiastic party pony-turned-phantom-canine. Though it was amusing to see a ghost wolf and a Flutter-kitty dancing and trying to sing.

Didn't a druid of Fluttershy's level also know bear form?

The image of Fluttershy as a huge bear, hiding behind a tree, passed through Twilight's mind prompting a polite giggle. It seemed pretty unlikely they'd ever see their soft spoken friend feral tanking any time soon.

"Sorry, Twi," Rainbow Dash shook her head, answering the question from before. "There was nothing good. Just spider meat and gross stuff like that."

"Ah found ah 'chipped spider fang' ... like that's worth anythin'," Applejack added, sticking out her tongue. "Not even any gold, though Ah guess it would be a bit silly if spiders somehow had gold coins on em."

"This silk is more valuable than gold," Rarity informed them, sounding satisfied despite the sticky, webby mess in her hair that she'd - for now -

given up on fixing. "Nightmareweb silk is among the most coveted of Equestrian fabrics. I can *not* wait to get back to my shop and start making new dresses and robes and cloaks! Nightmareweb embroidery is all the rage this season!"

"If you say so." Applejack shrugged. "So, Twilight, what next?"

"The Defiled Crypt," Twilight replied, turning her head towards the opened Mausoleum.

It was, like everything here, an ancient structure. Virtually no written records survived from the era in which this place had been built. Unlike most of the ruined castle, however, at least a few hundred years separated this structure's disuse from that of Luna's castle. Hermitic monks had resided here for several generations after the Mare in the Moon. Only when they, too, disappeared into the mists of history was the crypt finally left to the elements.

It reminded Twilight, vaguely, of the Canterlot Catacombs. The architecture was similar, though here many of the external pillars had fallen or crumbled. There was an outer platform, just off the ground, where relatives or friends of the interred could pray to or remember the deceased. The next platform above that was considered part of the crypt itself, and most unicorns would avoid it. There should be two or three rectangular stone slabs between the two platforms, with the names of all those buried within.

Leading her group, Twilight saw what looked like one of the marble rosters. It was tilted on its side, but still facing upwards. Another was face down, and looked extremely heavy. Unfortunately, while both stones were mostly intact, the surfaces were pitted and damaged. There was writing on some parts: names, probably, but most of it was badly faded. Using a few more archaeology spells, she tried to restore a section.

Names!

But then, she already knew this was a unicorn crypt, so that was no surprise. Checking to make sure Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy were finished dancing and ready to follow, Twilight stepped up into the inner platform. Her vision briefly swam and she had to shake her head to clear it. The

doors to the crypt had been blasted open with some kind of explosive, leaving the heavy stones to fall inward. The Twilight Cultists hadn't picked the most subtle and respectful way of entering a tomb. No wonder her map identified this as a "Defiled Crypt."

As expected, it was pitch black inside. A cantrip helped the situation slightly, maintaining a permanent glow-light at the tip of her horn. Rarity soon did the same, and the two unicorns provided a steady light in the darkness for their friends. Twilight felt Applejack and Rainbow Dash move up alongside her, ready to rush forward if a threat presented itself.

At least in this first section of the crypt, the walls were bare: just slowly decaying rock, dripping with perspiration. A more sensationalist part of her mind was happy to describe the walls as 'bleeding' but that was not an image she wanted to cultivate. It was just dew collecting naturally. Nothing sinister. The ceiling was low, but still high enough that a pony could rear without bumping her head. Pinkie Pie's bouncing habit, however, was out of luck. It smelled musky, but not foul, and a dark hallway stretched forward and down.

"This is suitably creepy," Rarity injected a little levity into the journey.

"Yep!" Pinkie Pie agreed, dryly reminding them of her personal cure for the ghostlies. "Ha. Ha. Ha." Her heart, for once, didn't seem to be in it.

The sound of their echoing hoofsteps filled the silence as they descended.

"There should be a Fane at the bottom here," Twilight said, if only to hear the comfort of her own voice. Ahead, piercing the gloom, the light from her horn revealed another statue on a pedestal. It, too, was broken. Shattered. Some sections of the ceiling had collapsed nearby, but they didn't seem to be the cause of the destruction.

The Fane was a small shrine within the crypt, to tend to the dead. More practically, it also housed the tomb guardians used by ancient unicorns to protect their resting places. These had been thoroughly destroyed by the looting cultists. Alcoves covered the walls of the circular shrine room, and whatever was within had been smashed with reckless

and almost gleeful abandon. Ancient tapestries had been pulled down and candles knocked over and trampled by maddened hooves.

"He. He. He."

"Pinkie, can ya'll please stop laughin'?"

The carnation colored shaman seemed about to object, but instead made a zipper motion in front of her mouth. She didn't look too happy about it. Even though they hadn't seen anything yet, the place was already giving Twilight the chills. Not that she was superstitious or anything! Just... that it was spooky... and there were actual ghosts - er, spirits - within. They all knew the danger was in there, around them, they just couldn't see it.

"Oh boy," Dash muttered. "Everypony back up a bit!"

"What is it?" Applejack asked, doing what the pegasus had asked, but not sure why.

"I just used 'Sense Undead,'" she explained, creeping forward towards one of the halls branching away from the fane. "There are... a lot of them..."

"A lot of what?" Twilight asked, feeling a sheen of cold sweat on her forehead.

"Ah... there's..." Dash glanced back, quickly. "Some hostile. Some not hostile. Wailing Souls. Soul Eaters. Preserved Dead. Some stronger ones, I think they're on the levels below us."

"Levels below us?" Rarity asked, "Heavens, how large is this place?"

The paladins hook her head. "No idea. Pretty big?" She swapped weapons, retrieving her shield and holy mace. "I better go Prot for this."

Following Dash, the six mares entered one of the interred halls. On one level, it was much like Twilight had imagined. There were near rows along the walls for the bodies to be stored, marked and labeled and slightly recessed. At the same time, it was as frightening as she had feared. Instead of nice, closed sepulchral tombs, the dead had been put to rest on

open beds and covered with cloth. Centuries had decayed fabric and flesh alike, leaving piles of skeletal remains wrapped within tattered brown rags. Hollow eyes and cleaned pony skulls stared accusingly at any who dared to trespass within the forgotten mausoleum.

Worse, the cultist pillagers had haphazardly pulled down corpses to rummage around for stashes of treasure. Piles of bone lay freshly strewn on the floor, in some cases kicked into corners when whatever jewelry they had been buried with was ripped free. Urns and canopic jars had been smashed and bucked open in a search for gold.

Dark shapes, vaguely pony-like, moved from shadow to shadow...

One came close by, but Dash held up a hoof to indicate not to engage. The ghostly unicorn, a transparent blue in the light of Rarity's horn, walked past them, forlornly shaking her head. She seemed to be in grief or pain and Twilight flinched as the ghost passed through her tail. Her identification spell indicated that this was a "Wailing Soul" and it seemed non-hostile. At least for now.

"This is just awful," Rarity said, turning to watch the Wailing Soul wander into the darkness. "Twilight, we have to do something."

"I'd love to, but... what can we do?" the other unicorn asked, now a bit more wary to blindly descend into the haunted crypts. "Should we just... try and disperse them?"

Rarity shook her head, and raised a foreleg as she thought about the situation they'd been handled. "No. No. Don't attack them unless they're hostile. It would take forever to return every bone and bit of stolen property. What to do? I think... well, first we need to cleanse this place of the nastiness that is offending all these poor ponies. The strongest spirits should be at the bottom of the tomb. Putting them to rest may be enough to purify the others."

"Why are the biggest, baddest, meanest, no-goodest things always in the deepest part of the dungeon, anyway?" Pinkie complained.

"They just are, darling," Rarity replied. "I believe it may be a cosmic rule of some sort."

"We shouldn't get sidetracked," Twilight reminded them. "Rainbow, see if you can find a staircase leading down."

"Got it!" The paladin confirmed, leading them deeper into the defiled crypt. More and more Wailing Souls wandered listlessly around them, until Twilight could almost hear their soft chorus of lamenting voices. Others were less melancholy as they cursed and damned the living for their intrusion, or simply out of spite.

"Wo-oah!" Dash suddenly stopped, raising her shield. Before anyone knew it, they were being attacked. In the cramped confines of the crypt, however, it was hard to see by what. Doing her best to target the strange shape, Rainbow Dash grunted and helpfully backed up and into a wall.

It was... a skeletal pony?

The damned creature, animated by a wronged spirit's hatred for the living, had risen from one of the crypt alcoves. Still wrapped in cloth, the Preserved Dead groaned painfully from a long decayed throat and chest as it struck at the pegasus paladin. Foul chemicals seeped from between the mummification wrappings.

"That's a disease," Fluttershy warned. "Ponyrot. I can't cure it."

"I've got it, then!" Dropping out of shadowform, Rarity glowed with holy light, burning away the putrid clouds and foul chemicals that surrounded Rainbow Dash. Having to switch forms, and then back to shadow, she gave an unhappy huff. A stream of shadow unwound from her horn into the undead zombie-pony, and together with the other damage being done to it, it quickly came apart under the onslaught.

One last pitiful groan, and it broke apart like paper mache.

"Don't look now, team, but there's a whole room full'a these guys looking for a fight!" Dash slowly advanced, pulling one or two of the animated dead. Applejack worked in parallel, taunting and holding a pair of undead while her friends burned the cursed things down. The two tanks were the only ones exposed to diseases, and between Dash's Cleanse and Rarity's Abolish, the group made slow but steady progress.

"Rarity, I wanted to ask you something," Twilight said, casting a trio of magic missiles and sending the arcane fire down into a shambling unicorn corpse. It moaned and collapsed, poison and disease filling the air.

"What about?" Rarity asked, Mind Flaying another one of the abominations.

"That... 'shadow body' thing you do?" *What was the name again?*
"Shadow Form I think? Why do you keep going in and out of it?"

"Well, you remember what I said about holy magic earlier?" She side stepped to avoid one of the fallen bodies as the group pushed ahead.

Twilight nodded.

"What's true for you is true for me as well," Rarity explained. "I can't use holy spells in my Shadowform. Actually, that isn't entirely true. I can still use some holy spells, like Power Word Shield... there is a subtle distinction between Discipline spells and Holy spells, you see?"

"I kind of don't," Twilight sheepishly admitted. "They're both holy magic, right?"

"Yes, but the source is different. Divine Spellcraft takes many forms."

"I read something like that, once. It was in Harrison Jones's notes on trolls! Loa, he called them!" Twilight couldn't help but blush at the thought of the renowned archaeologist. Not that she had any idea what he looked like. Probably not a pony. But his writings were just so... brilliant!

"Trolls use a divine magic that comes from worship of spirits and ancestors. Our divine magic comes from... oh, what was that word again?" Rarity gave a thoughtful pause, just long enough to strike down another of the Preserved Dead. "Ah, yes. Eternals. The Sun and the Moon, to be exact. Generally speaking, you can not use both at the same time, so long as the source of the power is a greater being."

"So, that Shadowform you use...?"

"You could call it a gift from Princess Luna," Rarity confirmed, her body wreathed by dark energy. Twilight still found it a little off putting, even after having seen it before. Here in the darkness of the defiled crypt, the beautiful fashionista looked almost like a dark specter herself.

"Mages consider it shadow magic," she continued. "But I was taught that it comes from the Light of the Moon. Truth be told, I prefer Discipline myself," she admitted with a smirk. "There is nothing quite as satisfying as making your own unique Light, rather than borrowing it from others."

Fluttershy raised her voice, just a little. "Actually, Twilight. The only one not using divine magic here is, um... you."

"That's right!" Pinkie Pie agreed, hitting three of the undead at the end of the hall with chain lightning. "My teacher once told me: 'Pink-pony' - actually, I told him, it was Pinkie Pie, not pink pony - but he said, 'shut up and listen, pink pony!' And then I went 'waaa' why do you have to call me bad names? And then he bonked me on the head and said, 'Fel magic is the only magic that is forbidden, and arcane magic is fel magic. It disrupts the natural order.' He *really* didn't like things that used bad magic."

"Anyway," she digressed and pointed at Twilight. "I think all that means is that the one using naughty magic here is you!" She then stuck out her lips and rolled up her eyes. "But then again, Master Boombox loves all kinda magic, and she isn't evil. She just loves making things that explode! I wonder which one of them was right?"

"Naughty magic, me?" Twilight couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I don't understand. What - what's wrong with using my magic?"

"There's nothing *wrong* with it," Rarity spoke in her friend's defense. "All ponies have magic in them, unicorns in particular. Pinkie Pie, what you're talking about is demonic magic. You're just overreacting as usual."

"It wouldn't be the first time!" Pinkie enthusiastically agreed, earth shocking another zombie. "Pew Pew!"

"I wouldn't worry about it, Twilight," Fluttershy said, trying to sound supportive. "Well, um... make sure nothing bad happens."

"You are the Element of Magic after all," Rarity chimed in.

As the last of the Preserved Dead fell, breaking apart into piles of rags and bones, the party rounded a corner. The normal rows of interred unicorn dead came to a stop at a pair of pillars. Past them and to the right, a large staircase led downward.

Waiting for them below were "pure" undead spirits, different from the relatively fragile animated corpses above. These spirits were only vaguely in pony form, some appearing like drifting lights and wisps and others as indistinct phantoms. They were all disturbed and agitated, unlike the surface level where most of the halls were filled with Wailing Souls. The trail of destruction left behind by the cultist looters continued, with one notable exception.

A fallen cultist pony lay, face down, in the middle of the hall, surrounded by phantoms. A sack full of ill gotten gains remained strapped to his saddlebags. There was no blood or gore. It was as if he had simply died of a heart attack. The enraged ghosts that had no doubt taken his life continued to haunt the halls, restlessly searching for other living ponies to punish.

Twilight took a step forward, together with Dash and Applejack -

~

Darkness.

The court was shrouded, as always, in shadow. The only light came from the full moon outside, the pale glow piercing the many wide windows that flanked the hall. Not to far away, another Guard stood silent, almost invisible within the long shadows that fell on both sides of the chamber door. A green eye turned, meeting, followed by the faintest of nods. They were brothers after all. Brothers of the shadow.

Brothers of the Night Guard.

The Princess rested on her throne, awake but not alert. Her breathing was steady and calm. She was bored, but not ill or uneasy. This had been her state for years now. The Lunar Court was far removed from Canterlot.

There were no Galas or balls or politics. What needed to be done was done in shadow. Occasionally the resident monks would organize rituals dedicated to the night sky, as they had done for centuries beyond counting. They would chant to the Gods that had come to Equestria, built upon it the Night Sky and Made Covenant with the Moon and the Sun and the Stars. Her Highness would attend these and watch, silently. Perhaps even remembering.

It was why they were here. The monks believed the day would come when the Traveling Gods returned to pass judgment on their creation. After thousands of years, was the Princess simply waiting for that end? That, even her oldest Guards didn't seem to know. Instead they recruited and saw to their dark vigil, as they always had. As they always would. The Princess had organized them to be able to act without her, to better leave her to her meditations. The Nights would be kept Safe. Always.

Ears prickled. Something approached.

Wings extended, sharpened by shadow.

The doors to the throne room opened, and the guards turned, ready to attack should the source prove alarming. The other guards outside had not raised a warning. Was this a legitimate guest? On her throne, Luna's eyes widened and her head raised up.

The sound of hooves on marble indicated not one, but a pair of visitors. The first was an elderly pony, gray and wizened in his years, most of his form hidden behind a plain brown traveling cloak. A step or two behind the old unicorn followed a young colt. His coat was a dusky blue, and though he too wore a cloak, the hood was thrown back revealing a close cropped, spiky white mane broken only by an upraised horn. The guards relaxed as their Princess relaxed, sensing no danger from the pair.

Both unicorns bowed low.

"Princess Luna," the elder greeted.

"Nemo?" the Princess inquired, eyes widening slightly. "I hardly recognized you." She frowned. "You've become old."

"It has been thirty six years since I last graced your court," Nemo, the old pony, replied. "I apologize for my lengthy absence."

Luna watched him, her eyes calculating. She only spoke again when she was sure of something.

"You will be dead soon," she reasoned. "This young colt is the next Element of Magic."

"Yes, your Majesty."

The colt in question took a step forward and flourished. "Highness," he said, voice smooth and confident, despite his youth and the intimidating presence of the Moon Princess before him. "I am Enigma."

A ghost of a smile graced the Princess's features. Her eyes fell on Nemo. "Why have you brought him here? Should he not be at Canterlot, learning from my sister's conjurers?"

"Princess," Nemo replied, respectfully. "Despite his youth, Enigma has already mastered the court conjuring of Canterlot. He is fully versed in mundane magics. You may also recall that I was trained here and must by tradition die here as well. It is where I wish to pass on the mysteries of our station."

"We welcome you home then," Luna diplomatically replied. Her close guard knew she had a rather mixed opinion towards the monks she shared the castle grounds with. The preservation of secret and sacred knowledge was vital, but she had little love for those who did not act upon their knowledge.

"There is one other matter," the aged Element of Magic hastened to add. "We have recently returned from a... journey into the west. There are rumors and signs... among the zebra in particular."

"Of...?" The Princess prompted.

"Great calamity," Nemo pronounced. "A terrible evil that stirs beyond the Western Sun Wall, beyond even the lands of Uldum."

An evil beyond the far west? Beyond Uldum? Very few ponies had dared to travel so far, even among the Twin Guard. The lands were treacherous to a degree unimagined by most Equestrians. An expedition to the Western Sun Wall was madness. Celestia's Royal Guards were able to keep peace in the north and east. The West was Luna's domain by right. The Night Guards let none of their discomfort show.

"Some new dragon then? One of the Blacks?" Luna asked, narrowing her eyes. "I shall have words with Neltharion if..."

"No, Majesty. It is no dragon," Enigma spoke up, his silver eyes alight. "It puts fear into the hearts of dragons, black, red, bronze. The Tol'vir are already divided and at war. They whisper of a coming doom. An evil from beneath the shifting sands."

Amused by the colt's brash impertinence, Luna smirked. "Is that so? Nemo... You wish me to send my Night Guards across the known world because of... whispers and rumor?"

"I ask that the Shadowbolts investigate," the aged unicorn ducked his head in another sincere bow. Enigma did the same a moment later. "I have already informed Princess Celestia. She was... skeptical."

Mention of her sister raised the Princess's hackles.

"I remember you as a boy, Nemo. Younger than even this one." She nodded, sagely. "You were always forthright. A veritable Element of Honesty. Very well!" Luna decided. "I will send my Shadowbolts to investigate the Western Sun Wall... and the edge of Uldum... Silithius, I believe it is called?"

~

- and groaned as the world returned to focus.

"What was..."

"Did anyone else..."

"Have a vision? I did! I did!"

The six Elements of Harmony stopped and turned to check in on their friends. Fluttershy was spooked, looking frightfully around for the source of the strange vision, and Pinkie Pie was excited, doing the same as Fluttershy but for totally different reasons. Rarity was composed, but silent, and Dash and Applejack looked more annoyed by the sudden interruption than anything else.

"I wanna see the cutscene again!" Pinkie backed up a few steps and then tried to trigger it a second time by going forward. "Awww! Everything's all normal!"

"Pinkie Pie, this ain't the time fer bein silly!"

"But I'm not being silly!" the generally silly pink pony protested. She looked up at the ceiling and then down at the ground. "We all saw that vision thingie, which must mean there's something that triggered it. And I wanna see it again, because it was probably important! Princess Luna was there, except she was kinda Nightmare Moonish, at least she was bigger and kinda meaner looking, and the castle upstairs was intact and it was pretty neat!"

"It was... interesting," Twilight admitted, and gasped as an idea occurred to her. Taking out her trusty magical interactive map, she checked the quest update section. Really: how did anyone adventure without one of these things?

Two new quests were in the log:

[38] A Sacred Burial

[38] Visions of Nightmare

~

[38] A Sacred Burial

Objectives:

Purify the Defiled Crypt

You will need:

ERROR: UNKNOWN

Notes:

"First we need to cleanse this place of the evil that is offending all these poor ponies. The strongest spirits should be at the bottom of the tomb. Putting them to rest may be enough to purify the others."

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[38] Visions of Nightmare

Objectives:

Survive the Visions of Nightmare

You will need:

Experience Vision of Nightmare (1) (COMPLETE)

ERROR: UNKNOWN

Notes:

"We all saw that vision thingie, which must mean there's something that triggered it. And I wanna see it again, because it was probably important!"

~

"Ooh! I made it into the quest log text!"

"This doesn't really explain much," Twilight mused, rolling the map back up and floating it into her bags. "But it does confirm that we experienced something that wasn't just unusual; it was important. It also implies that there are more 'visions of the nightmare' for us to trigger."

"Hopefully not during a boss fight," Dash replied. Facing the second level of the crypt, she raised her shield and imbued it with Holy Light. "We won't get anywhere by standing around! Let's bust some ghost heads!"

The second level was, unfortunately, more of a maze than the first. In addition to a few Preserved Dead that animated from defiled corpses, the mane six first encountered "Soul Eaters" - a type of phantom pony that, to their surprise, tried to take over the bodies of a victim. Luckily the time that it took one of the specters to invade an unwilling and magically enhanced pony was also enough time to blast the ghost apart. When there were several of the dangerous spirits on the prowl, Dash would use Fear on one, or Rarity would Shackle it. Both had the effect of preventing the ghost from trying to possess anypony.

The other, unexpected ghost to emerge was the "Enraged Shade."

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief as the dark form turned to ash and dust, purified by Dash's holy judgment spells. Enraged Shades would periodically pulse with dark energy, doing damage to everyone and interrupting spellcasts. Progress through the second level of the crypt was slow, but steady. Despite the difficulty, however, Twilight felt quite confident as they looked forward to checking out the next hall. They had gone around in a circle trying to find the stairs down and eliminated every other possible path.

Everyone was also working together smoothly. It was hard to believe that only the other day, Trixie had humiliated her in front of the guild lodging. Only a couple more levels, and Twilight would be on the same level as the so called 'Great and Powerful' warlock. Not that she felt a burning desire to avenge her loss in the duel or anything... well, maybe a slightly burning desire... but it also provided an important contrast. Twilight hadn't forgotten Princess Celestia's letter or the recommendation regarding forming a new guild. Maybe it was time she get started on that?

Right after they finished here. Tonight! She'd ask them tonight.

Twilight was sure her friends would say "yes." It was really just a matter of organization, not membership!

- - -

Marrs Orange opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was a greenish tint, cutting through the darkness. Pinpricks of white light shone too-brightly but also failed to direct all that light far from the source. His training soon kicked in, and he stood back up and turned to check on his subordinates. They had been hoof-picked by the Princess, but most of them were familiar colts from the Second Regiment. They were groggily getting back onto their hooves.

It took a few seconds for Marrs to realize that the room was pitch black. It was the light sources that tipped him off. They were too faint and too small. There were no shadows. The lights in the throne room had been taken out!

"Princess!" He spun, searching frantically for her.

"I'm here." Her voice was soft and small, sounding almost tired. He zeroed in on it with his ears, but it took a squint to pick out Luna's dark form against her throne. Her horn glowed a moment later, producing a gentle moonlight that slowly filled the room. Amazingly, the small bit of light made Marrs wince, his eyes taking time to adjust.

"Night... vision...?" he realized, shocked. As the dim light illuminated his body, and the forms of his subordinates, he could see the changed wrought in them.

Celestia's colors were well known by all Equestrians, and as distinct and recognizable as the golden barding that was the Royal Guard's trademark. Pegasi and Earth ponies became a solid white, their eyes and manes dark blue. Unicorns were turned slate gray, manes white. Their bodies, too, changed to fit a uniform, light-empowered mould.

Marrs had known that Luna's powers would have a similar effect. He had prepared himself over months of training to accept and even welcome the transformation, yet still, this new one came as something of a shock. Gone were the ochre hues of his family line, the wealthy Manehattan Oranges. His coat was now a dark, regimental Persian indigo... a reflection of Luna's colors. In the eyes of another nearby Earth pony, and in another pegasus, he saw electric green, split by a slitted black pupil, like a cat's. Their manes had been turned a shimmering silver. Pegasus, Unicorn, Earth pony, they had all been remade.

There was no time to act like a dazed colt.

Stomping his foot twice, and barking out a command, the twenty new guards quickly regained their professionalism and faced forward. Many would, once they were dismissed, spend some time getting used to their new forms. The pegasi in particular would need some time to get used to being larger and more muscular than normal. Satisfied with the quickly regained composure of his subordinates, Marrs Orange lowered his head to the Princess in whose power they were now dyed and bound. The other twenty Guardsponies quickly followed.

Their Princess, unfortunately exhausted by her magical exertion, was already closing her eyes. The moonlight from her horn continued to bathe

the throne room, even as she fell asleep on her throne, legs tucked beneath her. For a moment, Marrs was unsure what to do. Should he and the others continue bowing until they were dismissed?

'No,' he realized.

"I have no interest in supplication," she had said.

Raising his head, he quickly picked out four guards to station at the chamber doors and at the throne room's entryway. They were all without armor, but that hardly mattered. The others, he dismissed. Regulations were for two guards at each entrance and exit. He, the fifth, would stand guard as the Master at Hooves. Until ordered otherwise, regulations were to be followed.

Sitting silently to the far left of the throne, the black sheep of the Orange family smirked inwardly.

'I suppose I'm literally a black sheep now,' he mused. *'How appropriate.'*

His Princess slept on, oblivious. In Luna's dreams, she remembered - she remembered, vividly - a millennia ago, sending her finest guards, her Shadowbolts, on a mission to the far west. To the cursed realm of Silithius. To a sleeping menace beneath the desert sands. It was the most fateful task she had ever given them.

It had been her first step on the road to damnation.

Chapter 8

Pinkie Pie cautiously peered around the corner of the pillar, her face lit by the dying glow of a magical torch. There were dark bags around her blue eyes, and dust covering her carnation coat and rosy mane. There was fear in her eyes, too, at war with a waning determination to see her terrifying task to completion.

"I did as you told me, Twilight...! I found the temple of the Marearum..."

Buried, cursed and forsaken beneath the earth, divorced from the light of the sun or moon, a domed ceiling covered a vast, open arena. Rivers of fire and blood surrounded a raised platform inscribed with curses in long forgotten tongues. Torch-light filled the hollow eyes of hundreds of piled pony skulls with a hellish semblance of life.

"In the deepest recesses of the temple, I found a *dark gathering*... my companion, the wanderer..."

Pulling back her hood, the first of the three pony-like beings revealed herself. A once rich blonde mane was now matted and tangled, an ochre face with freckles lined by months of struggle against an inner evil. Green eyes were left glassy and defeated as she stared into flickering candles.

"... Rainbow Baal..."

Across from the wanderer, a walking corpse leered excitedly. The desert sands had scoured the color from her coat, but her mane and tail were a collage of bright colors, undaunted by centuries trapped in darkness. Bright red eyes glowed with malice.

"...and a great evil... who could only be the Lord of Hatred herself..."

Exalting in her own triumph, and upper half of what had once been a pegasus raised her skeletal hooves and wings. Great coils of her pink

mane fell to the side of her face and across her chest, the ends whipped into a ferocious frenzy by the unholy pink energy that kept her upper body afloat. Her turquoise eyes were sunken, but they burned with the fires of madness.

"...Flutterphisto!"

Dark Parasprites took to the air, chittering and screeching.

"I heard a voice then. Like a thousand needles in my heart...!"

"Umm. Hello. My Sisters... At long last, we, um, stand reunited..." Flutterphisto's mouth moved out of sync with the words, terrifying and impossible to un-hear, despite the stuttering shyness. "The, uh, Infernal Gate has been prepared, so... the time of our final victory is at hoof. If that's okay with you two. If you're not busy, I mean."

A monstrous portal rose from the streams of blood that surrounded the vile platform. Built from the bodies of hundreds of slain ponies, it wailed and screamed with their trapped souls! Oooo!

"So, um... let the way to Hell, be opened?"

Rainbow Baal and The Wanderer focused their evil powers, widening the rift between worlds.

"Um, yes. Okay. It looks... nice. I guess the evil that was once vanquished, will rise anew?" Flutterphisto chanted, adding to the horrible spell her Sisters were casting. "Wrapped in the guise of pony, shall she walk amongst the innocent, and, um, terror shall consume they that dwell upon Equestria I suppose?"

Remembering the soul stone she had pulled free from Rainbow Baal, Pinkie Pie ducked back against the pillar, keeping hidden. She had kept the stone safe, just like the Archangel Twilight had told her. All she needed was the courage to step through the gate and find a way to the Hellforge!

"The skies shall rain fire, and the seas... oh my... the seas shall become as blood! Oh, I almost forgot. Also, the, um... if it isn't too much trouble, it would be just great if the righteous could fall before the wicked."

Flutterphisto vowed, reaching a mad climax. "And all creation shall t-tremble before the burning standards of Hell!"

"What I saw then, was not meant for pony eyes...!"

"Um. Yes, so, the gate stands ready?"

The Wanderer gave an inpony scream, falling to her hooves. The fabric of her cloak rippled and warped, as her body changed, great spikes and horns tearing free!

"Are you okay? You look very spiky. Well, um, my young Sister, the time has come to assume your true form!" Flutterphisto commanded. "Arise, Diablojack! Lord... of eeeeeee Terror...!"

With thunderous hoofsteps, the hulking, transformed pony made to enter the screaming portal.

Flutterphisto issued one last proclamation: "You are the harbinger of our return, Diablojack. Send forth your Terror... into Hell! Please."

To the sound of ominous Pontin chanting, she -

"What just ah apple pickin' second now! Why'da ah have to be some kinda pony hell spawned demon in this 'ere story?"

"Duh! Because you were the hero in the story before that! But it was all part of the evil plan, so the hero becomes the bad pony! That's how these stories go! Good pony turns into bad pony!"

"Umm... why is my character so talkative? N-not to be too critical, I mean. Just that... um.. Twilight talks more than I do... and being the Lord of Hatred doesn't sound very nice."

"But Twilight is already the archangel who secretly helps ponykind fight evil!"

"I could fight evil, too..."

"I think it's pretty cool! So I'm the Lord of Destruction, huh! What kind of powers do I have?"

"I haven't planned that out yet."

"First, I should be super strong, and super fast, and super tough, and I should have a ton of minions to fight for me. Like fifty minions! No! Sixty! All of 'em super strong! And...!"

"Enough already!" Twilight interrupted, angrily stomping a hoof.

They were still in the Crypts under Luna's Castle, and a 'five minute afk' had turned into ten minutes, and then fifteen, as everyone started wandering off for "bio breaks" or just generally foaling around. Rarity had needed time to fix her hair and magic out all the sticky webs from before, Pinkie Pie had started talking about a 'fanfic' she was writing (Celestia knew for what, it didn't sound like any story Twilight had ever heard), Rainbow Dash started smashing a locked chest she'd found with a mace to break it open, and Fluttershy was trying to turn a small black crypt rat into a pet. Only Applejack couldn't seem to find some annoying distraction to keep them from the last leg of their little dungeon romp.

Sending out another "ready check" spell, she saw everyone confirm that they were "ready" ... except that Dash was still trying to pry open the chest she had found.

"Where's... a rogue... when you need one?!" she growled, finally putting away her mace and appearing to give up. Only to promptly start kicking the solid container. "Open! Open! Open! Open!"

"Whatever's in there is probably broken by now anyway," Twilight told her. "Just leave it!"

"No way!" Dash protested, patting the locked chest lovingly. "I've got a really good feeling about this one! What if there's an epic inside? Like a Krol Blade?"

"The chances of that being the case are one in ten thousand," the unicorn librarian lectured. "In other words, so remote as to be hardly worth considering at all."

"But what if you're wrong?" the pegasus refused to give up. "What if this is our one, super lucky epic drop, and we just leave it here?" She took out her mace again, holding it tightly in her mouth. "I 'st rotta 'ret 'ris open!"

"For heaven's sake!" Rarity finally said, putting away a fine mother-of-pearl comb. She gave their resident engineer a look. "Pinkie Pie, don't you have something to blow open that chest? Explosives or what have you?"

"Do I have explosives? Do I have **explosives**?" The pink pony chuckled, dryly amused, while draping a foreleg across the unicorn priest's shoulder. "What a funny question, Rarity." She tilted her head, asking herself, "Do you have explosives, Pinkie Pie?"

"I'm an engineer!" she announced, throwing a rectangular case down onto the ground. "Of course I've got explosives!!"

Pinkie Pie quickly started rummaging around the toolbox, her fluffy pink tail swaying wildly in the air. "But do I have the right *kind* of explosives? Not every boom needs a bang, and not every bang needs a fizz! Should there be more pop or more pew? Wham or whomp? Hot or bright, big or small, loud or..." She peeked out from the cover of the toolbox. "Silent but deadly?"

"Not one of those," Dash pointed out.

"What about a squeaker?"

"No!"

"Awww!" Pinkie Pie pouted, but picked something out from the case with her teeth. It looked like a rectangular block with brightly colored wires sticking out. "This might work!" she gleefully declared.

"Alright!" Dash pumped a hoof. "Hook it up! Let's blow this puppy open!"

Fluttershy grimaced. "I don't like that phrase..."

"Okey Dokey Lokey!" The engineer-shaman. With a spring in her step, she started wiring up the slightly bruised and battered treasure chest. There was a Twilight Cult mark on the front, but none of the cultists they had found dead in the crypt had a key for it. With no blacksmith in the group to make a skeleton key, and no rogue to pick the lock, the only recourse was to use overwhelming gnomish-inspired force.

"Oh! I almost forgot the disclaimer!" Pinkie Pie added while she worked. "I'm supposed to say: Pinkie Pie and Boombox Engineering Associates assume no responsibility for lost or destroyed property, limbs or other body parts. In the interests of safety, do not use this product! If accidentally used anyway, point away from face, friends, or anything you care even remotely about. Do not look directly into or directly away from the explosion. Do not ingest. In the event of a crit fail, run for your life!"

She bounced back away from the now rigged up chest, pushing a surprised Rainbow Dash and Rarity to the floor with a "WEEE!" Biting down on a bit of string, there was a faint fizz... and a tiny pop of light. A few fireworks twirled lazily from the seaforium charge, hitting the ground in a sparkle of green and pink.

Twilight shot a disappointed stare over towards her party loving friend. "Well, that was -"

The next thing the unicorn knew, she was embedded in a wall, covered with black ash. Coughing smoke and falling onto her face, Twilight groaned.

"Always me. Always me," she groaned, shaking her mane to get rid of the comical black dust. At least it wasn't an anvil or a grand piano hitting her this time. Eyes wide, the mage jumped, landing on her hooves just as a sizeable chunk of the ceiling fell, missing her by mere moments.

"I knew it!" she declared, pointing accusingly at the ceiling. "I knew you'd do that!"

Only to have a brick fall soundly onto the top of her head, cracking in two and leaving a sizeable lump in its wake. Gritting her teeth and digging at the floor with one hoof, Twilight had to fight to not burst into flame.

"Oops," Pinkie Pie appeared in the corner of her eye, face upside down. "I forgot to say there was a chance of causing the walls to collapse!"

Delicately touching the second horn on her head, adding a minor cold spell to decrease the swelling, Twilight sighed. Increased chance of bodily harm was pretty much the price one paid for being around Pinkie Pie for any length of time.

"I hope whatever was in that thing was worth it," she said, keeping nice and calm. Her eyes bugged out at the fact that the chest was now splayed and blasted open, like a pumpkin stuffed with cherry bombs. Parts of it were on fire. Twilight face-hoofed.

"Well," she declared. "*That* was a waste of time!"

"I know!" Dash was already looking down into the smoking ruin. "All that... just for some lame book?"

"A Book!" Twilight was suddenly bumping the colorful pegasus out of the way. She levitated out a musty tome, bound in iron and leather. "A book!! JACK-POT!"

"Unless it's a relic, I'm not interested," said bumped-paladin bounced up onto her hooves and dusted herself off with her wings.

"Is it a relic?" Fluttershy cautiously inquired, inching closer. While some classes used wands to augment their powers, others used relics or librams (essentially the same thing these days). Notably Shamans, Druids, Paladins and Death Knights. They were often a pretty rare find.

"Let me see," Twilight replied, floating the book around. It could also be an off-hand, and of use to herself as a mage. The identify spell triggered, reading the energies of the artifact.

"Lost Rites of the Western Reach?" she told the rest of the party. "As a subscript, it says: written by a mad zebra in alliterative haiku."

"But what does it DO?" Dash asked, narrowing her eyes at the document. Clearly she preferred her relics and librams to involve less reading and translating of foreign languages.

"Looks like stamina, intellect, spirit..." Twilight noticed an empty notch on the enchanted leather and iron cover. "And a gem socket. The identify spell says having it increases haste."

"Um. Can... can I have it?" Fluttershy squeaked. "Please? It's... kind of a healer... item. If Pinkie Pie doesn't want it, that is."

The elemental shaman shook her head. "I don't heal!" she said. "Oh! Unless chain lightning counts as a heal. Like electroshock therapy!"

"And I can't use it," Rarity, the only other healer in the group, also declined.

"All yours," Twilight said, floating over the ancient relic. "But I'd be happy to help when it comes to translating it! Zebra tomes are incredibly rare!"

Fluttershy nodded agreeably, and gratefully accepted the book. She took the back of it in her mouth, put it down in front of her, and opened the cover. A light flashed around her, binding the relic to its new owner. The pegasus druid then put it into her neatly organized saddlebags.

"Now that all that excitement is over with," Twilight began, and everypony was finally ready and at attention. "Let's go over what's in the next room."

Trotting a dozen yards or so deeper into the crypt's third level, Twilight passed another pair of fallen cultponies. Like the others, these had been killed by the various forms of enraged spirits that haunted the Defiled Mausoleum. The last couple hours had been spent steadily clearing the more dangerous forms of ghosts encountered by the Elements of Harmony.

Some, after taking enough magical punishment, dissipated entirely. Others left glowing husks, like orbs, on the floor. The zombie-like Preserved Dead crumpled into piles of broken bones and tattered cloth. None of them dropped any gold, but Rainbow Dash had noticed that she could recover some sort of "ghost slime" that she thought she could sell or vendor. Why anyone would buy "ghost slime" Twilight couldn't imagine, but the pegasus was sure there was *some* hidden market for it.

"Vendor trash!" the pegasus had explained. "Also called easy money!"

Rarity had accumulated a surprising amount of mageweave from the pacified spirits, and Pinkie Pie had (disgustingly) been struck by the idea of eating a mushroom she found on one of them. Because, really, it made *perfect* sense to eat a mushroom you find on a dead body. The shaman was lucky she hadn't been poisoned, never mind that many mushrooms were hallucinogenic. Not that one could tell if Pinkie Pie suddenly became a shroom fiend.

"It's a truffle!" she said, chewing happily on the recovered fungus. "And its soooo chewy!"

When offered, Twilight had politely declined on joining in on the culinary experiment that was "what can I eat that I find in a crypt."

At least, they had come to the apparent end of the road. This was where she stopped now.

Close by, the normal crypt architecture changed, the straight lines of intersecting halls becoming curved. Past an open door was a large circular space cut out from the rock. A gradually descending ramp ran down along both sides of the door, following the circular walls of this inner crypt. It was cylindrical, with a flat ceiling decorated with dark blue and white tile. Being a student of astronomy, Twilight had, on first seeing the room, immediately identified the constellations represented overhead.

This was clearly a very important tomb within the greater mausoleum, and her map had even marked it as distinct from the rest of the "Defile Crypt." This chamber was called the "Harmonious Shine." Sadly, things didn't look very harmonious down below on the lower level. There had once been three internments, not within the walls, but set into the floor. Cultponies had dug these up, or tried to. Only one had been successfully opened, the others left half-exposed.

The bodies of almost a dozen of the pillaging cultists were strewn haphazardly on the floor, some still with shovels and pick axes in their mouths. One of them was dressed in a more outlandish purple robe than

the rest: their leader, clearly. She was just as dead as her followers. Or... undead, rather. Still lingering near their bodies, the spirits of the cursed cultponies wandered aimlessly. Twilight didn't doubt that they'd be hostile, though at the same time they did look pretty weak.

The bigger problem was the three large spirits that hovered in the back of the room, about three yards off the ground. They were much clearer to the eye than the other spirits encountered in the crypt. It was rational to assume that they were the spirits of the three special ponies buried in the three special graves. Just by looking at them, in terms of size and visual clarity, Twilight could guess that they were much more powerful than the undead cultponies.

"Three boss type enemies," Twilight said, seeing her friends standing right behind her. None of them seemed too eager to dive down into that mess.

"A council fight!" Pinkie enthusiastically added. "These can be tough!"

The party leader nodded. Very likely they could AOE down the nine or ten minor ghosts in the bottom. The problem was the big three.

According to her identify spells, the one to the left was called "Shade of Nemo" - the same unicorn from the Vision of Nightmare earlier. He was partly wrapped in spectral cloth, like a mummy, and his original colors were still identifiable. He was naturally gray, with a light blue mane.

The one on the right was a new face, identified as "Shade of Talos." He was a very light shade of red, slightly shy of Pinkie's trademark pink, with a dark black mane braided into dreadlocks. Scars crossed his right eye and lower jaw, giving him a fearsome appearance in both life and death.

Lastly, in the middle, was the unicorn from the vision, not as a colt but as an adult. The "Shade of Enigma" floated easily, his eyes closed. He was larger than in the vision before, a handsome stallion rather than a colt, but his mane was as still snow white and brushed backwards into dozens of uneven spikes. The dark blue of his coat seemed almost lifelike, broken only by the occasional transparent ripple.

"We all saw the one on the middle and the one on the left in the vision before," Twilight said, having had a little time to think about this before. "They were Elements of Magic, from more than a thousand years ago. We haven't seen this third pony before, but he's probably another Element of Magic, too."

"Ah hope we're not supposed'ta fight three ponies with yer kinda crazy power, sugarcube," Applejack said what they were all probably thinking.

"They aren't Elements of Harmony any more," Twilight reasoned. "We are. As a worst case scenario, they're probably just three... undead unicorns."

"Three super powerful undead unicorns!" Pinkie Pie added with a carefree bounce. "With super scary magic and powers and fight mechanics we don't know about!"

"I don't think things are that bad," the purple unicorn replied, facing the sunken chamber. "I was told that the identify spell would indicate anything much more powerful than myself as a 'skull' level. I'm pretty sure... ninety percent sure... that these are just shadows of the ponies buried below."

"A shade is often formed from a powerful spirit that has been wronged," Rarity elaborated. "Those cultponies down there. They've done their best to make an absolute mess of this crypt."

"More than setting off a bomb to open a treasure chest?" Pinkie asked.

"More than even that," the fashion conscious priest answered with a upturned chin. "If we can defeat these shades and then restore the damage done, then it may be enough to pacify the weaker spirits on the other levels. That is how these things seem to work, or so I've heard."

"Unfortunately," Twilight spoke up again. "Pinkie's right. We don't know what kind of powers we'll be facing. The regular spirits look weak. We can burn those down with 'area of effect' spells."

"Just say AOE," Dash chimed in. "It's faster. AOE!"

The unicorn rolled her eyes. "Anyway... after that, I don't know what will happen. It could be that all three of the shades will attack, or they could come one at a time. Everypony will have to be ready for anything. Remember to keep your identify spells up so we know what kind of magic we'll be facing."

Pinkie rubbed her head with her hoof. "Oh...! If only there was some kind of place where we could go to read about the enemies we'd have to fight! Wouldn't that be super neat? Then we'd know what to do, oh, oh! And maybe there's be pictures of how to do it, too! And funny or inappropriate music to listen to!"

"Ya'll can keep dreamin'," Applejack dismissed the very idea. "Ain't gonna make it happen."

"If you see something dangerous, call it out," Twilight reminded everypony.

"Refreshing mark of the wild," Fluttershy quietly said, her body glowing green as she re-administered the 'buff' to the rest of the party. Magic from the Emerald Dream filled the bodies of her companions, providing them nature's blessing in the form of increased abilities, from agility to stamina. The blessing also greatly increased resistances to various forms of natural magical damage.

"I should redo Fortitude as well," Rarity realized, lowering her head in silent supplication. Flashes of light followed shortly after Fluttershy's blessing, filling everyone with holy vigor. "And Shadow Protection..."

"I'll put up a new brilliance." Twilight began preparing the buff spell.

Seeing everyone else was rebuffering, Rainbow Dash joined in, too. "I'll put up Blessing of Kings! I was using Ret, but I guess I can switch to Devotion Aura for the armor bonus..."

"Actually, would it be very much trouble to get Blessing of Might instead?"

"I'd also like Might... please..."

"I'll be using... ummmmm....!" Pinkie Pie pulled four different totems out of her bags, only to fall forward with a yelp. She quickly bounced back up, a totem in her mouth, another in one hoof, one balanced on her elbow, and another tucked into her tail.

"Stoneskin rocky-face!" She announced, twirling the earth totem in the air. "Flametongue-zappy-thing since I don't have Totem of Totally Super Wrath yet, Mana Spring! Tastes-like-pepsi... or maybe healing stream? Oh, and Wrath of Air! Everyone loves wrath of air!"

"And, ah... Ah guess Ah'll just raise mah voice and yell real loud..." Applejack adjusted her helmet. "That's about as much magic as you'll get outta this pony."

"Everything looks good. Everypony looks buffed and ready..." Twilight began to say, double checking to be sure.

"Okay, let's do this!" A certain pegasus rushed right into the room full of undead. "RAAAAIN-BOW DAAASH!!!"

"No wait - !" Twilight groaned, following the impetuous paladin. "Everypony! Go Go Go!"

"Awww, horsefeathers!" Applejack leapt down into the lower level. The fight was already starting, as the slain cultpony ghosts converged on Rainbow Dash, only to be momentarily stunned by a divine storm of swirling holy light. Burned and purified by the holy flames, the undead turned on the two heavily armored mares, grasping phantom hooves that tore at the soul and chilled the body. Fire and arcane energy still had telling effect, and Pinkie Pie and Twilight were soon down in the mix of things, unleashing their area of effect spells.

Glancing up, Twilight saw that a shimmering wall of magic had closed off the only entrance and exit to the sacred mausoleum antechamber. For better or for worse (probably worse) they were trapped inside. For the first time, the three floating Shades noticed the intruders.

"Who... dares... to trespass...?" The Shade on the left, Nemo, groaned.

"Who defiles this place?" The one on the right, Talos, sneered. "I shall have their souls!"

The one in the middle, Enigma, spoke last. "The living have no place here. How many centuries have passed in the lands above, that you would defile the Tombs of Fallen Elements?" The three watched as the cultist ghosts began to weaken and dissipate.

