



# Beyond Judgement

By Solar Phoenix

# Table of Contents:

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Twilight's Discovery</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>The Accident</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Strange Ponies</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Everfree Expedition</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Stronghold Siege</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Dissolution</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Arrival</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Interrogation</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Reconstruction</b>	<b>97</b>

# Chapter 1

## Twilight's Discovery

It happened by pure chance; A simple connection that almost wasn't made. Had a single synapse in Twilight's mind fired differently in that moment she would have never pieced together the first two parts of a puzzle she didn't know existed.

Twilight was standing in her basement, pouring over a new book she had received from Canterlot the day before: *The Safety Guide to Advanced Magic*. She had been looking forward to delving into this one herself since the incident with Trixie, so extra precautions were taken to ensure that she wasn't disturbed. Every entryway into the building was closed, locked, and if possible, bolted. The door to the basement itself was even barricaded with a spare bookshelf, for good measure. Hoof written notes were placed neatly on the front door and the windows saying that Twilight was not to be disturbed and that the library was closed for the day.

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"Is that really necessary?" Spike had asked her earlier after hanging the last sign. "You don't have to say the library's closed. You're the only pony around who actually reads any of this stuff."

"That's besides the point!" Twilight replied, holding her head high and placing her hoof proudly on her chest. "The lack of business at this library should have no bearing on how I conduct it. It's a matter of principle."

"If that's the case, than you wouldn't close the place and do your studying somewhere else."

"No, this book is more important than the library."

Spike slapped his hand on his face and sighed. "Whatever."

"Don't worry, Spike, I've got a special job for you to do while I'm studying." Twilight said, patting the dragon's head.

Annoyed, Spike swatted the hoof away, and then saluted at the idea of being given a task. “Right! What do you need?” he said, and produced a parchment and quill.

“First, I need you to go to Sweet Apple Acres and get me the largest apple you can find from the smallest tree in her grove. Then, I want you to go to Carousel Boutique and get me three ounces of powdered rubies – just don't eat it. Finally, I want you to go to Zecora's and bring me a jug of potion-grade purified water. Purify it yourself if you have to. Got all that?”

“Purified ... water. Got it!” Spike said as he finished his dictation. “Wow, that's one heck of a list. It'll take me all day to get this stuff!”

Twilight used her magic to open the front door, and started to push Spike out through it with her head. “Well then, I guess you'd better get on that. Goodbye Spike. Remember, don't come back until you've got everything!”

Caught off guard and physically off balance by Twilight's insistence, Spike hesitated before closing the door. “Jeeze, it's like you're trying to get rid of me, or something. What's all this for, anyway?”

“I'll tell you when you get back. Hurry, though, you've got a lot to do and daylight's burning!”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm on it.” Spike said, turning to leave and waving back. “Have fun studying.”

Twilight sighed with relief as she magically closed the door. She then retrieved a quill and the checklist she had hidden from the baby dragon in the drawer of her study table. “Send Spike on a pointless errand that will keep him occupied all day ... Check!” she said, ticking off the final item.

Spike was surprisingly resourceful on his errands, and never returned empty handed without good reason. So just to make sure he wouldn't get back until nightfall, Twilight had asked Zecora to spend the afternoon “keeping him busy” with that water – if it wasn't too much trouble, of course.

“If a stall tactic is what you need, have no fear, you can count on me!” Zecora reassured her. “He'll spend all day on a useless brew, and once upon nightfall, I'll send him home to you.”

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All the effort of closing up the library and sending Spike out on a pointless quest wasn't just for her own peace of mind, but for safety's sake. After all, Twilight was preparing to study a safety manual, and it's impossible to practice safety during dangerous spells without, well, danger. A stray bolt of energy in an open field could go anywhere, but in her basement, at least she was contained. The downstairs room was at least as large as the main room upstairs, but the walls were of solid rock. The roots of the great old tree the library was carved out of weaved and tangled around the walls. Nooks and crannies carved out of the underground stump and stone served as shelves for books and other supplies. Other than that, the basement was left mostly empty. She usually reserved this place for running larger experiments like this. Twilight herself would be alright, probably, she just wanted to make sure everyone else would be, at least.

Back when Twilight had faced the grumpy Ursa Minor, she had used every bit of her magical power to ease him back to sleep. More power than she was aware she had at the time. The adrenaline rush at the time kept her going afterward, but she paid for it the next day with a terrible ache all through her body, especially her chest, head and, somehow, even her horn. She refused to pour that much energy into a spell until she could get her hooves on the *Safety Guide for Advanced Magic*.