"Wait," Enigma continued, his voice a soft baritone. "I sense among them the Element of Magic."

"Then let us reclaim what is ours by right!" Talos roared. "Prepare yourselves, foals!"

He began to descend just as the last of the cultpony ghosts faded.

"Applejack!" Twilight yelled.

"Ah'm on it!" The apple farmer was already moving in to intercept the murderous Shade. "Show me what ya got, ya dried up old mule!"

The phantom unicorn floated a half-hoof off the ground and reared, accepting the warrior's challenge. Fluttershy and Rarity were keeping everyone up and in peak form, and when Talos and Applejack crashed together, jockeying and batting at one another with their hooves, it seemed pretty manageable. The Shade could only impart limited force; the damage it did cut through armor with an immaterial, freezing touch. Despite this, Fluttershy's healing was easily up to the task of fixing the little damage being done; everyone else did what they had always done, and concentrated their offensive abilities on the Shade of Talos.

"Rise and suffer anew, you damned!" Talos bellowed, his eyes burning white.

That was the first hint that something was amiss. The second hint was when all the cultpony ghosts that they had just destroyed began to reform and reanimate. Now dubbed "Broken Spirits" the ethereal blue

figures all came back, answering the call of the one who cursed and controlled them.

"Consecrating!" Dash yelled. "AJ! Hold the big guy!"

Flapping her wings, the pegasus paladin landed purposefully, directing a rainbow colored pulse of Holy Light straight into the ground. It spread out rapidly in every direction, producing a short lived ground consecrated by the Light. She divine stormed for good measure. The mass of undead spirits writhed and groaned as they suddenly found themselves on holy ground. Identifying the paladin as the source of the purifying flames, they converged on her.

"AOE! AOE!" Twilight yelled, running back into the swarm of phantoms. She was already building up energy for an explosion. The returned undead didn't seem very different from when they had originally been milling around. If everything stayed the same, then it wouldn't take long to repeat what she and Pinkie Pie had done before and burn them down.

"Impudent Foal!" Talos suddenly snarled, and Applejack cried out in pain.

"What's happening?!" Twilight has to raise her voice to be heard over the Fire Nova-ing flame totem and her own Arcane Explosions.

"Some sort of mortal strike," Rarity answered, backing away from the tumult. "It is interfering with our healing, but Fluttershy and I can handle it."

"All we have to do is heal a little more than before," Fluttershy explained. She was also backing safely away. Twilight realized that the two healers were already expecting that the ghosts that she and Pinkie Pie were destroying would just be re-summoned again.

"Pinkie Pie! Focus on the Shade!" Twilight ordered, as the Broken Spirits fell apart around her, filling the air with ghostly embers.

The shaman was in the middle of unleashing a torrent of lightning. "Should I pop a party before the other guys join in? I think we should party, and party now, Twilight!"

The mage gritted her teeth; considering the question as she cast another arcane barrage. The other two Shades hadn't joined in yet. So far the fight didn't seem that bad, but it was only a matter of time before the other pair got involved.

"Talos. You seem to be having trouble," Enigma observed, still floating and watching the battle.

Twilight quickly made up her mind. "Pinkie! Party!"

The rosy maned shaman cheered. "PARTY TIME EVERYPONY!"

Whatever she did to trigger it, Pinkie Pie's call was followed by a massive rush of power and energy. Just like before, Twilight Sparkle felt her body grow larger, taller, all but bursting with heroic effort. Spells became clearer and faster to cast. They poured all that magic into the Shade of Talos, for the moment the only enemy in their midst.

Still, neither of the two other Shades intervened.

For the second time, the Shade's eyes glowed white, and he reared up higher. "Rise and suffer anew, you damned!"

At his command, the Broken Spirits again reformed, rising up from their ashes like the not-so-mythical phoenix. Already knowing what to do, Rainbow Dash broke away from attacking the Shade and grabbed the mass of undead. Damaging and burning them with Holy Light, she built up threat on the endlessly resurrecting swarm. Twilight and Pinkie Pie rushed in to drop totems and aoe in the form of Arcane Explosions, Fire Novas and Chain Lightning.

"Impudent Foal!" Talos roared, again, just like before.

"This is not good, Twi!" Applejack yelled. "Another two a these and mah healin' will be down'ta almost half n' half!"

"We can handle it!" Rarity assured her. "As long as..."

"I have waited long enough!" the Shade of Nemo announced, slowly lowering down. "Talos. We shall oust these intruders together and be done with it."

...and there things went, flying out of control.

The gray unicorn coincidentally ended up far from any of Pinkie Pie's, Twilight's, or even Rainbow Dash's attacks. He paused on his near-landing, raised his head, and waited a moment. Not being actively engaged or taunted, he instead picked his own target. A heal from Fluttershy drew his attention, and his ire.

"He's heading for Fluttershy!" Twilight realized. "Rainbow!"

"Awwwww! You guys better keep me alive this time!" Dash hollered, and stuck her right hoof forward, towards the newly arrived Shade. "Hand of the Righteous!"

A holy brand seared the Shade of Nemo on the face, moments before he could close with the resto-druid. Fluttershy, for her part, had kept healing, despite the look of terror in her eyes at the rapidly approaching unicorn wraith. The Shade, almost on her, spun at the attack, face contorted with rage at the searing mark branded on it. Successfully taunted, he turned to engage Dash, despite the fact that she was still tanking several near-destroyed Broken Spirits.

The Shade of Nemo, like the Shade of Talos, fought hand to hand, but didn't seem to do even close to the sort of damage that Sniffles the Manticore did, much less Blood Diver. In fact, Nemo's melee was rather weaker than Talos' ... not that it would have helped much if his target was a frightened healer druid. Dash didn't seem to be faced with too much trouble keeping him occupied.

When, suddenly, Nemo spun around.

"Your magic!" He said, voice dripping with cold fury. He pointed his horn at Twilight. "Do you control it, or does it control you?!"

Abruptly, Twilight felt her spells slipping out of control. Magic that had come easily before became wild and untamed. Finishing a round of arcane

missiles, a spell she had cast almost a hundred times in the last twenty hours, she felt a reciprocal cascade of arcane energy shoot out in random arcs. Pinkie Pie, who had been staying close to help with AOE, yelped and jumped like a startled cat as a tendril of unfriendly fire hit her on the rump.

"Owie owie ow!" She spun in midair. "Watch it, Twilight! That hurt!"

"S-sorry! Sorry!" Hissing under her breath, the mage quickly backed away. Was it a curse put on her? A quick de-curse would fix the problem then! Activating the spell only prompted more violent fireworks and wild magic. It didn't hurt her, it only threatened those around her. The de-curse also didn't help at all. Whatever had been put on her, she would just have to wait for it to wear off. In the meantime, she needed to stay away from her friends.

The Shade of Nemo, again, turned away from Dash, and this time pointed at Rarity. Twilight had expected the same strange curse-like spell, but instead he projected a wave of arcane missiles towards the priest. It was far more potent than Twilight's own version of the spell, she couldn't help but notice. Just a second or two had knocked Rarity off her feet. Healing Light and a green natural glow surrounded her as she forced herself back up and into the fight.

"Well, I never!" She remarked. "That is *not* how a gentlecolt sweeps a lady off her hooves!"

"Rise and suffer anew, you damned!"

Again, the Broken Spirits reformed. Twilight checked herself and saw that she still had the Arcane Ignition debuff. There was no way she could run in and help Pinkie Pie AOE. She had to stay at range.

"You!" Nemo turned and pointed, this time at Fluttershy. She ended up with the Ignition debuff on her as well, and with the furious rate the druid was throwing out heals, the violet storm of energy around her would be suicide to get close to. At the same time, Twilight realized something. The Ignition debuff wasn't just making her spells go wild, harming friend or foe. It was also enchanting them slightly!

She focused on the Shade of Talos, hoping to bring it down. So far none of them had shown any signs of weakening. Mentally queuing up her trusty identify spell, Twilight noticed that both the Shade of Talos and the Shade of Nemo were at the same level. Either Nemo was far more fragile than Talos, or they somehow shared the life force that was animating them.

"Impudent Foal!"

"He's stackin' this attack faster'n it wears off!" Applejack yelled.
"Pretty soon ah won't be getting healed at all!"

"Twilight!" Dash called out. "Should we switch?"

It was either that, or let the pressure built on Fluttershy and Rarity.

"Do it!" the unicorn ordered. "Applejack! You pick up the next group of adds, too!"

"You!" Nemo pointed, this time at Pinkie Pie. Twilight had to keep from cursing. There went their other AOE. Now neither of them could get close to Applejack or Dash when the Broken Spirits reanimated! The longer these various debuffs piled up, the more impossible things were looking!

At virtually the same time, Dash and Applejack switched places, taunting off each other. Now the warrior was holding Nemo in place, and the slightly more lightweight paladin was muzzle to muzzle with the Shade of Talos. This was the hardest and most complicated fight yet, and they were rapidly running out of safe places to stand, as more and more of them became tagged by the Arcane Ignition debuff.

"Rise and suffer anew, you damned!"

This was, hopefully, the last time that -

"I grow tired of this display, my old Masters. Allow me to intervene and finish this farce."

Aw... *nuts.*

Enigma, however, did not descend like the others. He floated forward slightly, surrounded by a great halo of arcane light and fire. A glow over his chest radiated white light. It was a frankly frightening display... one Twilight suspected was similar to her own, many years ago, when a certain Sonic Rainboom had caused her powers to rage out of control. Regardless of how accurate that speculative comparison was, Enigma wasn't coming down. Did he intend to just rain fire from above? Dash and Applejack already had their hooves full!

Enigma glared down at the six mares. "Bathe in the Fires of the Infinite Beyond!"

That didn't sound pleasant. Twilight changed targets and confirmed that the Shade was casting a rather lengthy spell, called "Aura of Infinity." She tried to counterspell.

Only to have her counterspell bounce off an arcane shield!

"Everypony!" she yelled, a frantic note to her voice. "Switch to my target! Now!"

Collectively, they followed, directing shadowy curses and lightning upward. Only Applejack and Dash were too busy to help. The shield fell just in time, and a quick Wind Shear interrupted the cast that likely would have made the next few seconds of life very uncomfortable. The Shade of Enigma snorted in frustration.

His horn glowed, silver eyes alive in undeath.

A seemingly harmless bubble appeared around Twilight, colored a faint yellow. It didn't take a genius to realize that standing in something cast by a malicious Shade of a once powerful unicorn mage wasn't very wise. It also didn't take a genius to realize that, within the golden bubble, her spells - even instant cast ones - weren't working!

'Some kind of... anti-magic field? He can DO that?!'

Galloping out of it solved the immediate problem, but it also presented another concern. The more anti-magic bubbles the Shade of Enigma threw down, the closer everypony got to everypony else. Coupled

with the Acrane Ignition debuff, it was effectively herding them together, where they'd blast each other to bits with wild magic! As if to make things WORSE on top of that, the floating Shade collected dark energy around his horn before hurling it down, aiming towards a now fleeing Fluttershy.

The Arcane Crash missed the frightened pegasus, but forced her close to Twilight. Putting up a regrowth on Dash also sent a bolt of wild magic streaking towards the unicorn mage; it struck her foreleg with a painful crack -

"Impudent Foal!"

"You! Your magic betrays you!"

"Bathe in the Fires of the Infinite Beyond!"

"This is not goooood!" Twilight heard Rainbow Dash yell.

"Ah'm on the adds!"

"My target!" Twilight ignored the distractions. They needed to burn down that shield. The adds and the moving around could all come later. They all had the Ignition debuff by now, meaning everypony had to stay a few yards from anypony else while avoiding the Arcane Crashes and Anti-Magic bubbles. Dash only had one stack of the Mortal Strike ability used by the Shade of Talos. This was doable. They could do this!

"T-Twilight..." Fluttershy cried, starting to panic. "M-maybe we..."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" Rarity had to dive to avoid an Arcane Crash, moments from fleeing an Anti-Magic Bubble.

"No pony panic!" Twilight yelled, loud enough not just to be heard, but to be sure her friends all heard her voice in full. "Keep doing what we're doing! We can do this!"

It wasn't a magic spell. It was just a few hastily chosen words.

Yet the effect was, really, almost magical. Fluttershy and Rarity, who had been under intense pressure, who were both running low on mana,

steadied. Fluttershy jumped out of an anti-magic bubble, staying as close to it as possible to save space. Rarity backed up against a wall, forcing half the arcane crash to end up wasted and unable to threaten anyone else in the room. Pinkie Pie was likewise carefully keeping her distance and bringing down the horde of Broken Spirits that were mobbing Applejack.

"Applejack's mortal strikes have worn off," Fluttershy said, her voice tense but determined. If she was afraid, and Twilight knew her friend had to be (they all were), it wasn't impairing her ability to act.

It also meant that their tanks could swap again, if need be.

Finally, blessedly -

"How? How can this be...?" The Shade of Talos began to fade, growing less corporeal. "My power... I was... wasn't I dead...?"

The Shade of Nemo followed, a moment later, also fading. "Brothers? Where... am I...?"

Above them all, the Shade of Enigma stopped in mid-cast. The animating energies of the Shades were all connected. Hardly more than a few stray lightning bolts and arcane missiles had damaged Enigma directly, yet he was as weakened as Nemo and Talos. The unicorn wraith began to fade.

"Well... fought..." he whispered, yet somehow it was as if he was speaking into Twilight's ear. "Your magic.. your friendship and solidarity... is strong enough to cleanse this place."

Slowly, Talos and Nemo began to sink into the earth.

"If a thousand years have passed, then the Princess you saved..." Enigma descended, his body nearly transparent. The Elements of Harmony all watched him fall, near exhausted from the battle won. "Tell her... I am sorry... but what I did, had to be done..."

And he sank beneath the tile. All was silent, and then the ground shook. The three forcibly uprooted graves forced their way back down, seeming to reverse the flow of time. Earth piled back up only to disappear

beneath reconstructing blue and black tile. With one last shudder, the whole floor solidified, restored... save for the cultpony corpses.

- and then even those disintegrated, leaving empty robes and fallen equipment behind.

"Well, ah'll be," Applejack said with a crooked grin. An unearthly glow filled the purified crypt, and in this one antechamber, it lit up the tiled night sky inlaid into the ceiling above. Faded stars twinkled as clearly as the day they had been installed, more than a thousand years ago. The site of their battle became almost... serene.

"I can't believe we pulled that off!" Dash muttered, and quickly amended, "I mean... ah... not that I was ready to bubble-hearth or anything!" She chuckled, and slapped Fluttershy on the back. "Good heals! You, too, Rarity!"

"I must say, that was quite a bit more difficult than I expected," the sometimes-shadow priest commented, looking up with wide blue eyes at the cleansed and purified tomb relief overhead. The smile on her face seemed to hint that she was silently impressed with the decor, now that it wasn't quite so haunted.

"Mmm!" Fluttershy cheered, almost under her breath. "We did it."

"I'm almost too tired to have a party to celebrate!" Pinkie exclaimed, bouncing up and down. "Almost but not quite! I have just enough energy to eat a ton of cupcakes and brownies and caramel apples and sweet tarts and maybe, just maybe, some cream puffs and cookies!"

Twilight ducked low to pick up a small Mark of Command from on top of a pile of cultpony robes. To her surprise, the act of her doing so caused a small portal to appear overhead. The six mares inched away, more than a little wary of some kind of evil magic given what they had just fought. The energy from the portal was pure and white and soothing, however, and didn't bear any malice or ill intent.

Three small orbs emerged, circling the portal briefly, before falling gently to the floor atop each of the graves. Twilight blinked, noticing for the first time that the restored and purified resting places each bore a different

mark. A cutie mark, long forgotten, inlaid in polished copper. The falling sparks rested like tiny glowing balls before morphing and transforming into...

"A new shield!" Applejack and Dash both declared, eyes wide.

"Oh! A staff!" Fluttershy and Rarity did the same a moment later.

Pinkie and Twilight quickly identified the third gift. "A spellpower trinket!"

Slowly, six pairs of eyes narrowed at the sudden loot competition.

"Ha," a ghostly voice laughed.

- - -

The Shadowbolts had returned.

Luna remembered the night well. It had started like any other, as she did her duties as was her station in life, and then waited out the night in silence. Her Night Guard were all self-sustaining. They no longer came to her, except when there was some great emergency. The Grand Master of the Order was well able to see to trivial, mortal matters. It had been hundreds of years since she had given up trying to micro-manage her subordinates. There was no point. It was enough to set a system in place, as the Titans had done, and let it tick away over the ages.

This night, however, presaged an interesting break in an existence of forgotten and unappreciated tedium. The Shadowbolts were a cadre of her finest pegasi, all richly dyed in her power. They were the very finest in all of Equestria: trained in magics both Light and Dark and able to execute any mission, covert or overt. Her sister's festive weathermares, the so called 'Wonderbolts,' were hardly worth a mention. Flying rings around an enraged dragon was fine. Killing that same dragon in its sleep was better.

She had expected at least three to enter her throne room, fresh from their mission to the west.

Only one entered. Luna recalled a name based on the mare's coloring... only to realize that the pegasus whose name was on the tip of her tongue had died. A century ago. The resemblance of this filly was uncommon. Luna focused on the present and raised higher on her throne.

"You may speak, Shadowbolt."

"Princess Luna," the mare looked worn and hurting, but she spoke with authority and presence. She still wore the form fitting guise of the Shadowbolt, including combat harness and saddlebags. There was a bit of moisture on her lower lip. She had stopped only to dehydrate, and then rushed to submit her report.

Knowing the manners of her Princess, she dispensed with pleasantries and ceremony.

"Expedition Two-Four-One returned to the Lunar Observatory at two hundred hours," she announced, head high. "Casualties high, Princess. But we were able to reach the Western Sun Wall."

"And the Decurio?" Luna inquired.

"The Decurio is dead, Princess," the Shadowbolt lowered her head slightly, her eyes wandering to the cold tile floor. "I... I am one of four left in my unit. With our officers dead, I assumed command."

"...I see," Luna replied at length. A second or two passed, and her expression softened. "Featherfrost, isn't it?"

"Yes, Princess."

"I must see what became of the expedition." As she said it, Luna had already begun casting her spell. Her power touched the mind of the Shadowbolt pegasus. Featherfrost's eyes widened and she gasped. Images appeared before her, in reverse... a spell-like projection from her consciousness.

The dazed soldier shook her head to clear the cobwebs.

"Princess," she began anew, and her mind projected the initial ten-pegasus expedition as it left the castle grounds. "As ordered, our Decurio, Falconmane, led us west. The journey was uneventful at first..."

The pegasi traveled fast by air, usually at night, navigating by the stars. Like most Night Guard, they rested during the day in safe places. West of Equestria was a vast open steppe and prairie. In the northern reaches of the steppe, savage pony tribes still clung to their ancient ways beyond civilized borders. Luna had some affection for these ponies, that others called barbarians and nomads. They, too, knew how to travel by the night stars. Those brutal, nomadic ponies could at least appreciate the night sky, though they refused to recognize Celestia or Luna as Sun or Moon.

"We made good time across the steppe. As we entered Buffalo Lands, however, we noticed a migration in progress. We stopped briefly, and our translator spoke to one of their many chiefs..."

The projected vision showed the Shadowbolt Decurio, Falconmane, speaking with a huge quadruped around a crackling fire. Another Shadowbolt was seated nearby to translate. The Buffalo were another barbarian race who recognized no authority or beliefs native to the east in Equestria. Separated by vast wild lands, like Everfree, most Buffalo would live their lives never seeing a pony in the flesh.

"We learned that they were being driven north and east by the zebra, who were themselves being driven out of Uldum by the Tol'vir. We rested there for a morning and then continued west. The nights were cold, but quiet, and we were able to rest within the ample cloud cover. On the third night, just within the borders of Uldum, we caught sight of fires. Reconnaissance identified the disturbance as coming from a large group of fleeing zebra. They were under attack."

Luna frowned at the proof of warfare in the west, now laid before her.

Taken from Featherfrost's memory, she could see a large migratory collection of pony-like shapes from above. Attacking them were strange, black creatures...

"After an initial fly over, Falconmane made the decision to aid the zebra civilians," Featherfrost continued. "We attacked, using wind and lightning. To our shock, the creatures were able to use some sort of magical Purge against us. It locked down even our ability to fly. We were, however, able to ultimately destroy the attackers."

Luna got a clearer look at the creatures from the memories of the battle and the aftermath, when the un-injured Shadowbolts examined the fallen. The creatures were... vaguely similar to Tol'vir. They had catlike lower bodies, wings like pegasi only much larger, a humanoid torso and arms, and hideous toothy faces hidden beneath golden shrouds. More shocking than any of that was the fact that their bodies were not flesh and bone, but stone! A black, onyx stone!

Her pupils shrunk as she considered what that could mean.

"I myself was wounded in the battle, and nearly lost the sight in my left eye," Featherfrost said, not noticing the reflective look that came and went on the Moon Princess's face. "Fortunately, the Zebra were willing to aid us and attend to our injuries. They were lead by a mare... a Witch Doctor by the name of Zecora who was held in high esteem. She told us more of the horrors... of the situation... in the west."

The memory shifted to an aged Zebra crone holding a fetish mask.

"The Witch told us that those Zebra who remained in the West, fighting for the few fertile lands, had surely been killed. The creatures we had fought were related to the Tol'vir, and they called themselves Obsidian Destroyers. She said they were in league with a great evil that had risen further west, beyond the Obelisk of the Stars and the Halls of Origination. We stayed only long enough to heal our wounds, and then we continued..."

The Shadowbolts once again took to the sky, crossing from steppe to endless desert.

"As requested, Princess, we flew on, to the Court of the Ramkahlen Pharaoh. The reigning monarch was a boy-king, known as Ninjter..."

The brave pegasi descended in the night, and the view became an ancient city, still lit by life. Ramkahlen was ancient even by Luna's

standards. It had been built not long after the departure of the Titans and the Ordering of the World. Mortarless sandstone palaces and obelisks reached into the dusky desert sky. The Shadowbolts landed, the translator and Decurio speaking with Tol'vir guards. The cat-like humanoids were reclusive, but not normally unfriendly so long as sacred sites were avoided. Very few ponies dared to travel so far west into their lands, and none of the isolationist Tol'vir cared to venture outside Uldum.

"We were unable to speak with Ninjter himself, but his councilors assured our Decurio that the 'Obsidian Destroyers' were merely part of a clan in revolt over famine and taxation. We were advised to return home and inform our Princess that the affairs within Uldum were an internal matter of state, to be handled by the Armies of the Ramkahen."

"You did not do so," Luna guessed.

"Princess," Featherfrost replied, with a ghost of a smile on the daring pegasus's face. "Our Decurio thanked the Councilor for his hospitality and advice, and promptly led us west and north. The Old Maps spoke of an Obelisk of the Moon, and we made for it to investigate for ourselves."

Once again, the Shadowbolt's memory became more endless desert...

"We had, at this point, a full Decuria of ten pegasi. Then, a night soon after we left the Court of the Pharaoh, we bore witness to... Princess... what we saw was. Words fail me." Featherfrost lowered her head in apology, taking a shuddering breath.

"We saw something rise from the sands," she finally managed to say.

Her eyes closed, and the spell displayed what she could barely describe. It was some sort of creature, like a sand worm, but massive, and with a monstrous head bearing huge pincer jaws. The segmented body was orange, like the color of fire, broken by streaks of black, especially on the legs where they ended in wicked claw-tips. A tail with a pincer swept hungrily back and forth. It was fighting a large body of Ramkahen soldiers in the desert alongside a mass of mutated scorpids.

"I saw, with my own eyes, a dozen of the Pharoah's soldiers devoured alive..." Featherfrost continued, eyes wide at her own memories. "We tried to go around the battle, but several packs of scorpids must have seen or sensed us. They broke away to follow. We were far faster, but there were Obsidian Destroyers with them. They purged our ability to fly. Two of our Shadowbolts fell, and the Decurio ordered us to turn and engage."

What followed was a flurry of battle; broken, flashing memories -

"We destroyed our pursuers, but lost a flyer," the Shadowbolt explained, her face grim. "By morning, we were down to eight. The enemy used poisons we had no cure for. Burning our dead, we continued towards the Obelisk of the Moon, and marking it on our maps, kept west to the Sun Wall."

Eight Shadowbolts now, flew past a great black obelisk. Not far from it, built into a cliff wall, was a titanic set of doors, tightly sealed against mortal intrusion. Luna felt the breath catch in her throat. She knew what was behind those doors.

She knew that obelisk.

Featherfrost continued her report, "We came to the Sun Wall early the next night. It was as brilliant as the Wall to our north and east..."

The memory-picture changed to a great, glass-like energy matrix that encircled Equestria and Uldum. Here, it reflected back the vast desert and not the lush forests and mountains. It was also reinforced by a bulwark of stone in the form of great, mountainous cliffs. Dry winds kicked up sandstorms, and the picture soon changed to that of a cave, where the Shadowbolts huddled together as the sandstorm raged outside.

"Princess. We were forced to remain in that fissure for two days. No pegasus could have survived outside. We had been rationing water and food the entire trip, but... Princess... those howling winds..." Featherfrost licked her dry lips. "I swear, we heard voices. Whispers. From the wind and the sand. When the storm died down, we left... but we still heard the desert, whispering to us."

"Finally, our Decurio found the source of the shifting sands..."

The picture became one of a strange circular pit, dug into the desert. The walls had been reinforced by an organic ooze, hardened, and huge twitching legs protruded upward from the baked desert floor. Never before had Luna seen anything like this. It resembled nothing so much as a demonic, nightmarish hive.

"It wasn't long before we were noticed," the Shadowbolt's voice grew slightly weaker. "Things... things of all sorts began to crawl out. Some on six legs, some on four, some on ten or twelve... creatures never recorded before. Falconmane ordered one last pass, and then we fled."

"This time, we kept south and then east. We didn't find any others... nests... except that one, and the Sun Wall itself seemed intact all the way to the southern ocean..."

The desert once again stretched on, until, finally, meeting the blue sea.

"We stopped and landed only to investigate this. It was a... a face in the sand..."

The pegasus thought back, and the memory spell recalled a picture of a statue buried under the sand. Only the head stuck out from the side of a dune, but it was not the face of a Pegasus or pony, or even a Tol'vir. It was an Ancient Watcher, and the face was flat, with a nose and dark, lifeless eyes. Luna alone knew what it actually was and who - or what - had built it.

"Finally," Featherfrost said with a snort. "We headed towards the Throne of Four Winds. The elemental children of Al'Akir have often shown favor to pegasi, and our Decurio believed they could be willing to share information. Unfortunately, we were not permitted entrance to the Skywall itself, and our Patron among the Council of Wind, Rohash, soon dismissed us."

"We were to leave the next nightfall, but Siamat, Lord of the South Wind, sent a dignitary to speak with us. After a lengthy wait, his seneschal informed us that something he called the 'Curse of Flesh' was being

undone, within a place he called 'Ahn'Qiraj.' He refused to speak the name of the one responsible, or to point out the location of this temple ruin. Wind Elementals are often fickle and capricious, so getting anything at all from them may have been fortunate."

Featherfrost frowned at what came next, her memories quickly turning to an ambush and a fight.

"But... soon after leaving the safety of the Throne of Four Winds we were attacked by flyers from the west. Some attacked upright, on two legs, and wore strange barding and robes, and they led insect like creatures. We were forced into a fight, and vastly outnumbered..."

The Shadowbolt's eyes hardened. "Princess... we all would have perished, had Decurio Falconmane not flown into single combat with the enemy Captain. At the cost of his own life, he was able to slay the abomination. Without leadership, the insect swarms were easier to handle. I stand before you today due to his brave sacrifice."

She reached back into her saddlebags, carefully retrieving an item and placing it on the floor.

"I carried my three wounded comrades to a secluded cave, disposed of the bodies of those beyond saving, and salvaged what I could from the fallen enemy," Featherfrost explained, setting down one last item in addition to the rest. "On that slain monstrosity, we discovered this, Princess."

"These things...!" she implored, eyes wide. "Are not just beasts! They possess items of magical craftsmanship, the likes of which I have never seen...!"

Levitating the items in question, Luna examined them herself. There were strange, dark metal plates, made of a material and in a fashion she had never seen before. There were bits of cloth, with inscriptions and wards of alien design. And then there was a black metal band with a glassy crystal embedded. It was a ring, and within that crystal, bringing it closer - she saw a reflection.

A reflection of a jet black mare with murderous emerald eyes.

"No!" Luna gasped, awake. She looked around, momentarily frantic. It took a second or two to realize and remember where she was, and what was in the past. Buried, hopefully forever. Shuddering, she tucked her legs in tight. If only she had destroyed those horrible items!

Calming herself by force of will, she tried to regain a regal bearing. She was in her throne room. In Canterlot. Of course. Canterlot. Her new Night Guard were standing watch at the doors. They didn't have armor yet. Luna decided she would attend to that as soon as possible. It wasn't proper to have guards without armor. If any of them had noticed her panicked outburst a moment ago, it didn't show.

To the left of her throne, one of them lowered his head.

"Princess?" he inquired, quietly.

It took just a moment for her to remember his name.

"Marrs. I - I would like some tea, please," she whispered, a little shy of raising her voice just yet. That dream. Why was she having that dream? Why was she remembering back then, of all times?

"I will have some brought to you here," Marrs Orange replied. "The morning is a few hours away, yet."

Thankful for the reminder, Luna settled uneasily back into her throne. The walls and the faces around her may have changed, but the world outside was as dark and quiet as it had always been. Somewhat desperately, she watched her four silent guards. They bore her colors now. They were her ponies. They stood, mute, like living statues. They saw her watching them, but they didn't smile - they couldn't and wouldn't - no matter how much she secretly wanted them to. Maybe... maybe they would come to be as precious to her, and her to them, but Luna knew they would never be friends or companions.

Not like...

No. She didn't want to remember that.

So Luna sighed, lowered her head between her hooves, and waited restlessly for the dawn.

- - -

"She's a party pon-ee, a party poo-oo-nee! She likes to party every night and day, she likes to party singing hey-hey-hey!"

Captain Morning Star, of Her Majesty's Royal Guard, rocked back and forth as a hyperactive pink pony either tried to shake him to death or dance with him. The words spilling out of her mouth in concert with the strange music she had conjured up out of nowhere all indicated the latter. The fact that his teeth felt loose pointed to the former. Like a machine powered by pure sugar, Pinkie Pie was on a high.

She wasn't the only one.

"And then I was all like zap, pow! Exorcism proc! Judgment! Consecrate!"

The rainbow-maned pegasus was chatting up another, somewhat bemused, fellow Paladin from the Pegasus Detachment off duty. Watching her from a short distance away was a light gray pegasus civilian who actually seemed to be taking her wild tale at face value. The already colorful mare was adding similar color to her perhaps jaundiced account of the battle they had just returned from, playfully batting at the air and ducking and stepping like a boxer.

The priest and the warrior were at least worn out enough that they were simply resting on their blankets and enjoying the night air at this un-Celestia-ly hour. The druid and the mage were lying down by the fire, the former looking on the verge of falling asleep while the latter studiously took notes on a book they had unearthed. Her dragon friend was with her. Spike had been, to the baby dragon's sullen disappointment, left in the safety of the Guard camp while the Elements of Harmony went crypt diving. He hadn't been happy about it, but when they all appeared, alive and triumphant, he'd cheered loudly enough that the remaining cultists in the Observatory probably heard him.

Morning Star himself had been glad to see the mares back, and with news that the crypt areas were clear of both killer spiders and vengeful spirits. He had said as much while accepting another Mark of Command. Only the Observatory was left now, after a quick push through the Cloister. It had been his pleasure to accept ten Marks of Twilight as well, proving yet more essential equipment for the adventurous fillies. Was it his fault that he just didn't *sound* that excited? Royal Guards had an image to maintain after all.

Then the pink one had announced her intention to throw a 'party.'

What harmless fun, he had thought. After all, what kind of party could a pony possibly throw in a place like this? He had expected to see a round of drinks, some cheers, and a good meal passed around, followed by a night's well earned sleep. That was not this particular pink pony's idea of a party.

"Aww! You aren't having fun!" Pinkie Pie, for the Nth time, stuck her face several inches into his personal space. Pink hooves mashed his cheeks together. "Come on, smile! Smile!" She leaned in closer, trying to rearrange his face. "Smile." Blue eyes bugged out, and her hooves forced back his mouth into a grimace. "Smile. Smile now! Pinkie Pie compels you!"

"hrg."

"I will make you smile, *good sir!*" she declared, mimicking the voice of her violet colored friend. She bounced back, cartwheeled a few yards away, and pointed dramatically at the stoic unicorn guard. "You're pretty good at not laughing, I'll give you that, Mr serious pants-not-wearing-pants! But I've gotten a lot more powerful when it comes to my partying!"

"Miss Pie," Morning Star tried, not for the first time, to reason with the crazy pony. "I assure you I'm quite content. Those sweets you shared with my colts earlier were quite flavorful."

"Nein Nein Nein!" Pinkie Pie stomped both her rear hooves. "This is a party, and I will get you to laugh!"

Spinning around like a top, the strange music-making spell she had been using stopped with a vinyl scratch. Where the party-crazy shaman

had even learned such a spell, Morning Star couldn't hazard a guess. It had no combat utility at all. Instead, as the pink pony came to an abrupt stop, the tune switched to something completely different from the previous background beat.

This new tune was... kind of annoying.

"Earth!" Pinkie Pie threw down an Earth totem.

"Fire!" She dropped another, striking a silly pose. "Wind! Water!"

Raising a hoof to the air. "HEART!"

"Heart?"

"GO PLANET!" Pinkie Pie yelled, and the elemental totems all exploded, showering her with streamers and obscuring her behind a curtain of balloons. When the smokescreen rapidly dissipated, it revealed the once pink pony, now dressed up in an absurd red costume with hastily applied blue cupcake frosting over her face.

"By your powers combined," she overdramatically declared. "I am Captain Planet!"

The Royal Guard's eyes squinted.

And then she started to sing. "Captain Planet, she's our hero! Gonna take pollution down to zero!"

Biting his lip, he nobly made it through the first chorus.

Up until Pinkie wiped the blue goop from her face, and melodramatically cried, "You'll *pay* for this, *Captain Planet!*"

"Oh, Celestia, please," the guard captain coughed, hiding his face behind a raised foreleg. "That's enough."

"Did it work, huh, did it?!" Pinkie popped up from the opposite side, suddenly back to what passed for normal. Seeing the embarrassing smile

he was hastily trying to conceal, her grin grew wide and bright enough to force her eyes closed. "It did! I got you! I got you!"

"It would be difficult for anypony to keep a straight face at such a ridiculous display," Morning Star said, trying to force the undignified smile away.

"That's why I did it!" Pinkie confirmed, her grin turning into a more sedate smile of her own, and allowing her to open her eyes again. "Why are you ponies so frowny faced all the time? Doesn't the Princess ever let you have fun? She seems to smile a lot! You should smile with her!"

Morning Star nickered, amused by the innocent observation.

"That is exactly why we must keep a straight face, Miss Pie," he replied, his facial features finally returning - mostly - to normal. Damned, but her mood was infectious. "The Princess is loved for her generosity and kindness, as she should be. None care more for our land than Her Majesty, Princess Celestia. But kindness needs contrast. For there to be a carrot, there must also be a stick. We, the Royal Guard, must be that stick. When ponies see a benevolent Celestia, and a stern Guard, they will instinctively direct their hopes and affections where they belong: with Her Majesty."

It wasn't the best explanation, and it didn't capture the whole story, but it seemed to get the point across. Pinkie Pie's smile seemed to become more knowing, and she nodded.

"I know that," she said, glancing momentarily back at her friends.

Dash was laughing and chatting with her two hangers on, trying to convert them into fanboys (or just to convince them of her coolness), Fluttershy was sound asleep next to Twilight, still engrossed in the book from the crypt, and Rarity and Applejack were quietly watching the stars and nearly asleep themselves. Those who had seen Pinkie's flaunting of copyright infringement a minute ago had just as quickly forgotten about it, dismissing it as more randomness.

"There'll be more fighting tomorrow," she continued, her eyes pricking just a fraction in thought and concern. "So everypony should smile and be

happy while they can. If I could... if they'd let me... I'd even try and throw a party for the cultponies."

"Them?" Morning Star snarled, glaring at the fires in the night by the inner castle ruins.

"Yep!" Pinkie cheerfully confirmed. "Even them! I don't like them, but they're ponies too, you know? Even if they are dangerous, bad, super-mean ponies. Maybe if they were happier, maybe if someone had thrown them a party when they were sad, then maybe we wouldn't have to fight them tomorrow morning?"

The Royal Guard Captain could only stare at her. What she was suggesting was so... so... well, he doubted a party would've managed to convert any of the blackhearted ponies they had to face. Yet, at the same time, a part of him really did want to believe that, just maybe, it could have made one or two think twice before throwing their lives away. Of course, it was just stupid, silly optimism. Pie-in-the-sky. He was about to say as much, but...

But by the way Pinkie Pie was looking at the castle ruins, she knew it was a long shot herself.

"I see why you're the Element of Laughter," he said instead. Beneath this bright pink party pony was a sharp, though somewhat silly and idealistic, young mare. "Do you think you'll be able to keep an attitude like that going? If you intend to get to level 85, you'll end up fighting a lot of bad creatures. Not just ponies."

Serious, despite her smile - a contented smile, he realized - Pinkie Pie nodded.

"I have to! There's too much sadness in the world." Her blue eyes caught the fire from the camp, and she closed them to giggle again. "That's what I felt, when the Princesses brought us back to life. Back in Ponyville. Everyone was sad."

She looked down at her hooves - no, past her hooves.

"Not just ponies... the world itself was sad. Broken, like a wagon without a wheel. That mean dragon bully did something to it, I just know he did! Ever since then, it was like my pinkie sense got a big super charged jolt! But I didn't know what to do, and it wouldn't go away..."

She tilted her head back to the camp. "I always loved parties. So, just my luck, I heard that when you get five or six friends together to solve some of the world's problems... well, that's a party too! And I am Ponyville's Number One Party Pony!"

"So you keep saying," Morning Star replied, forgetting to repress a sudden, small smile of his own.

"There it is again," Pinkie warned him, pointing playfully at his grin. "You guys have nice smiles, so you better smile for us when we win tomorrow, okay?"

"I'll pass the order on to my colts," the Captain promised. "In the meantime, you should get some sleep."

"I can stay up longer than Dashie at least!" Pinkie Pie assured him, producing another blue cupcake from her puffed tail. "Once she turns in, *then* I'll get my rested bonus!"

"Hmn," he grunted, reverting back to his preferred silence.

Well, after one last thing, galloping around in the back of his head. "Tell me, Miss Pie, what would you have done if I hadn't laughed at that Captain Planet nonsense?"

"Beats me! Most of my stuff is just improv!" She giggled happily. "Even I don't know what I'm going to do half the time!"

Despite her earlier promise to outlast her boastful paladin friend, Pinkie Pie was soon yawning and she eventually relaxed, laying down on a nearby sleeping roll. It had been a long and exhausting day for her; she and her friends had earned at least a few hours of sleep. The Guard camp was no inn, but at least here they had a warm fire to keep away the cold night air.

Morning Star and the night shift of the guard remained awake, keeping watch. It was hard to believe that the fate of the expedition tomorrow, and the fate of the Everfree Forest, would be in the hooves of the now quietly dozing party pony and her five friends. He found it even harder to believe that he couldn't imagine them failing. Such strange and colorful mares, these 'Elements of Harmony.'

The Captain's mind wandered back to a letter, hastily delivered while the six had been away.

'Celestia, Your Majesty. You know where they are and what they're doing. The bearer of Magic is your personal student. Why do you need me to report on their progress?'

Of course, he would do as he was ordered, but still:

'Just what are you expecting them to find in the heart of that tower... that we, your own Guard, are forbidden to enter?'

Chapter 9

Princess Celestia lounged on her throne, contentedly nestled within cushions of woven silk and gold, soft with tempered cloudstuff and pegasus down. A golden halo backlit her crown and regalia, highlighting her radiance for all of her court to bask in. The Eastern Throne was as lively and vibrant as it had always been, since time beyond pony-time. Or, to be exact, since she had commissioned it moved from the Halls of Origination to Equestria, eons ago, from its former location by Rajh's side.

Sweet Rajh. She still felt her connection to the Titanic Watcher of the Sun, even now, but ponykind could not remain forever buried beneath the sands of that blistering desert. The Curse of Flesh had seen to that, and as Celestia herself succumbed to the weaknesses of the curse, she had felt the affection the Ancient Watchers held for her and her kind begin to wane. It had been time to move on, despite Luna's protests and refusals to leave Isiset's side, and abandon the land of their birth. Poor Luna had rarely smiled since the day those great gates had closed, forever, all those thousands of years ago, barred against any return.

Celestia, on the other hoof... was content.

Ponies of all colors and races basked in the warmth and totality of her sun's magnificent glow, the blessed gift of an Ordered World. None had the faintest idea of where their ancestors had come from, so long ago. Equestria was their home: their safe, idyllic, peaceful home. Even the weather and the wildlife bowed to the designs of ponykind. It would soon be a paradise in every measure of the word; let the rest of the world look upon it with envy! She, Celestia, would have created a new order, Her Order, one worthy of the Titans themselves in miniature!

All would bear fruit in time. Meanwhile, her courtiers laughed and played and frolicked in her glow, in her gardens and in her court. Jesters strummed lyres and other instruments and nobles cavorted, whispering and giggling under the stern gazes of the Royal Guard. It was all a joyful buildup to the Hearing of Petitions. Celestia always set aside part of the

glorious day to hear from her subjects. Most were merely content to be given entry and to praise her, but every so often there were requests and suggestions, all of which the Solar Throne gave careful consideration.

After all, while ever more of Equestria grew idyllic day by day, the border regions remained difficult to tame. Sadly, Luna had no interest in the creation of the New Order. Her own seat of power at Everfree had been left in a wild and untamed state, to better serve as testing and training grounds for her shadowy Night Guard. It was most unseemly, given the ancient and auspicious foundations of the place. There was no changing her younger sister's mind, however. Centuries of ambivalence had made her set in her ways; she hardly even responded to requests for her to even visit Canterlot for important festivals. Little Luna had become a recluse.

The Herald trotted forward, cleared his throat, and addressed the court, "All bow! The Light of the Day, the Bearer of the Sun, Her Majesty Princess Celestia, will now hear petitions from her most humble subjects!"

Raising herself up with elegance and poise, Celestia lifted a gold wreathed hoof.

"Come before me, my little ponies, and be heard," she spoke in a perfect voice that filled the hall with gentle, soothing tones of authority. Her court ponies were all bowing, heads low, and when they looked up at her, it was with love and adoration in their eyes. Celestia smiled, gracing them with the light of her pleasure.

"Princess," the Herald read from his itinerary in a booming voice. "It... it seems there has been a change? Ah. How strange." He quickly shook his head, dismissing the momentary confusion and impropriety. "Our first petition comes from... Everfree, your Majesty."

"Everfree," Celestia almost said it like a question. That wouldn't have done. Instead her tone indicating her mild displeasure. Then she 'hmm'ed at the slight possibility that it could be a servant of her sister, come to bear words of reconciliation and return.

"Let us begin then," she decreed.

The Herald nodded, and made the announcement. "From the Demesne of Everfree, and the Court of Lady Luna: The Element of Magic, the Magus Enigma, and his companion, the Lady Featherfrost!"

The announcement of the unexpected guests sent an almost inaudible ripple of concern among the court hanger's on and the noble ponies in attendance. They were all creatures of routine, and the vast majority of petitions were from the lower classes, as Nobles made their appeals in court under the guise of giving gifts. It had been ages since an emissary of Everfree appeared using their titles. Even Aged Nemo, the last Element of Magic, had clipped mention of any court or domain from his titled name, preferring the simple 'of Equestria.'

From the open doors of the Eastern Throne Room came a pair of ponies, one a unicorn and the other a pegasus. The former wore a plain traveling cloak of contrasting black and white. A foreign zebra fetish hung from his neck. He was a stallion in the prime of his life, with silver eyes and a matching mane, spiked backwards. This was Enigma. He had been to court before, and few were terribly shocked by his appearance now.

The other guest garnered more whispers. She was a light blue pegasus, almost grayish, with a mane of shocking ice-blue that curled up and then back, swept and shaped by the wind. She wore the form fitting guise of a Shadowbolt in stark black and indigo. Her golden eyes never strayed from the Throne of the Dawn to acknowledge the stares from the rest of the court. Her wings stretched lazily and folded up neatly to her sides.

"Your Majesty, Princess Celestia of the Eastern Throne," Enigma spoke first, bowing deeply. The pegasus followed a moment later.

Celestia gazed down at her guests. "It is always a pleasure to welcome home an Element of Harmony, Enigma. You put yourself on the top of my itinerary, I assume?"

"We all have pressing matters to attend to," he replied. "It seemed wise to not tarry."

"Your mentor would have waited his turn," she admonished.

"I am not Nemo, Your Majesty."

"No, you are not," Celestia agreed, letting a very mild trace of reproach into her tone. "What is your urgent business, Enigma?"

He took a deep breath, silver eyes hooded.

"The Element of Loyalty," he said. "I have Sunracer's Replacement."

Celestia's eye narrowed, her pink mane obscuring half her face. "Oh?"

"She stands before you," Enigma explained, and stepped back to incline his head towards the Shadowbolt by his side. "Featherfrost. I would present her as our last Element of Harmony."

"Majesty." The pegasus bowed, with courteous respect.

"We have not had an Element of Loyalty imbued since Sunracer's passing," Celestia reminded him. Reminded both of them. "Why do you need one now?"

"A war is waged within Uldum. An enemy rises that, if left unchecked, will undoubtedly threaten Equestria." Enigma's words send a shudder through the court. War was unheard of in Equestria, save for the troublemaking raids of the steppe nomads and the occasional uncouth dragon. "The Elements of Harmony must be assembled."

Celestia smirked. "Assembled... so that you may open forbidden places, closed to ponykind?"

Enigma's eyes widened just a bit; he was surprised she had figured it out.

"Yes, Majesty," he answered. "I do this at the request of Princess Luna, who even now fights to secure Uldum. However," he added, looking up. "I believe with all my being that Featherfrost is most worthy to carry the weight of the Element of Loyalty. Her devotion to her comrades and to Equestria is beyond questioning. In the years since being assigned my bodyguard, she has saved my life countless times."

"And you mine," Featherfrost spoke, giving him a thankful nod.

Celestia watched the two ponies carefully, and for some time, she said nothing. Enigma was the most powerful Element of Magic seen in generations, and Nemo had trained him in all the secrets of the Titans that survived from Before. He was not the hermetic that Nemo had been, but Celestia did believe he was loyal to the New Order and to Equestria. Featherfrost, on the other hoof, was a Shadowbolt, still dyed in Luna's powers and colors. That made Celestia slightly more wary. Much as she loved her somewhat withdrawn younger sister, she was not keen to let an Element of Harmony fall under the wing of her all-too independent Night Guard.

She stamped a golden hoof, hard, and a corona of light radiated from where she had struck the marble dais. A portal opened within that light, and from it Celestia withdrew a spherical stone bearing an ancient mark. It was the container for the Element of Loyalty, kept safe after Sunracer's death, twenty four years ago. Celestia nudged it and let it roll down the steps to come to a stop a yard or so away.

"Take it..." she said.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Featherfrost began to trot forward -

"...If you can," Celestia finished, her eyes turning to the pair of pegasus Royal Guards to her left as her wings shot out, framing her in a menacing corona of light. "Guards. Subdue her."

With a snort, the two large pegasi jumped down, interposing themselves between the Shadowbolt and the Element of Loyalty. Their wings snapped out, feathers sharpened by magical light. Featherfrost stopped her approach, slowing and then standing still. Her golden eyes were half lidded, and her wings slowly extended.

She waited.

Finally, the two Guards, remembering their orders - 'Subdue her!' - shot forward in unison. They reared to tackle the Shadowbolt and crush her under their superior strength. Only once they were committed to the attack

did Featherfrost tense and move, weaving between them like a streak of sky blue. The Guards landed, their faces and wings layered by ice. Snowflakes drifted along the path Featherfrost had taken, and the marble floor sported a zig-zag trail of frozen water, sticking up like a hundred tiny icicles.

Featherfrost stopped, one hoof on top of the spherical Element. The Royal Guards spun, shaking the snow off their wings, and tensed to give chase again. And again, the moment they committed to the charge, Featherfrost vanished, moving amid a swirl of snow. A second later and she was at Enigma's side, the Element of Loyalty held within her tail. Her wings shot out, releasing a small cloud of icy particles, and snapped back in.

Celestia's smile widened. "I see why she was chosen as your bodyguard, Enigma."

The Two Royal Guards growled, moving in to attack again.

"The test is over," the Sun Princess quickly informed them, in mid jump. "Return to my side, if you would?"

The pair stopped, wings struggling to halt their momentum. One was almost in reach of Featherfrost, hoof-blades extended. The Guards snorted and pulled back with military precision, returning to Celestia's left side. More than a few of the watching court ponies whispered amongst themselves at the displays they had seen.

"She is capable," Celestia continued. "As I expected."

"She had had ample opportunity and incentive to improve," Enigma explained with a dark chuckle. "Three times, she has guarded me on expeditions to the Western Sun Wall. There is no pony I would rather have by my side."

Featherfrost smiled at the praise, but kept silent.

"That is well and good, however, there is more to being an Element of Loyalty than strength or speed," the Princess reminded him. She turned her

eye on the Shadowbolt. "You must swear fealty to me, as all the Elements of Loyalty have done."

"Majesty?" Featherfrost asked, and her eyes flitted to Enigma for confirmation. He remained silent. Frowning, the Pegasus of the Night Guard took an involuntary step back before bowing her head. "Princess Celestia... I have already given my vows to my Princess and Lady Luna, and to Equestria. I... I am forbidden."

"Sunrunner was one of my Wonderbolts," Celestia said, as if not hearing Featherfrost's words. "You will take her place."

For a moment, the Shadowbolt seemed confused and torn. No doubt Enigma had told her of the importance of gaining the final Element of Harmony. Yet she had given her vows already, and could not honorably take new ones. The icy pegasus frowned, clearing thinking of some kind of way to accomplish her mission without compromising her honor.

"This... this must be another test," she reasoned, nodded. "It must be. Princess, you must know I would not go back on my vow as a Lady of the Night Guard."

"This is no test," Celestia assured her in a cool, impassive tone. "You have the Element of Loyalty. Make your vow to me and I shall bind it to you."

Featherfrost's mouth moved, but no words came out.

Her tail slackened, and the Element of Loyalty fell to the floor.

"I - I can not," she asserted. "My loyalty is to Equestria, and to my brothers and sisters in the Night Guard. I shall take no other vows." She turned to her partner and lowered her head. "I am sorry, Enigma, I..."

"There is nothing to be sorry for," he stopped her.

"But we...?" Featherfrost gasped, as a jeweled collar appeared around her neck. A stylized version of her cutie mark, a snowflake trisected by radiating lines, was emblazoned on the front.

"You have your Element of Loyalty now, Enigma," Celestia said, relaxing back on her throne. "And I believe you have chosen well. Is that all?"

The Element of Magic bowed slightly, in thanks, and Featherfrost did the same.

"There was one other matter," he said, without further hesitation. "Princess Luna has again requested assistance be dispatched to aid her in Uldum. As you are no doubt aware, the War of the Shifting Sands is being waged beyond the Sun Wall."

Celestia nodded. "So I have heard. Not too long ago, I spoke with the Great Bronze Drake, Anachronos. He considered our front in the war to be secondary to the defense of the Caverns of Time, and he also informed me that soon the other flights would mass and take the war to the enemy. All the dragon flights, save the Black, will descend and lay waste to these 'Silithid.' Our own priorities must be in the defense of Equestria, not Uldum. We are already pressed providing food and resettlement for displaced tribes in the west."

Seeing Enigma about to object, she held up a hoof for his silence.

"I am not mute to the pleas of my sister," she added. "I will go personally to Uldum. ...Soon. With a mighty host, and together she and I will bring order to the land as we have in the past. Tell Luna to be patient and not to take undue risks before I arrive."

The unicorn mage did not seem happy with this news, but agreed. "Very well, Princess. However, it may be too late to 'not take risks.' I pray you come as quickly as you can. Princess Luna needs your guidance and aid... more than you know, and more than she is willing to admit."

"Majesty," Featherfrost bowed again.

Enigma's body glowed, forming a sphere around himself and the Shadowbolt pegasus. Arcane text circled the pair, dancing along the floor. Then with a wink of magical power, they were gone. Celestia couldn't have known, then, just what her sister was already involved in, so far to the west. Or the lengths Luna was already prepared to take to secure victory.

Unlike her sister, Celestia knew why she was remembering these things; why she was having these visions of a time forgotten by ponykind. She woke up, having tangled her bedsheets around her sometime during the night. She had known these visions of the past would be returning to haunt her, but there had been little to do to prepare for it. Her demeanor was calm when awake, but clearly her body had not been as relaxed as it fought against what her mind knew came next.

The loss, the pain and... the betrayal.

"Luna..." she whispered, shaking her head sadly. There was no changing the past. What was done as done. What mattered was the future.

Working the kinks out of her legs, Celestia crooked her neck to the left and right to loosen up the muscles. She soon saw, in a full length mirror, that she looked quite frazzled: the hairs on her coat were on end and her mane had gone from gently flowing aurora to tangled web of rainbow colored snakes. Using a bit of magic, she rang a bell and sat on a soft cushion before the mirror, her mind racing.

If everything was going to plan (and it usually did), then today was the day.

Two unicorn servants quickly entered her room to ready their Princess for her appearance at court. They combed her coat and used magic to smooth out her mane and tail - these days more arcane firmament than physical substance. None could touch the Royal Regalia, so it was saved for last. Soft towels wiped her face, and enchanted water cleaned her mouth. After only a few moments, she was the picture of royal dignity and grace that she had always presented, and that after a thousand years her ponies had come to expect. Anything other than perfection would throw the poor dears into a panic.

Properly prepared and adorned, Celestia thanked her servants - pretty little maids that they were - and exited her private chambers. As always, a pair of Royal Guards fell in step alongside her. It was early morning and much of the court would not make formal appearance until after the ceremony of the rising sun. Before then, she had a small window of opportunity to overlap her time with that of her precious younger sister.

She found Luna in the dining hall, alone save for three of her new Night Guards.

The one closest had to be Marrs Orange. Celestia didn't betray any shock or surprise at the sight of the Earth pony's transformation. She had always known what giving these recruits to Luna would entail. The new colors given him were similar to those of the Old Night Guard, but just different enough to be noticeable, especially the silver manes Luna had given them. Rather more alarming, Luna had changed their eyes in more than just color. Marrs and his compatriots had slit pupils - the alteration was very unponylike and rather intimidating.

After a brief and unnecessary introduction, Celestia sat at the opposite end of the table to silently eat with her closest of kin. Luna looked tired, but her poise wasn't as rigid as it often had been in the presence of her older sister. She ate without speaking and slowly drank her tea. This was her dinner as much as it was Celestia's breakfast.

Finally breaking the silence, Celestia asked, conversationally, "I see your new Guard are taking to their colors well."

Luna glanced up quickly, before her attention returned to her after-dinner sweets. Which she picked at, not particularly liking sweet foods. She cut a slice from an apple and nibbled it, indecisively.

"Time will tell," she eventually replied.

It was not exactly a great conversation starter.

Celestia smiled, and helped herself to a bit of fresh melon. "I see. You are quite right. Time *will* tell."

It was a very subtle bit of prodding, but she didn't want to force Luna to talk if she didn't want to.

It paid off, almost a minute later.

"I must admit I... I am... tired," Luna finally said, pushing back her plate and giving Celestia a suspicious look. "A mere twenty one Guards, and it took so much out of me."

"You'll get used to it again soon enough," the Sun Princess promised.

Luna's eyes tightened into a faint scowl. "Maybe, maybe not. This body... this shell your Elements of Harmony trapped me within... it doesn't even feel like *me* anymore. It is like the Curse of Flesh all over again!"

"Sister..."

Luna looked away, guiltily. "I'm sorry," she apologized, quickly. "I don't mean to sound... ungrateful. I could just have easily ended up banished again. This is the price I pay for my purification, isn't it? I just... feel weaker. I don't like feeling..." *insignificant* "...weak."

"As you grow into your form again, your powers will return in full," Celestia replied, genuinely concerned for her sister. "Believe me, they will. Neither of us are... quite what we used to be."

"It wasn't just the ritual or the guardponies," Luna hesitantly added, wavering for a few seconds on whether to continue. She was clearly loathe to say too much, but desperate to talk to someone.

Celestia asked. "You know you can tell me anything, Luna."

The troubled Moon Princess frowned briefly, intensely, at that, but gradually softened.

"I..." she began, afraid to say. "I had a dream. About *him*. About a thousand years ago. I went to Uldum." She hung her head, and her voice trembled. "I made *that armor*. I did... things."

"That was all in the past," Celestia assured her with a glowing smile. "No one blames you for what happened. We-"

"Of course no one blames me," Luna interrupted, betraying traces of anger. "You burned all the records. No one knows me *at all* anymore. No one knows what I did or what happened or why." She gritted her teeth to

hold back tears but retained her composure as best she was able. "The two of you made me into an old mare's tale!"

Celestia couldn't help but return the frown, her composure slipping slightly.

"Luna..." she warned. "You have a whole new life ahead of you; you need to accept what happened and move on."

"I *have* moved on, big sister." The persian blue Princess pushed herself away from the table. "Marrs. Attend to me. It is time to retire for the day."

"My Lady," the Guard Captain bowed, falling in line and motioning to the servants to clean up.

"Luna." Celestia's voice was frosty, and every pony in the room froze.

All save one.

Luna herself tried not to look back, but when she did, it was with tears in her eyes. Still, she was stubborn, and refused to take back her words. The memories of a thousand years ago were still fresh, as were the wounds.

"I *am* sorry," Celestia told her, almost pleading. "When I told the Elements to Seal you, when I, when we..." For once, she found it hard to find the words, going with simply honesty. "We made a mistake. If I could do it all again... I would have told Enigma and the others to-"

At the sound of his name, Luna stiffened and turned away again.

"I don't want you to apologize," she said with a sniff. "And that pony is a thousand years in the grave. Besides, the Natural Order had to be maintained, didn't it? And you and I are both spares for the other, aren't we? It was my fault. I wavered. *I fell*. It was my fault. I brought it all on myself and I have to live with the consequences. Please... big sister... if you'll excuse me?"

Unhappily, Celestia tried again. "Luna..."

But it was obvious the conversation had already gone too downhill. Like quite a few others over the last year. On most things, the two sisters got along well: they had enjoyed long talks over shared meals or walks in the gardens, though Luna typically listened more than she spoke. Some topics, however, had become something of a taboo. It was obvious that the shadow of Nightmare Moon was still hanging over Luna. It had been forcibly expunged by the power of the Elements of Harmony a year ago, but it was an imposed peace. Deep down, there was still a war raging inside the Princess of the Moon. Luna alone could face her inner demons and overcome them. It could not be done for her.

"Tonight," Celestia said instead. "I have something planned for tonight. Rest lightly, because I may have cause to wake you."

Curiosity, ever Luna's Achilles heel, momentarily made her forget about herself.

"Tonight?" she asked, looking back with one eye wide, the other shut as she mentally went over any number of calendars and leap years. "There isn't anything special planned for tonight...?"

"Think of it as another surprise," Celestia promised, putting on what she hoped to be an infectious grin.

"If that is the case, why are you telling me ahead of time?" Luna wondered, already lost in her contemplation. "That defeats the purpose of a surprise... unless the *surprise* is that there's *no* surprise? Hmm..."

Already distracted by trying to figure what her sister was up to, Luna's mood had improved. Murmuring possibilities to herself, she began to trot away in much less of a rush. Marrs paused only a moment to bow respectfully to Celestia, and to give silent signals to the two Night Guards on watch. They fell in step with their Princess and commanding officer. Soon, Luna and her protectors were gone. Watching her go, Celestia sighed, relieved to have averted a total catastrophe.

Now, she just had to hope that everything was going as well in Everfree as it was in Canterl-

3. [Local Defense] Canterlot Merchant District is Under Attack!
3. [Local Defense] Canterlot Merchant District is Under Attack!
3. [Local Defense] Canterlot Merchant District is Under Attack!
3. [Local Defense] Canterlot Merchant District is Under Attack!
lampony yells: Horde rogue in AH!
3. [Local Defense] Canterlot Merchant District is Under Attack!
Rolling Restarts: Hey, is that an undead? What's he doing h
OMGWTFWHY?

Slowing putting down her tea cup, Celestia shook her head.

"Well, then. It seems today is off to a *great* start."

- - -

"I wish I could come with you guys," Spike said, gripping the strap that ran across his chest.

The Enchantment-only bag Rarity had made for him was large enough to be a backpack for the baby dragon, and she had studded it with jewels and imbued lacing the color of his scales. He'd already de-encharnted quite a few items for his friends, but it was clear he wanted to contribute in a more martial sense as well.

"I know you would, Spike," Twilight replied, leaning in to touch her cheek to his. "But its still too dangerous. You could get hurt, and if there were area of effect spells..."

"I'm still a dragon!" he insisted, frowning. "I can fight!"

"Just because you can, doesn't mean you should," she replied. "Just hold down the fort for now, okay? If the worst happens, we'll need you to be our backup and to get word to the Princess."

"I - I don't like it, but alright, fine..." Spike relented, backing away. "But nothing bad better happen. I'll be waiting for you guys to get back."

"We'll be back before you know it," Twilight promised, raising her head and trotting over to where Applejack and Pinkie Pie stood, next to a

large stone sticking out of the ground. "As soon as Rarity and Fluttershy are ready for their summon."

Rainbow Dash made a quick buzz and looped around to land on top of the stone. She was eager to get things going, and her wings flexed and stretched, mirroring her anxious and energetic nature.

"Come on, come on," she repeated, tapping the stone with a back hoof. "What are those two doing?"

"Yah know, Rainbow, it was just tha other day when we all had'ta wait for you and Pinkie Pie tah finish foaling around by tha mailbox."

"We weren't foaling around!" Dash objected, pointing down at Applejack. "It was serious business!"

"Very serious business!" Pinkie chimed in, nodding rapidly.

"Oh, really?" The farmer wasn't convinced.

"Where do'ya think all those cupcakes and sweets from last night came from?" Pinkie asked. "I'm bouncing them between myself and my alt to save bank space!"

"You can do that?!" Dash asked, and sucked in a breath. "That's brilliant!"

"What kind of mail even gets delivered out here, anyway?" Twilight wondered aloud. "And how?"

Dash snickered. "Oh, I've got a good idea how."

...

Meanwhile, somewhere over war torn Icecrown Citadel...

The Lich King frowned at the usual assortment of junk mail. How did this stuff even get here? And why did he still have a subscription to "Paladin Quarterly?" Not only wasn't Arthas working here anymore, or even

alive, but that subscription should have been canceled years ago. Were they still billing him? Did the undead still somehow have credit?

He was tempted to just kill the mailmare, but always seemed to just miss her.

Huffing at the frigid glacial air, the Lord of the Dead noticed a wobbly gray shape flying away.

"Googly eyed pegasus loon!" he yelled, throwing the junk mail off the side of the Citadel. "The Lich King has no need for 'Bed, Bath and Beyond' coupons!"

...

"You probably shouldn't think too much about it," Pinkie Pie suggested, her back against the summon stone. "Or else you'll go a little crazy-wazy."

"Yeah, and we wouldn't want any crazy ponies around," Dash agreed, lying on top of the stone and hanging her head down directly over the pink pony.

Pinkie just munched on a leftover cupcake from last night.

"Anyway," Twilight began to say. "We should..."

'I'm, um... ready for my summon... please...' Fluttershy's voice was ghostly, transmitted via magic to the rest of her party.

"About time!" Applejack replied, pushing against the summon stone with her forelegs. "So how'daya fire this thing up, anyhoo?"

"Like this!" Pinkie slurped up the cupcake, and still chewing, spun around to face the summon stone. Holding out a hoof, she declared, "Fluttershy! Fluttershy!! Fluttershy!!!"

A glowing portal in space appeared from the surface of the stone.

"I see!" Twilight said, approaching the portal. "The spell requires the name of the summoned to be chanted three times in succession."

"Just like a horror movie!" Pinkie further explained.

"Pfeh!" Dash, still lounging on top of the stone, rolled her eyes. "You don't need to say anyone's name! Pinkie Pie's just pulling your tail!"

"Aww! Its no fun the normal way!"

Sighing, Twilight held out her right hoof, thinking Fluttershy's name instead of saying it.

A few second later, the magical portal widened, and the outline of the timid pegasus druid became clear. She quickly solidified and materialized, stepping out from the fading swirl of purple energy. She and Rarity had both hearded back to Ponyville to check in on their homes, and in the former's case, to make sure Sweetie Belle hadn't gone on a cloth destroying adventure with her friends. Since the two mares were in Ponyville, they'd also been asked to run one or two quick errands.

Luckily there was a summon stone erected by the Royal Guard. With it, a party member could be pulled through the Twisting Nether from any point on the planet. It was potent static magic used to provide quick military reinforcement. Twilight had read about it, but the magic of how to create a summon stone was restricted to the Royal Guard. Apparently, many different military forces worldwide were inclined to set them up near areas of intense conflict to better bring in groups of mercenaries and other adventurers.

"I have the glyphs everypony wanted," Fluttershy said, pulling a few brown notes from her bag.

"Alright! Thanks, Fluttershy!" Dash hopped down and picked the note with her name on it. She then tossed her holy libram on the ground and started applying some dust of disappearance to it, rubbing her hoof in circles as if she were cleaning a dirty dress instead of a delicate piece of parchment.

"What'd you need anyway?" Twilight asked, taking her brown note and checking the glyphs within. She laid out her own spellbook with care, and carefully placed the inscriptions over the available slots.

"Ah, just some Prot stuff," Dash replied, and two golden lights sparkled from her holy text. "The divine protection glyph was the big one I wanted to try replacing." Job done, she stomped down on the book causing it to twirl through the air and unerringly back into her saddle bags. "What'd you get, Twilight?"

The unicorn triggered the apply effect, and the glyphs burned into her spellbook. "I've had to use polymorph a bunch of times already, and I heard there was a glyph that makes it harder to accidentally break. That and one to improve my arcane blasts."

"Sounds cool," the pegasus paladin agreed. "Crowd control's saved our flanks a bunch of times already."

'Is anyone listening? I do hope I'm not here talking to myself. I am ready for a summon!'

"Good timing, Rarity!" Twilight quickly put her spellbook away and held up a hoof to the summon stone. She thought about her fellow unicorn, picturing her in her mind, and thought her name three times for good measure. Rather than draw any magic from her, however, the summon stone possessed its own. It responded to her call, and the initial portal formed, purple haze slowly rotating around a bright white center.

Dash formed the second anchor for the summon.

"Ta da!" Rarity all but cantered out of the portal. "How do I look?"

It seemed that the well groomed priest had found the time to grab a quick bath and fix her mane to perfection. She had also thrown on a new purple shirt to match her new white vestments. Because, heaven help you if you fought life or death battles against hordes of evil ponies wearing a shirt that didn't match your chestpiece or boots. On the other hoof, she did look good.

"Y'all look great!" Applejack said, and joked, "Ah'm sure the cultists out there will be honored to have their mind flayed by such ah well dressed pony!"

"I brought some shirts for all of you as well!" Rarity pointedly accepted her friend's compliment, minus the sarcasm. "Twilight, you simply must try this one. Wearing a chestpiece without a shirt underneath is so... gauche! We aren't trolls or orcs, after all."

"We usually don't wear anything at all!" Pinkie pointed out, and tapped her chin quizzically. "But the last time I asked one of those human guys, hey, 'it must be hot with all that stuff on! Let's get naked!' He ran away. I wonder why?"

"Human types only get naked when they think they're going to spend all night wiping on trash," Dash explained with a sage-like expression. "I don't really know what that means, but it's what I heard."

"What it means, is that there is a whole new fashion industry out there, just waiting to be exploited!" Rarity informed her, and then, suddenly aware of what she had said, the unicorn blushed. "Exploited in a *good way*. I recently had a request made for something called *lingerie*..."

After quickly accepting Rarity's choices in shirts to fit under their new robes or barding, Twilight trotted ahead to redirect their attention to the fight ahead. She had a spring in her step, and despite only a couple hours of sleep, she felt invigorated and excited to get going. Magical energy all but crackled around her body. Her clothes were magic, her hooves and ankles decorated with enchanted shoes and bracelets, and a new magical hood covered her head. She felt like she could take on a half dozen Trixies and have room for an Ursa Minor!

It had to just be the adrenalin speaking, but maybe someday... someday soon!

"Okay, everypony," she said, raising her voice a bit. All her friends were standing in a row, ready to head out. "This is the last push. By tonight, the castle will be peaceful again, and Everfree will be back to... well, it'll be back to as normal as Everfree Forest usually gets."

"Let's go back over what we need to do," she continued. "First! We'll be heading through the Cloister area along with the Royal Guards. Try not to get too mixed up in the fighting. We'll be working with the pegasi to attack enemy casters. Once casters in an area are down, then we help with the melee fighting."

"Second! We keep an eye out for any of the ponies these cultists have coltnapped. Third. Everypony should also try and keep an eye out for this 'record of the first cutie marks' that the Cutie Mark Crusaders wanted."

"I still can't believe we're actually doing that," Dash groaned , hoof-palming.

"It doesn't hurt to try, and we did say we'd look," Twilight reminded her. "From the letter we found on Blood Diver... Highdiver, I mean... we should also be on the lookout for this Ambassador Mo'grog pony/person, and the one behind all this: High Priest Voidhorn. Who sounds like a unicorn. Everypony ready? Buffs look good. No one needs to AFK or Bio?"

The mane six all shook their heads.

"Then I'll talk to Captain Morning Star and start..." Twilight turned and was about to head over, when she came up short, nearly bumping into a pegasus who had crept up behind her. He wasn't a Royal Guard, that much was clear given his coloration and lack of armor, not to mention being normal sized. He shuffled back a step, bowing his head in apology.

"S-sorry," Ice Breaker said, moving aside. "Before you go, I just wanted to say good luck. We're all counting on you!"

Dash trotted up and smiled at him brightly. "Heheh! Don't sweat it! We got this in the bag! Now, if you want my autograph, that's two bits for..."

"Ah, come on ahlready!" Applejack butted into the paladin's rear, forcing her along.

"Nooo!" the would-be wonderbolt cried. "My adoring fans need me!"

"I love my fans, too!" Pinkie agreed, bouncing along. "Even though they are kind of pervy. Not as bad as Rarity's though!"

"Please, darling, they're called admirers, not fans... and what do you mean perverted?!"

Moments later, Twilight gave the word to Morning Star, and the ranks of Royal Guard started forward, stomping their hooves in unison. The Pegasi took to the air first, forming up into pairs. The unicorns warmed up their spells next. Like Morning Star himself, they specialized in defensive barrier shields. Each one could put up a dampening shield that reduced the damage taken by those nearby. The Earth ponies were the vanguard: the wedge that would push forward through the cultist infested castle Cloister.

"Gentlecolts!" Morning Star yelled. "You have your orders! We push forward to the Observatory. We leave not a single enemy behind us! Advance on my Mark!"

Unlike before, Applejack - who only had a defensive protection spec - stayed back. Everyone else except Fluttershy was going dps. for Twilight and Pinkie Pie, this was no different than normal, but Rarity cloaked herself in Shadowform, and Dash took out her Highdiver's Hoofblade to go Retribution. Pegasi circled overhead and, as one, swooped forward to begin the attack with an air-to-ground bombardment. Magical bolts shot up from the enemy occupied Cloister, as cultist mages sheltered behind pillars and fired up at the Royal flyers.

The Royal Guard pegasi were not weatherponies, but they were still pegasi. Dropping satchels from their underside, they climbed upwards in tight spirals, pulling together moisture to form stormclouds. The Cloister rocked with explosions as the dwarven and gnomish explosives detonated, shattering the makeshift defensive works put up by the entrenched cultists. While any resulting enemies caught in the blasts were a plus, the goal was simply to destroy any objections or earthworks.

Stormclouds brewed overhead.

"MARK! AD-VANCE!"

The Royal Guards moved forward in unison, maintaining formation around their protective unicorn mages. Just like when they formed the bridge to cross into the Courtyard, enemy unicorns quickly responded by

throwing large stones and other projectiles. Some were as small as a toy ball, and others were large enough to crush a pony outright. They arced through the air in a steady streak, taking advantage of the abundance of fallen masonry and broken stone that littered the castle ruins.

The unicorn Guards did their jobs well, however. Twilight was sheltered under Morning Star's shield, in the center of the advancing wedge. A solid, transparent barrier repelled the projectiles. Behind them, a young colt with a sun-adorned flag draped over his side played a marching tune on a ceremonial horn.

Cultponies littered the ruined Cloister ahead, and Twilight could see where the explosives had hit, blasting apart fallen pillars and stones that had been intended as barricades. As the Guard formations approached, a cry went up from the cultists still hiding in the ruins. The words were alien and strange, in a tongue Twilight couldn't place. They almost hurt to hear.

"Ia! Ia!" A mare's voice cried, and a dark unicorn stepped atop a fallen pillar, strange black flames running up and down her sides. "Hear me, minions of the Twilight Cult! The hour of Darkness Ascendant is at hoof! The Eye of the Master is upon you! Your Gods are watching you, my brothers and sisters! They hunger for flesh and blood and pain and death! Feed them! Gorge them! Destroy the unbelievers who would defile this sacred place!"

With a mad cry, a dozen ponies in purple robes leapt out of cover and surged forward. Morning Star barked an order over the din, and the Royal Guard formed a wall, their positioning tightening up to assure continued cover beneath their magical shields. It was a good thing, too, as cultist casters moved into position during the confusion, rearing up to pour fire and ice into the growing conflagration.

Thunder shook the sky above.

The Royal Guards in front were already caught in a ferocious melee. Now, it was up to the casters to decide the battle. Twilight identified and marked two targets, one with a skull the other with a star.

The skull was a "Twilight Firebreaker" - a unicorn in a red robe and an insane look in his eyes. Like all the cultists, his coat had been turned a

strange, mottled and brackish black. His forearms were in the air, and fire was swirling protectively around him.

The star, her own polymorph target, was a "Twilight Frostcaller" - curiously, this pony did not appear to be a unicorn. She was a Pegasus, and yet the spell identified her as a caster. She was clearly not suicidal enough to take to the air with so many Royal Guards flying overhead, but as she lifted slightly off the ground, it was clear she intended to cast some sort of spell. Twilight didn't give her a chance. The second she came in range, she became a sheep.

Another Firebreaker appeared from the crowd, and a lance of energy came down from above.

Flamestrike!

The target was a rather conspicuous Pinkie Pie, thankfully sheltered behind one of the magic dampening shields. The burning lance from above still hit her, and she promptly started bouncing around.

"My hooves! My hooves!" She quickly stopped her comical bouncing, and summoned a bolt of lightning at the offending cultpony. "That was super hot, you big meanie!"

Everypony else was helping, focusing fire first on the skull marked Firebreaker and then on the second one. Twilight did the same, but as party leader, she also had to keep an eye out for new threats. It was not an easy job, even with the little cheat that was her Identify Spell. There were a lot of ponies fighting across the broken space of the Cloister.

The dark sky above cracked, and a lance of lightning came down, blasting cultists below.

"There!" Twilight saw a cast far to the left. It was hard to see what the cultpony was, but her spell had identified an incoming enemy spellcast. It had also marked the new threat as a "Twilight Earthcrusher." Honestly, where were these terms coming from?

Suddenly, without warning, a spike shot up from the ground beneath Dash's feet. The pegasus yelped and ended up tossed through the air, right

out from the Guard magic shield she had been under, next to Fluttershy. The spear of stone had hit her hard, and knocked her right out of the protective field. Fluttershy was already casting a regrowth on the injured paladin, and after only a second or two of recovery, Dash zipped back in place.

"We need to take out those Earthcrushers first!" Twilight yelled, and put a skull up on the new enemy. Unfortunately, it was too far away for her to attack.

They were vulnerable on the left and right.

"Pinkie Pie! Rainbow! Switch places!"

"Okey Dokey Lokey, I'll be there in a jiffy!"

"You got it, Twi!"

The two swiftly moved out from under their shields to switch places, Pinkie transforming into a ghost wolf to get to safety a little faster. Debris continued to rain down from above, now complicated by Flamestrikes from Firebreakers. Once Pinkie got back in position, she dropped new totems, but was still close enough to help Rarity attack and interrupt the Earthcrusher. The new formation was better: with Pinkie and Fluttershy in the middle group, Rarity and Dash on the left, and herself and Applejack on the right. Two ranged would always be in range of a target on the left or right.

"Earthcrusher again!" Twilight announced, marking. It was on the right this time, and so she and Pinkie Pie focused fire on it. Those Earth Spears were definitely the worst spell of the lot. Not only was the damage caused by one apparently unaffected by the shields of the Royal Guards (since they only dampened incoming magic), but anyone hit would be vulnerable to the other spells and projectiles being thrown around.

More lightning came down from the pegasi above, splitting open an ancient marble pillar and causing the pieces to fall on top of a ranting cultist priest. It was organized chaos. The Royal Guards in melee pushed forward.

"This sucks!" Dash yelled, as she watched another Firebreaker fall. "The only ranged spell I have is Exorcism!"

"At least ya'll have that!" Applejack yelled back. "I should'a brought more apples ta buck! They'd be better'n nothin!"

A chill wind blew in, as another Frostcaller emerged, just as the sheep on the other one expired. Both pegasi started flapping their wings, summoning down a blizzard of frozen, sharpened ice. The ground became slick with water and, gruesomely, blood. Twilight tried not to think about that and continued marking and casting. A new polymorph turned one of the pegasi back into a sheep. It was hard to decide what was worse: the Flamestrikes or the Blizzards. Earthcrushers still took priority.

But there seemed to hardly be an end to them all.

Sticking close to Morning Star and under his magic dampening shield, Twilight winced at the fallen cultponies they were passing. The Royal Vanguard had crushed and then trampled them on the tireless march forward. Not a single one had broken ranks or formation, even when the cultists routed and fell back to another defensive point.

"Look at that! We got em!" Dash laughed, celebrating with a colorful backflip.

"Deir ponies are galloping from de battlefield!" Pinkie Pie bounced up, hoof in the air, putting on her best (worst) Neighponese accent. "A Shamefur Dispray!"

"Ia! Ia!" the mare's voice from before cried. "Cowards! Cowards! The Master has no use for the weak of heart! She has no use for those who fear death! Suffer for your weakness and failure, that the rest of you may see what becomes of those who forget the Master's Will!"

A chorus of pony voices cried out in pain, becoming gargled, choked sounds.

"Fight! Fight for the Master!" the madpony commanded. "Take Strength in the deaths of the Weak!"

That... was probably the prompt for Round Two.

"We are almost through the Cloister!" Morning Star yelled, urging his colts forward in a less dramatic fashion. "Double Time!"

The formations of guards picked up the pace, breaking into a practiced, gallop. Twilight and the rest had to match pace, as the groups of ponies crested more destroyed obstacles, fallen pillars, and broken statues. The Cloister was rectangular, with an open area to the middle. The cultists had wisely avoided that, knowing the exposed area would leave them open to pegasus assaults from above.

Seeing the rear of the rectangular Cloister area, Twilight saw the last of the cultist horde whipping itself into a frenzy. Seeing the Royal Guard coming for them at a battle-gallop, they cried and rushed forward to meet their enemies head on. The two forces, once a disciplined wall, the other a maddened, zealous mob, crashed head on to the sound of steel and hooves and breaking bones.

By sheer weight of mass, some of the cultists broke through or even jumped over the Guards.

One in particular, a wide eyed mare frosting at the mouth, bounced from her landing and rushed towards Twilight. Her right off had been removed entirely and replaced with a jagged hook, crusty red from use... She raised the weapon high, to drive it into the heart of the robe-wearing mage.

Applejack intercepted her with her shield, slamming the cultist out of the air and into the ground.

"Woah nelly!" the Earth pony interrupted. "Ah don't take kindly ta being ignored!"

Dash, just as easily, had intercepted two of the other cultists, and seemed to be handling them fine. Twilight directed a few arcane bolts to assist her warrior friend, but kept her eyes peeled for any danger that warranted focus fire. She soon saw something of just that sort: it was another Twilight Firebreaker, but she seemed to be growing larger! Within seconds, she was twice the size of a normal pony!

The Identify spell flickered, changing the designation to 'Empowered Firebreaker.'

The super sized cultpony roared, and her huge horn flared red. This time two pillars of flame came down on two separate targets. Recognizing the danger, Twilight marked her with a skull. She didn't even need to say anything; everypony knew what skull meant.

Unfortunately, whatever magic had been used to increase the size and power of the insane unicorn's magic had also made her tougher. A stream of arcane missiles blasted her face, causing her to cringe, but little more. Lighting and shadow added in, and the empowered unicorn ducked her head and howled in agony. A cast time measured in all of a second - too fast to easily interrupt - came and went, and then more flame pillars descended.

Before they could drop the Firebreaker, an Empowered Earthcrusher appeared. Her size massively increased, the type of pony that composed this caster variety became clear: she was an Earth Pony. The Pegasi were Frostcallers. The Unicorns were Firebreakers. It made sense... but how could Earth ponies use such powerful magic? Were they shamans like Pinkie Pie!?

She switched the skull to the Earthcrusher, even though the Firebreaker was already wounded. Nothing was more important than taking out the Earthcrusher. Twilight did not want to experience an empowered version of those stone spikes coming up from beneath her hooves!

Together, Twilight, Pinkie and Rarity hit her with everything they had -

And then the Earthcrusher reared up, her hooves angled down.

"Everypony move to the right!" Twilight ordered, quickly jumping to the side.

As the Earthcrusher came down, the Earth spikes came up. Serrated stone erupted from where Twilight had just been standing, and from beneath Fluttershy and Applejack as well. Captain Morning Star, still maintaining the magical shield that kept them from being killed by Blizzards

or Flamestrikes, inched away from a spike that had nearly impaled him while targeting Applejack.

"Keep it up!" Twilight yelled. "Keep it up!"

Moments later, an Empowered Frostcaller appeared, also swelling to double the normal pony size. Just to see if she could, Twilight quickly switched targets and cast polymorph. The cast fizzled, repelled by the now too-powerful enemy. The enraged pegasus reared up and started flapping her wings, only to snarl and grimace as lightning from above caught her on the shoulder. Her eyes turned upwards towards the Royal pegasi, who had moved the stormcloud to bring down Celestia's wrath anew.

Even through the Guard shields, damage from the empowered Blizzards and Flamestrikes was starting to build up. Fluttershy flipped back a sheen of sweat and kept casting heals, keeping everyone above the point where even an Earth Spear could finish a pony off. Near death, the Empowered Earthcrusher still managed to rear up and get in one last attack.

"Left!" Twilight ordered, seeing the attack coming.

As one, all six Elements of Harmony moved, neatly side stepping the three Stone Spears, this time rising up beneath Rarity, Dash and Applejack again. Shrinking as she died, the Empowered Earthcrusher fell to the side, disappearing behind the wall of fighting cultists. Twilight swiftly moved the skull mark back to the wounded Firebreaker.

They methodically brought the empowered cultpony down and then turned on the remaining Frostcaller. The pegasus continued to desperately cast blizzards that would have torn apart and frozen most ponies... but that were sufficiently weakened by the Royal Guard shields that Fluttershy was easily able to heal through the damage done. She, too, shrunk down to normal size as she fell.

"I don't believe this! You idiots!" the chanting voice from before yelled, as soon as the Frostcaller went down. "When I told you to fight and die for the Cause, I didn't mean you should *just* die for the cause! The implication was that you win in the process! Obviously you lot just aren't fanatic enough! What we have here is a clear failure of fanaticism!"

In a flash of light, a robed form levitated in the air, out of range of spells.

"I am the Mouthpiece of the Master! Hear me, children! Your lives are forfeit, but you have bought enough time. Rest assured, my devout flock, that when the Darkness Swallows this World, I shall put in a good word for all you little ponies! And to the Elements of Harmony, I say this: a great reckoning is at hoof! I shall personally enjoy tearing the Elements from your tortured souls as a gift to the Master!"

The floating cultist laughed and promptly teleported away. As she did so, her minions still fighting the Royal Guards convulsed and cried. Purple lightning arced from body to body all along the line of desperate, fanatic cultponies. They jerked and smoked and finally fell, dead, struck down by the dark magic that then danced merrily through the air, snaking around the partly collapsed Castle Observatory.

The life energy then solidified into a magical energy shield.

"Company Halt!" Morning Star's voice rang out. "Secure the area!"

The Elements of Harmony, meanwhile, cautiously approached the purple energy field that now completely enclosed the Castle Observatory. Even the top was closed off.

"A force field, huh?" Pinkie was the first to speak up among them. "That's pretty neat! Maybe I can vibrate my way through it if I eat enough sugar and caffeine?"

"This *is* Pinkie Pie we're talking about," Dash agreed. "It might work."

"No pony's vibrating through anything," Twilight stopped the two jokers. She trotted up close to the wall, getting a good look at the spellwork involved. "This is...wow... some pretty powerful magic. I don't think I could even teleport through it."

"If we can't fly in... and we can't use magic to get in..." Fluttershy asked. "What do we do?"

"Applejack, you mentioned seeing a door that led to a basement of cellar, right?" Twilight asked, and the apple farmer nodded.

"It was closed last time we were here," she said.

"We can't get in this way, but maybe we can go under the spell. Just like those Earth lances came up from under the guard's shields." Twilight turned away from the barrier to survey the now secure Cloister. the Royal Guard had command of basically the entire castle ruin... except the now warded Observatory.

"Pinkie," she said, not seeing anything obvious stick out. "Can you pick up any caves or tunnels below us?"

"Darn it, Twilight, I'm a shaman not a miner!" The pink pony objected. "Oh, wait, I am a miner. But I don't have a detect cave spell... that I know of... Oh, oh!" She picked out her Earth totem. "I know! Rocky! We can ask him!"

"Rocky?" Rarity inquired, raising a delicate eyebrow. "And who, may I ask, is this Rocky fellow?"

"Rocky is my Elemental Totem," Pinkie Pie explained, and planted the fetish into the ground nearby. It was a pretty crude looking thing, based around three rather familiar rocks, a party hat, and some wacky pink and blue streamers that fluttered directly upward. A metal and wood base and some rope held it all together.

"And what does Rocky do, sugarcube?" Applejack asked, leaning in to get a closer look.

They had all seen Pinkie Pie use her elemental totems, so everypony knew they worked. Somehow. This one just didn't seem to be doing anything obvious.

"Hey, I recognize those rocks!" Dash suddenly said, pointing at the totem. "They called me a chump!"

Seeing her friends stare at her askance, the chromatic pegasus shrunk back.

"It's a long story," she explained.

"Rocky here is a friend of mine." Pinkie Pie lovingly patted the strange totem. "And he was the first totem I made when I learned how to be a shaman! All the other elements were like, 'aw, ponies, eww, they're for little fillies!' I knew I could be a good friend to them, but none of them wanted to listen at first. They thought I was *silly*."

"You are kind of silly," Dash pointed out. Seeing her friends giving her the look again, she shrugged. "What? She is!"

"They thought I was silly *in a bad way*," the Earth pony continued, not particularly bothered by being called silly... the good kind of silly. "But Rocky remembered me from when I was little. He listened to me, and he accepted an invitation to my party. Of all my elemental friends, he's my best friend."

Pinkie Pie gently pushed Applejack back a step or two.

"Rocky?" She ducked down to be nose level with the totem. "I know I haven't asked you to come out before in front of other ponies, but my friends are all super cool ponies! You've been watching them, right? Will you come out and help us? Please? Pretty please with crystals and quartz sprinkles on top?"

Smiling brightly, the bubbly pony giggled and backed away. Her friends had formed a wide circle around her and the totem. For a few seconds, there was no response from the pile of rocks and wood and metal that was the Earth Totem. Then, with a surge of elemental magic, an avalanche of Earth shot upwards. Glowing bands encircled mace-like stone wrists, and a single large block of rock fused together into a massive barrel chest. Other curved stones formed shoulders and a small head, with a pair of glowing orange eyes. A tightly swirling storm of dust connected the arms with the body and the body with the ground.

The strange construct's head floated a bit from its body, darting from pony to pony, before settling down and facing Pinkie Pie. It held out a granite arm and open hand, and the pink pony laughed as she bounced up and into its grip. Hind legs in the Elemental's hand, and forelegs wrapped

around the upper torso like she was giving it a hug, Pinkie Pie's grin widened as she looked down at her friends.

"This is Rocky!" she said. "Say 'Hi,' Rocky!"

The Elements made a sound like a pile of stones being rubbed together.

"Amazing," Rarity said, daring to get a bit closer.

"This is the first Earth Elemental I've ever seen!" Twilight was fascinated, studying it with wide eyes. "Pinkie Pie, I didn't know you could do this!"

"Are ya'll sure he's friendly?" Applejack asked, still wary. "He looks awful strong."

The elemental creature, larger than any pony, held out a 'hand.'

"Earth elementals have a preference for us Earth ponies," Pinkie told her. "Hop on! He's a big softie... actually, he's mostly rock, but he's a softie on the inside!"

Tentatively, her curiosity outweighing her caution, Applejack stepped up onto the Elemental's hand. It was able to support her pushing down on the hand without any difficulty at all, and a bit unsteadily, the apple farmer tried to mimic what Pinkie Pie was doing. Rocky lifted her slightly once her back hooves were in the palm of his left hand, letting her grab hold of his upper shoulder.

Fluttershy couldn't help but also carefully alight on his back. "Aww," she cooed. "You're just like a big friendly bear."

Rainbow Dash, however, snorted, putting on the guise of being unimpressed. "So Earth elementals like Earth ponies, huh? Should I make a joke about blockheads?"

Pinkie stuck out her tongue. "Gassy says he likes pegasus ponies, so I can make airhead jokes, too!"

"Or fart jokes."

"I already made those last chapter." Before anyone could digest that statement, Pinkie Pie tapped Rocky on the shoulder. "Rocky! Can you help us find a tunnel under the ground? One with ponies in it?"

The elemental rumbled an incomprehensible reply that only the shaman seemed to understand. He quickly started moving, still carrying Pinkie, Applejack and Fluttershy. The small orange eyes peered, unblinkingly, as the too-small rock head moved back and forth. It led them around the side of the Cloister in a slow, meandering circle. Dash took to the air to follow, leaving Rarity and Twilight to trot alongside the strange being.

"Pinkie Pie," Twilight asked, while she followed 'Rocky.' "Can you summon actual elementals with all your totems?"

The party pony shook her head. "Only Rocky will come out like this, and he says I'm a special case. Other shamans can convince their fire friend to come out, too, but Sparky says I'm too weak to meet face to face. He's kind of a grumpy grump. Gassy doesn't like leaving his totem and Splashy is friendly, but very shy. I think likes you, though, because you're a mage. If you were frost specced, then you'd be able to summon one of his friends some day!"

The unicorn mage remembered something she'd read before about that. "I had heard that the mages of Dalaran had some sort of pact with water Elementals..."

"Yep! Maybe if I get stronger, I'll be able to convince Gassy and Splashy to come out and party with Rocky and Sparky." Pinkie paused, as her elemental ride rumbled. "Oh you!" she playfully batted the rock-elemental on the shoulder. "He says he doesn't want to party with other elementals. Some kind of old grudge. Most elementals don't get along with their opposites."

"Opposites?"

"Fire and water and earth and wind," Pinkie explained. "I made a joke about that before, but a shaman really *is* kind of the 'heart' that keeps them working together. If I wasn't around, they'd probably start fighting."

Rocky rumbled, and stopped. He gestured down to a nearby cliffside. The castle Observatory ran up almost to the edge of the chasm that surrounded the complex. The very same one that had been bridged the day before. A rainbow blur dove past to investigate the cliffside.

"So is there some kinda...?" Applejack started to say, and eeped as her ride rolled right off the side of the cliff. Instead of falling down, however, Rocky stuck to the sheer side of the chasm. His grip on Pinkie Pie and Applejack tightened, to make sure they didn't fall. Dash and Fluttershy made due with flying. Not too far down, the Elemental stopped, head bobbing excitedly.

A set of rocks in the side of the cliff faintly glowed.

"Ah ha!" Dash grinned at the marked target. "This calls for a Rainbow Dash brand *Dynamic Entry*!"

The pegasus spun into a tight spiral, shot up, around, popped Divine Protection, and then blasted right into the glowing rocks! For once, instead of crashing and ending up pegasus pizza, she blasted right through the obstacle. The thin but well disguised layer of rock shattered. Rocky rolled in through the gap, dropped Pinkie and Applejack, and then rumbled back up topside to retrieve Twilight and Rarity.

Soon all six mares were within the freshly exposed cave.