And so, barricaded and secluded in her basement, Twilight spent hours reading through the first half of *The Guide*. Actual testing of her most difficult spells would have to come after she thoroughly studied the book, perhaps even memorized it. After all, the second most important thing than being accurate is being safe. She took copious notes and kept them stacked nearby. Having anticipated the need for cross referencing some information, she made of a point of selecting every possible book she expected to need and placed them in the shelf she barricaded the door with. After verifying everything she could, it wasn't long before each and every one of those books were stacked in a pile around her. It was one of the most intense study sessions she had ever done.

As she began to get a migraine, Twilight needed to take a breather; so said *The Safety Guide for Advanced Studying* she had read long ago. This break was more or less involuntary as she collapsed on her side and several books, notes, and quills fell around her. One such note landed on her face, which she blew away with a snort.

“So tired ... my head ... but I can't quit.” Twilight mumbled to herself. “If I'm going to keep learning magic, I have to be able to learn even stronger spells ... If I can't do that safely, I'm no good ... This is too important ... I can't let Celestia down.”

Twilight's heart wanted to go on, but her mind wouldn't. So, she rolled over with her head on a book as a pillow and allowed herself a small nap. Again, this was largely involuntary; she had actually rolled over because she landed with the spine of a book wedged against her own as she fell. Once she turned and her cheek touched the cool, soft leather binding of the other book it was lights out.

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A few hours later, Twilight eased back into consciousness. She slowly staggered onto her hooves and looked around, dreary-eyed.

“The first thing to do after falling asleep during a study session is to determine where you were before you passed out.” Twilight said to herself, quoting *The Safety Guide to Advanced Studying* with a little bit of a dazed slur and a droopy eyelid

Twilight shook her head a bit to regain her composure and started to collect and organize everything around her, glancing through all her notes and the open pages of the books where they lay. They all swirled around her in a purple aura of magic before settling into their places. “Also, check any paper products in the vicinity of where your head was to ensure that you didn't drool on anything. If you did, immediately rewrite any notes, and tally the cost of any borrowed books that have been damaged.” she continued.

The thought of harming that wonderful book that was kind enough to be her pillow was enough to startle Twilight back into focus. She magically lifted it up to her face and examined it all over in a panic. Seeing that it was alright,

she sighed deeply and indulged herself with one last nudge of the cheek before placing it down with the others.

“Okay, that's enough fooling around. Back to work.” Twilight said, delving back into *The Guide*.

The particular chapter she was on was about how a unicorn can tell if she is pushing her magic too hard. “ ... *It is difficult to verify what it is like to continue to increase the power of a spell with this kind of suicidal intensity as unicorns have forfeited their lives in this manner. However, there are records of a few unicorns that have pushed themselves to the brink and survived. Descriptions vary, but they all seem to involve the caster's physical feelings becoming numb. Almost as though the pony's neurological system is imploding in on itself into the very center of her body.*”

This line sounded familiar to Twilight. She thought hard, and searched her memory for where it was. “Feeling ... center of body ... I've heard that in a spell before ... What was it? ... Ah! A detection spell!”

*Click.* The first two pieces of the puzzle came together.

Abandoning her post, Twilight ran upstairs. Taking a moment to dislodge the bookshelf from the door, she went back into the main room of the library and began to search frantically for the *Mind's Eye: A Compendium of Sensory Spells* book she was looking for. The main room of the library was about two stories tall, all carved out from the inside of the tree. The lower level was where most of the books and other things were kept in shelves carved out from the wood. Floral design carvings adorned the shelves and other surfaces along the walls and ceiling. At the upper level there were balconies both on the outside and the inside, which also included Twilight and Spike's bedroom.

“Oh, if only Spike were around, he'd know where it was ... Ah, ha!”

There it was, all the way in the back of the book, the most difficult spell listed in the “Sensing Ponies” chapter. “*All living creatures seem to emit a kind of energy. Studying this energy is extremely difficult as only this, the most advanced sensory spell ever conceived, is able to detect it. If a pony is able to successfully cast this spell, she will be able to feel the energy in*



*other creatures. This energy is always focused in the center of its body, around the heart."*

"Oh, wow, so this detection spell senses the energy of a pony. The same energy that fades when a pony ... uses too much magic?" Twilight whispered to herself. Something didn't seem quite right about that.

It was all getting a little spooky. But Twilight knew to be prepared for that when she read that unicorns had died from pushing themselves too hard. "Wait, I've heard that before too ... Sensing the heart ... Oh! It was in a story I read from a war history book!"

*Click.* Another piece fit together.