Rocky trembled, his left arm starting to break apart.

"Oh dear, is he alright?" Rarity, being right next to the elemental looked concerned enough to try and cast a healing spell. Despite getting her a little dirty, he had been careful with the two unicorns, and hadn't even messed up Rarity's hair in carrying her down to the cave. She even seemed a little fond of the big stone creature.

"Rocky can't keep up his old form for very long, since he's also my totem," Pinkie replied, trotting up to her somewhat unorthodox companion.

She hugged the elemental as it started to break apart. "Thank you for helping us, Rocky!"

"Yes, ah, thank you... Rocky..." Twilight politely said, smiling nervously.

A rocky hand patted her on the head, thankfully very gently. Taking that as a cue, all the others (except Dash) also expressed their thanks to the dispersing elemental. The pegasus just muttered something under her breath that was probably along the lines of 'see ya later'. Within the pile of rocks that fell, lifeless, to the floor of the cave, Pinkie retrieved her original totem.

"Thank you, too, Pinkie Pie," Twilight told her friend.

The pink pony giggled cheerily. "Always happy to help!"

"So this cave leads up to the bottom of the tower?" Rainbow Dash asked, eyeing the walls with suspicion. "I gotta say, tight little holes like this just aren't my thing."

"Oh! Oh! I could so make a joke about that!"

"Don't!" Everypony said at once.

"Even Fluttershy yelled at me!" Pinkie wailed. "I was *just* going to say-"

Said druid's eyes narrowed... dangerously.

"-to say that I forgot what I was going to say," Pinkie Pie laughed. "He he he! Scary."

"Come on," Twilight urged them forward, taking the lead. Her horn lit up to provide light. "We won't get anywhere by standing around."

"Sure thing, fearless leader," Dash followed close behind, and Applejack kept close, too. The tunnel was too narrow for them to trot three abreast. If something came at them in the darkness, Twilight would have to

quickly shoot backwards to get behind the cover of her two armored friends.

Dash's quip did remind Twilight of something, however.

"You know, I'd forgotten before, but I wanted to ask something earlier," she said, leading the group around a slight curve in the cave wall. "I was thinking about starting a guild for all of us!"

She stopped there, just to sort of gauge the response. Not that Twilight expected them to cheer or anything... well, not *much* anyway. A few 'sounds fun' or 'I'm in' remarks would have been good enough. Instead, the only sound was a steady drip-drip from one of the cave walls. Twilight waited a bit more, and finally looked over her shoulder. Why was nopony saying anything?

"What?" she asked, finally.

Rainbow Dash was looking up at the ceiling and Applejack didn't seem to want to look her in the eye either. Fluttershy was being Fluttershy, and all but hiding behind her pink mane, and Pinkie Pie was just uncharacteristically silent. At least Rarity looked sufficiently bemused as she tried to come up with a ladylike and polite response.

"Um..." Fluttershy mewed.

"What?" Twilight asked again. "You guys... don't want to be in a guild with me?"

"No!" Dash replied first, but almost all of them had said it. The pegasus paladin, scratched her mane behind her head. "Twilight. It isn't that... I mean, for me, I just... I was kind of thinking I'd join a pvp guild. At least until I joined the Wonderbolts."

"Ah got mah farm ta look after. Plus, you know," Applejack tried to put it in business terms. "Wouldn't it be better ta join up with a big guild rather than start a new one from the ground up? They'd have all the resources and infrastructure and such in place already."

"I'm inclined to agree," Rarity said, sounding guilty. "I would *love* to join a guild with you, Twilight. Really, I would. But... should we really start a *new* one? Those things require quite a lot of gold to really get going."

"But - but even the Cutie Mark Crusaders have a guild!" Twilight objected. "If Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo can..."

"Those three have a very small guild," Rarity countered, sounding frustratingly reasonable. "Twilight, we could start a small guild like that, but why? Financing a good sized guild bank alone costs more than I've made in all my years at the Carousel Boutique."

"Rarity's right, sugarcube. It may not look it, but even some of the medium sized guilds got more gold in their coffers than all of us put together. The big ones could buy a whole buildin' in Manehattan," Applejack shook her head, not too enamored of anyone moving their headquarters to that snooty city. "That sorta war chest don't just spring up overnight."

"I don't care as long as we're all doing it together!" Pinkie Pie declared, "Who cares if we're just another poor, tiny little guild who has to pug to get instances cleared? I don't!" She thumped her chest proudly, took a deep breath, and did a good impression of Fluttershy as she fell to the ground and hid her head under her hooves. "No! I don't wanna pug! They'll eat a pony like me alive in LFG!"

Fluttershy just muttered something under her breath, but it seemed sort of in line with what Pinkie had just said. Given that Twilight had known her for more than a year, a rough translation could have been: *'Um, I'd just be happy being with my friends, you guys... but the idea of pugging with strangers is kind of scary. Maybe we should just join a big guild together, isn't that, you know... good?'*

Something along those lines.

Twilight blinked a few times, waiting to see if there was any more to say or hear.

"I know guys in a couple good guilds," Dash added, upbeat. "Not just pvpers, either. The stallion you guys met before, Blacklight? He's in a guild

called Killer Angels. Top rated guild. I also chatted with this other stallion, Crazy Eight, and he's in They Might Be Giants, and he had Tier 11 shoulders, too! And then there was this one colt, Flankspanker, and he was..."

She trailed off, once again noticing her friends staring at her, incredulous.

"What?" she asked, frowning. "What'd I say this time? Why're you guys staring at me like that?"

"You... seem to have spoken with a number of young bucks," Rarity politely observed.

"Guys just dig me and like to hang out, that's all!"

"Did you make friends with any *mares* in other guilds?" the fashionista then asked.

"As a matter of fact! ...no, not really." Dash narrowed her eyes. "What does that have to do with anything? So I hang out with a lot of colts! There's nothing strange about that!" To deflect attention, she quickly pointed at her fellow pegasus. "You wanna talk about being popular with the guys, Fluttershy here's the one with her own fan guild! She and *Ditzy Doo*, somehow."

"Oh. Them." Fluttershy murmured. "They're very... nice."

"And you know what 'nice' means when Fluttershy says it!"

"Quite," Rarity answered. "But I don't think any of us want to join some strange fan club."

"What we should do is join up with a top ranked Alliance guild!" Rainbow nodded to herself. "A guild that has both pvp and pve, and then we'll all be together, and we'll meet new ponies! And people! The best of both worlds!"

At this, the rest of the group - minus a silent Twilight - began to agree.

"If... that's what you guys want?" she finally asked.

"Trust me, Twilight, this is definitely the best option!" Dash assured her, looking and actually sounding pretty convincing. "I'll mail some of my friends, and we'll scout around a bit to see what good guilds are recruiting. By the time we hit 50 or 60, we'll be all set. And it'll be soooo cool being part of a top rated guild! Killer Angels is probably the best bet, cause I know a bunch of guys in it already. Oh! If we could get into BAMFs that'd be awesome! I have no idea what BAMF stands for, but those guys are goood!"

Trying not to sound dejected, Twilight nodded. "I guess we can look into that later. Let's keep going."

After all. It wasn't like they'd said "no." Exactly. Just "no" to a new guild. They all still wanted to be together. There was really no reason to take the news poorly, was there? Twilight told herself 'of course not!' What did it really matter if they joined a big guild or started a small one, as long as they were all together?

Of course, Princess Celestia's letter had been... specific.

Twilight kept her thoughts to herself as the six mares ventured deeper into the darkness.

Chapter 10

My first memory, as I emerged from my shell, was not the face of my broodmother, but that of a small, juvenile pony, with ruby red eyes and two toned, light and dark purple hair. Years later, the fuzzy memories of that day would make more sense: the broken shards of my egg, cut into neat near-squares, the strange light that gently wrapped me in its glow, the sounds of voices and clomp-clomp cheering. I had not been hatched, alongside dozens of my brood brothers and sisters, in a sequestered cave or other deep, dark place. I was born in the glow of a unicorn's horn.

Her name was Night Sky.

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"You guys will forgive me for living on clouds all my life, but... seriously, what on Celestia's good, green Equestria is *that thing*?"

Rainbow Dash's question aside, the six Ponyville mares were staring at a creature none of them had seen before. It was long and sinewy, like a segmented worm, but half of it reared up like a cobra as it moved. Strange mouthparts cleaned themselves as an eyeless head pecked at a rock, breaking away bits to eat. It didn't really conform to any known class of animal. It was, to put it simply, weird as all heck.

As was her tendency since getting the spell, Twilight tried to use some of her new magical repertoire to classify what she was seeing. "My identify spell says... that it's an 'Everfree Burrower.'"

"Ugh. Like a giant earthworm?" Rarity asked, her nose crinkling in distaste.

"We don't have anthin' like that under Ponyville, do we?" Applejack, not normally disturbed by down to earth grossness, also seemed rather put off by the huge, blind rockworm.

"I don't think we do." Twilight turned to their resident animal expert. "Fluttershy?"

The quiet pegasus druid was peering at the creature, clearly having never seen one before. Encountering a new form of animal life, some of her timidity appeared to recede in favor of curiosity. Without a word, she morphed into her druidic kitty form. Her friends had all seen the transformation and its results numerous times, but Twilight still found it strange to behold: but not because of the physical metamorphosis itself or because of the magic involved. Fluttershy's "kitty" form was lithe and vaguely leonid, with some rather formidable looking teeth and claws one wouldn't normally associate with Fluttershy of all ponies.

The druid entered stealth, vanishing before Twilight's eyes.

She was scouting ahead again, clearly. Fluttershy, despite being the jumpiest and most demure of their band, was also the only one who could stealth in any fashion. Ponies in general were ill suited for rogue-like activity, but Fluttershy in her cat form could turn invisible and stalk ahead with relative impunity. As long as she didn't get too close to another creature or run into something capable of seeing through her stealth, she was safe.

The cave they had been traveling through had wound around itself and then descended until it connected with a series of caverns and grottos. The only light to see by was provided by the cantrip-glow of Rarity and Twilight's horns. Condensation and groundwater dropped from the ceiling and along the walls. This curious annelid was the first sign of life they'd encountered so far.

Fluttershy stalked back to the group, dropping out of stealth and returning to her normal pony form. Lowing her head slightly, she glanced back at the grotto.

"I don't think... most of them are bad... as long as we don't scare them," she reported in a hushed voice. "But we should be careful. I saw a-" her voice dropped to a near whisper. "-a dead body."

"A cultpony?" Twilight asked. It must have been further to the back of the cavern.

Fluttershy looked down at her hooves. "I don't know... it was just... bones."

"Okay." Twilight decided, now comfortable in her role as party lead. "Stick together. No AOE. Let's just try and slip by without a fight."

Fortunately, the Everfree Burrowers seemed to be non aggressive, concerned more with eating rocks and digging holes than attacking ponies. The six mares still kept their distance from the critters, though, not wanting to press their luck. Twilight even managed to get a closer look at the odd beasts as they passed by one in single file, Rainbow Dash and Applejack ready to shoot forward and intervene if anything turned hostile and attacked.

Fluttershy took the lead, marking a few of the more hostile worms - "Maddened Burrowers" - in their path. She even used a druidic spell to hibernate two of them that were too close for comfort. It made for slow, cautious going as the group snuck through one grotto, down a curve and into another.

"You know, this would be a lot faster if we just..." Dash started to argue, but fathered at the plaintive look on Fluttershy's face. "...never mind."

No one else seemed to object to the pace set by the animal lover, though Rarity did squeak in discomfort as they passed through a slimy, lichen covered crack in the wall.

"This whole adventure has been simply ghastly," she declared, keeping her voice low. "When we get back home, I for one intend to spend a long day in the spa helping my body forget what it's been put through. You're all free to join me of course. Rainbow, when was the last time you cut or styled your mane?"

"I dunno." The pegasus paladin shrugged. "A couple years ago?"

"Years!?"

"Oh! Look! Fishies!" Pinkie Pie suddenly pointed down to a pool of water several meters below them as they crossed over a rocky bridge. Sure enough something seemed to be churning the waters in a pool nearby. There were other fish visible beneath the surface with glowing bodies, identified as "Everfree Frenzies." They didn't look like friendly goldfish.

"Please don't fall in," Fluttershy suggested, still leading them across the slightly slippery viaduct. "It would probably be... bad."

"I bet there's a Lurker Below down there! Or Gahz'rilla! Oh! Or Gahz'ranka! I wonder if that hydra we keep running into has a name too? If not, I think we should call him Gahz'Pinkie! Somepony here has to have some fishing skill, right?" Pinkie popped out ahead of their druidic pointpony. "What about you, Fluttershy? I bet you can fish, can't'ya!"

"Um..." said pegasus shrunk back a bit in the face of the excitably earth pony.

"What if that pool has a super rare pet in it?" Pinkie asked, wiggling her eyebrows. "Like a Mister Pinchy! Or a Giant, smelly rat? Or an ooze!"

"Oozes aren't cute. Or animals. They're... blobs."

"What about big, stinky cave rats?"

Actually tempted, Fluttershy did look back at the mysterious pool.

Seeing the druid waver in her determination to just keep leading them forward, Applejack spoke up from the back: "Ya'll ain't really gonna stop and fish in some strange underground cave on the off chance that there's something in the water, are'ya?"

"Well... um..."

"Do it!" Pinkie Pie gave a supportive cheer, grabbing Fluttershy and turning her ninety degrees so she faced the mysterious fishing node. Then, nibbling on her lower lip, she adjusted the pegasus a little to the left. ...and then a little to the right.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash both seemed about to object -

"What if there's some poor animal trapped down there?" Fluttershy wondered aloud, looking at her bemused friends with wide eyes. "Like... a magical crawdad? I've... um... always wanted a magical crawdad..."

"I don't even know that animal IS."

"Ahlright, geez."

"Ugh! Fishing is so... bad for the skin!"

"Okay. Fine." Twilight sat down. "But we're only stopping for a few minutes. Sometimes it seems like everything is trying to side track us."

"Hey, is that an Archaeology node over there?" Dash asked with a grin.

"Where!?" Twilight started frantically looking around... only to catch on at around the same time Applejack and Rainrow Dash started to falter in holding back their snickers and giggles. The unicorn fixed the two with a stare.

"Hey now," she remanded them in a lecturing tone. "Archaeology is serious business."

"I totally agree, Twilight darling! Troll artifacts have become quite popular as ornamentation this year. Would you like me to procure one for you?"

Level stare finding a widely smiling Rarity, Twilight hrumphed.

Fluttershy, meanwhile, had somehow fitted on a fishing hat with hooks and loops of wire in it and was now holding a strange looking fishing pole between her legs. How she even held onto the device was anypony's guess. Pinkie Pie was all but bouncing in place next to her.

"Come on Lurker Below!" Her eyes never left the bobber in the water. "Come on giant pony-eating hydra boss!"

"sssh." Fluttershy gently admonished her friend. "please don't scare the fish."

"oh!" Pinkie turned it down a notch, but still bounced. Just in little bounces and not big ones. "come on optional mini-boss!"

Twilight couldn't help but roll her eyes.

As if some giant monster waited in the churning waters below to be fished up like a common trout or murglesnout. Even if there was some monster down there... wait, why the heck were they doing this?!

"oh. a nibble." Fluttershy whispered. "come on big smelly rat pet. I mean... cute little mousey..."

Instead, a fish emerged from the pool at the end of the line. Pulling it up, Fluttershy deftly removed the hook with her hooves. Again, exactly HOW she managed this, Twilight couldn't quite piece together. The filly clearly had some serious skills.

"Hey! I know that fish!" Pinkie Pie stuck her neck out to get a closer look at the catch. It was mostly yellowish in color, with red streaks that seemed to shift in the light. Big blue, but probably blind, eyes dominated the head. Like any fish out of water, it was gasping for water but otherwise not struggling or moving much.

"I'm sorry, little fishie..." Fluttershy began to say, ready to throw it back.

"Wait! Deviate Fish! I love Deviate Fish" Pinkie suddenly grabbed the freshly caught fish out of Fluttershy's hooves and flipped it up in the air -

And right into her mouth.

With a look of shock, her friends could only watch as the pink party pony caught the small fish in her mouth with an audible 'snap'! Swallowing the magical fish whole, Pinkie Pie's lips puckered and her whole body began to vibrate, sparks shooting out of her coat and mane and tail. Blue eyes became wide as excitable saucers.

"Oh! Oh!" she gasped. "This was a good one! Is it? It is! The Party Time debuff! Eeeeeee!!"

A second later, and the zanky pink pony started laughing hysterically, followed by randomly cheering, clapping her hooves, bouncing, dancing at imagined music, and then strutting around clucking like a chicken. The random Deviate-spawned emotes continued for a minute, and then with a WOOSH! they came to a climax. And Pinkie Pie shrunk down, down, down until she became small enough to perch on a pony's nose.

She then started laughing again and bounced around, trailing sparkly light in her tiny wake.

By the time the magical debuff wore off, another minute or so later, Pinkie Pie's friends were still staring at her, slack jawed. The shaman grew back to her normal size, still grinning madly from her little trip down the rabbit hole. She immediately fell on Fluttershy.

"Oh! Catch another! Please?" Pinkie Pie deployed puppy dog eyes. "Please?"

"Hold up one apple pickin' second!" Applejack intervened. "Ya'll didn't just eat a fish whole, didya?" She pointed at the party pony. "Please yell me Ah was imagin'in that!"

"Huh?" Pinkie Pie inquired, cocking her head in (apparent) confusion. "Oh. Yeah. I guess I did?"

"Gross!" Dash exclaimed, but then a second later: "I wanna try the next one."

Rarity shuddered. "Eating an animal is barbaric enough, but eating one live?!" She gave Dash a wary look. "What are you, one quarter griffon?"

"Pops did always joke there was a little dragon in my mom's side," the chromatic paladin replied with a thoughtful look. "Usually when she started yelling about him not mowing the clouds outside."

The ret pally shook her head. "Anyway," she continued. "Everyone else eats fish, and all the best stat food is... you know... meaty or fishy. I was in AV a week ago, and ate this Fish Feast someone dropped..."

Rarity seemed about to object again -

"I don't mean dropped-dropped!" Dash quickly cut off any insinuation that she ate food thrown on the ground. "I meant he set it up in the area where we were waiting. Everypon- *everyone* else was eating and getting the food buff, so I thought I'd try it, too. Eating some fish or, you know, whatever... won't kill you guys."

She even laughed as a thought came to her. "I guess there aren't a lot of high level vegetarians outside Equestria?"

"Not yet," Fluttershy spoke up. She recast a few times before hitting the churning pool.

"Oh boy! More crazy deviate fish!"

"Pinkie Pie, you really shouldn't eat some poor fish just for amusement," the usually-timid pegasus told her, causing the later to back away a bit.

"But..." the party lover tried to argue. "But it was *fun*."

"It wasn't fun for the poor fish."

Not quite sad, but chastened, Pinkie Pie sat and quietly watched as Fluttershy continued fishing. The rest of what she caught, she released, except for an old weathered chest that she caught. After a minute or so, the churning pool of Everfree Deviate Fish dispersed. Fluttershy then opened the box she had hooked and trawled from the water.

Inside, they found a few bits of junk: tangled hooks and line, bright baubles ...and three flasks.

"Can I see those?" Twilight asked, and carefully levitated them over to where she was now standing. As usual, her trusty identify spell started

searching and scanning. A moment later, and she knew what they had found.

"Elixir of Water Walking," she told her friend. "Lasts ten minutes. Kinda useless in here."

"At least we got something out of all this," Rainbow Dash said, back to her 'let's get going' mode.

Fluttershy efficiently packed up her fishing gear, took off her fishing hat, and poofed back into kitty form. Soon the six mares were back on their way. There were more marked hostile Burrowers in the grotto ahead. What difference there was between an "Everfree Burrower" and a "Maddened Burrower" wasn't clear. Fluttershy dutifully marked the potentially hostile rockworms and led them around. It probably would have been easier just to kill a few of the ones in the way, but the druid wanted them to get through with a minimum of fauna-related casualties.

At last, the rock walls broke, and the normal cave decor became marked by something foreign: mining supports!

This was where the natural network of caves ended, meeting up with the artificial dig that had been hinted at in Voidhorn's letter to Blood Diver. From the information provided by Ice Breaker and the letter, there were supposed to be pony slaves kept in these tunnels. What they soon saw was not wholly what they had expected.

"Diamond Dogs?" Rarity breathed, seeing the familiar Equestrian canines. There were several in the tunnel, digging away at the walls with claws and pickaxes. A few, exhausted from their work, were lying on the ground. They were also chained to color coded metal balls by crudely painted iron chains and shackles.

"Not just them," Twilight remarked, dimming the light from her horn so as not to attract attention. She motioned with a hoof towards the back.

A cream colored pegasus pony, a young mare, was also shackled to one of the ball-and-chains by her left hindleg. She had a pick axe hanging limply from her mouth, and her side was hard against a wall as she caught

her breath. Soot, grime and sweat mingled with dust and her coat to give it a grainy appearance. There were also marks on her side and flank.

"Keep working! Keep digging, you scum!"

The voice, disgustingly, belonged to another pony who trotted into view. The six Mares of Harmony ducked out of sight. Rarity and Twilight killed their horn glow. This new pony was quickly identified by Twilight's spell as a "Cultist Taskmaster." The other chained slaves, Diamond Dogs and pony alike, were all labeled as "Beaten Drudges." The purple robed Taskmaster was a unicorn, and he sported both a rather nasty looking whip and no apparent hesitation in its application.

He lashed away at an exhausted Diamond Dog and then at another, before turning to the pegasus pony. "You!" he snarled. "Back to work! Deeper! Dig Deeper! If there are more artifacts out here, you will find them!"

Even before he finished with his second sentence, he had started wailing on her.

Twilight's horn blazed a radiant white, bright enough to turn the dark cave into a strobe light. She didn't speak, except to jump out of cover and offer herself as a target. The other five mares, who had all been watching the offensive scene in varying shades of agitation, waiting only for marks to go out and the order to intervene, jumped out to their friend and leader's side. The Taskmaster pivoted, eyes wide, at the sudden appearance of five rather heavily armored and armed ponies.

"Intruders!" he growled, whip lashing at those nearby. "Assist me, slaves! Or face my wrath!"

Amazingly, the beaten Diamond Dogs, instead of seeing the situation was to their advantage, obeyed the order. With groans of pain and distress, they forced themselves forward to actually protect their abuser. The beaten pegasus mare cried, but also forced herself to her feet, afraid to disobey. With broken, dirty paws and meager pick axes, they charged.

"I'll get these guys!" Rainbow Dash rushed forward, not needing an order or a target. "Take out that other jerk!"

"Go!" Twilight, Rarity and Pinkie rushed forward behind Applejack's charging form. Dash's Avenger's Shield hit the charging group of slaves, bouncing from one to another. They turned to engage her and ran right into her Consecrate.

"I'm sorry!" the whipped pegasus pony cried, swinging her pick axe and dragging her ball and chain behind her. One or two of the other Diamond Dogs seemed to mutter or whimper something similar. A shield of light helped the rainbow maned pegasus to weather their feeble but numerous attacks.

"Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!" The Taskmaster cried, whipping the backs of the slaves (especially the one that didn't move) right up until Applejack charged into him, slamming her head right into his chest. Stunned, he gasped, and a second later her shield and barded upper body were in his face. Like all the elite cultponies, unnatural power enhanced the unicorn's constitution and powers.

Aside from his shadow infused whip, which somehow managed to tear bloody wounds right through armor, his horn glowed to cast a new spell: "Cripple." Twilight interrupted it before he could finish the spellwork. She didn't particularly want to see the effects of a spell like that on any of her friends. Four to one, it wasn't long before the vile Taskmaster let out one last curse and fell back, the sickly light from his black horn fading.

Their handler dead, the Slaves immediately gave up, dropping their weapons and shying away from their saviors - saviors they had, moments ago, been attacking, albeit half heartedly. No longer being swarmed by them, Dash shook her head and mane. Between her armor and Light gifted paladin protection, not to mention Fluttershy's skillful druidic healing, she was as good as new, despite the melee.

"What going on out there?" A cruder voice inquired, in patchwork Equestria, from back the way the Taskmaster had come. "Stupid slaves fight back? Dumb-dumb slaves no learn!"

Rightly, this was no pony that emerged to investigate. It was a Diamond Dog... but in the same black and purple robe that all the Twilight Cultists wore. The humanoid creature wore the attire as crudely as it spoke Common, and like the cultponies, its coat was dyed a shade of blackish-

gray by evil energies. It saw the gaggle of slaves, and more importantly the six well equipped pony intruders!

As stupid as his speech seemed to indicate, the dog did the smart thing.

It turned and tried to run.

"Applejack!" Twilight ordered, already casting a Slow spell. The Diamond Dog Taskmaster's frantic Dash was immediately reduced to a crawl. Applejack charged again, taunting the creature and forcing it to fight her rather than escape and get reinforcements. A distinctly unladylike reference to the Taskmaster's mother and her promiscuous lifestyle choices did the trick, and the slave handler turned to fight the apple farmer. He fared no better than the unicorn slavemaster that had fallen less than a minute earlier.

When he, too, fell... and no other cultists emerged from around the corner, Twilight increased the natural cantrip glow of her horn to normal levels. Dash and Fluttershy were already moving to check on the beaten pegasus pony they had saved. Applejack was eying the bend, wary of another Taskmaster coming to check on things. Pinkie Pie was content to trot up to be next to Twilight, and Rarity... Rarity was heading towards the Diamond Dogs.

Horn glowing, back in her Discipline Priest spec, the alabaster Element of Generosity started to heal them with quick flashes of light. She went about it with her usual precision, the blasts of healing light moving from the closest of the canine slaves to the one farthest away. The spate of rapid fire healing quickly drained her energy, but only once she was done did she stop and gingerly find a somewhat clan place to sit and drink to replenish her mana.

The now freed Diamond dogs all shied away from her.

One, however, was watching her with careful eyes set into a pug-like face. The one slave who hadn't moved when the Taskmaster had demanded they attack, he had suffered more for that fact than the others. Seeing him, Rarity stood back up and started to cast another healing spell. To her surprise, the Diamond Dog lifted his arms, and a dark, brown

healing energy rose up from the earth to mend his wounds. He barked something at the other Drudge slaves in a low guttural tongue. They shuffled uneasily amongst themselves.

"You healed them," he then said, in accented but understandable Equestrian. The question was clearly directed at the group's fashion conscious priest.

"It would have been most improper not to," Rarity replied, giving the canine a cautious look. "I trust that isn't a problem?"

The Diamond Dog grunted. Literally. "You. Are you here for the treasures, too? Or have you come to stop Night Sky?" He snorted, twice, seeing they didn't recognize the name. "The one who calls herself Voidhorn."

"Treasure *does* sound nice," Rarity admitted with a little glow in her eyes.

"But we're here for Voidhorn," Twilight confirmed, trotting up with Pinkie Pie close by. The party pony looked curious at what the Diamond Dog had done: it appeared to be some sort of elemental magic.

"Her underlings made mistakes. Capturing ponies is risky." The gritty Diamond Dog smirked, showing teeth. "Ponies always have too many friends who come looking for them."

"Who are you, you old mutt?" Pinkie asked, trotting right up to the chained dog. She stopped only to get a close look at the shackle on his leg. Like all the others it was heavy, but not so heavy he couldn't move. It was tightly secured, and quite heavily locked.

"Like yourself, young pony, I am a shaman of my people," the old dog replied. "I am Rex, a Geomancer of the Rustpaw Pack." He fixed his eyes on Twilight. "To get to Voidhorn, you will need to reach the upper stairs. I believe there to be ten more Taskmasters wandering the mines between you and the subbasement."

"However," he warned. "Unless you wish to risk being attached from behind as well as in front, you would be wise to clear the mines. I can aid

you, so long as you free those enslaved here. I have no reward to give you... but..."

"Of course we'll help," Rarity answered, accepting the quest on behalf of her friends.

"That's right." Twilight nodded, agreeing as well. "My name is Twilight Sparkle. To my right is Rarity, and the pink pony poking you is Pinkie Pie. And wow, that sentence was hard to properly pronounce." She coughed, composing herself again. "How long have you all been down here? Sir?"

She tacked on that last bit with some unease. It was hard to separate these Diamond Dogs from the ones that had kidnapped Rarity months ago. They all looked mostly the same. This one had a collar, and he spoke Equestrian, so he was a bit more ponyish and relatable than the others. Still, those dogs had hardly been the kind of creatures good ponies associated with.

"The Rustpaw were hired to dig here three of your months ago," Rex answered easily. He sat down on his haunches, back to the rock wall. "We were promised gems and gold to use as trade, so long as the artifacts we unearthed went to Night Sky... the unicorn who now calls herself Voidhorn. Our Chieftan, Gull, agreed to her terms. Before long, some members of the Pack became enthralled by her, including Gull himself."

The old dog frowned, his lips curling in a wordless growl. "The betrayers joined her growing cult. The rest of us who refused to abandon the old ways ended up as we are now. Soon I noticed more of your kind - ponies - being brought in to labor. Replacements for those of the Rustpaw who died. This brought hope. No other pack would care what happens to Rustpaw, but missing ponies always lead to search parties." He held out a clawed hand. "And here you are."

"Your... pack dug all this?" Twilight asked, looking around at the hewn rock walls.

"Much of it, yes," Rex replied with a measure of pride. "We found strange things, buried. In vaults. Sometimes, in deep places... I have heard that there are great halls from the dark times. We found one, and we gave

what we found to Voidhorn and her servants." He huffed, angrily. "Rustpaw never did find any gems or gold, either. Typical."

"You ponies..." He stared at Twilight with something akin to accusation. "You ponies built this place over bad energy. Bad magic. It has seeped into the ground. Poisonous magic. ...Old magic."

Pinkie Pie looked around with bright blue eyes. "It smells funny in here, too!"

"Yes, I don't imagine they have the best facilities down here," Rarity explained with an elegant degree of tolerance for the abominable conditions. To Rex, she curtly added, "You know, dear, it really would help your image if you Diamond Dogs washed occasionally. And cut your nails. And if you had a little grooming. And a breathmint or two. Perhaps after we leave this place?"

The aged canine shaman just grunted. "I will show you the way to the Vault we found, if only to help you defeat Gull and free the Rustpaw. If we are fortunate, one of the Taskmasters will have my fire fetish from when I was first captured."

"A Fire Fetish?" Twilight asked, "Like one of Pinkie Pie's totems?"

"Yes," Rex replied with a snort and a nod. "You would call it a Charm. Without it, my command of flame is limited, and without it, you will find defeating Gull to be ...difficult. Among our kind, he was known as Gull the Unbreakable."

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The mined out shafts soon became mixed with the remains of ancient stonework. The excavation efforts of the Diamond Dogs and over a dozen captured ponies had run into ruins and structures buried beneath Luna's castle. It was as if the fallen structure was itself built on the rubble of even older works. Twilight was simply fascinated: from what little she could see of it, the architecture here was completely different than anything in Equestria.

The walls that had been dug out were monolithic and huge, yet finely wrought with intricate lines and grooves that ran from ceiling to floor. Strange looking geometric shapes occasionally split from similarly colored lines. They looked almost like cut gemstones, but a closer examination revealed some sort of metal set into the walls, like electrical wire. Despite untold ages, it was cool to the touch, and completely dirt-free. Sadly, much of the original structure beyond the walls themselves had been destroyed in the cave-in that collapsed the ruin.

Amid what many would consider the archaeological find of their lifetime, brutal Twilight Cultist Taskmasters whipped and beat their captured slaves. After defeating more than half a dozen of the evil creatures, Twilight Sparkle felt she could say at least this about the so called Twilight Cult: it was equal opportunity. Keeping count, four Taskmasters had been ponies, two male and two female, three had been Diamond Dogs, and one had been a griffin. A griffin of all things!

The cult, it seemed, was not picky about who or what it indoctrinated.

"Unbelievable! A griffin, too?" Dash voiced Twilight's thoughts, leaning down to get a look at the Taskmaster they had just finished off. She had been in the process of lashing an exhausted Earth pony slave when the six intruders had made their presence known. Her companion, another slave handler, was a Diamond Dog and he had watched the beating of the pony slave with a hearty laugh. Twilight had just marked the two and brought them down as soon as possible.

She had known the Twilight Cultists were bad ponies. Bad *people*. That much had been driven home by their treatment of their captives and Catnip's cruel mutation of local Manticores as fodder to attack the Royal Guard. They had broken into unicorn tombs and looted them with reckless abandon, showing no respect for the deceased. Now, at last, she was seeing just what those captured ponies were being subjected to, and it was starting to make her blood boil ...and if what she heard from Rainbow Dash was accurate, there were other branches of the Twilight Cult doing the same or worst around the world!

"I just don't understand... why would anypony *do* this?" she wondered aloud, while Fluttershy and Rarity healed the newly freed slaves.

Dash, still hovering over the fallen griffin, carefully parted some of the dead Taskmaster's feathers, as if looking for something beneath. She looked up at the unicorn with russet eyes that betrayed sadness and righteous anger.

"I've been asking myself that since we fought Highdiver," the paladin didn't use his fallen name, Blood Diver. Her hoof glowed with Holy Light, but recoiled. "There's something... wrong with them, Twilight. Like they're becoming... wrong... like part of them isn't even alive anymore."

"Yes, I noticed something similar when I used my Mind Flay spell." Rarity, looking tired but satisfied with the good she was doing, sat and tried to fix her hair, momentarily removing her new priestly circlet in the process. The magic from it dimmed when out of contact with its master.

After a moment or two of preening, the unicorn priest explained, "As I said before, when I use my Shadowform I can not use Holy Light spells. Princess Luna's power, the Light of the Moon, and Princess Celestia's, the Light of the Sun... the same power you use, Rainbow... are actually very similar. But they are spiritual opposites. When I use my Discipline spec, my focus is really inward, towards my own sense of being, but when I go Shadow, a part of me enters the mind of what I'm... dealing with."

"The minds of these cultists," the Element of Generosity continued, frowning at the fallen Griffin and Diamond Dog. "It is like a miasma flows through them. Poisoning them. They don't think about their families or friends. They don't regret their deeds. They just want to hurt others. I don't really understand it myself, admittedly, and I hate to say it... but it may truly be for their own good that we... you know." She coughed, politely. "*Stop them.*"

"You did seem pretty quick to help out that Rustpaw guy, all things considered," Dash observed, trotting away from the fallen Taskmasters. She craned her neck left and right, working out the kinks from the fight.

"I don't hold a grudge against Diamond Dogs, if that's what your insinuating," Rarity sounded a little insulted. "While those who captured me were crude and uncouth in the extreme, not to mention foreign to the concept of sanitation, I never felt as if I was in any real physical danger."

With some training their company was actually quite bearable. These fiends are entirely different."

"I'll take your word for it. Hey, Pinkie Pie. Catch!" Dash's left wing flexed, tossing over a small wooden charm she'd found on the griffin's corpse. The pink pony was about to catch it in her mouth, but Rarity's magic intercepted the oval shaped woodcut.

"Hey!" Pinkie groused. "I was gonna get it!"

"Going to get sugary drool over it perhaps," Rarity replied, holding the strange charm up for all to see. "Do you suppose this is the 'fetish' we were supposed to find?"

"I bet it is!" Pinkie cocked her head as she examined it. "Oooo-ooooh! It's different from how I learned to make *my* totems."

"Where *did* you learn to make those things anyway?" Dash asked, heading over to round up Applejack and Fluttershy.

"I learned it from a guy I know," Pinkie answered, eyes half lidded, evasively adding a question of her own, "Where did you learn to be a Ret Pally?"

"Paladin Camp, obviously!" Dash chuckled, tail swaying. "Best camp in the world!"

"Better than band camp?" Pinkie asked.

The pegasus stuck out her tongue in disgust. "You went to *band camp*? Sounds lame."

"Where'd you think I learned to sing and dance and play so many instruments?" Pinkie Pie giggled as a private joke. "Plus, this *one time* at band camp..."

"*Regardless*, girls, this charm is clearly incomplete. There seem to be some gems missing." Rarity rotated the charm and closed one eye to get a closer look. "Pried loose. Rather crudely no less! Honestly, wasn't there even one proper jewelcrafter among these ruffians?"

"Oh! Maybe that's what these are for!" Pinkie emptied a pocket in one of her bags and a few 'chipped gems' fell out into her hoof. "I found them on two of the bad guys we took down in the other room!"

"I also looted... ah... I also picked up a 'chipped gem.'" Twilight levitated a small piece of ruby out and floated it to other unicorn. "Do you think you can put the fetish back together, Rarity?"

"I believe so..." The priest answered with a smile. She was already starting to see how it would come back together. "Yes! Yes. I can definitely fix this up!"

"I bet Rainbow has some pieces, too," Twilight reasoned, already picking up the pace to head over and see. "She loots basically everything that isn't nailed down after all."

A minute later, and all six mares were together again, the others sitting or standing around to watch Rarity slowly put Rex Rustpaw's Fire Fetish back together. The fashionista wasn't just a tailor; she was also a skillful jewelcrafter, and reassembling a magical charm wasn't far removed from making idols or figurine trinkets. Six pieces of ruby slowly coasted through the air, and one by one Rarity found their appropriate slot and delicately re-inserted them.

Finally, the last piece locked in place, and the charm burst with living flame.

"Done!" Rarity announced, proudly. "I must say, I had thought the fetish to be rather crudely designed at first, but there was a remarkably complex design underneath! With some modifications for more sophisticated sensibilities, something similar could be quite a fashionable addition to-"

"To what?"

"Ah!" Rarity jumped, surprised by the sudden appearance of the Geomancer Diamond Dog. He had appeared literally out of thin air right behind her!

She whirled on the canine and pointed an accusing hoof. "Where did you come from? You weren't there a moment ago!"

"Wasn't I?" Rex inquired with a toothy grin. "Anyway, you've completed the quest I gave you. The ranks of Taskmasters have been broken and most of the slaves are free. Hand over the fetish and I will take you to the vault to confront Gull."

"I wish I could appear out of nowhere with a big yellow exclamation mark over my head." Pinkie Pie gave the NPC a jealous look. "I'd be like: re-ak! And then: dun-dun-dun-dun-dun!" She popped up behind Dash, arms around and behind her head. "Dun-dun-dun-dun-dun! Press triangle for sleeper hold! That's what I'd be like!"

"You're *already* like that," said pegasus commented, flexing her wings to get the crazy earth pony off her back.

"Oh yeah!" A second later and Pinkie was back next to the questgiver.

Rarity had already handed over the reassembled charm, and the Diamond Dog attached it to a loop of string to put it around his neck. Once in place, he exhaled, a few flicks of fire in his breath. Holding his ball he was still shackled to in his left hand, a measure of elemental strength reinvigorated him. And with a blast of ethereal fire, the energy flowed through him and out, down into the halls.

Immediately followed by the sound of voices, yelling -

"The spirit of fire will restore hope and courage to the downtrodden," the Rustpaw shaman declared. "We shall rise up. Those few overseers and Taskmasters who remain will feel a slave's wrath! Now come! Gull awaits!"

Still holding the ball, he shuffled as quickly as he was able. In the next room, Twilight could see the effects of the restored fire fetish in the hands of the Diamond Dog geomancer. Two more Taskmasters, another pony and canine combo, were being overwhelmed by the slaves they had assumed to be whipped into submission. Rex Rustpaw ignored the ongoing battles in the halls, leading them onward.

Deeper in the complex were dozens more slaves and even more Cultists, the Taskmasters now being accompanied by heavily armored 'Cultist Tormentors.' In a fair fight, they would have easily been able to put down a slave revolt, but all the drudges - Pony and Diamond Dog alike - were being empowered by Rage of the Rustpaw.' Bloodlusted, they were able to stand hoof-to-hoof with their better armed and armored Cultist masters.

"Shouldn't we, um.. help... them?" Fluttershy suggested, not too comfortable just walking through an area where so many hostiles were fighting, and so many friendlies could use healing.

"Defeat Gull and this battle will be won," Rex Rustpaw reminded her. "That is the priority now, for all of us. We are almost to the Vault."

Twilight, following closely, stole a moment to check her map.

The magical parchment had again updated itself. She could see, marked out on it, the caves they had entered by ('Burrower Tunnels') and the mines they had passed through, leading into the ancient ruins ('Twilight Excavation'). Soon, they passed into a new section with a separate heading: The Vault of the Moon.

This area was fully excavated. The halls had been cleared of rubble, revealing a stone floor that almost seemed to have been cut from a single titanic block of marble. The metal inlaid into the walls, while dead elsewhere, almost seemed to glow here, providing a ghostly ambiance. Alcoves that had once been buried had been cleaned out, revealing statues set into the walls: more alicons. Some were rearing up, others holding stone-wrought books, others with their heads bowed in prayer. The vaulted ceiling arched high above, providing enough room for Dash to stretch her wings and fly.

"This is amazing..." Twilight couldn't help but say. "To think this was under Luna's Castle...! Did ponies really build this?"

"An' why build it underground?" Applejack asked, green eyes staring up at the unnecessarily high ceiling overhead. "Ah dunno about unicorns, but Ah've never heard of ponies buildin' all that much under tha Earth. Even in Manehattan."

At the end of the excavated hall was a flight of stairs... the steps large enough that they could jump from one to the next more easily than descending the normal way. The stairs themselves split and ran around yet another statue. It was another alicorn, but it was rendered in stars, like a constellation ripped from heaven and frozen with magic. Her body was semi-transparent, composed of a dark ether that shifted restlessly, and within it sparkled points of light.

The posture of the alicorn constellation-statue was also familiar, at least to Twilight Sparkle. She had seen Celestia assume that exact same pose when she ritually raised the sun. Yet the unicorn was certain that this was a representation of Luna. The statue's dark wings spread to flank the stairs downward on both sides.

Rex Rustpaw led them past it with nary a backward glance.

At the bottom, there was a large circular platform, surrounded by more shifting dark matter. Mundane crates and boxes and mining equipment lay scattered around, completely out of place among the otherworldly architecture. A large pair of doors with some strange circular mechanism had been blown apart with what must've been a fairly substantial application of explosives, creating a crack easily wide enough for a pony or two to pass through.

"Come," Rex urged them on. "We are almost there. Gull will be within the Vault itself. To defeat him, you will need the power of my Fire Fetish. As you battle him, he will call upon the Earth to shield himself and augment his power. I can call on Flame to melt his protections, but in my weakened state... I believe I can use this ability only twice. Prepare yourselves."

"Buffs," Twilight reminded her party. She refreshed Arcane Intellect. Having done this before, the rest of the group were quick to reapply their designated spells. Fluttershy even added one, by putting a 'Thorns' spell up on Applejack. Spines of natural energy briefly shimmered across the apple farmer's body.

At last, they saw who - or what - they would be fighting.

Gull was a Diamond Dog, but like Blood Diver (or, rather, the former Royal Guard Highdiver) he had been perverted and enhanced through his pact with the Twilight Cult. The canine was now a huge, hunched monstrosity, with a massively enlarged torso and barrel-like arms. Even for a hulking Diamond Dog, his proportions were skewed, and adding to the menace, crystalline growths were merged into his shoulders and back.

He stood in the center of the Vault of the Moon, itself a large open area. The inside was circular and the walls lined with coffered alcoves and repositories. Piles of books lay in heaps and piles. Standing out even more was the fact that the twisted Diamond Dog was not the only living being in the room. An auburn colored pegasus filly, no more than Scootaloo's age, was suspended in the air by dark chains, and from those dangled evil looking charms and artifacts. The air around her crackled and hissed with malignant power.

Gull growled at the sight of the intruders, pointing a huge paw at them.

"These must be the Elements of Harmony Lady Voidhorn spoke of," he said, displaying perfect diction in contrast to his monstrous form and deep voice. "Rex. You old fool. How kind of you to deliver them to me. Their broken bodies will be a fine gift to present to the Master at her Ascension."

"And who is this Master you guys keep talking about anyway?" Dash blurted out, boxing with her hooves. "I wanna know, so I can give her the old one-two!"

"I was going to ask the same," Twilight said, but stepped back to let Applejack and Dash take up tanking and melee positions. She glared at the former leader of the Rustpaw Diamond Dogs, who had betrayed his people and sold them into slavery.

"You turned your people into slaves!" she yelled at him, anger and disgust undisguised. "And for what? Catnip. Blood Diver. And now you. Why are you doing this? How can you do this to your own kind?"

For a few seconds, Gull just narrowed his eyes at her. At them all.

"Those who wish to survive must serve," he finally said. "The Old Ones will rise again. Deathwing the Destroyer has taken Flight once more! This world will *Break* and *Burn*. Our creation was a mistake. Do you understand, pony?" He smiled and laughed, orange eyes gleaming with strange, insane energy. "You are an offense. We are all an offense in the eyes of the Gods! My kind? I feel no kinship towards creatures of flesh and blood like you. Any of you."

"And her?" Dash pointed up at the filly suspended from the chains. Her wings were flexed, itching to fly up and attempt a rescue. "What are you doing to her?"

"This one." Gull pointed back and up at the filly. "Is Voidhorn's. She was our mirror into the past, but... you could say she has had a crisis of Faith..."

The pegasus's heated glare could have melted steel.

"As for my Master," the mutated Diamond Dog chuckled, brazenly. "I speak, of course... of the Ebon Mare. Of Nightmare Moon."

- - -

Uldum

The desert sands crawled with the endless swarm of Silithid pouring in from the crack in the Western Sun Wall. They burrowed from cisterns far below the Earth, so deep that their hives radiated heat. Twitching alien spires of chitin and flesh rose from the baked wasteland, and from this vile Hive the invasion radiated outward. The skies darkened with flying pests, huge shadowy forms buzzing amid the starved, flesh eating locusts. On the ground the sands shifted with burrowing fiends, and skittering warrior insects hissed as they raced to pounce on the unwary.

Western Uldum had fallen. The young Ramkahen Pharaoh, Ninjter, was dead, and central Uldum had fallen into a panic. From the south, only the Tribes of the Neferset remained organized and in the field. Off the coast, nestled high in the sky, the Shearing Gates of the Throne of Four Winds remained closed, barring entrance or exit to the Skywall and the

Elemental Realm of Air. No aid would be forthcoming from the Elementals, even as the invasion reached their very doorstep.

Luna's wings stretched wide as she soared, accompanied by her personal guard of pegasi.

Far below, a swarm of shapes began to fjord the Vir'naal River that divided Uldum, making for the Eastern side. One across the river and through the last stretch of desert, there were only verdant forests and wide open plains separating the Silithid advance from Equestria. It would be a slaughter the likes of which a pampered ponykind would never imagine.

The sun behind her set against the flank of a titanic sphinx, perched atop one of the high plateaus on the southeastern side of the river. The moon was starting to rise, and with it, Luna felt her power slowly build. The regal alicorn turned away from the Silithid swarm, heading east herself. There was nothing she and her handful of guard could do to prevent the crossing of so massive a host.

Weeks of skirmishing had proven that the numbers of Silithid were vast, and their magics ancient and deadly. The Qiraji Prophet caste in particular worried her. She had slain no less than three of the monstrous commanding entities, but their haunting whispers still cursed her in her mind, mocking her failure to decapitate the leadership of the invading swarm. Every strike, every minor victory, had dwindled her own forces bit by bit. Her personal guard was down to six pegasi, none with more than five years experience.

'Where are the dragonflights? Where is Ysera? Where is Alexstrasza? The most powerful of their brood can all cross the Sun Wall at will. Where are this world's protectors?' And, a whisper in her mind cursed, 'Where are you, Sister? Where are you?'

The Night came, painting a dark pallet of stars across the sky as Luna and her escorts came in to land and, for a moment, rest. Luna herself felt a sheen of sweat between her coat and her new armor. It was uncomfortable to wear, but the Obsidium and Elementium plates had saved her life in more than a few pitched engagements. Her dark blue helm in particular served to reinforce and protect her mind from unwanted intrusion.

She hardly dared to take it off anymore.

Before her lay the pillared entrance to the forbidden: The Halls of Origination. The Halls in which ponykind had first been created. The Halls in which she had learned to be the Light of the Moon; where she had met her sister and her kin... where she had first met Neltharion and the other young Dragon Aspects. For more than ten thousand years, the great gates had been barred to all those suffering from the Curse of Flesh.

Before them stood the last of her loyal Night Guard, assembled in force: flights of dark pegasi in their stormrider uniforms, regiments of armored earth pony clibanarii and unicorn casters, ready to meet the enemy. Many were wounded, but on their hooves and ready to fight, one last time. They were down to two hundred stallions and mares, including Luna's own Equites Singulares. Since coming with her to Uldum, her Night Guard had fought in dust storms, in the blistering heat of the day, in dark tunnels and in swarm filled skies.

They had never wavered, but the sad fact was that they were losing.

Her Guard alone could not drive back the Silithid incursion, especially not with the Tol'vir kingdoms in disarray. There was only one thing to do: one slim chance to save Uldum, the land of her birth, and in saving Uldum... Equestria.

She had to do the forbidden, and return to the Halls of Origination.

There, she could strengthen the Sun Wall; redouble its strength and extend it deeper into the earth, cutting off the Silithid swarm from its base of operations. The effect would only reinforce the isolation of Uldum and Equestria. Even the most powerful of dragons would find it impossible to pierce the wall, and neither she nor Celestia would ever be able to leave. It had to be done. It would be done. As for a way to destroy the Silithid now trapped beneath the Sun Wall...

Luna smirked to herself as she trotted up the steps and across a sand strewn venue, flanked by a forest of massive pillars. Like all the ancient structures in this land, the scale of the steps and pillars and doors was colossal. Fittingly so. It was built by gods to be used by giants. Her ponies scurried among the sand washed ruins like ants.

And she was the most powerful ant of them all.

Waiting for her at the top of the steps to the Hall of Origination, she saw her trump card: the assembled Elements of Harmony. Around her, the Night Guard began to line up and come to attention, sensing the time had come for one last set of orders from their Princess. Luna's gilded hooves, armored in dark obsidium, carried her forward, higher. Her coat, too, had darkened slightly. Some side affect of the armor she wore, her scribes believed. Luna didn't mind the color change; she felt more powerful than she had ever been before. The wind shifted, and with it, a biting cold.

Luna saw Enigma, first: Bearer of the Element of Magic. By his side, as always, was Loyal Featherfrost, wearing the armor of the now decimated Shadowbolts. She was the last of that elite fighting force. All others had perished fighting the Silithid and treacherous Obsidian Clan of Tol'vir, now known only as Obsidian Destroyers. The two were inseparable.

Further back near the great doors, a pitch black mare with a salt gray mane stood next to an aqua blue mare with a tri-colored iris-violet mane and tail. A third mare, a pegasus pony colored in sunny flax and poppy looked about uneasily. A fourth pony, this one another male unicorn, crept up behind her to whisper something that seemed both encouraging and embarrassing: the nervous pegasus perked up, whispered something back, and tried to keep her wings from growing too obviously flustered. Luna frowned at the unicorn in question; his colors, a white coat and dark pink mane, were far too familiar for the Princess's comfort. It was unfortunate that the Element of Charity had to have so much of that bloodline in him.

Luna grimaced slightly and shook her head: where had that thought come from? True, Luster's colors were a bit off putting, but as befitting the Element of Charity, he was nothing but courteous. If Celestia felt free to let him roam about on adventures, then all the better. In a way, he was the black sheep of that ivory colored family.

The three mares, Luna knew as the Elements of Fidelity, Festivity and Decency respectively: the dark earth pony Black Pepper, her sister Happy Days, and the pegasus Sunflower. Together with Enigma and Featherfrost, all six wore the emblems of the Elements of Harmony as collars across their chests. Only Enigma, as the Element of Magic, was

given a headpiece: a coronet of platinum that all but disappeared beneath his silver mane. Not for the first time, the sight of him filled Luna with confidence and... something else. Enigma was her finest servant. His service over the last few years, and more recently in the battles in Uldum, had been very impressive.

She hadn't thought about him that way, not seriously... until recently. It was fatigue, probably. From all the stress and the fighting. She wasn't Celestia after all. She didn't need... or even want to socialize with mortal ponies. No. Not... really...

A whisper in the back of her head turned to mocking laughter.

"Enigma!" Luna called to him as she approached; like Celestia, she towered above lesser ponies at her full height. "Are the preparations complete?"

"They are," the magic user's voice was, as always, calm and cool. He had everything under control. Luna trusted him to do as asked, and to do it well. She trusted him.

"But," Enigma added, trotting up alongside her. He picked what he said next carefully. "With all due respect, I still believe we should wait for Princess Celestia. The tablet you had us translate is very specific. The Sister Princesses. Plural. Entering alone may be... dangerous, for you and for others."

"We will have to take that risk." Luna came to a stop before the vast doors to the Halls of Origination. "Enigma. The armies of the Silithid are almost on us. They know I plan to open the Halls of Origination, and they intend to stop me. My dear sister has left Canterlot far too late to make a difference. It falls on us, Enigma. Are you with me?"

The unicorn archmage chuckled and lowered his head in acquiescence. "I have always been with you, Princess. But casting a spell without all the proper reagents... I don't know if I can compensate for Celestia's absence. Tricking the gates open is risky."

"If we lose this place, we lose Uldum," Luna reminded him, lowering her head slightly to look him in the eye. "If we lose Uldum, Equestria will be destroyed. You can do this, Enigma. We can do this."

*So close to him, Luna felt herself smile. Yes. Enigma's magic, with her own, would open the forbidden gates of the Titans. She would reinforce the Sun Wall and unleash destruction on the Silithid - destruction as if a **nightmare** had been made manifest. Not a single trace of the Silithid or Qiraji would survive. Every foul atom would be burned away!*

The thought of what she would unleash filled her with warmth and excitement and a dark pleasure. Impulsively - and Luna did not normally think of herself as impulsive - she leaned closer to touch her cheek to Enigma's. She felt him, felt him stiffen, and then heard him take a step to the side. Frowning, she realized it must have been because of her helmet. Other ponies found it cold and slightly painful to touch.

That was all it was.

"Princess," he muttered, for once sounding flustered. "I - you should know-"

"Yes. Yes, of course. The Obsidium." She apologized, or at least she implied apology. "I had forgotten."

"Yes... that...."

"No matter," she insisted. "I shall have no use for this burdensome armor once our lands are secure. Now: begin the spell. We must open the Gates. I must speak to Anhuur and Rajh as soon as possible."

"Of course, Princess." The Element of Magic curtly turned and rounded up the other five Elements. Luna also turned, heading back to the top of the stairs as the six stallions and mares began Enigma's spell. Arcane energy swirled over their heads, and bright green symbols lit up over the surface of the Titanic doors. Ancient identification mechanisms activated, framing the monolithic stone doorway with runes.

"My Night Guard," Luna addressed the now assembled remainder of her forces. They milled about in companies and regiments, all to hear her

speak. "This is our final stand. Together with the Elements of Harmony, you must protect the doors we now open. Inside is our salvation... the magic I need to protect Equestria and destroy the Silithid. Take heart. I will not fail you. By morning, we will all toast to our victory, and rest easily during the day. This I swear to you."

It was not the most elegant speech she had ever heard. She was no Celestia. Yet her Night Guard cheered, moved at the least by knowing what they had to do, and what was at stake. Luna took one last look at them and turned to face the door. Her horn glowed, and her wings outstretched. Her magic mixed in with that of the Elements of Harmony.

And the Great Gates of the Halls of Origination opened to her.

- - -

Gull, it went almost without saying, hit like a tank. That much was implied from the sheer size and mass of the insane Diamond Dog. He eschewed any sort of actual weapon in favor of his massive, rock-hard fists. Applejack, moments after taunting him with an apple to the face, was the first to really feel the power of their opponent. Unlike Blood Diver or the frenzied Manticore, Sniffles, Gull hit slowly. His blows were choreographed with all the cast time of a spell, making the worst of them easy to sidestep and avoid. The quicker, weaker ones that couldn't be so easily avoided, were still telling blows.

For the fourth time, Applejack ended up on her side, backhanded and stunned. Gull was methodical in his attacks, swinging his massive fists like battering rams. Fluttershy's healing was so far able to cope with the damage done, but the apple farmer turned trained-warrior still grimaced painfully as one of her broken ribs forcibly reset and healed. The magic that normally helped to numb pain was hard pressed to keep up. As the only real good side, she wasn't lacking for rage energy to fuel the abilities and tricks Grim Thunderbrew had passed onto her.

Meanwhile, her tanking allowed everyone else to concentrate on their job: Rainbow Dash was behind the monster Diamond Dog, slashing into his back with her Highdiver Hoofblade and blasting away with holy Judgments and Seals. Rarity was in Shadowform, unleashing tendrils of mind flaying energy while Pinkie Pie and Twilight hadn't needed to move aside to stand

and unleash elemental and arcane attacks. Gull soaked it all up like a giant, angry sponge.

Aside from one problem, it was basically what Thunderbrew had described to her as a 'tank and spank' ...

Gull was stacking an elemental ability Twilight had identified as "Elementium Aberration" that couldn't be purged, spell-stolen, or otherwise dispersed. He had started the fight with only a single rank of it, but it was increasing steadily every second. Like Twilight, Applejack had an identify spell of her own, though she didn't flaunt it or talk about it much. During her training, Grim had given her some basic magical items she would need as a warrior unable to spellcast herself. One was a simple rune she could use to power the spell-identification she'd need to fight any sort of magic using caster-type.

It had read and analyzed the "Elementium Aberration" spell as it stacked, confirming that as it built up over time, it mitigated more and more incoming damage, magical or physical. When it reached one hundred percent, Gull would become his namesake: the Unbreakable. He would have one hundred percent damage mitigation. It seemed too good to be true to Applejack, and she rather suspected that if the Diamond Dog did reach that many stacks that something different than invulnerability would occur. The name of the spell alone hinted at a possible transformative effect.

She couldn't let him stack the spell that high!

"Ponies!" Rex Rustpaw called out, from near the door. He was casting a spell of his own, using the recovered and reassembled Fire Fetish as a totem. "Remember what I told you!"

Holding out a hand, the Diamond Dog shaman projected a line of churning fire down onto the floor of the Vault. A circle briefly outlined over the marble before turning into a boiling pool of red and orange, like a circle of agitated lava. Then it vanished again, replaced by a transparent sigil. It was about that moment that Applejack realized something else about her opponent. Since the start of the fight when she had charged in, she hadn't moved him much, but when she did readjust slightly, Gull had not exactly been fleet of foot in catching her.

"Applejack!" Twilight yelled, about to give her the order.

"Ah know!" the warrior assured her, smirking to herself beneath her armored helm. This was her fight. She knew what to do! Another brutal strike knocked her off her hooves, forcing her to roll and bounce back up. Gull was already rising up to do a two-handed slam. Knowing what to look for, Applejack spun, slapping him in the face with her tail as she avoided the blow - the resulting miss cracking the marble floor.

"I'll crush the life out of you!" Gull sneered, soundly only marginally put out. He seemed to think time was on his side and that he could just play around until he became 'unbreakable.' Or until he transformed into the 'Elementium Aberration' his spell was named for.

Applejack waited, making sure he had about seventy going on eighty stacks of his protective spell.

At this point, Rarity, Pinkie, Twilight and even Dash may as well have been attacking a block of solid steel. Arcane bolts fizzled and shattered on contact with the Diamond Dog's nearly diamond-hard skin. Lightning and flame shocks splashed harmlessly, and even Rarity's shadow magic had little effect. Behind the wall of muscle, Dash let out an exasperated groan at how ineffective her attacks were.

"Come on, doggie! Come on!" She jeered, backing up.

"Ugh!" Gull snarled as she avoided another telegraphed blow. "Stand and fight me like a true warrior! You fight like a dairy farmer!"

"Apple farmer actually!" Applejack bounced back, leading him... bit by bit. "And at least Ah don't fight like a cow!"

"Stinking little pony! I'll smear you into paste!" So fixated on her was he, that he didn't notice when he walked right over the faint rune left in the marble floor. Applejack's careful backtracking turned into a jump as she got out of the way. By this point, Gull had just over eighty stacks of Elementium Aberration.

The moment he stepped on the Rustpaw rune, the fire of Hell erupted around him, and all eighty stacks turned into an immolation aura. The massive Diamond Dog vanished in a literal pillar of flame, waves of heat blasting outward from the inferno he had been turned into. Gull roared in pain and rage, his pace increasing slightly as he continued to give chase.

Applejack turned and galloped at full speed, leading him away from her friends. She had just enough time to notice that, just like the protective spells that had steadily built up, they were now ticking back down. There was no way she was going to get up close and personal with a bloodthirsty mountain of muscle and fire; by the looks of things, the damage done by setting off the rune was probably more than Pinkie, Twilight, Dash and Rarity had done to him put together.

The enraged Diamond Dog bellowed, falling to all fours as he tried to catch the fleeing earth pony.

"I AM GULL! I CAN NOT BE BROKEN!"

Applejack didn't stop to taunt the immolated canine. She just kept leading him around on a circuit around the curve of the circular room. After twenty seconds or so, the entire Elementium Aberration buff had been burned away. The hulking Diamond Dog emerged from the flames horribly burned, but still intent on crushing the ponies before him. Seeing the immolation aura dissipate, Applejack charged back in, to keep him in one place. She had to keep "aggro" on him, like Grim Thunderbrew had taught her, or risk him turning on her friends.

"Pitiful little pony! Did you think a trick like that could kill me, Gull? Gull the Unbreakable?" He tagged her with a swat of his paw, sending her face down into the stone.

It was not pleasant, even with Fluttershy's Regrowth flowing through her. It was also a position Grim Thunderbrew had been fond of knocking her down into. 'Eating dirt' he'd called it. She'd hated it then and she hated it now.

'Now, now, lass. Yer a warrior, or ye want'ta be one. That means yer gonna get stunned. Yer gonna get knocked around. Yer gonna get beat up.' He had lectured once, after having slammed her into the hay and

pinned her under a heavy leather and metal boot. *'Yer gonna have to learn to take it, spit out yer blood and teeth, and get up fer more. Get angry. Get revenge. But get back up. Yer gettin' hit so yer friends won't be!'*

Setting her hooves down, she pushed up against the massive paw holding her down. Muscles strained, lifting it just enough for her to roll out and bounce back up. Back up for more. Spitting blood and phlegm to the side, she grinned jumped at the massive Diamond Dog, slamming a steel-shot and armored hoof into his face, and then following up with a shield bash. There was no way she could actually overpower this monster she was fighting.

But she could keep it busy.

Just like before, the stacks of Elementium Aberration began to accumulate. Faster! It was increasing by five at a time! There wouldn't be much time before the Dog became nearly invulnerable again.

"Pinkie!" Applejack yelled.

"Party time!" Twilight ordered, coming to the same conclusion at the same time.

The rosy maned shaman shot fireworks from somewhere within her tail, a spray of sparks and stars briefly surrounding her.

"Okey Dokey!" she stamped her hooves to the floor, and a heroic burst of energy infused the six mares. "Let's get it *started* in here!"

Strangely, catchy music accompanied the *Party Time Heroism* spell.

"Ponies!" came the call from the door again. "This is the last one I can manage! Do not let Gull transform!"

So it was a transformation then!

Applejack tasted blood as another blow spun her around. Steel shod hooves clacked as she regained her balance, and took note of where the Flame Rune had been put down. It was in the center of the room: which

was convenient but kind of dangerous. Everypony had taken up positions near there while applejack led Gull around the edge of the room before.

Thirty stacks. Thirty five -

"RAGH!" Gull bellowed shaking a rainbow colored blur of light and steel away from his side. "You scum can not kill me! I am Gull!" A blast of lightning and arcane fire seared the side of his face. "I AM GULL!"

Again, a backhand knocked Applejack to her side with a painful crack.

Fifty five stacks. Sixty -

The Diamond Dog was on his last legs, but being rapidly bolstered by the Elementium Aberration stacks. He started stomping his feet and hitting the ground instead of using the targeted Thundering Strikes from before. Debris began to fall from the alcoves and Vault storage above, along with chunks of stone from the ceiling. The ground itself shook, shockwaves hitting everypony in the room.

"Oh dear! Oh my!" Fluttershy gasped, breaking her normal silence as she struggled to keep everypony up. "Please, if you can heal yourself a bit, please do so!"

"Doggone it!" Applejack cursed, activating her Last Stand. It was what Thunderbrew had called a 'panic button.' When a warrior was up shit creek without a paddle, they used Last Stand. The apple farmer felt the glyph activate, flooding her body with energy and power. She didn't have a lot of self-heals, but this one would temporarily boost her constitution by almost a third.

Fluttershy continued healing, even as debris bounced off a shield of light that had enveloped her. Ironically, she ended up taking the last damage of anyone. Rubble continued to rain down, together with the shockwaves, but the group weathered the attack.

"Haha!" Dash cheered from somewhere behind the enraged Diamond Dog. "Hand of Protection for the win! Paladins are the best class!"

"In yer dreams they are!" Applejack backed up again, pausing only to turn around and buck another pair of apples at the now nearly fully stacked Gull. He was back up to eighty applications of Elementium Aberration. Luckily, he was just as clueless as before that he was being led around, and as he charged at the damned warrior pony that had so aggravated him the entire fight...

The Fire Rune erupted beneath him, consuming and converting his armor into molten fire.

"NO! NO!! GULL - GULL CAN NOT - DIE..."

The monstrous Diamond Dog managed only a few more enraged steps before succumbing. He stumbled, reached out to the ceiling and roared, waves of fire pulsing out from his burning form.

Finally, with a puff, he turned to blackened ash.

Applejack could hardly believe it. They'd done it! They'd won, again! The heady rush was starting to slowly fade, but the danger was past. Letting out a relieved sigh, she fell to the floor to rest. Fluttershy's incredible healing quickly brought her body up to peak condition, as usual, but a big fight like that was still emotionally draining.

Rainbow Dash got the achievement [Flawless! Unbreakable! Diamond Dog!]

Applejack got the achievement [Flawless! Unbreakable! Diamond Dog!]

Pinkie Pie got the achievement [Flawless! Unbreakable! Diamond Dog!]

Twilight Sparkle got the achievement [Flawless! Unbreakable! Diamond Dog!]

Fluttershy got the achievement [Flawless! Unbreakable! Diamond Dog!]

Rarity got the achievement [Flawless! Unbreakable! Diamond Dog!]

"Gull the Unbreakable has been beaten."

Also looking drained from casting the Fire Runes, Rex Rustpaw slowly walked towards the pile of ash in the center of the Vault. He stopped only to look disapprovingly down at the remains of the traitor Diamond Dog chieftain. Holding a hand out over the still burning embers, he muttered a

quick prayer, and then stood to face the filly bound by chains in the back of the Vault.

Dash was already up near her, flying, and trying to break the black chains.

"Wait, heroes!" Rex called to them, though probably speaking to the rainbow pegasus in particular. "I know that child. She was with Night Sky - Voidhorn - when my people were corrupted. Are you certain you wish to release her?"

It didn't take long for anypony to make up their minds.

"If you can help, please do so," Twilight spoke for them, knowing how they all felt. "Otherwise get out of the way! We're not leaving somepony to suffer like that!"

"The Rustpaw owe you our freedom." The geomancer raised his hands and closed his eyes. "Spirits of the Raging Earth. Aid me!"

The black chains began to faintly glow, as small clouds of dust formed curling eddies around them. The six mares took that as their queue to strike. Dash cut and blasted through one of the chains while Twilight and Pinkie destroyed the other at range. With a snapping sound of failing magic and overstressed metal, the chains broke, also dropping the blackened trinkets and charms attached to them. The dark aura that surrounded the amber colored filly faded, and she fell - only to be caught by Dash before she could hit the ground.

The pegasus carefully brought the unknown pony youngster to the ground, checking her for wounds. Applejack, having no means of healing anyone, let the magic users take the lead on what to do with this new turn of events. There seemed to be something very strange about the little pegasus. Even a cursory look didn't show any physical damage, and why would anyone, no matter how deranged, suspend a little blank-flank filly in the air with massive chains and dark magic?

It made no sense.

Unless...

The rescued filly took a deep breath. Too deep. Only a truly ...ah, 'special'... pony like Pinkie Pie could suck in so much air. The filly stirred, and her little wings shot out. Rainbow Dash, who had been holding the little tyke, was knocked back, whole cloth. The others hastily backed off, all except Fluttershy.

Fluttershy, despite her fear, tried to get closer... to see what was wrong.

"Don't worry. You're safe now," the kindhearted pegasus assured the frightened filly. "We won't hurt you, we-"

"You." The filly's voice was off. It didn't sound old. It sounded like...

"You will not hurt me?" The filly laughed, and her body expanded!

Hooves turned into claws, and the tiny Scootaloo-wings sprouted, feathers receding into leathery skin. The thing that changed the least was the color. Auburn coat became amber scales. Her cute little blonde tail shimmered and became that of a dragon, the top studded with small spines. This was no adult dragon, it soon became clear, but it - *she maybe* - was clearly older than Spike, at least by a couple years. Unlike their friend, this dragon immediately fell to four legs instead of his preferred two. Applejack was no expert, but by how she knocked Dash aside it also seemed as if a steady diet of dark magic had clearly given her a jump start in raw power to boot.

She hissed at Fluttershy, bearing her teeth. When she spoke, it was with a young voice, feminine, but not truly pony-like. "Yes! Say it now! That you will not hurt me!"

The dragon huffed, purple and black flame shooting from her nostrils. "I can smell you! I know why you are here! You've come to purge this place of the Twilight Cult, have you not?"

Green eyes shot around, from pony to pony, before the dragon's body relaxed.

"Come," she said, sounding almost resigned. "Finish it, then."
Breathing sand and fire, she backed up, wings spread and ready to take her to the air. "But do not think to kill me in my sleep!"

Fluttershy marched right up, heedless of the strange sand-breath, eyes wide and framed by a scowl. The small dragon hissed and shrunk back. She looked torn between bolting, attacking, or just accepting the inevitable. Fluttershy was soon just inches away, looming over her. Her friends were all tensed to jump in, in case their normally timid pegasus druid miscalculated on the use of her stare. The cornered dragon tensed, ready to jump -

"Stop moving," Fluttershy said, simply. She held up a hoof, wrapped in a warm, green glow. "You're more hurt than you look."

Still caught in the stare, the young dragon froze, and then slowly realized that the nature magic being cast on her wasn't harmful. Her wings lowered and her shoulders slumped; head bowed, she finally managed to look away from Fluttershy's stare. Clawed hands balled into fists. In most species, this would be a threat and warning sign, but in dragons, it meant the opposite. It meant her claws were sheathed.

"You should just kill me already," she growled, sounding almost angry. "You don't know who I am. If you knew-"

"Quiet," Fluttershy insisted, and the dragon shut up.

It wasn't the first time Applejack had seen Fluttershy's serious side take over. It was impressive as always, and had staved off an unnecessary fight. The apple farmer breathed a sigh of relief. She really hadn't wanted to charge in and fight some pre-teen dragon filly... or whatever it was they were dealing with. She kept close to Twilight and Pinkie Pie, though. Just in case.

"Rex," Twilight said, turning to the Diamond Dog geomancer. "Who is this? She's a dragon, isn't she...? I didn't think they could polymorph at such a young age."

The old pug frowned, his face scrunching up even more.

"Voidhorn called her 'Amber.' This is the first I've seen of her true form." He gripped the fetish around his neck, protectively. "As I said. It was the two of them... who corrupted and enslaved the Rustpaw. They begat the evil magic that now flows from this place to poison the Earth."

He gave Twilight a concerned look.

"When we first met them..." he told the studious unicorn mage. "They told us they came from Canterlot. And the mark on Voidhorn's flank... is much like yours, Twilight Sparkle. From what little I have learned, I believe you are both disciples of the being we know as Sol Invictus. The demi-god you call... Celestia."

Chapter 11

Twilight felt it right away: this "Vision of the Nightmare" was different from the others. She had seen things through other's eyes before. Luna's. Enigma's. Princess Celestia's. This time, the vision was sharper, clearer, more solid... and she experienced it from a third pony perspective. It was as if she was watching through time, still herself, but an invisible and intangible witness to the past.

She saw Luna and the other Elements of Harmony as they passed into the Halls of Origination. The Lunar Princess was so similar yet so different in this past life; it was eerie. Her coat was a dark indigo, as if halfway to black from normal, and her mane and tail were a shade darker, but were still solid and deep sky blue. Her appearance was regal, and she had to be as tall as Celestia herself, but there was none of the Sun Princess's warmth of presence or personality breaking through Luna's determined expression. The dark armor she wore produced a trail of magical hardfrost in its wake: like a breath of warm air visible on a cold day. Her hooves left faint crackles on the floor behind.

She looked... Powerful. Determined. Implacable.

The same could not be said for the Elements of Harmony who followed her. The six ponies were looking around in dismay, confusion and awe. Twilight immediately noticed, again, the parallels between these ancient friends and her own. Whether it was coincidence or not, the Elements had picked the same basic arrangement of bearers... or hosts: two unicorns, two pegasi, two earth ponies. They had even picked the same *sort* of bearer. Maybe they always did.

Featherfrost's analog was Rainbow Dash, in Loyalty. The Shadowbolt was older than Rainbow, and much more reserved, but they both had an almost palpable aura of confidence and reliability - the sense that when push came to shove, there would be no one better to have by your side. She kept close to Enigma, constantly on the look out for danger. Perhaps it was a life filled with combat instead of competition, but the

ancient pegasus had Dash's natural jumpiness and enthusiasm, but morphed into a sort of hardened edginess.

Sunflower (Twilight wondered if the name was hereditary or a coincidence) was Fluttershy's analog, and like the present-day Element of Kindness, she looked terrified of their surroundings. The chamber they were within, part of this so called "Hall of Origination" was vast beyond any pony's normal sense of scale. The steps of a stone stairway leading upwards had to be jumped. Flanking statues with non-pony features (to Twilight, living in the present, they resembled the Azerothean "humans" who now visited Equestria) towered nearly to the vault's massive ceiling. Strange shafts of light fell from above, despite there being no actual connection to the heavens above. Buttressed lanterns and strange constructions glowed with a soft, eternal light.

It was no surprise that somepony with Fluttershy's temperament would be scared. Any sane pony would at least be apprehensive, being in such an alien place. Sunflower pushed forward, keeping close to the talkative white stallion named Luster. This was Rarity's analog, and Twilight found it a bit strange that both unicorns were the only males in the group. Enigma, at least, looked nothing like her... but with his magnolia-white coat Luster did resemble Rarity in some ways. He was well groomed to hoof, with a witty and charming sort of atmosphere. He was almost princely; Rarity probably would have gotten along well with him, were he not a thousand years her senior. His cerise-pink hair was almost Pinkie-like, though, and made him seem a bit effeminate.

He was chatting animatedly with Sunflower, keeping the timid pegasus's spirits up.

Twilight watched, fascinated, as Black Pepper - Applejack's precursor - trotted away from her sister Happy Days to whisper something to Enigma. She was clearly concerned about where they were headed, or possibly what was behind them. Twilight hadn't seen much of the two earth ponies yet, but Black Pepper seemed fairly humorless. There was also something exotic about her, dark colors aside. Most earth ponies were colorful, and dark coat colors were more commonly expressed among unicorn populations. Happy Days, Pinkie Pie's light hearted, light-colored precursor, zipped up to flank Sunflower, teasing her about something. The

easily and often flustered pegasus blushed brightly and even flew a few inches off the floor for a time.

Enigma, Twilight paid personal attention to. He was... her precursor, her analog, her direct predecessor. From what she had learned, he had played a very important part in executing Luna's banishment to the Moon. Yet, here, he followed Luna. Before, in another vision, he had acted on her behalf in Celestia's court. He had grown to stallion-hood in Luna's castle, among the monks there. He was even interned there. He and Luna seemed... close.

He was also a rather different sort of pony than Twilight believed herself to be. She had seen him praise Featherfrost in Celestia's court, but he didn't seem to act very warmly towards any of his friends in the Elements of Harmony. He led them, and perhaps the others took strength and heart in that leadership, but when they had chatted or joked before, he never laughed or joined in. He didn't appear to be particularly friendly, and he didn't try to be. Yet, was he really supposed to represent Magic as Friendship? Or... she had heard him speak of Order and Balance. Enigma did seem to exemplify those virtues.

She was both the Element of Magic, and of *Friendship as Magic*.

He was... something else.

Was that why, under these Elements of Harmony, Luna had been banished, while in the present - or a year ago rather - she had merely been purified? There was little justification to it, and she knew it was an unfair comparison to make, but Twilight couldn't help but wonder if it was all somehow connected. They were all Elements of Harmony, but all so different: the same basic virtues, born by different individuals with different ideas and different approaches.

Approaching a great vaulted door, etched with geometric symbols and ancient hieroglyphics, Luna paused. The Princess's horn glowed, but met some resistance as she tried to will the passage open. A winged scarab set into a massive, fifty ton slab of stone over the doorway glowed red. Luna glanced up at it and stamped a hoof in vexation. She clearly recognized what she was seeing. Twilight guessed it was basically a

"do not enter" sign. Huge crystal windows to the sides of the door, covered with glowing bronze and brass, could have possibly provided some other means through, but they looked magically imbued. Twilight got the feeling, even as a disembodied watcher from the future, that they were security wards built long before ponykind.

Enigma joined Luna, and at his direction, the other Elements of Harmony used the same sort of spell from before to trick the door open. The scarab went from a solid red to a blinking red... and finally it turned a soft blue. The rectangular, stone door hissed, releasing a cloud of dust accumulated over millennia, and then retracted up into the doorway ceiling. Luna galloped forward, seeing something, her eyes wide with impossible-to-contain excitement.

Twilight's ghost-like presence followed the Princess.

In this new chamber, built still to Titan scale, was a raised platform with two sunken areas to the sides. Glowing sigils hung suspended in the air, and a bright - holy - light suffused in from the inward slanting sections of the ceiling above. Luna was already flying towards the center platform, her previously stern demeanor having melted away into a filly-like squeal of joy. For a moment, it sounded less like Luna was an immortal goddess and more like Apple Bloom reuniting with her family after Big Mac and Applejack came back from that family reunion the town over.

She threw her hooves and forearms around the neck of a strange creature: it resembled the Tol'vir in the other visions, with a catlike lower body, humanoid torso and arms, and a masked head. This creature, however, was huge. Luna herself was dwarfed by the size of it, her whole body just a little longer than one of the creature's arms. It also seemed to be made of living stone, like black granite and onyx, broken up at the joints with red quartz. Strange stone wings protruded from its back, and it wore pieces of gold and green armor as if that barding was just a part of its stony hide.

A golden ram-like mask, with forward curving horns, almost entirely covered what seemed to be a hideous, black, crocodile-like face. The strange creature-construct stood in the center of the circular platform, and faltered slightly in surprise at Luna's affectionate embrace. A stone hand came up to gingerly touch the alicorn on the back, but then fell away.

"Anhuur!" Luna finally exclaimed, providing what had to be a name. "It's been so long! You're the same! You didn't change at all!"

"Of course not," the construct replied, with some hesitation.
"...Luna."

Anhuur's head tilted, in a very pony-like fashion.

"You were told never to return here," he reminded her, and gently pushed her away. "Your body is soft. I... I can see the Old Gods' curse in you. Flesh must not be permitted to walk the Halls of Origination. The Word of the Titans is Law."

"Anhuur..." Luna landed on her hooves and stared up at him, sounding hurt by the rejection. "You know me."

"Rajh's Dictate was that only both Sisters would be considered for entry in an emergency," the ancient Tol'vir watcher continued, unmoved by the alicorn's distress.

Luna tried to argue. "I-"

"You have used the Elements of Virtue to subvert the defensive mechanisms of this facility," Anhuur continued, pointing at her accusingly. "You have opened the doors and left this place vulnerable, and now you threaten to reintroduce the Curse of Flesh. Your kind was banished from this place for a reason, Luna!"

"I tried to wait for Celestia!" Luna yelled up at him. "I tried! But there is no. more. time!" She said each word with indignant emphasis. "Have you seen what is becoming of Uldum, Anhuur? I can't wait for her any longer!"

"NO." The temple construct's voice boomed, reverberating through the chamber. "As is my function, I have judged you, Luna. I have seen inside your heart. You are tainted by the Curse of Flesh and the whispers of Old Gods. Unlike so many other facilities, this Holy Place is still clean of corruption and I will keep it that way."

Green eyes blazed beneath his golden ram-helm.

"As Temple Guardian, I, Anhuur, can not permit you entry!"

"Anhuur, please," Luna pleaded, rearing up to touch a hoof to the finger pointed at her. "You must let me through. Don't you remember when we were created? You were there with the others when I first learned to raise the sun and moon. You..." Her voice slipped, as the stone being lifted his hand away from her touch. "You're like a brother to me..."

The temple guardian's eyes, green ingots under a gold helm, darkened briefly.

"These Halls are no longer your home," Anhuur finally said, his voice a thunderous rumble. "Return to the world of Flesh. There is no place for you here."

"You don't mean that. You don't." Luna told him - or maybe told herself. Turning from grief-stricken to incensed, she stared defiantly up at the ancient being. "This is my home! This is where I belong! I have every right to be here! The power within is my birthright!"

"Let me pass, Anhuur!" she yelled, taking a step towards the onyx guardian. "For the Love of the Titans, let me pass!"

A golden spear appeared in the Temple Guardian's right hand.

"NO," he boomed. "These Halls must not be disturbed. Not even by you."

Luna's face contorted with rage, a dark energy flowing from slit, green eyes, wet with tears.

"Then I will force my way through!" she snarled.

- - -

"Do you understand now?" The juvenile dragon was shaking, lowering herself back onto her four legs. Twilight emerged from the Vision

heady, almost overpowered by how vivid it had been compared to the others.

She wasn't the only one, either. Everypony, from Applejack to Rarity had seen what Twilight had seen; experienced it. These "Visions of the Nightmare" weren't just hallucinations. It was hard to believe, but this young dragon, Amber, massing less than a wet Pinkie Pie, was the source of the haunting fragments in time. Despite a more animalistic posture that came with a growing dragon's leaner, longer form, the grief and sadness on the bronze drake's face reminded Twilight of Spike, back when she had asked him to stay behind at the Royal Guard camp.

"It was me. All along, it was... me..." She leveled the accusation at Fluttershy in particular, holding a grudge for the kindness the pegasus had shown her. "Not just your visions, either. I was the one who turned Night Sky, my... my friend... into Voidhorn. I'm responsible for the Twilight Cult being here!"

Rarity shook her head, recovering from the powerful time-lost vision. "I don't see how..."

"I admit that was pretty freaky," Dash agreed. "But giving someone daydreams isn't exactly the end of the world."

"You two don't understand," Amber told them, and stared at the one unicorn who hadn't spoken. "I think you do, though."

"What happened?" Twilight asked, though she already had her suspicions. "Tell us everything."

Standing guard over the dragon, the aged Diamond Dog geomancer, Rex, had made certain it didn't try any tricks. He was involved, too, as a third party, and while he knew some of the tale he clearly was at least a little curious to know the rest. How had the Rustpaw ended up enslaved, alongside so many abducted ponies? How had the Twilight Cult wormed it's way into Equestria? Why were they in Everfree, at Luna's old castle?

Amber craned her neck to the side, inquisitively. "I told you: it was me. Me and Night Sky." Sniffing, she forced away a pained expression

on her reptilian face. "Ten years ago, Night Sky graduated from the Royal Academy for Gifted Unicorns at the top of her class. She wanted to teach and lecture, and remained as one of the faculty. She loved research and history... we both did..."

The young dragon lowered her eyes. "We traveled and studied, learning the varied mythologies and histories of Equestria, from the Zebra to the Buffalo to the Griffins and Diamond Dogs. Astronomy, legend, magic. We even sought out dragons for hidden knowledge. She returned to Canterlot to teach a few classes and present her findings, and then we were back on the road. It was... exciting: a wonderful time in our lives! The Princess even sent us to help towns and meet foreigners."

"But," Amber snorted a bit of sand and fire. "It was a few years ago, on a trip to the Griffin Tribes. I don't know why, or what triggered it, but... but I did something. We had a vision of the past. Neither of us paid much attention to it at the time. We both thought it was just a vivid dream. Night Sky was investigating a legend that you would know as the Mare in the Moon. Almost all evidence of her was destroyed in Equestria, but only among ponykind."

"Maybe... it was the artifacts we collected or the legends we heard?" the dragon wondered, shaking her head. "The visions grew stronger. More detailed. Longer. More intense. Night Sky became convinced that Nightmare Moon was real, and that proving it would be the triumph of her career. That it would get her into the history books. Driven... by me... she returned to Canterlot three years ago, and presented her case before the Academy."

Twilight shook her head, knowing what was next. "They didn't believe her."

"She was..." Amber paused, weighing her words. "Night Sky was laughed out of her department, discredited... and her artifacts and research were seized by Royal Guards. I was only then starting to realize what I was: that I was somehow responsible for the visions we were seeing, that I could somehow see through the veil of time. I didn't know that I was one of Nozdormu's children. To this day I can't imagine how my egg ended up in pony hands."

The young dragon crushed her eyes closed. "I drove her mad. By the time I learned to control it, it was too late. Night Sky was obsessed with proving she was right... and then, a year ago, you... the Elements of Harmony... you defeated the returned Nightmare Moon. Night Sky was vindicated."

It should have been the end of the story, but -

"Princess Celestia even sent a letter of apology when she returned some of the research. I believe she tried to explain why things had been conducted the way they were: why the truth had been covered up long enough for Luna to come back. She wanted to try and make amends." Amber shook her head again, gritting a row of sharp teeth. "It was too late. It was *all* too late. Whatever was in that letter... whatever platitudes or reason Celestia tried to get across... it didn't work. Night Sky flew into a rage. Her life was ruined and she refused to go back to Canterlot."

"I don't think she was Night Sky anymore by then. The Visions... and the terrible artifacts she unearthed..." Amber trailed off for a moment. "She left. Called herself Voidhorn. She wants to bring back Nightmare Moon."

"Nightmare Moon already came back," Rainbow Dash jumped in, hoofing her chest proudly. "We took care of her! Totally kicked her flank!"

"Besides," Applejack added, "Princess Luna's back; ain't that enough?"

"It isn't," Amber gravely replied. "Luna herself isn't Nightmare Moon. It isn't *Princess Luna* that Night Sky wants to bring back. She wants the power within her, but driven mad by grief and the whispers of Old Gods. That is why the Twilight Cult agreed to help us. Night Sky was already assembling a group to turn Luna into Nightmare Moon. The promise of Everlasting Night, of a literal Hour of Twilight..."

"That is what this is all about. That is why the cult is here. They passed on secret and dark magic to Night Sky... and I was there. I was there and even after I knew how to control my powers, even after the

terrible things the cult did..." Amber looked back down, ashamed. "I did nothing. ...I even *helped*."

"Do you see now? Do you understand?" the little dragon hissed. "So go on. Don't you have a leatherworker in your party? I'm sure you can make something out of my - hey!"

"Stop," Fluttershy ordered, staring hard at the bronze drake. She leaned in. "Ponies are dead. Not just ponies... if you were involved, and you want to pay for what you've done, then you need to work for it."

"That's right." Twilight also stepped forward. "We aren't going to hurt you, but we *are* going to ask you to help make this situation right. So stop asking for the easy way out."

"Asking for death is the easy way out?" Amber inquired, and looked away, ashamed. "What a joke... but..." She tilted her head slightly, fighting the thought. "But... fine. I'll help. But I won't fight Night Sky. I can't. Even after all this, even though I know she has to be stopped, she's still... precious to me."

"How exactly does this Voidhorn expect to bring back Nightmare Moon?" Rarity inquired curiously. "And what's to stop us from using the Elements of Harmony like we did before?"

Amber nodded at the reasonable question.

"First, I must give you the final Vision," she explained. "When you know the truth about what happened a thousand years ago, then you will be ready. Night Sky is conducting a ritual within the Observatory using artifacts precious to both Princess Luna and Nightmare Moon. Luna herself won't even be present, making it impossible for the Elements of Harmony themselves to interfere..."

- - -

The Vault of Lights

Anraphet stood motionless and inactive, and in neat rows along a vast network of alcoves at the construct's feet, a thousand stone ponies

stood at attention. They were unicorns and earth ponies and pegasi, missing only the breath of life to animate their stone and iron bodies. Beneath the Vault of Lights, within the buried Chambers of Animation, the pony race had first been born: one of several Titan created seed races. Neither living nor dead, they were potential-life, missing the spark that would never be given: not since ponykind had been expelled from the Halls of Origination over ten thousand years ago.

Cosmic light still flowed through ancient Titan machinery, bathing the Vault of Lights in a gentle if artificial glow. Strange plates shifted underhoof, just beneath a transparent layer of glass that made up much of the floor. In the portals below, a thousand more tiny shapes could barely be seen, waiting still as statues, abandoned. It was a sight none of the then-Elements of Harmony could have imagined.

Even Enigma was in awe.

Only she - only Luna - remained focused on the task ahead. Approaching silent Anraphet, the caretaker of the Vault, the Moon Princess tried not to let her apprehension show. Temple Guardian Anhuur was beaten, though alive, in his chamber. He had forbidden entrance. She had been forced to make her way past him, and with the Elements of Harmony by her side, she had done what needed to be done. That didn't mean it failed to weight heavily on her heart.

These Halls were her home. They were the only place she had ever considered home. Anhuur had once been her brother, created by the Titans to protect and serve. The pain it caused her to see him fall, by her order - by her magic and by her hooves - was almost more than she could bear. But bear it she would. For Equestria. For her ponies. For a cause she knew to be right.

Anraphet was a humanoid construct, built in the image of a Vanir. Impossible coils of precious gems merged into his meteoric body and the most ancient and potent of magics gave him life, when he chose to have it. Ruby red eyes opened, shaking off the dust of ten thousand years and leaving it to trail down his etched face like dry tears.

"Potential contaminants detected," his monotone voice announced.

"Anraphet," Luna quickly spoke, and she used her wings to indicate the Elements of Harmony were to stay behind her. "It is I. Luna. Recognize and confirm access to the Seats of the Keepers."

"Contamination detected," Anraphet repeated, and a beam shot from his forehead to scan over the seven ponies, starting with the ebon mare who led them. Red light washed over them and then retreated.

"Confirm access to the Seats of the Keepers," Luna said again, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "I must speak with Ammunae, Setesh, Isiset and Rajh. Admit me at once."

The great construct paused, processing the request. Anraphet not like Anhuur. He was similarly oath-bound, but his function was not to determine the worth of those who entered, but to confirm their threat to the function of the facility and to carry out the will of the Four Keepers above who could not leave their Seats of Power. Luna did not want to fight the Caretaker, but would if she had to. After what she had done to Anhuur, there was no going back. Not physically. Not emotionally. She had to keep going forward. It was the only way to justify what she had done.

"You are permitted entry," Anraphet finally declared, a great stone hand rising to indicate a caveat. "You alone. Luna. Are permitted entry."

"Princess," Enigma warned, clearly concerned by their group being split.

"We can't let you go alone!" Featherfrost, the Element of Loyalty, started to spread her wings. Bits of ice were already collecting around her. "We stick together or not at all!"

"These Keepers you mentioned must know we had to force our way in," Black Pepper observed, stating her mind as usual. "If it were me, I wouldn't let that go unpunished."

"This is the only way to avoid a fight," Luna interrupted before any of the others could try and talk her out of it. Turning so they couldn't

see her face, masked by her black obsidium helm, she took a deep breath. "If I am to be punished, then so be it. But I will make my case."

"Isn't there anything we can do to help?" Sunflower asked, frightened by the overwhelming sights and presence of the Titan structures around her but determined to do what she could anyway.

"Princess!" Happy Days called out. "You will go with our prayers!"

Only Luster remained silent, his ears flat until they almost disappeared beneath his pink mane. He turned, slowly, to star back the way they came. "Enigma," he warned. "We aren't alone, my friend."

"Contamination detected!" Anraphet announced, this time as his whole body began to move. A flowing cape of dust fell from his back and shoulders and formerly crossed arms. "Unauthorized life forms have entered the complex! Commencing extermination protocols!"

"No!" Luna spun around, pointing a hoof at the Elements of Harmony. "You must leave the Vault of Lights! All of you! Wait for me in the Maker's Rise." Her voice was almost frantic. "Make sure no Silithid enter this place! Do you understand?!"

"We will do as asked," Enigma answered for the rest. "Everypony. Back!"

Anraphet was already powering up, and with him, the sanitation protocols in the room.

The Elements of Harmony took off in a gallop, heading back the way they came. Luna watched them go just long enough to see Enigma glance back, a worried look on his face. Then she also made a hasty exit in the opposite direction. She knew all too well that Anraphet would activate his Omega Protocols even with "friendly" organics in the Vault of Lights. He was the Caretaker. Even if the race of stone ponies he was built to care for would never be given the gift of life.

A small circular platform waited for her within Anraphet's antechambers. Pressing a hoof to the elaborate bronze disk, it began to

spin and activate. A flash of light engulfed her, and teleported her directly to the Seat of the Keepers in the upper chambers of the Halls. All accomplished unicorns were capable of some personal teleportation, but Titans' point to point teleporters... it had been a long time since she had felt that old magic.