This story took twilight a little longer to find in all the history books. She was afraid she wouldn't find it at all since the story wasn't about magic, but about a scout who's companion was mortally injured during a failed mission: *"She was bleeding so much, I couldn't do anything about it. I don't know healing magic, I just sense things. A fat lot of good it was doing us now! I kept telling her she would be alright soon, but she never said anything back. I just held her in my hooves. All I could do was sense. I sensed her blood spill slowly on the ground. I sensed her breathing slow. I sensed her heart stop. I sensed her energy fade away. I sensed all of it."*

A chill went down Twilight's spine as she read the passage. But it all made sense. The energy these books were all talking about wasn't just magic or feeling, it was the life force of a pony. "I've read about the idea of a life force before ... Medical books! I need healing spells!"

*Click, click, click.* The pieces were all coming together. Twilight was figuring something out, but she wasn't sure what it was yet. She had completely forgotten about magical safety at this point. To the contrary, she was making something very unsafe.

Most of the advanced healing spells Twilight read about made some kind of mention to a life force. It generally involved mending the body in such a way so as to let the energy flow naturally and aid the recovery of a patient. The finer points of this made her feel a bit squeamish. Each new connection made Twilight more and more excited. She was definitely making a big discovery.

"I've gathered enough evidence to prove the existence of a soul!" Twilight shouted, bounding around the room like Pinkie on an exceptionally good day. "I could write a thesis! I could write a book! I could win an award! I could-!"

Twilight stopped suddenly as a new idea dawned on her. She had evidence, but to really prove it she would need more than that. She needed a use for it.

"I need to invent a spell! My very own spell! I've never invented a spell! This kind of thing only happens once in a lifetime!" Twilight gasped. "Celestia will be so proud of me! I just need to think, what can I do with this?! Ah, I know!"

*Click.* Just one last piece left to fall into place.

Twilight recalled another quill and parchment from her desk. She then transcribed everything she had just discovered about the function of life force. The use of a telekinesis spell in combination with the sensory spell she just learned, she theorized how it would be possible to hold onto life force without letting it fade away. Of course, a number of healing spells would be necessary to recover the body of the pony whose life force was already fading. She then read aloud as she wrote the conclusion of her spell. Her writing was calm and steady, but her voice was shaky and ecstatic.

"And so, with the body restored from the initial injury, the life force is then pulled back into the body and allowed to fill back into it. All of this must be done shortly after the injury, since the body will immediately begin to decay. Furthermore, once the life force is faded completely, there is no known way to bring it back. Using these techniques, it is entirely possible to bring a recently dead pony back to life!"

There was a long pause in the library after Twilight finished her writing. The quill and parchment hung in the air as the significance of what she had just written sunk in, her eyes still wide and somewhat crazed. She could bring the dead back to life. She wasn't even sure Celestia herself had that kind of power.

*Click.*

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A few hours later, just as night started to fall, Spike returned from his errands. He struggled to carry a jug of the most pristine water anypony had ever seen, while balanced on the lid was a measuring cup with shimmering red powder and topped with a small, green, unripened apple.

“I'm home, Twilight!” Spike shouted from behind his jug as he came through the door. “Do you have any idea how long it takes to purify all this water? I was blowing fire and boiling this stuff all day!” He set down his spoils from the afternoon, and then puffed out his chest triumphantly. “But I got it all by myself!”

Looking around, he noticed Twilight was nowhere to be found in the main room. Everything was perfectly shelved and organized, just as he left it earlier. “Huh, that's strange. I figured she'd tear this place apart like she always does.”

Spike headed up the staircase and looked for Twilight in the bedroom. “Twilight?! I got the ruby dust too! Rarity just about fainted when I told her I wanted to crush the stuff! Oh, man, that would have been great if she did! Uh, I mean I could have picked her up and carried her to a couch, or something, and show off how strong I am!”

Unable to find Twilight upstairs either, Spike headed back down to look in the basement. He was starting to get a little worried; she never stays out late unless Pinkie's throwing a party or something. She wouldn't be anywhere but here while she's studying, but why wasn't she responding? “The apple was the hard part! Applejack's got all kinds of small trees, and most of them don't even have apples! The only one on any of them is this lump!”

Spike reached for the door to the basement and opened it. “Twilight?”

Sure enough, there Twilight was after all. She was just finishing up cleaning the last of her mess from earlier that day. Having apparently been too focused, or too distracted, to hear Spike shouting earlier, his short question

startled her and she flinched. The book she was putting back also jerked, knocking a few more on the floor.

“Ah! Oh! Spike, you're home!” Twilight replied, sounding a bit jittery.

“I got everything you wanted. You okay, Twilight?”

“Yes, I'm fine, thank you. Did you find everything you needed alright?” She asked, starting to pick up the books she dropped.

“Nah, nothing you're number one assistant couldn't handle!” Spike said, puffing up his chest again. “But wait, you're the one who needed all this junk. What's it for anyway?”

Twilight trotted – cantered – up the staircase past Spike. “Oh, nothing, don't worry about it.”

“Nothing!” Spike shouted, irritated. “I spent all day getting this stuff, and you don't even want it?”

Turning back, Twilight said “I'm sorry, thank you for getting all this for me, really. I just don't need it right now is what I mean. It's been a long day, I think I just need to go to bed.”

“If you say so.” Spike said, then stretched and yawned. “Yeah, I'm worn out too. I walked clear across Ponyville today. It's like somepony picked the longest errand for me on purpose.” He said, raising an eyebrow at Twilight.

Twilight didn't respond, and just continued cantering up to her bed. A brief look of concern flashed across Spike's face. He didn't know what to make of her behavior, so he just shrugged it off. “Ponies!” he thought dismissively.

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After having dinner by himself, Spike went up to the balcony to his own basket bed at the foot of Twilight's. She seemed sound asleep so he climbed in and started to settle down for the night.

“Um, Spike?” Somepony whispered.

The voice was so soft, Spike thought it may have been Fluttershy for a second before he realized it was coming from Twilight, who had lifted her head. "Yeah?" He replied.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Can it wait until tomorrow?"

"It's just that ... Would you mind sleeping over here with me tonight?"

That caught Spike by surprise. "Huh? But we haven't slept together since you were a filly. Well, except that time you read that headless horse novel. Is that what this is about?"

"Um ... Yes." Twilight replied, forcing a smile.

"Eh, I'm too tired to care right now. Whatever you want." Spike said begrudgingly before hopping onto Twilight's bed and curling into a ball. "Good night, Twilight."

Twilight scooted over a little bit so she could feel Spike's back against her own. "Thanks, Spike."

With the warmth of a familiar body next to hers, Twilight was able to get to sleep a little more easily. But still, she had a nightmare about ponies rising from the dead. Ponies from the past, many of which whose bodies were ravaged by time. They reached for her, calling out to her.

*"Why couldn't you save us, Twilight? Why couldn't you have been here earlier?"*

# Chapter 2

## The Accident

Twilight didn't ask again for Spike to sleep next to her after that night. Although, the nightmares did persist for a few days. Eventually, by forcing her discovery to the back of her mind, and the instructions she had written into the back of some secret location, she was able to largely forget what she learned. Granted, forgetting things was not an easy task for her.

In the following months there was a subtle change in Twilight's attitude. She was aware of the difference, and she knew why it was, but she felt it was for the better nonetheless.

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“Oh, man!” Spike shouted ecstatically from Twilight's back. “Do you think she'll actually do it this time?! Do you think she'll actually pull off another sonic rainboom?!”

“That's the idea.” Twilight said, trotting down the open road. “Dash has been practicing for weeks. I hope she finally does it again.”

It was an excellent day for flight practice. There was a scheduled rainstorm just a few days earlier, and all the clouds had been cleared out since. Taking the opportunity to fly in the bright, shining sun, Rainbow Dash was going to spend the day attempting to perfect her special move, and invited Twilight to watch.

“What's the point of doing the most super-rad trick ever if no one sees me do it?” Dash had argued.

Ignoring the fact that a sonic boom, rain or otherwise, could be heard for dozens of miles, Twilight took the afternoon off to support her friend. Her training grounds, so to speak, were on the outskirts of Ponyville so she had to take a long walk down a country road alongside Everfree forest to get there. Spike was insistent on coming along too, for his own reasons.

“Can you believe I've known her all this time, and I've never seen her do it? This is gonna be so awesome!” Spike said.

“She's only ever done it twice. You weren't even hatched when she did it the first time. Actually, you were hatching just as she did it.”

“I could have been there for the second time, if only somepony had given me that walk-on-clouds power.” Spike said as he poked Twilight's head.

“Ow! Stop it, you know that spell only works on ponies. I would have gladly taken you with us if only your wings would start coming in.”

“Yeah, they should be coming in any day now. I swear, I can feel them.” Spike said, prodding his back.

Twilight giggled and rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say, Spike.”

“You know, I'm surprised we're coming out here at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“It's just that you never used to do stuff like this back in Canterlot. You were always study, study, study. We never did anything fun.” Spike explained. “You remember Moon Dancer? We never actually gave her that present for her birthday.”

Twilight paused for a moment as she remembered that bear Spike had gotten. She laughed to herself and continued trotting. “Of course, silly. That's because I've made such wonderful friends here. Besides, I don't think she liked me that much anyway.”