She rematerialized next to the central lift. A bronze console nearby indicated it was still inactive, and had been since the Exile. It was in the middle of an intersection of four chambers, the Four Seats of the Keepers, that lay in the cardinal points of the compass. To the north: the Seat of Radiance, bathed in the light of the sun and framed by gold and dark iron. To the south: the Seat of Life, not bathed in light, but giving it off through brilliant green plantlife that covered the walls. To the East: the Seat of Destruction, as deep as the night sky, illuminated only slightly by pinpricks of starlight and the purple glow of a dark throne. To the West: the Seat of Magic, alive with bright blue and vibrant violet hues, ever shifting, flaunting, always conscious of its own power.

Luna headed first to Setesh.

He was her old friend; her old mentor. His power was her power. He would help her. She knew it!

Setesh, as ever, sat on his throne. There was no life to his Seat of Power, and no ornaments save those originally installed into the structures around him. Void Creatures - beings of primal darkness, from the uncorrupted depths of the nether not claimed by the Burning Legion - milled around, watching Luna's approach with hollow star-like eyes. Void worms, flying eel-like creatures that fed on magic, tried to approach her. Luna ignored them.

Setesh himself was a humanoid construct, like all Keepers. He was built with the face of a Jackal God. Knowing time was rapidly running short, Luna approached his throne directly, lowering her head with a respectful bow.

"Great Setesh, Construct of Destruction!" She greeted him.

"Luna. Our child," Setesh replied in a deep, distant voice.

"You know why I have come, do you not?" she inquired, trying not to sound too hasty, but hoping to get things moving in a timely fashion.

"I know of Anhuur. I know of the trickery used to enter this place." He didn't sound mad, however. "I know of what transpires in sacred Uldum."

"The creatures that would overwhelm Uldum would take this place and undo the Titan's work!" Luna argued, looking up at him with a determined expression. "They would threaten Equestria as well. Please, Great Setesh, lend me your power. Lend me your aid!"

The stone being chuckled mirthlessly. "Though built and sworn to defend this place, even the Titans works may - with time - be consumed by the void. Chaos is the natural Order. If you wish greater access to this power, I shall grant it."

"However..." he held up an onyx hand. "As with all things, there is a price to be paid. The powers of chaos and destruction do not bend to the weak of heart. It will feed on your rage. It will feed on your fear. Master it. Or be mastered."

Luna bowed her head again, and felt the power unlock within her. She had always been close to Setesh. Her dominion was primarily the darkness and the night. Even Elune sat within a cradle of the twisting nether. Divine power coursed through her, augmenting the gifts given to her ages ago. Gasping, she felt her tail and mane twitch... and daring a look, she saw stars glittering brightly within a mist-like tail. There was no time - no point - dwelling on it, or any other physical changes she would need to endure.

"Thank you, Great Setesh!" She bowed again, and excused herself, heading west. Ammunae.

Ammunae would not be so easily convinced to bolster his gifts.

The Ram Headed Construct was in the vault opposite Setesh, wreathed in a vibrant green glow. The image of a tree was superimposed in the crystal plume behind his throne, and his chamber was thick with plant and insect life. Bloodpetal Lasher plants turned flower-like heads in her

direction as she approached, their whip-like thorny arms flailing excitedly at the taste of new life. Seed pods, living spores and hungry vines danced and consumed and died. Among the jungle, dryad nymphs cavorted, caring to the alien gardens.

"Great Ammunae!" Luna greeted, lifting a hoof and bowing respectfully. "Construct of Life!"

"Luna," Ammunae's voice was melodic, but uncaring.

"Please, Great Ammunae, grant me your boon!" Luna, like before, dared to look up at the seated construct. As a child, she had never spent much time with this Keeper. Ammunae, like Rajh, were more closely aligned with Celestia.

"The land above suffers," she began. "Life is-"

"Life. Continues." The Ram headed construct appeared disinterested. "You have come to plead that the Silithid be destroyed. Like those afflicted by the Curse of Flesh, they are tainted by the Old Gods. In that respect, no one life form can be weighed against another. I see no break in the cycle of life that warrants activation of Uldum's Origination mechanisms. I have received no orders from Algalon or Loken."

"They will overrun this complex!" Luna argued, frowning at the stubborn Keeper.

"If they do so, it will be because you opened the door for them. Luna." Ammunae rested his head against his fist. "Begone from my seat, child. If your race ceases to be, then another will take its place, and another after that. So long as there is life, all will be reclaimed in time."

"Great Ammunae, you must-"

"I was created to ensure life exists, not to shepherd your particular brand of it at the expense of another," the Construct of Life closed his eyes; a flagrant dismissal. "Begone."

"Begone!" One of the dryads chimed in, perhaps just because she liked the word.

Another of the half-elf, half-fawns giggled. "Begone!"

"Begone!"

"Begone!"

"But..." Luna tried again, in vain. "But Great Ammunae... without your power, without your blessing, I can not Re-originate Uldum!"

"No." Ammunae, finally, sounded vaguely amused. "But you can destroy it."

Stunned by the outright rejection, and jeered at by the dryads - and even the flailing, angry plantlife, Luna retreated, ashamed. Descending the stairs that let up to the Seat of Life, her head spun. She had expected to have to work a bit to convince Ammunae and Rajh, but not to be dismissed out of hand. She had enough of Ammunae's original blessing within her to still pass the activation key within the Re-origination chamber, but she would be unable to give life where Setesh's power took it. Yet, she couldn't go back. Not now.

'How... how could he reject me like that?' Luna's head hurt to think of it, and she shook her head furiously. 'Just like Anhuur... rejecting me... forsaking me...!'

She stamped a hoof, growing angry.

'How could they? But...! But! It doesn't matter!' Turning to the south vault, Luna broke into a trot. *'Uldum is mostly desert anyway, isn't it? Who cares if I turn a desert into a bigger desert? Who needs Ammunae anyway? I'll do this without him!'*

Mighty Isiset, unlike her brothers, was not an animal-headed god. She was built to resemble a fair Vanir, though as Luna saw her now, the Princess could sense a strange coldness to the construct-woman's face. Isiset, like Setesh, had been one of the Keepers Luna had been close to, millennia ago. She was the Construct of Magic and Keeper of the Arcane, her throne frames and bathed in an ethereal blue glow. Star shards and arcane anomalies populated the vault around her Seat of Power, like a

living constellation set not against the night background, but against an ever-flowing nebula.

"Great Isiset!" Luna greeted, eyebrows turning up as she noticed the Construct paying no attention to her. "Great Isiset! Construct of Magic!"

Still no response.

"It is I..." the Princess tilted her head in confusion. "Great Isiset? It's me... Luna...?"

"Oh. Yes. Luna." The female construct finally replied, albeit distantly. Luna noticed she was staring at one of the mirrored arcane anomalies. "I remember you. Child."

"Do you... um... you know why I've come?" Luna asked, demurring slightly. This wasn't the reception she'd expected. Why was this Keeper so, well, spaced out?

"Something about those hideous creatures overrunning the lower levels?" Isiset guessed, smiling contentedly at her magical reflection. "I expect Anhuur and Anraphet will deal with it. Why don't you and Celestia go help?"

Luna was, frankly, speechless.

"Great Isiset... is... is something wrong?" she ventured to ask.

"I don't think so," Isiset mused, still enraptured by her own image and the magic she had conjured. She lifted a hand and waved Luna off. "Go bother one of the others, if you don't have anything serious. I'm... busy..."

"I - I do." Luna shook her head, vigorously. "I mean, great Isiset, I must have your boon; your power. I need to unlock the Re-origination mechanisms, to-"

"To deal with these disgusting Silithid or whatever, yes?" The Construct of Magic didn't seem to appreciate the intrusion, mostly because

it was a pest problem. "Fine. Fine. You're leaking Setesh's impure energy into my vault, anyway, so anything to have you on your way."

"I am?" Luna staggered, caught by a sudden flood of arcane power. Her head swam and she dizzily fought to keep on her feet. The room became bright - too bright - and her eyes burned.

"What's... happening... to me?" She hissed crushing her eyes closed and gingerly touching her eyelids with a hoof. She tried to open her eyes again, but the room was blinding. She had to stumble around in darkness.

"A side effect of my gift. Of my power. I merely made you a bit more beautiful, little Luna." Isiset gave a small noblewoman's laugh at the pained pony's antics. "The power of the Arcane is so trying, don't you know? Like peering into the Infinite. Norgannon himself once told me that. It is a duty and a delight..." Isiset's voice took on a dreamy, lustful tone. "Such a delight..."

"I... will use it well," Luna struggled to say, her eyes and face still burning. "Great Isiset."

Blindly groping and stumbling away from the bright Seat of Magic, Luna slowly experimented with opening her eyes again. Her eyes felt different. Her vision was much sharper than before, especially in the dark, and her body... her body had darkened even more! Her coat was now as dark as a starless night sky! What had Isiset's power done to her?

Conjuring a reflective surface, a simple mirror, Princess Luna saw her face -

And gasped. Her eyes! Her eyes were a burning, frightful green, and her pupil was so narrow and slit that one would mistake it for a cat's! These weren't her eyes! Even the eyelashes and eyeshadow were an ethereal purple. What had happened?

'Where are my eyes? My blue eyes? Where is my face?' Luna felt a surge of panic and fear race through her, her breath starting to come in ragged gasps. Still dazed, she dropped the mirror, and it shattered into

countless magical shards. Armored hooves moved of their own accord, her body gradually taking her to the final Seat of Power.

Rajh.

He stood within the chamber known as the Seat of Radiance, bathed in the light of a hundred mirrored and projected suns. Tight beams shot down from notches in the ceiling with burning intensity. The heat was unbearable, even halfway up the steps, and it was all Luna could do to squint and bear the light, even focused as it was into the floor. The whole room seemed to glow with red and orange, the walls heated to unbearable temperatures like a reflection of the molten core of the world itself.

Rajh, hawk headed Construct of the Sun, stood among it all, apart from the Sun-Touched servants who bowed from their ranks along the far walls. They were bound elementals of fire; the only beings who would bear Rajh's radiance for any length of time. No: actually, that wasn't accurate. There was one other being who had bathed in Rajh's power without fear.

But... Celestia wasn't here now.

"Luna," Rajh's voice was resonant and commanding. There was no warmth to it. Rajh was incapable of warmth. Only blazing heat. "You dare to enter here?"

"I-" She tried to say, shielding her face from the light. The great sun disk above Rajh's throne released a flare, and the blast of heat caused the Lunar Princess to break out in a sweat.

"Anhuur forbade you enter these Halls," the Construct lectured, thundering forward with heavy footfalls. "Yet, rather than heed his wisdom, you beat him nearly to death. You used trickery to enter this place, violence to force your way through, and now you use deceit and guile to seduce power from the other Keepers! You, Child, are befouled by more than just the Curse of Flesh."

"Great Rajh," she pleaded, still shielding her eyes. "Please listen to me. I had to.. I didn't want... I didn't..."

"You are **not** the Luna I knew," his voice boomed. "You are not a Luna who will have Elune's Blessing. Foul creature. I should burn you down to your bones."

Luna took a sharp breath through clenched teeth. Rajh's heat - his very presence - was murderously intense and overbearing. She tried to think of what to say to this Construct. He had never been fond of her. The only creature, the only pony, Rajh had ever shown affection for was Celestia. And Celestia wasn't here.

THIS. This was why both sister were needed to re-enter the Halls of Origination. Anhuur, that big idiot, he would have listened to Celestia. If they had both been there, he would have listened to them and given them a chance to prove that they deserved to be allowed back in, if only briefly. Celestia wouldn't have resorted to violence.

And - and Rajh and Ammunae liked Celestia. They would have listened to her. They would have given her power. Then, together, both sisters... sun and moon... could have saved Uldum and Equestria. But Celestia wasn't here. Celestia wasn't here! She wasn't!

"I... I'm sorry..." Luna felt the tears running down her cheeks, but still she glared up at the radiant Construct of the Sun, a scowl on her face. "I'm sorry, but I am going to activate the Re-origination Device. I will purge Uldum of the Silithid! I will protect Equestria! With or without you, Rajh! So give me your blessing or get out of my way!!"

The hawk headed Keeper tilted back slightly, either confused - or maybe a little impressed - by the little Princess's declaration. A darkness passed briefly over his hooded eyes. A hand slowly raised, as if to unleash the power of the sun itself, but then Rajh turned and returned to his Seat. The sun disk above him churned and spat fire.

"The chamber is open to you. Do as you wish," he consented. "But it will not be with my blessing."

Knowing she wouldn't be getting anything more, Luna turned to leave.

"For what it's worth... I do wish things hadn't turned out this way," she added, not looking back.

"**Yes**," Rajh answered, mysteriously.

Returning to the central lift, she stood in the middle of it and waited. The huge circular platform, partly physical, mostly tangible magic given form, was still inactive. Pausing at the teleporter nest to the lift, Luna took a few moments to collect herself and control her emotions. There was no point crying. There was no good to be gained from regrets. She knew what she had to do.

In the uppermost section of the great pyramid was the control room for the Re-origination Protocols. This was the Titan term for Azeroth's "reset" button. At the most powerful, it was fully capable of rendering the entire planet down to component molecules, and resetting it back into a lifeless husk. With the power of Ammunae and Rajh unlocked, it would also be able to re-seed the planet using the last set of Titan variables. Together with Algalon and the Ulduar Facility, it would be able to either reset the planet from scratch or call down a Titan to oversee any changes prior to bringing the planet back to life.

Luna did not need nearly that much from it. What she needed was the controls to reinforce the Sun Wall around Uldum and Equestria. She could then re-originate only part of the local landmass. The Silithid... the treacherous Obsidian Tol'vir...! They would all be destroyed! It was the only way. Nearly every living thing to the west of the Halls of Origination would be undone.

"I have the gifts of Setesh and Isiset," Luna told herself, using her magic to activate the control disks. There were no windows in the relatively small vault, yet she could begin to perceive the world through the arcane machinery. It felt... right. She was a creation of the Titans, herself, after all. It felt right!

"I... I have to..."

Not wanting to think more about it than she already had, she activated the Device.

Immediately, it latched onto her mind for directions. One by one, it confirmed the blessings she had received: some recently, some eons ago. Rajh. Setesh. Ammunae. Isiset. It accepted all four and gave Luna access, but...

But something wasn't right. No. Not like it should have been.

It sensed that the blessings were unequal. Luna felt the Titan machinery readily, almost greedily, grasp onto Setesh's power of Destruction and Isiset's power of Magic. The first two phases of the device were almost fully powered; quite more than enough to re-originate Uldum itself. The other phases, however: of Creation and Life, were deemed deficient. Luna tried to think of a way to compensate for this, but it was all happening too fast. The machine read her thoughts, not her second thoughts, and executed them.

Luna felt something leave her body - some power - and fell forward, hitting her head against the controls...

...

It was hours later when she awoke.

Groaning not just from the blow to the head, but from the energy drain of using the Titan Device, the Moon Princess was slow to get back on her hooves. The room was dark, but she saw everything perfectly. She hadn't turned back. Her coat was still pitch black like tar, and though she didn't have a mirror, she suspected her face was still changed as well. Her mane and tail were also still ethereal. Working the kinks out of her wings, she gathered herself together and used the teleporter to return to the lower levels closest to the Maker's Rise.

Even as she materialized, Luna was met by the sound of sobs. They were an unfamiliar sound; was somepony hurt? He or she didn't sound like anyone Luna knew. Hurrying, she cantered to a gallop and then took to the air, flying towards the voice. Wings flapping, she rounded a corner towards Anhuur's chambers and the Vault of Prophecy. She immediately saw the beaten form of the massive construct, still laying on his side, as still as if he were dead. There was more than that expected sight however.

There were a few fallen Qiraji, perhaps two or three. It was hard to tell exactly, since they were missing part or most of their body. Scattered here and there were empty robes and discarded regalia, with no trace of an owner in sight. Like Anhuur, however, that wasn't the source of the sound.

Luna landed, slowing to a shocked trot at the sight of her sister.

"Celestia," she whispered, blinking in surprise. The white alicorn was cradling a sphere in her hooves, tears running down her face in silent despair. Her pink mane and tail were flat with grief, cascading down her sides and along the stone floor like running water.

Sunflower was next to her, the shy pegasus standing and looking distantly upwards.

"Celestia?" Luna asked again, getting no response. "Sister?" Her voice was soft, though. It was possible her sister just hadn't heard -

It was then that Luna finally realized the source of the sobs. It wasn't Celestia either. Further back, past her, Luna recognized Enigma. The unicorn stallion was also pawing at another of the orbs. His silver mane was matted with sweat and exhaustion and his eyes were overflowing with tears. The indomitable archmage, the prodigy Nermo had brought to her court so long ago: he was the source of the grief-stricken sounds? Getting closer, Luna noticed him holding what looked like cloth: black and purple, with bits of armor attached. *Shadowbolt colors*.

Not too far away,

The orbs -

Luna took a frightened step backwards in realization. Desperate to be proven wrong, she turned to Celestia. Her sister. It couldn't be. She couldn't have...!

"Celestia!" Luna all but yelled. "What happened? Celestia! Answer me!" She saw her sister stare at her with violet eyes rimmed by red. "Celestia. What happened."

"Oh. Luna..." her sister's voice was pained. So much so that Luna recoiled at the sound of it. "What have you done? What have you *become*?"

"That isn't an answer!" Luna snapped back, growing defensive and angry. "I saved Equestria is what! I saved Uldum! I saved this place! Our legacy! I -" She turned desperately to Enigma - faithful, loyal, dependable Enigma - and trotted quickly over to him.

"Enigma, please, I need you. You must tell me, did the re-origination work?" She prodded him with a hoof, but he simply sat there, cradling the orb and discarded uniform. "Enigma!" She tried again, and then lowered her head to try and snap him out of it with her proximity. "Enigma, please..."

The unicorn archmage rolled his head back slightly, finally noticing her. Luna couldn't believe how broken he looked. Not once, not since he had come to the Lunar Court as a young colt, had he looked so defeated. He blinked a few times, slowly recognizing her.

"Enigma," Luna pressed. She had to know. "The Silithid. The Qiraji. Did we win?"

"We... we held them... at the Maker's Rise," he finally said, and bowed down to nuzzle the orb in his hooves. "Featherfrost..." he whispered. "She... she dissolved. They all just... dissolved. Turned to steam and ash..."

"No." Luna gasped, backing away from him. "No. No that isn't... it wasn't supposed to..."

"The Silithid are all gone," Celestia spoke up, seizing Luna's attention. The alicorn was standing now, though she kept an eye on the orb near her hooves. She finally tore her eyes away from the now abandoned Element of Harmony to direct her disappointment and ire at her younger sister.

"All gone," she repeated. "And... so is every Tol'vir settlement I passed over on my way here. I didn't see a single plant or animal. Luna... everything is gone. So yes, you won."

"No." Luna denied it, shaking her head slowly. "NO!" She said again, pointing at her sister. "You were late! You were always late! This is your fault! And you're lying! You're. Lying."

Turning around and around, momentarily lost, Luna tried to approach Enigma again.

"Please tell me the truth, Enigma," she all but begged. "I didn't-"

She saw the orb again, and the mark on it, and bolted.

Rushing towards the entrance, she passed a stricken Happy Days and Black Pepper. A part of her was glad that the two sisters were still alive, but she kept going. She had to see, with her own eyes. Out the entrance to the forbidden Halls and up the excavated antechambers into the light, Luna winced. So bright! Even at night! When had her pale moon become so bright?

Her hoof clacked on something hard, and she glanced down: it was a piece of barding.

It wasn't alone, either. There were pieces of emptied uniforms and armor strewn around the entryway, down the steps towards the Halls, and among the pillared temple grounds outside. Mixed among the discarded equipment were the occasional purple robe, of the sort worn by Qiraji command castes. There was no sign of life. Even the plants were gone.

All that was left was the wind and the sand...

"N- Night Guard!" Luna cried out to the empty pavilion. "Night Guard! Come to me!"

She accidentally stepped on an empty helmet and reared, tears streaming down her face.

"No. No! Night Guard! Attend to your Princess!" Luna demanded, spinning around and raising her voice. "Anypony! To me! TO ME! My Night Guard, we have won! The enemy are destroyed! Come out!"

Only the wind answered.

"Reveal yourselves!!" She howled, dark arcane power erupting from her wings. "I command it! I AM YOUR PRINCESS! Reveal yourselves! You aren't dead! I didn't..." Collapsing forward, she could only stare at all the empty uniforms. "I didn't..."

Losing her balance, the Moon Princess fell onto her side with a dull thump.

"Oh. Oh Elune..." she gasped, looking up to the moon. Her Moon. To the ever silent goddess she had been created to be avatar to. "What have I done?"

- - -

"Princess, my sincere apologies." Marrs Orange was standing before a gilded silver door, flanked by two of his hoof-picked new Night Guard. Despite only being sworn into Luna's service the other day, like all Guardponies, he took his oaths seriously.

"But Lady Luna has requested that she not be disturbed," he explained, warily taking note of the Royal Guards that stood alert to Celestia's left and right side. "She also told me specifically that 'this includes my sister.' I am sorry, Princess."

Celestia's heart secretly fell a fraction in her chest, knowing that Luna didn't want to see her, but she steadfastly refused to let that bit of emotion show. What was happening now went beyond misunderstandings and squabbles between siblings. Luna was in pain. In danger. Celestia could feel it. She *more* than felt it: she *knew* it.

"Marrs," she addressed him by name, sounding conciliatory. "I appreciate your sense of duty and loyalty, but you can not stop me from entering that room."

"Nonetheless," the Earth pony replied, his expression carved from stone. "I have been given my orders, Highness."

"I see." Celestia raised her head high, and vanished in a burst of light.

She didn't teleport far - only into the adjacent room. There was a sound of voices, the clacking of armored hooves, and a rush and scuffle as Guardponies tried to either reach or stop others from reaching the silver Lunar doorway. Celestia ignored it for the time being, as she approached the sleeping form of her dear sister.

Luna was in bed, resting during the day as was her natural cycle, but her sleep was clearly not sound. She thrashed even as Celestia watched, and the blankets and pillows that should have adorned her bedding were tossed to the floor or hurled across the room. The smaller alicorn shivered, curling into a ball as her form wavered, black inky-darkness trying to congeal and color her iris-violet coat. Starry night pooled and stained her matted mane and tail, trying to find spiritual purchase.

Celestia approached, but was forced back as a black energy reacted to her presence with a spray of hostile sparks. Crackles of residual lightning and the smell of ozone permeated the room, shredding delicate cloth and causing a pillow to split open.

"Princess!" Marrs' voice called out, and the prodigal Orange family heir galloped up to Celestia's side. He ignored the regal white alicorn and rushed towards the clearly stricken Luna. He, too, ran into the crackling field of magic and stopped short, recoiling with a burned right hoof.

"What is this? Magic?" he spat the word. "Who would dare?"

He quickly turned, motioning the other Guards back. The two Night Guards and two of Celestia's own Royal ponies were worriedly looking in and weighing whether to go inside. No doubt they would have rushed right in already, but the Night Guards didn't want to let the Royals inside, and the Royals didn't want to leave the side of their Princess. The result was something of a stalemate, with only Marrs able to force his way through by virtue of rank.

"This is Luna's magic," Celestia explained, watching on with mixed vexation and concern. "She is at war with herself. A dark force wishes to corrupt her. "

Marrs's altered, cat-like eyes narrowed, but the Guardpony focused his attention on his stricken Princess. "I... don't understand. If there is foul magic involved, we must summon Warders and Astromancers! And Medical unicorns!"

"No," Celestia countermanded, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. "I have already taken measures to deal with this. Luna's... inner conflict... can not be resolved by you or me."

The newly installed Master of Hooves for the night Guard nickered and pawed the floor anxiously.

"Then what are we to do?" he asked, frustrated by his inability to assist.

"We must wait," Celestia answered, hiding her face behind her flowing aurora mane. "And hope."

- - -

Alone.

Princess Luna sat, alone, on her throne in Everfree. This night, as every night, was as still as the grave. The hermetic monks of Everfree avoided her out of fear. Her Night Guard were gone. Every last one had died in Uldum. What few stragglers remained in Equestria - the elderly and the wounded - Luna dismissed. She couldn't bare to see them. Not when all she could remember was a sand strewn plaza of empty uniforms. Not when she could imagine the faces of her loyal guards as her own power disintegrated them alongside the enemy.

Had they cursed her, then, as they died?

Luna hoped they had. *She was cursed.*

Alone.

Every night, she sat alone on her throne and looked to the Moon for answers. Elune, never the most talkative of deities, was silent

even to the most desperate of entreaties. Luna knew why. She had been abandoned. Forsaken. The physical Moon heeded her, but the spirit of the Moon wanted nothing to do with her anymore.

Neither, it seemed, did Luna's own sister. Celestia had spent a short time in Uldum, to help get the ecosystem going again with Ammunae and Rajh, and then she had returned to Canterlot. Luna couldn't bear to speak with her, and the feeling seemed to be mutual. Even Enigma had left. Luna had asked him to stay, to be the one pony she could rely on, but he mourned for Featherfrost and left on a trip "to inspect the reinforced Sun Wall." He never returned.

Alone.

No pony cared. No pony noticed. Not just her: no one seemed to notice her Night Guard were gone. They had done their job so well, making the nights safe, that ponies had forgotten about them. Even with the custodians of the nightfall gone, no pony seemed to notice or even care. They just went about their carefree lives. They were forgotten.

Celestia had made sure no pony ever learned of what happened in Uldum. Those few Tol'vir who survived by virtue of being near the coast or far from the Halls of Origination could never know, though Luna privately suspected that many had hints as to what occurred. The Silithid were gone; every trace of them burned away and returned to the earth. What happened outside Equestria and Uldum with respect to the War of the Shifting Sands, Luna didn't know. The Sun Wall permitted no exchange of information.

For all she knew, the whole of the rest of the world could be overrun.

But... Equestria was safe. The Nights were safe. Even if no pony knew.

No pony cared.

Luna had discarded her armor, but her body was still changed. She knew how monstrous she looked now: with an oil-black coat, demonic slit eyes, and a mane and tail that looked like pieces ripped from the

twisting nether. If any pony knew what the Burning Legion was, she knew they would place her among them. She was no Princess anymore. She had become... something else.

Something - a voice told her - that no pony would ever love again.

It was during one of years worth of lonely nights when a small shape entered through an open window. Luna thought it a bat, at first, but the leathery wings belonged to a tiny dragon. A black dragon! If her guards had been here, they would no doubt have rushed to defend her or to apprehend the little creature. Neltharion's brood had become nothing but trouble over the last couple thousand years.

The little dragon fly over, and held up a scrap of parchment in its front claws. Curious, and hardly caring even if the drakeling did attack or cause mischief, Luna telekinetically took the paper. Message sent, the little dragon sped for the window and disappeared into the darkness. Luna examined the letter for a moment, and unwound the black string it had been sealed with. She had always been very curious, and a note was more interesting than anything that had happened in, well, years.

Unraveling it, Luna read over what was written.

And frowned.

Dropping it at her hooves, before it curled back up, one phrase could be seen. Four simple words:

DON'T LET THEM FORGET

- - -

"Don't let them forget," Voidhorn repeated. The Four terrible words were still written in that scrap of paper; still barely legible even after a thousand years. Written by Deathwing's own hand. Or claw. "Don't let them forget."

So Nightmare Moon had been born.

So Voidhorn... had been born.

"I won't let them forget. Not Nightmare Moon. And not me!" She laughed quietly to herself as she carefully positioned the slightly torn and damaged piece of parchment. It had taken years of scouring the Castle grounds, of unearthing the Vault below, of stealing and bartering with foreign races... but the artifacts assembled were potent.

The note. Bits of armor. Scraps of Featherfrost's uniform, taken from a museum in Cloudsdale. Pieces of Enigma's burial shroud. A dark crystal with residual essence gathered from both Nightmare Moon's banishment and Luna's "restoration." Meteoric iron. Personal effects: beads from a broken abacus, given to Luna before written memory, an Icon of Norgannon, a Tear of Elune, a Qiraji scepter of power, taken as spoils of war, the eye of an Obsidian Destroyer that had been at the Battle before the Halls and that had seen the destruction firsthand. *Precious Titan recordings*: ancient disks that Luna herself had once treasured and hidden away. And, perhaps the most *precious* of all...

A gift... from Cho'gall and the main branch of the Twilight's Hammer.

An Eye of C'thun! Still living, still malignant, still dreaming in madness. Voidhorn tried not to stare too deeply into the lidless eye that floated in the center of her precious collection. C'thun's body was broken and crushed among the collapsed Temple of Ahn'Qiraj, but that which was not alive could never truly die. The evil of the Old Gods was a part of the world entire; it could not be stopped. It could only be vainly and futilely held at bay, like an exorable and unstoppable tide.

"This eye..." Voidhorn mused, carefully placing her hoof over the lidless, pulsating monstrosity that stared into infinity. "This eye sees into you, 'Princess Luna.' *I see into you*. Remember what you were. Remember what you are!"

"Remember," the insane unicorn whispered. "Don't let them forget us. Plunge this world into deepest darkness, and **never**... let them forget..."

- - -

"Inc!"

Dash's warning came the moment the doors to the Observatory Proper opened. "Inc" - on other words: INCOMING! A veritable wave of degraded cultponies charged into the gap. Gibbering and chanting, they ran right into an Avenger's shield, a thunderclap, and a circle of consecrated ground. Twilight quickly unleashed the fury of the frozen north, adding a Blizzard to the mix.

The small swarm of cultists fell after only a few seconds.

"OH!" Pinkie bounce-stomped in frustration, her new voodoo mask covering her face. "Shammy aoe sucks! I didn't even get a single Fire Nova off!"

"This isn't a competition for dps," Rarity reminded her as she walked by. "Regardless of what certain ponies think."

"You only say that because you aren't running Recount," Pinkie Pie protested.

"You'll never out-dps me!" Dash declared with a half-giggle, half crazy-laugh. "Even with that creepy new helm of yours."

"Creepy?" Pinkie cocked her head and turned on Fluttershy, the druid leaning away with an eep. The new shaman helm that Pinkie had gotten from Gull's Cache looked like something out of Zecora's hut. In fact, it probably was some old Zebra artifact.

"I'm not scary looking, am I?" Pinkie asked, looming over the shy pegasus.

It didn't help that the voodoo mask looked like a horrific Tiki, with crazy black white and red stripes and a grimacing face with slanted eyes highlighted in red. It wasn't even really a helm. It was just a mask crudely strapped to Pinkie's head. Fluttershy, as expected, shied away from the hyperactive pink pony.

"Um... it's... okay..." she squeaked, "Maybe a little scary. Maybe. ...sorry."

"But I like it!" Pinkie whined, and sighed, relaxing her shoulders. "Alright. If that's how you guys feel."

Spinning furiously around, the party pony stopped, and the mask was off.

Or so it seemed. Tapping a hoof to something solid, but invisible, right in front of Pinkie's face, she giggled. "Invisible!"

"Yeah, I hide my cloak, too," Dash admitted, before anypony could ask: why, how, or wtf?

Twilight raised a hoof anyway, to at least try and ask -

"You hide your cloak?" Rarity inquired, giving the small vestment-wings on her robe a tasteful sashay. "Whatever for?"

"It gets in the way of making a good rainbow behind me," Dash explained, and wiggled her rear and tail for emphasis. "It's my trademark!"

"Ah hate ta interrupt, but we got more o' these fellas coming ta say hello," Applejack warned, intercepting the four gibbering cultistponies with a thunderclap.

"More of them?" Twilight asked with a frown, already summoning up another Blizzard.

"Oh! It's a gauntlet!" Pinkie enthused. "That means we need to keep going forward!"

"Unbelievers have breached the Observatory!" A voice called out. "Slay them! Bring me their heads as a sacrifice to the Master! Prove your dedication!"

"Great." The Arcane unicorn groaned. "Okay everypony! You heard her. Forward!"

Like Pinkie had said, it was a gauntlet. Every so often, a small wave of cultists would gather up and charge them. They were collectively weak, but along the way up the flights of stairs they would also be attacked by elite cultists. Like the ones they had fought before, these were tougher than the average pony and augmented by the dark powers they worshipped.

Yet again, the group's identify spells proved their worth, though it was also fairly easy to pick out which of the elite enemies were melee types and which were spellcasters just by look. Dash and Applejack were quick to pick up the Twilight Brutes who charged into melee with bladed weights on their legs and hooves. As befitting the name, these were hulking oversized earth ponies and diamond dogs driven into a furious rage, very much like a slightly more powerful version of the Twilight Zealots the Elements had encountered before.

New to the mix were "Twilight Nightmenders" - these unicorns and other races in black and purple robes kept back, spamming healing spells and opening dark void zones in the floor. One of these nearly killed Dash after the pegasus, distracted, remained in it for a few too many seconds. A flash heal by Rarity and a paladin-bubble kept the pegasus up long enough for her to scoot out of the void zone.

"Dashie! Hey! Don't stand in the fissures!" Pinkie Pie warned, totally after the fact. "Black stuff is bad!"

"Yeah, I know!" Dash yelled back over her shoulder while shield-slamming a frosting cultpony. "Don't stand in fire; you fail at raiding!" Unleashing a Seal of Truth on the mob, she knocked him aside, a broken tooth bouncing off her shield. "Gimme a break here!"

"The devout shall be given eternal life within the Embrace of the Master!" Voidhorn's voice continued to cry out, whipping her remaining followers into a frenzy. "Your brothers and sisters sacrificed themselves to defend this place! Do not fail them! Do not fail the Master! Or your suffering shall know no limits!"

"Keep going!" Twilight ordered, "Rarity! Pinkie! Blue triangle!"

The Nightmender cursed as her aoe-heal was interrupted, and then further stymied by a mind flay. Switching schools to drop another shadow fissure, targeting Applejack, she was knocked off her hooves by a combined barrage of arcane bolts and furious elemental lightning. Without her magical support, the diamond dog Brute that had accompanied the madpony eventually fell to concentrated fire. The weaker cultponies weren't even targeted by aoe: they were mostly a distraction as long as Applejack and Dash kept them beating on solid plate.

Luckily the stairwells leading up the Observatory were wide enough to allow for the fighting. It wasn't much of a choke point, though there were occasional line of sight problems with spells. This was Twilight's first trip up to the top of the Observatory via this route, but her friends all recognized it. They had used these same stairs back on their first adventure together.

They were close to the end!

At the same time, Twilight also noticed that the cultists had done some redecorating. There were empty cages and broken boxes lying around along with dark braziers that glowed with magical violet fire. As the group ascended, facing one wave of enemies after another with no time to stop and rest (or drink to replenish mana) Twilight felt a dark presence emanating from above, growing closer and closer with every step they took. But they had to keep going. They had to stop Voidhorn!

Not just to save Princess Luna; but to save Equestria and themselves. The madness that was the Twilight Cult in Equestria had to be stopped here, in Everfree. If Amber was to be believed, then the whole local movement had been organized and coordinated by Voidhorn.

She had met Highdiver and turned him.

She had encouraged the insane Catnip.

She had corrupted Gull and enslaved the Rustpaw.

She had approved the ransacking and defiling of Unicorn Catacombs in Everfree.

She had made pacts with Cho'gall and the foreign Twilight Hammer Cult.

It was time to put a stop to her.

Pushing up through the final flight of steps, Twilight Sparkle unleashed a series of arcane blasts to knock out the last of the non-elite cultponies. There were two more elite enemies up top: a pair of unicorns standing next to a floating crystal. Purple energy was flowing from their horns into the floating stone, and Twilight's spell identified them as "Dark Summoners."

Before her eyes, another four insane cultponies appeared out of thin air!

"Skull!" Twilight yelled, already making the targets. "Then X!"

While Pinkie Pie and Rarity switched targets, Twilight focused on helping Rainbow Dash finish off the last Nightmender. She then tried to target the Summoners up on the top of the stairs, but once again, line of sight was causing problems. Almost all her spells required a clear line of fire. Rushing past, she had to settle for being fairly close to the determined cultpony summoner as she blasted her. After a minimal beating, the two cultists cursed and ended their channeled summoning spell for reinforcements.

"Argh!" One of the Summoners, the male, snarled, trying to repel a certain apple bucking warrior. "You're after my Cabalist bracers of the Landslide, aren't you?! Well YOU CAN'T HAVE THEM!!"

"You idiot!" The female Summoner yelled back, withering under Pinkie Pie's elemental assault. "No one cares about those lame green bracers you found!"

"You're both idiots!" Twilight interrupted before the male could object. "Give up and we won't hurt you!"

"Never!" Both male and female cultponies howled. For her audacity in interrupting an argument the pair had probably had a dozen times before, they both targeted Twilight Sparkle with a life-draining

channel spell. The arcane mage whinnied, covering her face to try and ward off the green beams, but even as her life force started to be torn away, Fluttershy's spot-on healing shot through Twilight's body, healing the damage being done.

"Resto Druid!" The female Summoner yelled. "Do something about her, would you already?"

"Why don't you!" the male Summoner yelled back. "Why are you always telling me what to do? Stallions don't like mares who yell at them all the time!"

"Like I need... relationship advice from you..." The female Summoner started to falter, switching her life drain to Fluttershy. It was helping to keep her up and fighting, but couldn't keep up with Pinkie Pie and Twilight's dps.

"You... idiot..." she finished, finally collapsing.

"Candy Corn!" The male Summoner snarled, enraging even as his health rapidly started to fall.

Twilight gritted her teeth, suspecting there was no way they could finish this last pony off without killing him. She hated having to resort to violence, even after all she had seen the cultists capable of. Why couldn't any of them even try and see what sort of evil ponies they had become? Why did they have to fight to the death like this? Why had they given themselves over to evil powers?

Why -

Why was Pinkie Pie so far back?!

"Pinkie Pie!" Twilight yelled, raising her voice. "Pinkie! PAT! PAT INCOMING!"

"What?" The formerly masked party pony spun around, noticing several figures headed her way. She had moved out a fair distance from the two summoners to safely drop her totems and start casting. Since the stairs had line of sight problems, this means going slightly down the hall

towards the Observatory Proper. It had been empty before, but now a series of shadows were getting longer as they approached.

"EEP!" She quickly bounced away, closer to where everpony was fighting -

Forgetting that her totems were still on the ground, one of them shooting fire and the others providing passive magical buffs. The patrol rounded the corner, noticed the pulsing quartet of totems, and immediately aggroed.

"Ha!" One of them, a human of all things, immediately started casting a spell. Another, a blood elf, threw her hand forward and unleashed a chain lightning that caught five of the mane six, doing more damage with every strike as it bounced from target to target. The chain blast jumped from Pinkie Pie, to Applejack, to Rainbow Dash, to Twilight, to Rarity. The shadow-discipline priest gave a strangled cry and collapsed, her perfect mane and tail frazzled beyond repair.

"Rarity!" Fluttershy cried, having just barely escaped the deadly attack. She stopped healing to battle-rez with Rebirth -

Meanwhile, a third patroller, a massive bull-headed Tauren, roared and charged in with two huge swords in each meaty hand. The fourth member of the group, a lanky undead in black, ragged robes, threw down a smoke bomb and disappeared.

"Oh no! A Rogue!" Dash yelled, dropping a new consecration. "I hate Forsaken Rogues!!!"

The undead backstabber shadow-stepped right into Dash's consecration, breaking his stealth, but not preventing him from unleashing an enhanced Sinister Strike into the paladin. The pegasus immediately whirled to engage the new threat, tagging him with a holy seal. The entire rest of the fight, meanwhile, had already devolved into a disorganized and insane melee.

The Tauren cultist bounced from his initial charge target - Pinkie Pie - to the group healer, Fluttershy. The easily frightened pegasus was interrupted part way into casting her Rebirth spell on Rarity, and,

acting on instinct, started to run away from the huge fighter's roaring face and swinging blades. Dash continued to fight with the rogue, jumping and flying to get some distance as she unleashed a quick exorcism and turn evil. The rogue, hit by the latter, turned to flee -

Only for the Seals on him to break the fear a moment later.

"Oh man!" Dash cursed and started to fly around in mad circles. "YAAAAAA!!!"

"Con-SARN-it!" Applejack cried over the din, trying to get some control of the situation. "You, Udders for brains!" She quickly taunted, using one of her preferred insults. "You fight like a cow!"

"RRAGH! Taurens are not COWS!!" The bull-man roared, forgetting all about the fleeing Fluttershy to pound on the warrior.

There was a loud crack, as the crystal that this fight had - at first - revolved around shattered. Twilight lost sight of the second Summoner they had been fighting, but it seemed that Dots and some incidental dps had taken him out. She tried to think who or what to mark, when the Blood Elf in the back used another massive chain lightning.

This time, it "only" bounced across four targets, since Fluttershy was too far away, from Pinkie Pie to Dash to Twilight to Applejack. This wasn't really a good thing, since combined with the damage she was already taking from the enraged Tauren cultist, she now had to soak up a blast of lightning that got stronger the more ponies it hit. Fluttershy, still flying and unsure what the heck to do, did her best to cast a few heals Applejack's way.

"Save me Grounding Totem!"

"Ah... nuts..." Applejack went down -

"YAAAA!! I'm Poisoned! Get this rogue off me!!!"

"Everypony, we have to -" Twilight gasped as she saw the Tauren, having finished with Applejack, turn back to his original target.

Fluttershy's eyes grew huge as the insane cultist loomed over her like a muscle-bound mountain of horns and hair.

"Eee!" she squeaked.

With a frustrated, frightened cry, Twilight quickly unleashed the biggest blast she could manage, momentarily knocking the brute off his hooves. If only she had somehow managed to one shot him, but the Tauren was an elite even among the cultist elite. He rolled and bounced back onto his feet, switching targets again. Twilight backed away, murmuring a spell that had trouble forming. Moments from reaching her, however, the bull-man became entangled in thorny roots.

"I won't let you hurt anyone else!" Fluttershy declared, already trying to desperately cast a heal -

Only for Pinkie Pie to jump away from her Grounding Totem as it absorbed a single chain lightning blast and vaporized. A heal got her back on her hooves, but then the human next to the blood elf finished his lengthy cast and transformed into some kind of... elemental! It wasn't like Pinkie Pie's totem either. It was thinner and wreathed in fire with jagged shards of stone within.

With a leap, the Elemental Monstrosity jumped at the weakened Shaman to finish her off -

"WAAAAAIIITTTT!" Pinkie Pie yelled.

And, amazingly, the burning monster did just that, stopping just short of striking her.

"You..." Pinkie took off her invisible voodoo mask and replaced it with a pair of Groucho glasses. "You wouldn't hit a pony with glasses on, would you?"

Twilight face-hooved. Apparently, yes, he would. And did.

"Pinkie, too?! No! I don't wanna die! I'm too cool to die!"

Dash gave the rogue chasing her a good kick, landed between Fluttershy and Twilight, and glanced between the last two of her friends. They still had a battle rez, and if they somehow survived, then they could -

The four mobs loomed over them: the Tauren cracking his knuckles, the blood elf laughing haughtily, the transformed human burning like a living fire, and the undead rogue scraping his poisoned knives together...

"Um. Um." Fluttershy cowered behind Dash. Twilight didn't blame her. That did look to be the best place to be at the moment. Not like it would help much.

Not knowing what else to do, knowing she couldn't just run - they'd just chase her down, wouldn't they? She quickly polymorphed the annoying green eyed blood elf cultist. The prissy woman stopped laughing as she turned into a sheep, her 'oh hohoho' becoming a 'ba-baaab-baaaa!?'

"Alright! Let's do it!!" Dash roared, as they closed in, unleashing one last Avenger's Shield -

- - -

The world became an opaque, lusterless gray.

"This is *unbelievable*," a disembodied voice growled from nearby. "We're dead! I hate dying!"

"Ya'll ain't the only one ta get killed this time," Applejack's spirit-form corrected the paladin.

"We're GHOSTS?!!" Twilight suddenly blurted out, as 2 plus 2 became 4. She looked down at her hooves and saw that they were indistinct, semi-transparent versions of what they had been in life. Like the rest of the world, they had been turned a shade of gray.

"Yeah. We're dead," Dash replied, sounding miffed but not panicked. "This may come as a surprise, but I've been killed a few times."

"Gee, what a surprise," Applejack commented dryly.

"Well you don't sound surprised!" Dash barked, quickly calming back down. She was sitting next to her body and glaring at the patrol of mobs that had just killed them. The idiots had rushed back off, not even bothering to collect the fallen.

"Oh dear." Fluttershy was also standing over her body, her face scrunched up as she fought back tears. "Oh. Oh. I don't like being dead." She sniffled and lowered her head between her hooves. "Just tell me when its all over."

"It'll be over when Pinkie uses her reincarnate and rezzes us," Dash said with a huff. "Where is she anyway? And where's Rarity? They didn't release to the graveyard, did they?" She shook her head sadly in growing despair. "Please. Please tell me they're not trying to run back to their bodies all the way from there!"

"Ah can't even remember the way we came, ta be honest."

"Oh calm down," Rarity announced as she returned from the room ahead. "I was merely having a look around."

"So where's the pink faceroller?" Rainbow Dash grumbled.

"Look at me, I'm SLIMER!" Pinkie Pie floated by, somehow throwing ghost-goo at the paladin. Dash ducked her head to the side, easily avoiding it.

"You idiot! Didn't you learn anything about resetting your totems?!" Dash was quickly back on her hooves as she grabbed at the elusive flying party pony. "Don't just fly around! Reincarnate already!"

"Awww!" Pinkie's ghost gave a moue face. "But flying is fun! Being dead is kinda fun! Oh! Oh! After this, do you guys wanna go haunt somepony? I wanna get into a radio and start playing creepy music and then pop up out of the bathtub!"

"Pinkie Pie, dear, this is rather serious," Rarity explained, waving an irate Rainbow Dash down. "You know what happens if we remain dead for too long, don't you?"

"...yeah..." the Shaman admitted, her ghost-form slumping along with her mood. "I know."

"Then you also know you really must resurrect us as quickly as possible," Rarity continued. "Our bodies won't be left where they are for long. By the cultists here or by nature."

"Yeah. I know," Pinkie repeated. "Okay! Okay! I'm going!"

"Thank you very much, Pinkie Pie," the regal spirit of Rarity told her friend with a gentle smile. "But, dear, not to be rude or overly critical, but you simply have to be more careful of where you drop your totems."

"That's right!" Dash chimed in. "I can't believe we got this far just to wipe on trash! You owe me a repair bill!"

Sighing at all the rebuked, Pinkie Pie settled down near her body and used her shamanistic Reincarnation. Returning to her body, partly healed, she was able to slip off and start casting Ancestral Spirit - the shaman resurrection spell - on Fluttershy. It would bind the spirit back into the body, and heal it enough to get it back on its feet.

"I can't believe how calm you guys are," Twilight observed, and corrected herself: "Relatively calm anyway. I mean, we died. We actually died!"

"Yeah," Dash groaned. "It sucks."

"Ah heard about this sort of thing," Applejack explained, shrugging her shoulders. "Part'a the path of being ah warrior, Thunderbew called it. Yer probably gonna die a lot, he said."

"I guessed we were going to wipe when I saw Pinkie Pie put on those glasses," Rainbow Dash also elaborated, finally, on more than just how much she hated dying in the first place. "She knew it too. That was why she picked a safe spot to get killed."

"What?" Twilight shook her head in disbelief. "Really?"

"Pinkie Pie dropped a grounding totem and ran to a spot where she wouldn't be noticed if she Reincarnated," Dash calmly explained. "She isn't as loopy as she acts. Even I know that. When I saw her 'pick a spot' I knew we were going to die, but that we had wipe recovery. So it's not the end of the world. But that doesn't mean she doesn't owe us for the screw up!"

"That's... I didn't even notice..." Twilight admitted, impressed with her friends' class knowledge and foresight. "Either way, let's not dwell on who made what mistakes, okay Rainbow? That goes for everypony here. I'm sure Pinkie feels worse than anypony about what happened."

Dash snorted in annoyance, but otherwise agreed. "Yeah, okay."

"You know," Rarity said in the silence that followed. "This reminds me of back in Ponyville. When we all died that first time."

"Oh? That time?" Dash asked. "I was in the air, so I didn't get hit. *Or the achievement.*"

"Ah was on the farm, but got resurrected later," Applejack bore a small smile. "Still, ah don't remember much 'a it myself."

"I don't either," Twilight turned to Fluttershy, but she was in the process of being resurrected. Already partly returned to her body, the ghostly pegasus shook her head.

"I had a vision... or maybe a dream?" The fashionista mulled that over for a moment before concluding, "I suppose you could call it either one. I saw... a being of light. It was like a living gemstone, and it hummed and sang to me."

"A living gemstone?" Applejack inquired, not sure what to make of such a claim.

"Yes. But it... it's hard to describe exactly." Rarity reached up to twirl some of her ghostly hair around a hoof. "It was beautiful and perfect, and parts of it moved, revolving and rotating like a wheel. But it was made of gems and pure light."

She gestured to her left. "And Celestia was there, sitting by its side. And Luna was on the other side."

"The Princesses, too?" Twilight asked. "At least they make more sense being in a vision, since they were the ones who resurrected Ponyville after Deathwing's attack."

"I thought so too, but I know what I saw." Rarity smiled and shrugged. "Well, I didn't see any of it, so to speak, but you understand my meaning. Anyhow, I remember hearing Princess Celestia's voice, and she said, 'Where there is light.' And then Princess Luna said 'there is also shadow.' A moment passed, and I felt a tingle in my body. They then said, one and then the other: 'bask in the warmth of my glow' and then 'take shelter beneath my wings.'"

"It was about that time that I realized I was dead. That Ponyville had been attacked." Rarity's smile faded, and her expression became more grim. "And... and the only thing I could think about was Sweetie Belle. Was she safe? Were the Princesses and this other being, were they speaking to her, too? I wanted to help them. I wanted to make sure Sweetie Belle and the others were safe. I tried to tell them that I wanted to help, but I couldn't talk. Not like we're doing now."

Noticing that Fluttershy and Pinkie were now resurrecting her and dash, Rarity finished her story:

"And then I heard a soft chime. Like wind chimes, but distant and... and for some reason I felt like I needed to cry." The refined unicorn took a second to stand with dignity over her body. "When I came back, I saw the Princesses and so many others who had been taken outside their burning homes to be resurrected. I still heard the chime, and it felt like magic... but different. I learned how to become a priest a few days later from a night elf who had come to assist Equestria after the attack."

She vanished in a burst of light, and Rainbow Dash followed a second later. Both mares returned to their physical bodies and retreated out of sight to where Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie were both already working on their next rez. Pragmatically, they had resurrected the other two divine magic using ponies who also had resurrection spells: as a paladin, Dash could call back the fallen out of combat, and so could Rarity as a priest. Only Applejack and Twilight didn't have similar abilities.

Said apple farmer gave her only remaining company a sympathetic look. "As interestin' as this is, Twi, let's not end up here too often, ahlright?"

"We won't," Twilight promised, expression growing serious.

- - -

The mighty tauren laughed as he recalled the battle. "Oh, that was great! Did you see the look on the faces of those little ponies? Especially that little druid one? Oh, Earthmother, that was sweet! I got two of them, so dibs on most of the reward."

"I believe it was I who caused the most damage," the thin blood elf admonished her fellow cultist. "You would be wise to remember that, you big oaf."

"You should've let me eat them," the undead rogue muttered, though with only a partly intact lower jaw the gaunt humanoid's voice came out with a wet gurgle. "I've heard they're quite delicious with a little mushroom sauce and some rosemary."

"You mean rosemary the herb, or Rosemary the woman you killed like 3 weeks ago in Tanaris?" the human in the group, returned to a mortal shell, gave a disgusted grimace. His undead companion's sick grin answered that question.

"Bad enough you have to be all 'I'm a cannibal' undead all the time, do you have to eat rancid meat, too?" The man rolled his eyes. "You're just being disgusting for its own sake."

"Rancid meat is delicious. You've never tried it."

"I don't have to eat rancid people-meat to know its disgusting!"

"Regardless, *eating horse* is also quite improper," the blood elf lectured, wagging a delicate finger at the undead rogue. "It is a sign of low breeding."

"I don't think 'low breeding' matters much in my case," the Former-Forsaken replied, wiping some thick, slimy drool from his partly missing jaw. "And Equestrian ponies aren't horses. They're supposed to taste much sweeter."

"Would you eat a Tauren, then?" she inquired, crossing her arms.

"Of course!" the undead replied. "Mmm. Tauren. A little lean for my tastes, but..."

"Now that's disgusting," the bull tauren in the group remarked.

"You three just need to broaden your culinary horizons," the rogue admonished his fellow, non-undead, cultist companions.

"My horizon is broad enough as it is," the human noted.

"How on the name of Yogg'saron did you get Ascended anyway?" The tauren wondered, cleaning one of his runeblades.

"I have friends in high places. My friend's cousin is on the Ascended Council in the Bastion. Um. Ignacious, I think?"

"Great, nepotism," the tauren groaned. "I realize this is a world ending cult, and I'm alright with that, but corruption in the ranks, too?"

"Oh, quit complaining," the pretty green-eyed elf Elementalist waved him off dismissively. "You have no idea how much better this outfit is than Sunstrider's mess of an operation back in Outland. Leaving those pack of scavengers was the best move I..."

The four rounded the corner to retrieve the fallen ponies.

And, as they did, the blood elf's dulcet tones turned into a loud:
"Baaa!"

The other three spared only a moment to realize their pretty companion had been polymorphed into a sheep before identifying the culprits. It was the damn ponies from before! They were alive! Unleashing a savage roar, the group's mighty tauren warrior took a thundering step forward to enter the fray and crack some pony skulls -

Only to trip and fall flat on his face as a thorny mass of roots erupted out of the floor to entangle his hooves! "What the?! Roots again!!"

Part way into vanishing, the undead rogue was hit by an apple of all things, smearing bright red juice all over his face. Sputtering and snarling, the undead was then hit by a burst of Fairie Fire, making it impossible to stealth at all. Wiping the applesauce from his desiccated face, the rogue's eyes widened as he saw two rather irate ponies in plate heading right for him.

"What the hell?" The remaining human member of the Cultist Elite Guard quickly started his Ascended Transformation spell. A wind shear and then a counterspell tried to interrupt, but this particular magic couldn't be so easily disrupted. It was a long cast, but there was nothing they could do to prevent it. The evil man chuckled darkly as he thought of all the things he'd do to these ponies that he hadn't had the chance to before. Starting with the annoying pink mare and the unicorn that had tried to interfere with his spellwork!

"Don't just stand there transforming!" The rogue yelled as he tried to fend off the warrior and paladin that were beating on him, now with the combined power of a mage, shaman and shadow priest as backup. He was not geared to take a beating like this, and even being a rogue, there was only so much dodging and deflecting he could do.

"Transforming is what I'm supposed to do!" the human yelled back. "All my magic is keyed to my elemental form!"

"Argh! No!" The undead rogue garbled as he started to go down. "I never did... get to eat.. a pony..."

"DAMN THESE ROOTS!" The enraged tauren brute finally broke free, tearing through the thorns to get in melee range of the annoying pony warrior. The one that had called him an udder-for-brains last time. "I'll cut you into pieces! AGAIN!"

"If you can move, get the druid!" the still-transforming Ascended human cultist yelled. "The druid!"

"I got her last time!" The tauren yelled back, already trading blows with the blonde maned pony. The rainbow colored paladin was already slipping behind to attack the tauren from the rear.

"Fine! Old Gods! I'll do it myself!" With a blast of heat, the former human transformed into an Elemental Monstrosity. Flesh and skin burned away, replaced with bladed shards of stone within a fiery maelstrom. He immediately started rushing towards the little pink-maned druid healer.

Only for more roots to rise up and, despite the flames, entangle him, too!

"What? Fireproof roots?" The Elemental ex-human started trying to tear through them with burning hands. "This is why everyone hates druids!"

"Um. Everyone does not hate druids," a timid voice spoke up, mildly correcting him.

"Hehe!" The bubbly pink caster of the group started charging a lightning bolt between her hooves. "Let's see how you like it, you big flaming meanie!"

"Aaaaa- damnit!"

By the time the polymorph broke, the transformed human was already down, though Applejack and Dash were still whittling away at the tauren mountain of muscle and steel. The tenacious bull-man was not one to fall easily. Casting another ridiculously fast chain lightning the moment

she got free, the blood elf could only curse as it was deftly redirected into a well placed Grounding Totem.

"You know, not only did you kill me, but you've burned and *ruined* my hair," a soft voice whispered in the blood elf's ear. Her body shook, and a shadowy presence rushed into her mind, taking control. "I don't think I can forgive that."

Against her own desperate impulses, the mind controlled elf shakily pointed her fingers at the tauren brute, and unleashed another elemental blast: a dark mockery of Pinkie's shamanistic spell, using the corrupted, enslaved elemental powers of the Twilight Cult. The massive warrior bull shook and steamed for a moment before falling like a felled tree.

A second later, and a mind controlled blood elf exited the building via the nearest window.

"NOOO!! POOONNNIEESSS!!"

Unfortunately, not being an engineer, she lacked the all-important a parachute cloak feature.

- - -

"Did somepony just jump out of a window?" Captain Morning Star narrowed his eyes at the free-falling blood elf cultist. "Ah. No. Not some *pony* then. It appears your friends have reached the upper level of the Observatory."

"I toldya Twilight and the others would make it!"

Turning his head, the Royal Guard captain regarded the little dragon perched on his back. "How did you talk me into letting you on my back again?"

"I... asked nicely?" Spike suggested with a disarming grin. "Nevermind that!" he patted the Guardpony unicorn on the back of his helmet. "You guys need to find another way inside to help!"

Captain Morning Star frowned a bit at that. He had... somewhat conflicting orders from the Princess herself. Momentarily considering how, and if, to explain any of that, he paused instead as the ground beneath his feet started to shift and rumble. Nimbly jumping back, already erecting a pair of magical shields to protect himself and the dragon on his back, the Captain barked a quick order to the guards nearby.

"That digging..." Spike muttered, his grip on the Captain's mane growing a bit tighter, and not simply to keep from falling off. "It can't be!"

The swirling mound of earth raised up briefly and then sunk right down, forming a perfectly circular pit. Morning Star recognized it immediately as not simply physical digging, but magical geomancy. That was not a common form of magic among ponykind. In fact, the most well known - some would say notorious - geomancers in Equestria were...

"Diamond Dogs!" One of the Guard yelled a warning, and formed up to surround the hole.

A moment passed, and one of the expected culprits emerged, one meaty paw in the air and the other holding a talisman tied to the dog's neck. Gradually, the elderly Diamond Dog released that, too, raising both hands in a sign of non-aggression. He was followed by, of all things, another dragon... or a sort different than the young specimen on the Captain's back.

Close behind the strange pair, others emerged, many wounded or otherwise in need of medical care: ponies and more dogs, some supporting one another as they struggled to walk up the incline that led to the surface. Confused by the presence of so many of the dogs, the Royal Guards turned to their Captain for orders.

"Take the wounded to the base for triage!" Morning Star commanded, approaching the juvenile dragon and the elderly Geomancer. "You two! Stay where you are."

The elderly Diamond Dog lowered his arms, but didn't otherwise move.

The dragon shrunk back, but also tucked its - her - wings in. "Sir," she spoke, revealing a youthful female voice. "I have a message from Twilight Sparkle and the Elements of Harmony."

"Oh?" the Captain cracked a smile. "Go ahead."

"Her group is moving to stop N- to stop Voidhorn and the ritual atop the Observatory," the bronze drake explained, briefly closing her eyes. "Please catch up when you can and secure the area behind them, but do not otherwise interfere. This is a job they have to do alone."

Morning Star's smile faded, but he nodded, understanding. "I see. Those were our orders anyway."

"My pack means you no harm," the elderly Diamond Dog spoke up, his Equestrian clear though just a bit crude. "We will only stay long enough to see our injustices avenged."

"They're all okay, aren't they?" Spike asked, directing the question at the two new arrivals.

"If you mean the Elements of Harmony," the other dragon replied. "Then yes. They are alive at the moment." She craned her neck slightly to get a better look at him. "You must be Spike. ...Twilight's Assistant."

"That's me." He seemed a bit unsure how to talk to or with the other dragon. "Twilight mentioned me?"

"Yes," The bronze dragon answered, somewhat evasively. "Let us not waste time. You wish to see her, don't you? To help your friends?"

"I..." Spike only wavered for a second. He jumped off Captain Morning Star's back. "I do!"

"Then come. I will show you the way." The slightly older female dragon headed back to the hole in the ground that led into the caves below. Spike, rightly, didn't think to try and jump on her back. He hurried on two legs while she prowled on four.

"There is something you can do which may..." she mused.
"Prove timely."

Chapter 12

The Observatory was already churning with moving, shifting shadows by the time the last of the imported Twilight Cult elite guard hit the ground. Fierce magical energy had rent open what was left of the domed ceiling overhead to form a crackling, pulsing sphere of evil magic encompassing the entire upper floor. Within that sphere, flickering images - stolen, painful, memories - appeared and disappeared, fading in and out from ragged tears in time and mind.

"Interrupts, *interruptions*, **interruptions!**" a hateful voice declared from a raised platform in the center of the Observatory Sphere. "How is a mare supposed to awaken a MAD GOD with all these accursed interruptions?!"

"Wow-wee!" Pinkie ignored the angry ranting and stared at the inside of the nightmare orb with wide, excited eyes. "This place is trippy-wippy! That's my third favorite kind of wippy, too, after cheese and miracle!"

"It does appear we've come to the heart of matters," Rarity agreed, shaking her charred mane. At least most of the damage was hard to make out in her shadowform.

"This is it," Twilight seconded, trotting alongside the priest and shaman as they entered, Fluttershy close behind. Taking the front, Applejack and Rainbow Dash only allowed a few moments of awe at their surroundings, then they focused their eyes on the platform and saw their final opponent: the source of the cult in Everfree.

Voidhorn.

"Twilight. Sparkle." The High Priest of the Equestrian cult approached the edge of the platform to better look down on the six intruders. "And the Elements of so called 'Harmony.'"

She was, unlike the others, a pale unicorn with a dusty, partly immaterial mane and tail. With her cultist robe and hood pulled back,

Voidhorn's face became visible, including her immeasurably bright orange pupils. It was almost as if they were cast from fire itself; faint trails of red-yellow flame arced from the corners of her eyes. Dark tattoo-like streaks marked her face and body in foreign patterns.

"Oh, yes, yes, **yes**, I know you six," she continued, her voice laced with disdain. "I know about the powers given to you. When I saw you foals fighting alongside Celestia's dogs outside, I suspected you'd find a way to keep interfering in my affairs. Even with my barrier up."

"Heh!" Dash spoke up at that. "Is that why you teleported away with your tail between your legs?"

Voidhorn glared at the cocky pegasus.

"Don't look so smug," she growled, horn starting to glow with dark purple fire. "...I know what you're thinking, but that little skirmish was *merely a setback!* I'd planned to sacrifice those fodder to raise this shield eventually. You appearing with all those Guards simply hastened the inevitable."

"We know all about your plan!" Twilight quickly confirmed that the area below the platform was clear. There wouldn't be any more interference either way. "We won't let you turn Princess Luna into Nightmare Moon! We'll stop you. No matter what!"

"Princess '*Luna*'?" Voidhorn inquired with an exaggerated tilt of her head. "What do you know of Princess '*Luna*'? **Nightmare Moon** is the real Princess of the Night! **She** is the rightful ruler of Equestria! Don't look at me like I'm the one trying to make her into something she's not!"

"You!" She pointed an accusing hoof at the Elements of Harmony. "**You** changed her! You banished her, not to the Moon, but into a prison of weak, frail flesh! I merely wish to wake her from that slumber: to have her remember who and what she really is!"

With a little canter, Voidhorn jumped down from the raised platform onto the floor. The insane cult master chuckled, slowly licking her lips as bits and pieces of her robes burned away. More of the black tattoos became clear, covering the whole of her body with chaotic, shifting

patterns. On her sides, twin waves of malevolent magic formed into a pair of black, jagged, gossamer wings.

"I'll show you pitiful ponies the Nightmares revealed to me by the Old Gods!" She broke into a run. "I'll show you why I've broken all who crossed my path! You six are no different!!"

"Applejack!" Twilight ordered, already spreading out away from her friends as they formed a semi-circle. "Rainbow! Everypony spread out!"

The warrior and paladin rushed right into Voidhorn, the former crashing into the charging madpony with a thunderous rage-fueled crash. Applejack met her enemy with a raised shield and a rearing challenge, but the former Academy Unicorn slashed her horn, creating a shield of force to partly repel the apple farmer's attack. Coming in from behind, a Holy Seal also crashed into a magical barrier to Voidhorn's left, a speedy rainbow blur blasting around her in dizzying, spiral circles. The madpony sneered, bearing teeth, and flexed her shadowy wings - a black cloud of magic nearly knocking Dash out of the air.

"Enchanted steel and holy magic?" Voidhorn laughed, rearing up and spreading her dark wings wide. "Pathetic! Bask in the fire and shadow of pure oblivion! Drink deep of the Nightmare!!"

The sphere of captive memories wavered and darkened, projecting its intensity throughout the Observatory. The air itself became hazier, darker, more ominous and foreboding. Faint shapes, echoes of the past, appeared as indistinct silhouettes all around them. Dark clouds from ages long gone settled across the uppermost hemisphere of the nightmare sphere, obscuring it almost completely. Still, images and memories from Luna's past continues to play, behind the clouds and across the curved walls.

The pall was everywhere, and Twilight Sparkle knew better than to assume it was some simple change of ambiance. Her identify spell quickly informed her that it was amplifying all shadow damage taken. It also handily created a visible magical marker for her convenience.

Nightmare Depth: "10"

Putting that fact aside, if only for a moment, the unicorn mare set her hooves and lowered her horn, casting a barrage of arcane missiles at the still laughing Voidhorn. Dash and Applejack were having a bit of a hard time in melee, since the mad pony seemed to enjoy moving around and simply blocking attacks with her mana shield, but they didn't appear to be in much danger except from Voidhorn's dark wings.

These, she used in a slashing manner to ward off Dash's attacks from behind and Applejack's shield-slams from the front. To Twilight's eye, Voidhorn herself did not appear to be a physically menacing specimen. She was no massive Blood Diver, though both used their wings (purely magical ones in the unicorn's case) as weapons, and she was certainly no hulking Gull (aside from simply not being a Diamond Dog). Going by looks alone, Voidhorn appeared to be in worse shape than Twilight herself was: she was thinner, more gaunt, and the madness that had taken over her mind gave her coat a sickly white pallor.

Her magical shields were strong, but how did she expect to win in a fight with -

"Rainbow Dash..." Voidhorn declared, craning her neck to look back over her shoulder at the quick-winged paladin. "I know you: blind, stupid loyalty. A slave to everyone but yourself. Don't you see how you're chaining yourself down? Allow me to set you free!"

Her burning orange eyes flashed.

The chromatic pegasus slowed, paused, drifting down until her hooves touched the floor. Twilight had expected an immediate response from her proud friend, but instead, Rainbow Dash smiled broadly. ..

It wasn't a nice smile.

When the paladin looked back up, the multi-colored mane falling to reveal her eyes, Twilight could see that they were a possessed, insane orange! Black magic engulfed her form and she began to grow in size! Switching targets from Voidhorn to Applejack, she flashed a hoof, unleashing an Unholy Judgment!

"What in tarnation!?" Applejack suddenly found herself fending off not only Voidhorn's ethereal magical wings, but now Rainbow Dash's furious assault with the Crusader enchanted Highdiver's Blade. She began to desperately back away, blocking with her shield, but the mind controlled pegasus was almost twice her normal size now, and lost in a merciless fury.

Even Dash's colors had inverted, reflecting the control Voidhorn had over her.

"Somepony do somethin' ahlready!" Applejack slammed her hooves down, hard, thunderclapping with a small blast of nature magic. It was enough to give her some room to try and move away, out from the furious assault. Both Voidhorn and the possessed Rainbow Dash followed.

"Twilight!" Pinkie called out, holding a ball of lightning in her right hoof and prepared to unleash it. "What do we do?"

"I - I -" Gritting her teeth, Twilight quickly cast polymorph. "Fluttershy! Root Dash after this breaks!"

"You think you can take me on!?" The possessed Dash demanded, blasting around to Applejack's side to deliver a brutal strike with her oversized hoofblade. "HUH? HUH! I'll destroy you!"

Only to turn into a little white sheep with a "GAH!"

"It won't hold for long!" Twilight yelled, even as she finished the spellwork.

"Ah know!" Applejack slipped under one of Voidhorn's black, shadowy wings, rolling and running to the side to turn the unicorn away. Blocking another strike with her shield, she retaliated with the sword clenched in her teeth. She knew she had to get some distance between herself and Dash before the polymorph broke due to damage.

"ARGH!" The enraged Rainbow Dash burst free, as lingering thunderclap and bleed damage broke the transformation. "Twilight!" Her formerly sky blue wings stretched, to take her into the air, but a winding tangle of roots came from below, trapping her in place.

Stuck, the only thing the mind controlled paladin could do was -
- was cast Hand of Freedom on herself and break free. *Damnit!*

"WAHAHA!" She laughed, charging at a now panicked Fluttershy. "Even when I'm evil I'm totally awesome! Hey now! Don't fly away! I just wanna hit you with my sword!"

"That's why I'm flying away!" Fluttershy cried, running and then jumping to fly for a few body lengths and then run again as the swooping pegasus paladin swirled around her in a predatory inverse rainbow. "I'm really sorry I tried to root you, but you're being mean and I need to keep healing Applejack!"

"Fluttershy!" A refined voice called out; Rarity was at full gallop, moving to intercept the frightened druid. "Behind me!"

Rainbow Dash just gave another mad laugh. "WAHAHA! And what're *you* gonna do, Rar-ity?" She asked with a crazy grin, coming around for another attack. "Threaten to mess up my hair!?"

Rarity frowned, blue eyes noting Fluttershy having stopped just behind her. She turned her attention to the incoming pegasus and took a deep breath.

The Psychic Scream that ripped free from the typically superbly well mannered unicorn's throat sent a chill down Twilight's spine. It wasn't even so much a sound; it was like a thousand whines condensed into a single moment of pure, unrelenting, unbearable horror. No pony could put up with it, and the full force of the fear effect was directed at the incoming mind controlled pegasus.

"EAAAAGHHH!!!" Who then crashed in a very Dash-like manner, bouncing off the floor and flying in dizzying circles. "It hurts! Make the whining stop!"

"As you should all know, I'm not pleasant when I'm *whining*," Rarity explained, and forgetting about her victim, turned her full fury on the

cause of it all: Voidhorn. Narrowing her eyes dangerously, she unleashed a brutal stream of mind flaying shadow energy at the mad cultpony.

The attack must have struck a nerve, as Voidhorn staggered back a step from her fight with Applejack. Orange eyes flashed with dark power and coils of alien energy burned along the length of her pale, tattooed horn.

"**Rarity...**" Voidhorn snarled, "*I know you*: self-absorbed, self-defeating generosity. You want others to approve of you; to hold you in high esteem! How much can you give others before you have nothing yourself? Please... allow me to set you free!"

"Oh... oh dear." Rarity's eyes widened, the blue rapidly being overtaken by bright, burning orange. A dizzy look overcame her, and within moments she began to grow to half again her normal size. The shadowform she had been in to enhance the darker side of her priest powers became notably more frightful, the black wings that stretched out mirroring those of Voidhorn herself.

Rarity's narrowed into vicious slits, and an evil look crossed her face as she spun on Fluttershy, the pony she had just protected moments before. "Fluttershy, dear, don't take this too personally. But you're mine now!"

Her next Mind Flay, targeting the group's stressed healer, was fortunately interrupted by a wind shear.

"Hey!" Pinkie Pie interrupted. "Forget about that healing aggro!" She stood on her hind legs and adopted a strange pose, her arms crossed and cape fluttering in some - previously unknown - overly dramatic breeze behind her. "I'll be your opponent!"

"If you insist, darling!" Rarity's now super sized form faced the pink shaman. "I'll - BAaa!"

"Or maybe Twilight will just polymorph you while you're distracted?" Pinkie asked, raising an eyebrow and falling back onto four hooves. "Oh! I can't wait 'till I learn how to Hex! There'll be frogs everywhere!"

"Oh, my head!" Dash slowly lowered herself down to the ground. "That was... weird...?"

Pinkie Pie popped up behind her from out of nowhere, as was her custom. "You!" She pointed. "Were turned into a big mind controlled bully! Actually, it looked like a lotta fun! I can't wait till my turn! Do you think there's an achievement if we all get it?"

"Nevermind that!" Twilight yelled, cutting short another of Pinkie's potential (inane) ramblings.

"Right!" Dash agreed, now back to her regular size. She rushed into the fray.

"So you don't enjoy fighting amongst yourselves, do you?" Voidhorn roared, rearing up on her hindlegs. She took a conspicuously deep breath. "Very well! Then BURN!"

Applejack nearly vanished behind the curtain of purple and black shadowflame. Hunkering down behind her shield, she could only try and weather the attack and keep her opponent from getting anypony else caught in the cone of fire. Fortunately, Fluttershy was free and unmolested, allowing her to drop quick heals on the group's tank. Even after taking the entire blast, point blank, Applejack was still in good enough health to strike back with a vicious pummel to Voidhorn's shoulder.

Twilight signaled to Pinkie Pie, and they continued their barrage of magical and elemental attacks. Voidhorn only seemed able to Mind Control one pony at a time, and with Rarity polymorphed, it was easy to let Applejack tank, Fluttershy heal, and just sit and do damage. Voidhorn's magical shields began to buckle and damage leak through, charring and scarring her shifting tattooed coat.

"Enough!" She finally snarled, releasing a burst of power that briefly knocked everypony off their hooves. Even Rarity's polymorph broke, freeing her. Growing from a small sheep, she started to grow even beyond her normal size, only to stop and quickly revert as the mind control faded.

"I will scour your souls from your feeble bodies!" Voidhorn cried, floating into the air and erecting a burning shield around herself. "Embrace oblivion!"

"Hey!" Pinkie Pie gasped, her eyes growing wide. "Hey! What!" Shockingly, the party loving shaman started to rise into the air, gripped by an invisible hand. "Stop! Ow! Ow! You can't death grip me! You're not a DK! OR a Sith!"

Shadows thickened and began to move, churning into a vortex...

With Pinkie Pie in the center! Twilight immediately felt her body begin to burn, as shadowy magic - amplified by the Nightmare Depth debuff - started to seep into her skin. Frantically looking for a safe place, she saw Fluttershy in the middle of healing Pinkie Pie, Rarity also looking around in a panic, and Dash flying and trailing shadowy energy like the wake of a ship.

There had to be a safe spot somewhere, right? But where?!

"There!" She realized, running towards Pinkie Pie. "Cluster on me! Quick!"

Fortunately, their group was experienced and meshed enough that nopony questioned Twilight's plan. As one, they all collapsed in on Twilight, who had come to a stop beneath Pinkie Pie's choking, struggling form. She was the center of the swirling vortex of shadows, and like the eye in a storm, it was also the one safe spot. Fluttershy was the last to arrive in the tight huddle, quickly casting a regrowth on herself and another on their death gripped friend, who would have been killed then and there otherwise.

Finally, thankfully, it ended and Pinkie free-fell into the arms of her friends.

"That was not fun!" She coughed, holding her throat. "Force Choke is overpowered and totally super unfair!" She shook a hoof at the slowly descending Voidhorn. "Don't think you're cool just because you have so many dark side points!"

"**Deeper** and **deeper** into the Nightmare!" The insane High Priest pony dispelled her flame shield to close with a charging Applejack. "Stupid, pathetic little ponies! You are already doomed! Celestia has forsaken you! She had sent you to your deaths! Only infinite darkness awaits us!"

Moments after getting close, she opened her mouth to unleash another torrent of shadowflame. And then -

"Get ready!" Twilight warned. "She'll probably-"

"**Fluttershy...**!" Voidhorn hissed, a sibilant tone into the druid's ear; in her very mind. "*I know you*: misplaced, selfish, overbearing kindness. You claim to care so deeply for others; for the helpless and the weak. But who cares for you? Who loves you? Who can you rely on? Who will protect you? NO ONE. Allow me to set you free!"

Impossibly - unbelievably - Fluttershy's gentle turquoise eyes darkened and dimmed mid-heal.

"Oh. Oh no," she muttered, closing her eyes and swallowing anxiously. "Oh. I think..."

When Fluttershy's eyes opened, they were a burning orange and red.

"Um. Sorry. Everpony," she chuckled, mouth slowly twisting into a mad grin. "But I think I'm about to do something a little evil."

A second later, and she transformed into her druid kitty body and vanished.

"Ohhhh," Twilight canceled her polymorph as her target disappeared. "That's not good! Rainbow!" She yelled to the flying paladin. "Pick up Fluttershy when she reappears! Rarity! Off heal!"

"Got it, Twi!"

"Yes! On it!"

Hearing that, Twilight Sparkle went back to dpsing Voidhorn. Even though Fluttershy was out of the equation, as far as healing went, Voidhorn herself didn't do that much damage except for her shadowflame dragon-like breath, and there seemed to be a cooldown on when she could use it. There was another pressing concern...

Nightmare Depth: "40"

'Deeper and deeper into the Nightmare!' Voidhorn had said just before. The air was growing thicker with shadows, and the debuff was stacking, forcing them all to take more and more damage from any shadow related magic. Twilight wasn't sure if Voidhorn herself was also suffering from the debuff, but aside from Rarity, none of them did shadow damage anyway. If the fight dragged on too long, then eventually Applejack would be killed by a shadowflame breath no matter who was healing her, and everypony else would be destroyed by one of those shadow vortexes.

They had to finish the fight before the debuff got too high.

The strange images and memories on the inside of the massive nightmare sphere around them were also growing more detailed and expressive. They had to be Luna's memories. She was in some of them herself, but most were from the first-pony perspective. Twilight saw Celestia in some of them, but she had a pure, pink mane and tail, not like in the present. Other frames had strange creatures in them, some of them humanoid, but also massive and alien. Not the humans Twilight had seen before. A few replayed events she had seen before. She found herself staring at one in particular, of her predecessor - Enigma - cradling the remains of Featherfrost after the incident in Uldum. From Nightmare Moon's eyes...

"Um. Sorry about this, Twilight."

Together with the voice, a bright orange pair of eyes appeared out of the darkness behind her.

POUNCE!

The arcane mage, stunned, couldn't move or react as a kitty-druid, almost twice Fluttershy's normal size, jumped behind her. A huge,

golden paw, like a lion's, raised up into the air to rake and rip and tear. Four rather wicked, curved claws emerged from the fluffy cat's paw.

'Fluttershy... is about to maul me to death?' Twilight wondered, still dazed by the pounce. *'I can honestly say I never expected to go out this way.'*

"Hand of Reckoning!" A multicolored blur shot by, bowling the kitty druid over in a flying tackle. "Time for the ultimate druid versus paladin pegasus showdown! We'll see who has the best class!"

"Remember not to hurt her!" Twilight finally managed to shake off the stun-effect.

"I've covered in plate barding!" Rainbow Dash replied, pinning the kitty-Fluttershy to the ground. Her wings flapped excitedly. "What can she possibly do? Bite me? Ha!"

CHOMP

"AAAAAA!! SHE BIT ME!!!"

Twilight watched, eyes half-lidded, as Dash ran and flew, Fluttershy firmly attached to her tail.

"Get it off get it off get it off get it off!"

"Nya!"

Twilight groaned, focusing on Voidhorn again. "I guess I should be happy that she didn't mind control-"

"Pinkamina Diane Pie!"

"Oh **no**."

"I know you!" Voidhorn commanded, eyes burning like Sulfuron Ingots. "Deluded, hedonistic laughter. All those parties and all those so called friends; it makes it easy to forget how little you really have. What else will you conveniently leave behind when it becomes unpleasant or

unbearable? When the laughter dies, your weak spirit will break! Allow me to set you free!"

Strangely, Pinkie Pie just stood, stony silent, surrounded by her four totems.

"Ooooooooo," she gradually drawled. "Being evil feels all tingly." Her hair slumped, slouched -

And spiked.

"Ha." She twitched, starting to grow larger. "Ha. Ha."

Fluttershy, by this point back under her own control, turned back into a pony and wisely started to back away. Dash, her tail covered in kitty slobber, also began to back away from the mind-controlled, generally not very mentally stable to begin with, Pinkie Pie. Twilight felt herself inching away as well, and Rarity had already started running.

"Aww, shucks," Applejack grumbled, leading Voidhorn and herself away. "Why'd ya have'ta go and do that to her of all ponies?"

"Ehh." The madpony shrugged. "I don't see what-"

"HA. HA. HA."

Pinkie Pie exploded. Twice.

"BWAHAHAHA!" The possessed shaman emerged from her own flames to levitate in the air. The world slowly dyed psychedelic blues and pinks and greens and ominous ponytin chanting signaled the activation of a very special, very personal Party Time heroism. Lightning blasted wildly from Pinkie's hooves in all directions, hitting the nightmare sphere, the floor, nearly zapping a jumpy Rainbow Dash, and even catching Voidhorn on the rump.

"You idiot!" The cultist roared. "You can't shoot at me! I'm mind controlling you!"

"Everypony. Dance." Pinkie Pie demanded, tongue lolling out over her jaw, one eye wide and the other squinted. Insane fires burned around her like a living firecracker. **"DANCE!"**

A rain of buzzing sparklers and burning confetti began to fall from the dark clouds above.

"All of you." Pinkie's voice became deep and ominous. "Have fun. Have fun or **die**."

"What in the name of Yogg Saron's many maws is with this pony?" Voidhorn jumped back as a stray lightning bolt, enhanced by her own magic, nearly blasted her. "Stop this foalishness immediately and destroy their healer or something!"

Pinkie Pie's head lolled loosely around, as if she wasn't even aware of her surroundings.

"Ponies!" Twilight yelled, batting away a falling cupcake that had mysteriously fallen from overhead. "Dance! Everypony dance!"

A bit reluctantly, the five mares started to move. Voidhorn just glared at them, and then at her own mind-slave, and then back at her so called opponents. There was no music - creepily enough, no sounds at all except for their voices - but she pretended there was and swayed a bit back and forth, pretending to dance.

"What are you idiots doing?" Voidhorn growled, knocking Applejack away with a contemptuous foreleg.

"The two step," the farmer replied.

"You!" Voidhorn pointed at the levitating, super-charged Pinkie Pie. "I command you to attack your filthy little friends!"

"Filthy?!" Rarity objected, but didn't stop pretending to dance and enjoy herself.

"You mean you aren't enjoying the party?" Pinkie Pie drowsily observed, licking her lips. One eye focused on Voidhorn. "Are you a God?"

"Uh... no... but-"

"Then die!"

ZAP

"This isn't a game, you foal! Now do as I command or-"

ZAP

Voidhorn stuck out her lower lip and took a deep, calming breath. With one hoof, she dusted off where she had just been zapped, again, by her own minion's lightning.

"Listen here, you little-"

ZAP

"Pinkamina, I demand you-"

"There is no Pinkamina! Only Zul!"

ZAP

"RAAAGHH!" Voidhorn finally just erected her flame shield and took to the air. "I don't believe this!"

"WEEE!" Pinkie Pie, now normal sized, fell to the floor, bouncing like a rubber ball.

"I've controlled dozens of ponies, but never one with the mind full of rock candy. Well, no matter! I'll just kill you instead!" Voidhorn focused her Death Grip on a new target. "Suffer!"

Twilight felt a force seize her by the throat and lift her into the air. Everything turned dark and her limbs flailed as they failed to find purchase or relief from the pressure around her neck and torso. It was as if an adult dragon had seized her bodily in one massive hand, intent on

making pony paste. Only a flare of nature-magic based relief made it bearable.

If only she could see - if only she could be sure her friends were surviving the shadow vortex that she new must be forming and twisting around her. The hurricane of negative energy would be amplified by the Nightmare Depth everypony was suffering from... except Voidhorn, cocooned within her flame shield. They had to group up together like before! But she couldn't see and hadn't had time to give any orders. For once, things were happening without her and outsider her control, and the feeling of uncertainty for her friends was as painful as the magical vice she was trapped in.

Finally, thankfully, the pressure released and Twilight fell back, down, into the arms of her friends...

"Are you guys..." she stated, and saw them all around her. Safe. "Thank Celestia...!"

"Still alive?" Voidhorn also landed, stalking towards them with a sneer. "I suppose you've earned another minute or two of life, but you must have realized that, eventually, you **will** die. With every breath, you sink into the Nightmare. It will take you, and there is nothing you can do to stop it."

Taking a deep breath, she one again unleashed a cone of shadowflame at the charging Applejack. Twilight knew what would come next. As long as AJ kept up, despite the stacking shadow damage debuff, Voidhorn would be preoccupied warding her off. Everypony else, between doing what damage they could to the cult leader, needed to be ready for another mind control.

This was the third round of them and Voidhorn had to be getting tired. Not only had she expended massive amounts of magic to form and project the nightmare sphere and the corruption ritual that Amber had described, the unicorn had also been unleashing one potent magical spell after another on top of using her mana pool as a magical shield. On top of even all that, all the accumulated arcane blasts, elemental energies, holy judgments, shadowy curses and plain old beatings were taking a physical toll. It was slow, but steady.

"**Twilight Sparkle**," Voidhorn said the name slowly, savoring it. "I know you, too! Magic. *Friendship*? Isn't it strange? When did you become so reliant on others? Is that really the kind of pony you aspire to be?"

The evil pony laughed. "I can see you for what you really are. You will **never** become like Celestia. And do you know why?" Voidhorn's burning eyes seemed to take up Twilight's entire world. "Because, deep down, You. Are. **WEAK**."

"Allow me... to set you free..." Twilight whispered the words even as she heard them.

Her eyes felt heavy.

The world felt... distant.

And, suddenly, all the nasty, evil impulses that festered in the hearts of all creatures took on a new, all important life. What reason was there not to do what she felt like? None! Why was she helping Princess Celestia and her friends anyway? Wouldn't it be interesting to do something else? Like pay Fluttershy back for pouncing on her? Besides, all she ever did was heal-heal-heal, and then there was all the trouble caused by her stupid drama with Rarity and all those stupid little animals. And the trouble with Philamena.

"If you like animals so much, how about I make you into one!" Twilight heard herself say, with more than a little mania laced into the tone.

Only for her spell to be interrupted.

"Wind shear?" she hissed, recognizing the interrupt. "Lay off it, Pinkie Pie! I'm trying to cast here!"

An arcane blast would -

A holy brand caused Twilight to wince in pain. Who? Oh, of course. Rainbow-freaking-Dash. Big headed, arrogant, lazy, pranking, troublemaking-!!

"Terribly sorry about this, Twilight." Rarity ran closer, opened her mouth and... oh, not, not that!

By the time the Mind Control blissfully faded, leaving behind the mother of all headaches, Twilight swore never to give her fashion-conscious friend the chance to complain ever again. There was no way that most priest's psychic screams took the form of a mind-shattering litany of *whining*. The story of how she had made the Diamond Dogs surrender by talking to them was one thing, but was this anything like they had been subjected to? It really did hurt!

"*I know you!*" Voidhorn's words cut through the haze, forcing Twilight back into the fight. "Brutal, blunt, simple-minded honesty. You who abhor falsehood in others; isn't it true that the one you lie to is yourself? Your honesty is arrogance!"

Oh. Oh no!

"*Yee-haw!* I'd say it's pony buckin' season! Which onea'ya are first?! Better yet, ah'll take ya'll on! Come on! All at once!"

If Applejack was Mind Controlled...!!

"Rainbow!" Twilight's voice hurt to hear, but she ignored that. A chromatic blur was already taunting Voidhorn, who had been about to charge at Fluttershy. Dash smartly led the unicorn away from the now crazed looking Applejack as Fluttershy cast entangling roots to keep the warrior in one spot.

"Aw, come on! What's with this? Ain't none'ya mare enough ta take me on?!" Applejack tried to tear herself free, but with strength alone, it was impossible for her, even enhanced by Voidhorn's magic. "Ya'll are cowards!" She shook an armored hoof at Fluttershy in particular. "Ah'll buck ya into next week!"

"Um. Just stay there, please," the druid suggested. "If that's okay with you."

"It ain't!"

"The Element of Loyalty, now? You have no idea how much I despise you ponies!" Voidhorn ranted, laying into the chromatic pegasus with a furious blast of shadow and fire. The under armored, unprepared ret-paladin tumbled away from the furious conflagration, using a quick lay-on-hands to get herself back up to full health.

"You six and Celestia! You ruined everything!" The cultist's jagged, ethereal wings convulsed as a backlash of elemental and magical attacks crashed through her shields to open up fresh wounds.

"Your mentor!" She turned to glare accusingly at Twilight. "**My mentors** - lied to my face! To protect her version of the truth! To protect the pony she thought her sister should be! There is no Luna! **There is only Nightmare Moon!**"

"I **will** watch Equestria burn! A flickering, sick light in the darkness! And *She'll* know! *She'll* know! She'll **KNOW!**" Voidhorn bucked Dash away and pitched slightly to the side, finally growing weary. "She'll know... that some things... can't be forgiven... or brushed under the rug. I - I want her to die... The Master wants her to die! Nightmare Moon..."

"Isn't that... what you want... too?" Falling but catching herself, the deranged unicorn snorted and reared back up. "NO! Not Yet! I am not dead yet!"

Horn glowing, she blinked - teleported - back up to the platform.

"What tha'heck?" Twilight heard Applejack say, returning to normal. "Ah, shoot, she got me didn't she?"

Fluttershy commanded the roots to loosen, and they released the trapped warrior. Twilight quickly took stock of the situation. "Applejack! Be ready to pick aggro back up!"

"Gotcha!" The warrior winced, shaking her head. "I gotcha."

"This body is weak, frail, mortal..." Voidhorn's voice echoed from above, and the nightmare sphere became darker. "But I am not beaten yet! Drink in the Nightmare! Drink in the Infinite! This is the End for All of us!"

"I don't like the sound of that," Rarity whispered, getting closer to her friends.

"The cornered mouse bites the cat," Fluttershy agreed, cringing a bit at the saying. "Um. Or so I've heard."

"Everypony group up," Twilight ordered. The walls of the sphere were shimmering, and the shadows growing even thicker and stronger. "We'll face this together."

One of those shadows... became quite pony-like.

Twilight checked her identify spell -

Nightmare Depth: "100"

It had spiked up when Voidhorn teleported back to her platform. Yet, she hadn't cast any other spells, and the debuff alone wasn't doing any damage. Tearing her attention from the debuff warning, the unicorn mage saw the pony-like shadow begin to congeal, growing increasingly distinct. Parts lightened, from black to dark blue, and others from dark blue to azure.

Wings extended, long and regal, and the horned head writhed in agony -

"Princess Luna?" Pinkie Pie said it first. They all looked around: the pictures on the inner surface of the sphere were now all around them, like a dozen indistinct sets from different movies.

"Are we in a dream?" the pink one wondered aloud. "Oh! Oh! Or a dream within a dream? Can we go deeper?" she started to rummage around in her tail, and took out a top. "This should tell us!"

"What are you going on about now!" Dash bopped her on the head, causing the top to fly from Pinkie's mouth. "Be serious for once!"

"But I don't wanna!" Pinkie declared.

"ugh!" The still forming Princess Luna tried to rear up, but there were lines - chains - holding her to the floor. "...no. No! I don't want - don't show me that!" she cried, green eyes snapping open. "I don't want to remember...! I- I-"

"You must remember." A different voice, not Luna's, not Voidhorn's, thundered. **"You must remember! ...I will *not* be forgotten."**

The clouds above had been spinning, and now they began to form... into something. Twilight squinted, already suspecting what. Tighter and tighter, the dark nightmare-fog swirled, until it began to take the figure of a neck and head, a horn, and a dark star-covered mane. Murderous green eyes, sharply slit by a black pupil, glared down at the assembled ponies below.

"Never forget!" Nightmare Moon boomed, **"We were betrayed! We were forsaken! We lost everything! Remember me. Remember your HATE!"**

A black form appeared from the memory mists: an alien, insect like creature on eight skittering legs. The body that rested on the spider-like form was vaguely humanoid: a fused abomination of ornate purple and gold robes, green chitinous shells, and a dozen smaller twitching legs, like the underside of a horseshoe crab. A pair of beady eyes stared out from a crack in the shell, almost like a face, and two huge antennae flanked the shoulders and back.

"The Silithid. The Qiraji!" Nightmare Moon spat the words. **"Do you remember, Luna? How much you hate them!"**

"I... I do hate them...!" the chained Princess choked, the chains tightening around her. "I hate them..."

Luna's head began to bow.

"Kill them all... " she muttered in pain. "Destroy them..."

"That's right, Luna. Destroy them. Only you can do this." Nightmare Moon's voice was mad, frantic. **"Remember me!"**

The Nightmare Apparition began to skitter towards the chained alicorn -

"I don't think so!" A rainbow colored blur interposed itself between the Princess and the shadowy figure from the past. Rainbow Dash smirked. "I don't have the faintest idea what's going on, but I'm not the kind of pony who likes to sit and watch!"

"Hehe!" Pinkie Pie bounced over, also getting in the way. "Me neither! I kinda wasted my super party time spell, but I'm still up for a game of pin the tail on the bad guy!"

"We all are!" Twilight, Fluttershy, Rarity and Applejack joined them a moment later. She marked the insectoid nightmare with a skull. "Let's do this!"

Roots emerged from below -

Lightning filled the air -

Arcane bolts shot through -

Shadowy tendrils curled towards their prey -

A divine judgment came from above -

An apple also flew. For what it was worth.

"That's all the ranged ah have!" Applejack protested. "Ah gotta get a crossbow 'r somethin' after this."

And the Nightmare Apparition evaporated like a faint cloud.

"You six again." Nightmare Moon spat. **"This nightmare will become your grave."**

"We don't have invitations, but if this is a party, it's a pretty sucky one!" Pinkie pointed up at the malevolent visage. "And I should know! I've thrown a lot of sucky parties!"

She narrowed her eyes comically.

"You know. Before I got good. At throwing parties?" Shaking her head so fast it became a pink and rose colored blur, she pointed up even more furiously. "Anyway! Do your worst, you big party pooper!"

"Luna!" Nightmare Moon ignored the crazy earth pony.
"Remember. The war. The ponies you led to their death. The enemies you killed. The blood you spilt. And for what? To be forgotten? To vanish in the night? Make them remember!"

This time, it wasn't a single shape but a half dozen. They were ponies in dark armor, mixed with cat-like Tol'vir and smaller insect-like Silithid. They all started towards the chained, helpless Luna, whispering and cursing. Applejack charged into one, and it dispersed instantly, but she also flew back, blasted by an eruption of shadowy energy. Her shield was still smoking from absorbing some of the blast.

"Ah think this is a job fer ranged types," she commented, taking up a position to Luna's left.

The six Elements of Harmony arrayed around her, facing outwards to keep the Apparitions at bay.

"They trusted you!" Nightmare Moon continued, conjuring up more of the shadowy memories. **"They trusted you with their lives, Luna. And every single one died. And when you needed them most, who was there? The Elements of Harmony? No."**

Six slightly larger shapes appeared along the rest, moving slowly towards Luna.

Twilight quickly marked them, directing arcane magic to take them down. Despite being dream-like and immaterial, somehow they had enough substance to be slowed and destroyed. Roots and spells further reduced their speed, and chain lightning and mind flays tore them apart, one by one. Some of the minor Apparitions got close, but Applejack and Dash took care of them.

"No. They condemned you. Enigma condemned you! He hated you!" Nightmare Moon cried, her eyes growing wider. **"He hated you, Luna! They all hated you in the end! They all did!"**

Twilight wanted to scream defiance at the... the thing that was tormenting them, tormenting Luna, but focused on the fight. Arcane missiles streaked from her horn, despite her tired state, destroying more of the Nightmare Apparitions.

"The Titans abandoned you. Where were they when you were taken by the Curse of Flesh? Even the other Constructs turned against you. Used you. And discarded you. Light of the Moon? To them. To everypony. You're just trash." Nightmare Moon snorted ash and shadow and roared: **"REMEMBER!"**

"No," Luna moaned, straining against her chains.

Two huge shadows appeared from the swirling mists.

"Skull and then X," Twilight ordered, marking the new targets. Under her breath, she whispered, "There's no way we're messing this up now."

Quickly glancing back at the pony in the center of their circle, she gave the approaching Apparitions a fierce glare. "We'll definitely protect you, Princess..."

"You can not escape what you are. I am still here. Still inside you. I am you!" Nightmare Moon leaned down until she took up half the sky. **"Every scrap of pain, every scornful look, every curse under your breath, every insecurity, every failure, every success! I won't let you... or anyone... forget me! I won't let them forget everything we've lost! I won't let it all have been for nothing!"**

"Remember!" She thundered. **"Remember the carefree lives of ease! Remember how they worshipped Celestia! Remember how they forgot about you! Remember seeing them sleeping, not a care in the world for all we suffered through!"**

"**Did even one pony thank you?**" the dark goddess demanded to know. "**Even one?! ...Remind them. Plunge their world into darkness!**" Her slitted eyes flashed with madness and hate. "**Suffocate them with shadows! They'll remember when the night lasts forever! Make them remember, LUNA!**"

"No," the voice was just a whisper.

"I AM YOU."

A huge, dark hand reached for the chained Princess... but came apart under the barrage of attacks.

"HATE THEM," the Nightmare commanded. "**Hate them. Hate your sister. Hate the ponies. Hate the Titans! Hate Elune! Hate them all! Every one and every thing that abandoned you! They'll remember you. They'll regret what they did.**"

"I hate..." Luna seemed to pull herself inward. "I hate..."

Her wings snapped out, and the chains shattered -

"No." She defiantly turned her eyes up to the massive ebon Night Mare. "No! I'll never become like that again."

The black mare opened her mouth to speak, but Luna cut her off.

"I am you," she threw back the words.

"So what do you hate?" Nightmare Moon asked, shrinking down to normal size... which was still larger than any other others present. She descended, armor and all, just as she had a year ago in Ponyville.

"Me?" she wondered with a nickering laugh. "Do you hate me?"

"Didn't I just tell you?" Luna asked back, shaking her head. She advanced on her tormentor, brushing through Twilight and Rarity like a ghost. "*You are me.* How can I hate myself?"

Nightmare Moon glare turned to confusion at her other self. No: Twilight realized, it wasn't confusion. It was suspicion. She didn't believe, she didn't trust, even herself.

"I lost control," Luna explained, getting closer to the Night Mare. "But I know. I know the one you hate. And it isn't Big Sister."

Nightmare Moon sneered, her lip curling to reveal teeth.

"You're a part of me. The anger. The frustration. The... loneliness." Luna leaned her cheek into the Night Mare's chest. "I made mistakes. But I don't hate anyone. Not even myself. I'll accept what I did as you, and what you did as me, and move on." She sighed into the ebon apparition and took a step back to look her, eye to eye.

"I'll make them remember," Princess Luna promised. "But I'll do it my way."

For a long while, Nightmare Moon was silent.

Then, finally:

"You really think...?" she began, and closed her eyes. "I see. Fine. I guess I'll have to... leave the rest... to you. But don't forget. Our vow."

Twilight blinked, and the dream - the nightmare - was gone.

- - -

The moon was high and full, but dark.

Nightmare Moon laughed, triumphant, one armored hoof on her sister's fallen form. Easy! It had all been so easy! With the powers of Setesh and Isiset, and the even greater powers unlocked by her communion with Neltharion and his sponsors, it had been easy! It mattered not that Elune refused to speak to her. Greater powers existed, chained by the treacherous Titans below the earth. They understood her. They knew what she wanted in her heart of hearts!

"Weak!" she pressed a hoof down to her sister's injured side.
"Weak! Weak! **Weak!** You're all so WEAK!"

She leaned down to stare her fallen sister in the eye.

"I should have done this long ago," she told her, exalting in her victory. Wings at full furl, a storm of dark magical fury surrounded her like a hurricane. Forgotten stars twinkled in the wake of her mane and tail, whispering blasphemies and prayers to unspeakable names.

Beyond the two sisters, Canterlot was plunged into darkness. Fast moving clouds and untamed weather began to release flurries, and already the cold, dark city on the mountainside was receiving a frosting of snow. It would be the first of many, many, many long, dark nights for the ponies of Equestria. Even if it took a thousand to drive the point home, they would all learn to fear and respect the night. They would remember that they slept and dreamed by her sufferance!

"Luna..." Celestia gasped, pink mane around her face matted by blood. "In the Makers' Name, stop this madness! You must-"

"I must? I must?" Nightmare Moon stomped down on the Sun Princess' wounded side. "I must what? I must listen to you? Because you know best?" She cocked her head to the side, questioningly. "Tell me something, sister dear: if you know best, why are you bleeding so much? Why are you at my hooves? Why aren't you begging for my mercy? Because that seems like the smart thing to do in your situation."

"Luna!" another voice called out, eliciting an angry sneer from the Ebon Mare.

"Enigma." she identified the Element of Magic on the far edge of the palace roof. Turning ninety degrees, she smirked. "Black Pepper." And to her other side. "Happy Days." And finally behind her. "And... Sunflower."

"By the earth, Princess," Black Pepper gasped. "What has become of you?"

"I just thought I'd change the world a bit," Nightmare Moon admitted with an aloof laugh. "Not just controlling the weather and evicting the troublesome species, though," she explained, giving her beaten sister another poke with her armored hoof. "Nothing so mundane!"

"I just thought," she said, directing it at Enigma in particular. "That I'd give Equestria a chance to know me better. The Night doesn't have to be eternal, but... Enigma... wouldn't it be beautiful if it was?" She frowned at him. "You've gotten old, you know. Still haven't settled down?"

His silver eyes hardened.

"Oh, that's right!" The Night Mare chortled, green eyes wide. "Featherfrost is dead, and no other pony could *ever possibly* take her place! But - but! Isn't it ironic?" Nightmare Moon's sanity slipped from deranged to lucid moment to moment.

"Without that Element of Loyalty, or the Element of Generosity... poor, dead Luster..." She smirked behind her at the elderly Sunflower, the timid pegasus shaking not with fear, but anger and indignation. "Without those two, what good are any of you? Like broken, rusty links in a chain. Remove even one, and the whole thing comes apart!"

"Luna," Sunflower said the name like a curse. "You're mad."

"That's not a very kind thing to say," The Ebon Mare mocked and shook her head condescendingly at the Element of Kindness. "Oh, don't look so hostile. I won't kill any of you. After all, I'm doing this for you, too!" She gave grief stricken pegasus a wily look. "Don't you hate not being able to talk about it?"

She turned her mad eyes on Happy Days and Black Pepper.

"They were your friends. Your close friends." And then Enigma. "And your lover." And then Celestia. "And your grandson..."

She laughed, but tears ran down her cheeks.

"All dead. And my Guard. *All dead*. And they don't even have graves to rest in or songs to remember them by. I don't want them to be

swallowed by history. I don't want to forget. I... I *can't* forget... I can't close my eyes without seeing them..."

"Luna," Celestia coughed, trying to sound and project confidence, even from her prone position. "What we did - what you did - can never leave this circle of ponies. The peaceful Equestria, the peaceful world we're building, depends on it..."

Nightmare Moon glanced down at her with one vicious green eye.

"No, Big Sister," she said, her voice icy as a glacial wind. "Tonight... your dream... your Equestria... the world I lost everything to protect... tonight *your Dream becomes my Nightmare!*"

"We **will** stop you," Enigma swore, determined despite his advanced years.

"Huh! You're old, like I said! And unless you've gone blind, too, I'm more powerful than I've ever been!" Nightmare Moon spread her wings. "Oh, Enigma... its true: you aren't the handsome young colt you used to be. But even now, I'm a little tempted to ask you to join me, to be with me. To sing my praises. Sadly, since offering you everything probably won't work, I guess I'll **take** what little you have left away instead!"

"We *will* stop you," Sunflower's voice, so determined, only amused the Ebon Mare more.

"We will stop you," Black Pepper echoed, and Nightmare Moon's amusement turned to annoyance.

"We will stop you," Happy Days said it with great sadness. "We have to."

"A broken chain, like I said," the Night Mare declared. "Chant all you like."

"No, Luna - they're right."

The black alicorn glared down at her beaten sister.

"Eh?" she asked with feigned interest. "More yapping from a beaten dog?"

"We will stop you," Celestia agreed. Her pink mane moved, like a snake, to trap Nightmare Moon's legs. Annoyed, but unconcerned, the fallen Moon Princess chuckled.

- until she saw Enigma levitate out a familiar stone orb.

"What? Are you going to hit me with those keepsakes?" She tried to pull a hoof free from Celestia's pink mane and glanced back, confirming Sunflower had one in her hooves as well. "I don't know what you think those can do without a bearer. They're useless."

"No, Luna. They aren't."

Celestia closed her eyes, and a faint green glow of pure life energy spread out across the rooftop. Still tangled in the white alicorn's mane and tail, Nightmare Moon glowered and intensified her efforts to get free. Not enough to appear frightened, of course. Because she wasn't. There was no force in Equestria or Uldum to challenge her.

Ammunae's gift reached the two dead stone orbs, and the cutie marks on them lit up with life.

"What *is* this?" she demanded, and tried to tear herself free. Failing that, she tried to shift into the shadows... only to be caught in a shield of light. *Rajh's light*.

Celestia's mane began to shimmer, turning from solid pink to a shifting rainbow...

Nightmare Moon laughed madly. "You still have some of that power? Impressive. Not that it matters!" She tried again to get free. "Release me, Sister. Or I really will kill you. You know I can!"

"I'm so sorry, Luna..." The beaten alicorn blinked away tears.

"Heh. Heheh. Heheheh!" Nightmare Moon brayed , turning from one remaining Element of Harmony to the next. They were all wearing their regalia and glowing with power. Lines of arcane energy were spreading across the chill, night air, encircling the pair of alicorn sisters.

"STOP KIDDING AROUND!" The black Princess roared, spittle flying from her mouth. "Don't you know who I am? Don't you know what I can do? I'm invincible at night! You can't kill me!" She licked her lips, anxiously. "You won't kill me..."

"Luna," Enigma said, and closed his eyes.

"Luna," Black Pepper followed.

And then Sunflower. "Luna."

"Luna," Happy Days sniffed.

"Luna," Celestia said last, and the two sisters locked eyes. "*I banish you.*"

Only giving a token struggle, Nightmare Moon leaned back and gave a ragged, tortured sigh. She could feel it: from the tips of her wings, along her spine, spreading through every pore and down every hair. Everything was turning white and chalky. One last wrench finally freed a hoof, but it was too little too late. Holding it up, the dark Princess could see flakes of blood on the armored horseshoe. Her sister's blood.

"Big Sister..." she mused, speaking while she still could interact with the world. "I didn't know you could do this. Since when...?"

Celestia's expression was unreadable. "Since..." she slowly replied. "Since the day after."

"The day after?" Nightmare Moon wondered, but quickly understood: "You mean the day after I re-originated Uldum? You waited that long to think of a way to stop me? A whole day?"

"It took that long to convince Ammunae and Rajh," she admitted, without a single shred of pride.

"Hm." The Ebon Mare closed her eyes, accepting the end. "I see. You never trusted me, did you?"

"It isn't about trust, Luna." Celestia let her go and painfully got back on four hooves. Her aurora-like tail and mane waved behind her. "I wish-"

"I don't want to hear it," the Night Mare cut her off. She was almost transparent now. "I'll be back. 'Tia. I *will* be back. And I'll see what kind of world you want to make. I'll see what my ponies died for. And if I don't like it..."

Nightmare Moon was gone, but her words lingered on.

"...I swear I'll destroy it."

- - -

The startled voices of her friends quickly snapped her to the present. Gone was the nightmare sphere and the visions of the past. The entire spell had come apart, revealing the real Observatory beneath. It was still very much the crumbling ruin that Twilight remembered from her confrontation with Nightmare Moon a year ago. Ancient stain-glass windows lay cracked in their foundations, stone tiles and masonry were riddled with ivy and moss and steps were slick with centuries of falling rainwater.

The roof, though, was completely gone, revealing a star strewn sky and a bright, full moon.

Even the Blood-Shield that had once encompassed the entire structure had dissolved.

"No! NO! **NO!**" Voidhorn cried from behind a fallen magical platform. In her hooves were a number of charred, ruined artifacts. The air still crackles with spent mana, but the ritual had either imploded or dissolved. It charged the air enough for Twilight's hair to stand on end.

"No!" Voidhorn moaned again, trying to scoop together some dusty ashes. "How can this be?" She looked up at the six approaching mares. "How are you still alive? You can't come back from the Nightmare! You can't!" she snarled, standing back up. "It's impossible!"

"Nothin' more fun than doing the impossible!" Dash gloated with a wide grin.

"Please surrender," Fluttershy suggested. "We don't want to hurt you."

"Surrender. Surrender?" Voidhorn's orange eyes widened with primal, mad fury. "Surrender! Me? Voidhorn?! I will never surrender again!" Instantly, she went from hot to cold and backed away, a small grin on her face. "No. Never. Never. Never-ever. Never-ever-ever-ever! I'm a true believer. I'll die first!"

Slowly lowering her head, she picked something up in her teeth.

A yellow lidless eye.

"All glory... to the Old Gods!" Her jaw tensed to bite down. "And a thousand curses on-"

"-on whom, Night Sky?"

Seven heads turned up to where a pair of pegasi perched on the exposed rafters of the roof. Except they weren't just pegasi. One white and the other dark blue, each bore a prominent, long horn. Taking to the air, they slowly settled to the battle strewn floor of the Observatory.

"Princess!" Twilight joyfully remarked, already lowering her head to bow even as she corrected herself: "Princesses."

The other five Elements of Harmony quickly followed suit.

Only one pony stood, her eyes twitching with rage.

"You!" Voidhorn hissed with pure contempt, vocal despite the twitching eldritch eyeball held in her teeth. "And...!" She started at Luna. The normal, awake, blue and blue Luna. "And... Nightmare Moon..."

"Princess Luna' is fine," the smaller alicorn suggested.

"It's over, Night Sky," Celestia spoke, sounding terribly sad. "Please don't hurt yourself any more."

The cultist's right eye twitched again.

"How?" she growled. "You should be in Canterlot! Nightmare Moon should be rising! You can't be here!"

"We got a letter suggesting we make an appearance," the Solar Princess answered easily.

"As one of my domains, naturally I had teleportation spells installed long ago to take me here in an emergency," Luna explained. Her eyes shot up, and Voidhorn followed them to where a handful of Night Guard pegasi had also taken up positions in the rafters.

Voidhorn looked away from them, turning thoughtful.

At first, she said nothing. Then, taking a step to the side, she saw movement from the Observatory stairway. A pair of dragons emerged, noticing that they had been spotted. The smaller of them rushed forward, up to Twilight's side: Spike. She smiled at him, but wisely kept herself between the young dragon and the still dangerous cultpony they had cornered.

"Amber," Voidhorn called out, to the shape that tried to remain hidden. "So, in the end, you betrayed me? Sacrificed me? How..." She smiled. "How *wonderful*. Consider it one last lesson... passed with flying colors."

"You're wrong!" Twilight raised her voice, and her head, to ensure she was heard. "Ever after what you did to her, torturing her to get more of those... visions, she didn't want to betray you. She didn't want us to

hurt you." She looked down at Spike, and smiled wanly at the fallen unicorn. "I know she still thinks of herself as your friend."

- -

She held the small creature in a cocoon of magic. It was hard to believe this little dragon had come from an egg just two months ago. It was already able to read and speak! Now if only it had learned to better care for itself. Dipping the reptile into a soapy bath, Night Sky 'tsked' as it splashed playfully with its arms and wings. The Compendium described this dragon as a 'bronze' drake. Very rare.

Celestia would be arriving later to check on it. Everything had to be perfect.

The unicorn filly allowed herself a small smile. She had been admitted into the Academy! She even had a dragon to raise as an assistant! Everypony expected great things from her. She wouldn't disappoint them! She'd prove to be everything they expected and more, and she would start by showing the Princess how well she could care for her new dragon! Her new best friend!

- -

"My friend?" The cultpony snorted, dismissively. "Then perhaps I gave her too much credit."

"Night Sky," Celestia stepped in, but the smaller pony growled and backed away. "What I did to you, I did for the good of all ponykind. The truth *couldn't* come out. Not then. You have to know that."

"Shut up," the mad cultist snarled, jaw clenching. "I'm not a foal. I know! *I just don't care*. Equestria? Ponykind? Why should I care one lick about those abstract things? All I had... all I was... all I ever valued... was my work. My research. And you took it. You burned it. You ruined my life."

Her teeth tightened on C'thun's eye, starting to deform it.

- -

Night Sky cursed and struggled against the guards holding her back.

Maybe, if they had only been earth ponies or pegasi, she could have managed. But Celestia's unicorn guards were well trained. Magical restraints kept her from using spells, and two others easily found her hidden records and copies in the secret locker under the floorboards. Helpless, she could only watch as the Guards tore them floor open and levitated out the locked box. In moments it was open, and the contents dumped onto the ground.

She screamed at them to stop: they already had the copies! Those were the original manuscripts! The very first translations of the Mare in the Moon myth as recorded by the Diamond Dogs, Griffins and Tol'vir! It had taken years of work and thousands of miles of travel to pick fact from falsehood - to prove that the legend was real!

It was futile. Pointless.

The Guards took the originals. Like the copies, they would be hidden or burned. The truth would be suppressed. Why? Why? Why was She doing this? Equestria deserved to know the truth about Nightmare Moon. They needed to be prepared for if she returned. They needed to be ready to rally. To find the Elements of Harmony. To protect Equestria!

Didn't they?

Pawing through the remains of her research; the tattered, fractured, ruins of her academic career, Night Sky felt a bitter hatred spread through her veins. Something brushed up alongside the unicorn mare, and she blinked, the sick, angry feeling receding back into her mind, the roar becoming a whisper. Looking down, she saw Amber trying to pull together some of the remaining papers: trying to salvage what was left behind. Her scaled hands held paper remains, shredded and burned.

When - with a gentle breath of sand and time - the bronze drake brought new life to the destroyed scrolls. Paper de-shredded, coming back together, moving against the stream of time itself. Manuscripts restored themselves! Night Sky watched with awe and affection, smiling for

the first time since she had been ejected from the Academy of Arcane Sciences in disgrace.

Amber held up the restored scrolls.

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding tired. "This was all I think I can save."

"It's a start!" Night Sky promised. She reached out to the young dragon and embraced her tightly. "We'll make them pay. All of them."

- -

"You sacrificed me." With hate in her fading orange eyes, Night Sky's body started to shake as she held back laughter. "Everything I did after that, every life I sacrificed for my purposes, I did it in your image, Princess. You threw away my life, my research, my respectability, to protect your precious little sister. So yes... I understand how important she is to you... to the world. But do you understand what you took from me?"

She suddenly all but shouted, "Do you?!"

Celestia's mane fell as she nodded. "Please don't do this, Night Sky."

"You never did teach me the power of friendship..." Voidhorn wrapped her lips around C'thun's eye - and bit down with a wet splurtch, swallowing the mass in one gulp.

"But I'll teach you something, Princess. No matter what happens to me... a thousand knives wait for you in the darkness! The Twilight... Cult..." She gasped, spitting up blood. "Will Destroy you!" She gagged, only managing to force out three final words: "**All of you!**"

The Solar Princess cantered back, shielding herself as Voidhorn fell, twitching and hissing. Dark, ruinous power invaded her from without and within. Strange, alien flesh slouched over hooves and flanks. For just a moment, as one power faded to be replaced by another, a cutie mark was visible: an open book, with stars inside it. Then it disappeared beneath the growing horror.

A faceless, tentacles maw gasped for air.

Celestia shook her head, eyes melancholy. "Night Sky..."

"She's gone." Luna stepped forward, wings warding everypony else back. Celestia seemed on the verge of objecting, but her sister shot her a look, laced by sharp green eyes. "The Night is my domain. This is my castle. My responsibility."

Voidhorn's new form, that of a Faceless One, stood on two misshapen legs. There was nothing left of the pony she had once been, warped far beyond comprehension. Lidless yellow eyes twitched and started through flaps in purple muscle, and barbed tentacles covered the hideous arms and back like transplants from a kraken. Slurred, wet sounds - like words - slipped from its mouth, painful to listen to.

"By the grace of Elune, and the authority vested in me by the Titans..." Luna faced the growing monstrosity. "*Star. Fall.*"

A beam of starlight fell, engulfing the gibbering Faceless One. It cringed at the light, but betraying some instinct or fragment of its previous self, the living fragment of the Old Gods hesitated... and looked upwards with awe. Tentacles waving, it reached up, as if to grasp the source of the starlight.

A pulse traveled down the beam: an arcane hammer powered by the spiritual power of the Moon. The Faceless One that had once been Voidhorn vanished, and with a crack of thunder, so did a good portion of the Observatory. Masonry crumpled like paper and the floor fell in, burying two ruined floors below in a hail of debris. Dust and ash kicked up and the rest of the far wall came apart, chunks of it raining down off the edge of the Observatory. In the time it took to pick a flower, the northeast corner of the building was a smoking, slanted wreck.

At last. It was over.

- - -

Twilight Sparkle got achievement [Soul Searching] !
Twilight Sparkle got achievement [Castle of the Sisters] !
Rarity got achievement [Soul Searching] !
Rarity got achievement [Castle of the Sisters] !
Applejack got achievement [Soul Searching] !
Applejack got achievement [Castle of the Sisters] !
Fluttershy got achievement [Soul Searching] !
Fluttershy got achievement [Castle of the Sisters] !
Pinkie Pie got achievement [Soul Searching] !
Pinkie Pie got achievement [Castle of the Sisters] !

- - -

The trip back down was easier, though slower, than the one the mane six had endured on their way up. There were also no deaths, though Pinkie Pie did take some falling damage due to excessive bouncing and jumping down flights of steps. Royal Guards were busy collecting wounded cultists for incarceration and Luna's Night Guard kept the uppermost level secured. Voidhorn's cache had included some rare items, but most of what had been recovered had been artifacts used in her ritual.

There was no sign of the ogre ambassador from Cho'gall's main branch Twilight Cult.

Luna didn't seem too preoccupied with the search for the two headed sorcerer, however. If he turned up, it wouldn't end well for him. Instead, she levitated the magical artifacts that had been used to invade her dreams and personally set to work taking notes. She spoke little and kept in step with Celestia as the Princess and the Elements of Harmony slowly made their way down to ground level.

Juggling a dozen items, and a sizeable chest to later store them in, the Moon Princess still had enough presence of mind to notice a pair of rose colored eyes staring her way...

"Can I help you with something?" she asked, still logging what had been recovered.

Rainbow Dash started at being found out, but caught herself and nodded. "Well, I, ah... I was wondering... is any of that stuff there like a 'record of cutie marks' or something?"

"Oh yes, that's right," Rarity chimed in from the other side of Celestia. "Sweetie Belle and her friends had that quest for us."

"A record of cutie marks?" the Princess herself asked, glancing at the items floating around her younger sister.

"I believe they mean this," Luna answered, moving one of the artifacts to the right for the larger alicorn to see. It was a seamless metal disk, the surface indented with slowing lines of solid amethyst. For those aware of such things - and there weren't many - it was a Titan artifact. Celestia's one visible eye widened a bit as she realized what it had to be.

"This is... I see," she chuckled. "So you held on to that all this time?"

"It had some meaning to me," Luna admitted, and considered what to do. A small smile gracing her muzzle, she floated the disk past Celestia to her prize student. "You can borrow it if you want, though... who did you say you planned to give it to?"

"The Cutie Mark Crusaders," Dash explained, only to realize that there was no way the Princess knew about -

"Oh, them," Luna mused.

"I have an alt in that guild," Celestia agreed.

"What." Twilight, Rarity, Applejack and Rainbow Dash all managed to say it at the same time.

"We were their fourth and fifth guild signatures," Celestia explained, her eye making a happy crescent.

"You're both members of the Cutie Mark Crusaders?" Twilight asked, incredulous. "Seriously?"

"Our alts are members," the regal white Princess corrected. "Sadly, I couldn't join as myself. It isn't allowed."

"Oh! Hey! My bank toon needs a guild, too!" Pinkie Pie enthusiastically jumped in. "Do they RP?" She gave a happy little bounce. "Dashie's been telling me all about the fun she had ERPing and I-"

"Shut up!" A rainbow blur grabbed the party pony in a headlock. "Don't tell the Princesses about that!"

"What on Equestria is this 'alt' thing?" Twilight hung her head. "I swear, I'm surrounded by crazy."

"At least it's a fun kind of crazy," Spike noted, riding as always on her back and comfortably reclined against her neck.

"Regardless, I believe those three plan to give the Titan Disks to Brann," Celestia continued, nodding thoughtfully to herself.

"Brann?" Luna inquired.

"Brann Bronzebeard," the Solar alicorn answered.

"Wait, you mean the 'foremost authority on ancient dwarven and Titan archaeology' Brann Bronzebeard?" Twilight asked, recognizing the name with more than passing interest.

"That's him." Celestia seemed quite amused by the growing stars in her student's eyes. "I'm sure he'll be quite grateful. Were a pony interested in archaeology, I believe she would be quite excited by the chance to meet such a scholar."

Twilight giggled like a schoolfilly, but quickly caught herself and forced on a straight face. "I - I believe he could answer some questions I have about his writings regarding Ulduar."

"But what is it?" Dash asked, referring to the disk itself.

"That," Luna answered, slowly descending the stairs. "Was something I borrowed when I left... an old home, long ago. Among a few other things, it records when Big Sister and myself were given our cutie marks, and the first five thousand marks bestowed on ponykind. Every pony alive today is descended from those five thousand, and every cutie mark is based on them as well."

"As you can imagine," she quickly added, in the stunned silence that followed. "It is of some historic value. Once Lord Bronzebeard is done studying it, I would appreciate it eventually being returned."

"Neat!" the prismatic pegasus summed up her own thoughts.

"The cutie marks a' all our great ancestors?" Applejack whistled, and tipped back her hat. "Ain't that a find?"

"Any other loot?" Dash trotted closer to the former night mare, now just Princess. "I mean, we didn't get anything from Voidhorn, and usually bosses drop epic loot and stuff! Or tier pieces!"

"Or a hawkstrider!" Pinkie Pie popped up next to the alicorn, causing Luna to jump a bit in surprise. "Oh! Oh! Or a raptor mount! You can't get raptor mounts as Alliance, and they look pretty cool! I mean, *yeah*, you can get the archaeology raptor mount, but who wants to do all that lame archaeology? Flying from one fossil dig site to another? BORING! Oh! Or Ashes of Al'ar! I wanna ride the Phoenix God, but the last time I tried to get into Tempest Keep, everyone was like: LOL! What level are you? How'd you even get to Outland? GTFO! But anyway, what kinda super loot do ya have for us, huh huh huh?"

"You know we'll already be getting some stuff for the Marks we collected," Twilight suggested. "You don't have to give us anything, Princess Luna."

"That's right... but, um..." Fluttershy muttered. "You don't have any pets in there, do you?"

Luna slowly shook her head in amusement. "You six are an odd bunch, you know that? Kind of like..." she trailed off, and coughed, picking

out two recovered artifacts and bringing them to eye level. "Well, maybe I do have something for you... something appropriate. Think of them as heirlooms."

First, she floated over a cloth belt. The color was a bit faded, but a little touching up would restore it to working order. It was otherwise rather simple: a silk sash with a touch of elementium filigree in place of a buckle. Twilight carefully took the gift with her own magic, and immediately felt the power of the artifact. A familiar power.

"The Cord of Arcane Flows," she identified it. "This used to belong to...?"

Luna nodded. "That's right. I think they'd be glad to know the Elements of Harmony were in good hooves."

The Princess then floated over an icy pair of shoulders to the group's paladin, the 'Mantle of Feather and Frost.' It didn't appear to be much, since it was made of cloudstuff, but once Dash put the mantle on, it reformed out of the air, becoming solid. Sleek, snowy clouds covered her upper arms and part of her back, trailing snowflakes behind her as she moved.

"Cool!" the cool blue paladin did a little flip in the air, adding a touch of frost to her rainbow. "Very cool!"

Next, Fluttershy received a piece of polished, ornamental amber resin containing a single entombed flower, still in full bloom: a starburst of red encased in gold. A bronze ring encircled the oval jewel. The timid druid cupped it gently in her hooves, eyes closed as she felt the power of the natural energy within the ancient fossil.

"Talisman of Everlasting Flowers," she whispered, having identified spells of her own. She bowed to Luna, hugging the healing trinket to her chest with one arm. "Thank you so much."

Luna smiled and inclined her head to the young mare.

"I wondered if I should give this to you, Big Sister..." she said, her tone more morose as she considered the silver and mayan-blue cloth

she had discovered. The textile was in remarkably good shape, preserved by holy magic that still shined through, despite centuries past.

"Thank you," Celestia replied, she but shook her head in the negative. "But as you said, he would want it passed down."

"This once belonged to a Prince," Luna explained, and passed the cloth on to Rarity, the present Element of Generosity.

"He hated being called it, though," the older Princess noted with a distant look. "He was much happier once he found his true calling."

"This fabric is... magnificent..." Rarity accepted the prayer shawl with reverence. At her touch, it shimmered with tiny lights, like pinprick sized diamonds. It was almost like silk trapped between material and immaterial.

"The Vestments of Fallen Stars," she whispered, and to Luna and Celestia, she bowed her head. "I'll take good care of it."

"I'm not even sure how anyone found this," Luna wondered, floating over a pony-sized ring to the resident apple farmer and warrior. "It wouldn't have been among my things, I don't think."

Applejack examined the 'ring' - it was meant to fit between the knee and fetlock and slid easily over her hoof once she removed her armored glove. There was nothing fancy about it from looks alone: it was simple, well wrought steel, snug but not uncomfortable. Yet an old Earth Pony magic was suffused into the artifact, filling the farmer with strength and resilience.

"Iron Band of Truth," Applejack said, and tipped her hat. "Ah like it."

"Oh oh oh! Finally! Me! Me! What'do I get? Huh? A mace? Something with a troll on it? Something on fire? I like fire! Oh! Is it a troll on fire! That's also a mace!? I'll go enhancement if I can dual wield burning trolls!"

"I'm not sure what to make of it myself. Happy Days was... a little weird." Luna floated over another ring. This one with a simple gem set in it.

"A ring?" Pinkie Pie wondered, quickly slipping it on while giggling. "Hm. It feels funny!" Looking down, she saw that the gem had turned bright green. "Hey! Green!"

Sticking out her tongue, her blue eyes widened into saucers as the green turned pink.

"And now it's pink! He-he! I love pink!"

"Ancient Mood Ring," Celestia mused, watching Pinkie - like all the others - with a confused expression. "An artifact of terrible power..."

"Ooooooh. Blue? Wait, is the ring making me blue, or I am making the ring blue? Or is someone making us **both** blue?" Pinkie's philosophical contemplation was broken as the color changed again, distracting her from a certain wall. "Oh! Fuchsia!"

Just in time, too, as the eight ponies finally emerged from the Observatory and into the open air of the pavilion courtyard. There, rows of Royal Guards and dozens of freed ponies and diamond dogs were all waiting, flanking the main walkway. Celestia and Luna paused, subtly letting Twilight and her five friends move forward, not yet noticing they were being put into the forefront.

Captain Morning Star stamped one hoof against the stone floor in salute -

And so did every Royal Guard, unicorns, pegasi and earth ponies.

"HO-A!" The barked in respect. A few feet from Twilight, Dash blushed and chuckled. Fluttershy shrunk a bit at the attention. Rarity self-consciously tried to fix her still frazzled mane. Applejack simply smirked. Twilight looked back and saw Celestia urging her forward with a not so subtle gesture with her hoof.

"Well done, little ponies," Morning Star told them, and saluted. "Well done."

"Indeed." Rex Rustpaw wasn't far behind. The old geomancer bowed his head respectfully. "You and yours will always be welcome among the Rustpaw."

Among the crowd, Ice Breaker waved, together with some of his rescued friends. "Thanks again!" he shouted over the others. "I'll pay you fillies back some day! That's a promise!"

Even the many wounded ponies they had rescued were out to see them off, despite bandages and crutches and blankets wrapped around shoulders. It was only really then that it sunk in. The Twilight Cult in Everfree was completely dismantled. Even if Voidhorn's last words had been a vow that the evil organization was not gone from the country, at least here and now, it had been kicked to the proverbial curb, and almost a hundred lives had been saved.

It felt... pretty damn good.

"So what now?" the question had been asked by one Rainbow Dash, despite her soaking up the props and cheers from the crowd more than anypony. The paladin gave Twilight a knowing smile.

"What makes you think I have anything planned after this?" the mage asked, ducking her head to hide her own persistent grin.

"Um. The... um... Darkmoon Faire is in Elwynn Forest," Fluttershy suggested, timidly waving to some to a group of patched up pegasi. And one stallion staring at her with hearts in his eyes. Okay. Let's be honest. More than one.

"Ah wouldn't mind seein' Westfall," Applejack kept herself mostly hidden by her stetson hat. "And maybe setting up some apple exportation deals in Stormwind an' Ironforge."

"Well I, for one, have to get back to my boutique," Rarity positively glowed at the adoration and attention of all the ponies - and diamond dogs - they had rescued. "But the Eastern Kingdoms are

renounced for their magical craftsmanship, and I've heard they do simply fascinating things with runecloth..."

"Noblegarden Roadtrip!" Pinkie Pie cheered. "Follow me and I'll have us power-leveled to 85 in no time! I'll just need access to your accounts and-"

"Ha! As if I'd ever give you my password!"

"But I already know your password, Dashie! It's 'Cooler20'"

"... no it... isn't. It's, uhhh... something else. But definitely not that."

"Um. you should just use an authenticator. That's how I got my core hound pet. See?"

"My word, what is that!"

"Argh! Hey! Why does everything try and eat me?! Bright colors are supposed to be a deterrent!"

Hidden behind Celestia's legs, an auburn blank-flank filly watched the mares with confusion.

'Hard to believe, isn't it Night Sky?' Amber thought, chuckling as the rainbow pony tried to shake off the hungry core hound pup. It was an amusing sight, but her mood quickly turned somber.

'The Elements of Harmony... if only we had met them a year ago. Maybe then it wouldn't have been too late for you.' Reptilian eyes narrowed. *"...I'll watch them... and see if their future is as the sands of time predicted.'*

- - -

By the time they arrived in Ponyville, it was past midnight.

Ponyville was still bustling with some lingering activity: various adventurers were still up and about, enjoying themselves at taverns or inns.

Most of the town residents, however, were fast asleep. By one o'clock, the last of the late night raiders would be returning, chiming one after another as their hearthstones brought them to innkeepers for one last hot meal and a warm bed after a night of wiping on one boss or another in some far-off land.

With the increasing number of flying mounts used, and the late hour, no one noticed three royal chariots discretely come down on the edge of town in land technically owned by Sweet Apple Acres. Not wanting to cause a stir, the Princesses had expressed their preference to come and go with a minimum of interference. That meant no fly-bys of Ponyville proper.

As the mane six jumped from the chariots, they chatted amongst themselves, planning for the future. Of them, Twilight was the first to turn back to the chariot she had left, and bow.

"Princess," she said, Spike sleeping on her back. "Thank you once again."

"We are the ones who should be thanking you, Twilight Sparkle," Luna answered for her sister. She and Fluttershy had shared a quiet ride together, just as Twilight had ridden alongside Celestia in her chariot. The dark alicorn was not normally very talkative.

But now, she stepped down from the golden caisson to return the bow.

"I feel ready to face a great many things now," she explained, green eyes glowing faintly in the dark. "Things I have been avoiding... and neglecting... for far too long."

"It was an honor to help," Twilight replied, and saw her mentor smiling. "I... I learned something about the magic of friendship. Would you like to hear it, Princess?"

"Oh," she remarked, perking up. "That would be wonderful, Twilight. What did you learn?"

The studious unicorn trotted over to the circle of her friends. "I learned that... well, I learned a lot of things over the last few days, but I think the most relevant is that no pony can live without something important to them. I don't mean a cutie mark either, or a 'special talent.' I mean something to believe in... another pony, an important friend or ideal... the magic of friendship comes from the part of ourselves that we share with others, and the part of others that they share with us."

"We encountered ponies, and... even diamond dogs... who fought for reasons we don't agree with. Ones we probably won't ever really understand. But I *wanted* to understand, even if I can only scratch the surface. I don't think we'll ever be able to find common ground with the Twilight Cult, but that doesn't mean friendship is a magic unique to ponies. Maybe Equestria being reunited with the rest of the world will be a good thing. For all of us."

She smirked, eyes twinkling. "Or maybe not. But I'll find out eventually. I still have a lot to learn."

"As do I, Twilight," Celestia agreed, pride in her student clear for all to hear. "As do we all."

"Oh! Oh! And I learned to be careful where you leave your totems or you could facepull and wipe your group! And to only pop Heroism during a burn phase!"

"Heh! And I learned that the best party isn't the one with the most hardcore, badass fighters or whatever! It's your friends!" Rainbow Dash gave the pink earth pony a playful nudge. "Because friends stick together, even when things don't go perfectly!"

Since they all seemed to be taking turns anyway, Applejack inclined her head. "Ah'd heard it before, but I really learned first-hoof that it ain't easy bein' a tank. I took a beatin' to high heaven, but ah gotta say, it was worth every minute ta know every blow Ah took was one my friends didn't have'tah."

"What about you, Rarity?" Twilight asked the first of two silent members of their party. "What did you learn?"

"Oh, nothing much," the regal unicorn with the rather burned purple mane replied. "I learned that resurrection magic is sadly lacking when it comes to cosmetics. That dungeons, although filled with treasure, tend to be rather filthy. I learned to start packing wet-naps. I gained a few levels in tailoring. I also learned it is much cheaper to contract diamond dogs to retrieve gems for you rather than do it yourself. These 'Rustpaw dailies' have a chance to drop rare jewelcrafting recipes! And I've heard they have mounts and a pet, too."

"Really? A pet? Like... a little puppy?"

"Rarity!" By the objection, Spike was clearly back among the waking world. "Don't farm rep with the guys that kidnapped you! I can help you dig up gems, too! Don't you want Spike Rep? I already have a daily!"

"Yes, I heard. To *give* you gems. Not to *get* them."

"...um... oh yeah."

Twilight rolled her eyes. "What about you, Fluttershy?" She asked the golden pegasus. "Did you learn anything about friendship?"

"Um. Maybe," the druid demurred. "That is..."

"Go on! I'm sure Princess Celestia can't wait to hear!"

"I. um. Well... if you really want to know..." Fluttershy dipped her head to hide behind her slowing pink mane. "...a while back, after I first learned how to be a druid, after we saved the animals of the forest from the fires, I... had a bad experience. I was so sure I wanted to be a healer: a restoration type druid. I wanted to help everyone I could. Some friends I made decided to go on another adventure, and they asked me to come with them to help heal."

"I wasn't sure I was ready, but they didn't have another healer, so I went along," she explained with a sad look. "I was just learning back then and I... didn't do very well. No one died, not permanently, but the group broke up. I had to make my way home by myself...."

"Some friends!" Dash interrupted with an angry huff.

"Well, um, as you can guess," Fluttershy continued, despite the interruption. "I eventually got back. I'd practiced more, but I still wasn't that confident of myself. I wondered if maybe I was wrong? Maybe I wasn't cut out for healing. It isn't like anypony has a cutie mark telling her what her class and spec should be." The timid druid had everyone's attention, and gulped.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she continued, "I told myself: one more time. Don't let your friends down. If you can't pull it off this time, you'll never be able to." She cracked a smile and raised her head. "And, um... I guess the last two days taught me that I do like healing. *I really like it.* I like being a resto-druid. I really do."

Rainbow Dash smirked and slid up to her friend's side. "So basically..."

"You want to be..." Pinkie Pie continued, taking the other side.

"A tree!" Fluttershy declared.

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The image was grainy, not simply from age, but repeated use.

It had been played and replayed, over and over, a great many times over tens of centuries.

The sky was vast and dark, but patchwork. Stars were still in the process of being properly set in place; some were finished, others works in progress. Among them all, the Moon was a pure circle of white light, without imperfections of any sort. The floor shifted slightly, distant parts of it rising and moving apart from the others. As they did, it became clear: it wasn't a floor, or the ground.

It was a single, giant hand.

"Come, Luna. You can do this." A deep, eternal voice spoke like a metallic chorus. "You were created to do this."

A tiny, dark blue speck on the hand grew closer, and a bit more distinct. It was one of several, with various shapes and sizes. Next to the dark blue speck was a white one with contrasting pink.

A giggle came from that white and pink shape. "Do you want me to help?"

"I'll do it!" a third voice, that of the dark blue mote, quickly replied. "You just watch me! I'll do it!"

A light blue mane flowed as the filly looked up at the featureless white Moon. *Elune*. In it's pure, original form. Slowly, fretfully, the tiny alicorn raised her hooves and spread her wings -

And the Moon moved.

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SPECIAL ADDENDUM

[GM] Shadowed whispers: "Rainbow Dash. Do you have a moment to chat?"

Rainbow Dash whispers: "Oh, hey, a GM! Is this about my ticket? One sec."

Rainbow Dash whispers: "Okay! Ready!"

[GM] Shadowed whispers: "According to this, you didn't get the achievements for your Castle of the Two Sisters run?"

Rainbow Dash whispers: "Darn right! I was running it with my friends and after we beat Voidhorn they all got the Soul Searching achievement and the completion achievement."

Rainbow Dash whispers: "I didn't notice that I didn't have it until... until someone pointed it out. I don't think I need to say who."

[GM] Shadowed whispers: "The Instance ID was 5673027?"

Rainbow Dash whispers: "I even got loot from the boss and I didn't die or zone out or anything!"

[GM] Shadowed whispers: "I can confirm that you were there for the kill, and I'm going to give you the achievement credit you missed. We're still experiencing problems with the new 6-man instances and apologize for any inconvenience caused."

Rainbow Dash whispers: "No problem! Thanks for getting back to me so fast!"

Rainbow Dash got achievement [Soul Searching] !

Rainbow Dash got achievement [Castle of the Sisters] !

Rainbow Dash whispers: "Woot!!"

[GM] Shadowed whispers: "Is there anything else I can help with while I'm here?"

Rainbow Dash whispers: "I think that's it!"

Rainbow Dash whispers: "...Actually, wait! I was wondering something."

Rainbow Dash whispers: "I'm working on unlocking the Wonderbolt reputation dailies and I noticed there's another reputation for the Shadowbolts. Is there a way to gain one rep without losing the other?"

[GM] Shadowed whispers: "Sorry. Like Aldor and Scryer and Frenzyheart and Oracles, you can only align with one opposing faction at a time."

Rainbow Dash whispers: "But I could get, say, Shadowbolt rep to exalted, get the title, uniform and tabard and other goodies... and then switch and

work Wonderbolt rep up to get the other title and uniform? And then have both at the same time?"

[GM] Shadowed whispers: "Theoretically yes."

Rainbow Dash whispers: "Awesome. Hehehehe! This is gonna be sooooo cool!"

[GM] Shadowed whispers: "Good luck out there!"