“I dunno, I think you've been extra friendly lately. Even after we moved here, you were still study, study, instead of study, study, study. But now you're just ... study.” Spike continued. His expression immediately afterward suggested that his statement worked out better in his head.

Twilight giggled some more. “You're not making any sense!”

“Whatever. If it means I get to finally see a sonic rainboom, I ain't complaining.” Spike said, laying down on Twilight's back.

The two of them traveled on for a few minutes longer. Spike relaxed during the journey, but Twilight enjoyed taking everything in, from the birds chirping and the rustles of other little creatures that lived in Everfree. The place wasn't nearly as spooky during the day. She even recited the scientific names of some of the flowers they passed by on the roadside.

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As Twilight and Spike arrived at the end of the field that Rainbow Dash was practicing at, Twilight could tell that her friend was already getting frustrated. Dash was flying in long stretches at a time, before starting to dart around in random directions, muttering angrily to herself. Practicing this move was always hard on her, but at least she wasn't having a mental breakdown like last time.

"Rainbow Dash! We're here! Hello!" Twilight shouted up to her, waving a hoof in the air.

"It's no good, she's too far up there and she's freaking out again." Spike commented. "You're gonna have to get her attention with something."

"Okay, let's try this."

Focusing her willpower into her horn and briefly charging up energy, Twilight prepared to fire a flare into the air. In a burst of purple magic, a bolt shot from her horn, whistled in the air and burst like a firecracker.

The flare only traveled a few meters into the air, and was nowhere near getting Dash's attention.

"Come on, you can do better than that, I know you can." Spike said. "You're the most powerful unicorn in Equestria, remember? Use a bigger spell!"

The words "bigger spell" made Twilight flinch. She hadn't thought of advanced magic since that day.

"Uh, are you sure? Maybe we should just watch from here."



“Are you kidding? Look at her.” Spike said as he gestured to the distant blue pegasus flying around in increasingly erratic patterns. “Does she look like a pegasus that's about to pull off a sonic rainboom? She needs our help.”

“Oh, alright. Stand back.”

“Now that's what I'm talking about! Let's see some real magic!” Spike shouted as he jumped happily off Twilight's back and stood clear.

It was as good a time as any to try out the safety techniques Twilight read about before. She widened her stance and felt the support of the ground beneath and around her hooves, bracing her like an unbreakable tower. The only way to get a flare that high was to fire it out of her horn like a cannon. She angled her neck so the force of the recoil would go down her body and legs and into the dirt instead of flinging her head backwards. She drew energy from all through her body, instead of just around her chest where it was most plentiful – and most vital.

Once she was ready, Twilight released the flare. Her horn glowed purple as energy flowed into it. Like a prism, the energy changed shape and became the aerial bolt. With the force of a small howitzer, the flare shot high into the air, spiraling and whistling as it flew. At the height of its flight, the flare burst into a pink, six-pointed star resembling Twilight's own cutie mark, complete with smaller white sparklers.

Dash definitely noticed that beacon and, after recoiling from the surprise of it, started to fly down to meet her friends.

“Woo-hoo!” Spike cheered. “Now that was awesome! A little overkill, maybe, but I shouldn't expect anything less than incredible Equestria's greatest unicorn.”

Twilight blushed and giggled a bit. “Hehe, I guess I still don't know my own strength. I did practice a few new techniques a while back.”

“Hey, Twilight! Spike!” Rainbow Dash shouted as she came in to land. “That was a pretty rad explosion up there. Thanks for showing up.”

“No problem, Dash. How's your practice coming?”

“Ha! Are you kidding? I got three sonic rainbooms before you got here.” Rainbow Dash said proudly.

“Really? We didn't hear or see any on the way here.”

“Okay, you got me.” Dash said, hanging her head. “I still can't do it. But, I'm not leaving here today without a rainbow explosion in my wake!” She punctuated her last remark with a stamp of her hoof.

“That's the spirit! And we'll be right here to see you do it. Right Spike?”

“You bet! We're right behind you, sister!”

Dash smiled from ear to ear, and started beating her wings to hover just off the ground. “Right! Let's rock!” She declared, and started to head for the sky again.

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“She's not getting any closer, is she?” Spike asked, an hour later.

“I don't think so.” Twilight replied.

“I don't get it. She did it before, why can't she do it again?”

“It's a very difficult skill. That's why she's only been able to do it twice.”

“Uh, oh, she's coming down here again.”

Rainbow Dash swooped down at a steep angle and then made a sharp turn to level out in front of where Twilight and Spike were sitting on the grass. She landed on her hooves with a thud and stomped around a few times out of frustration.

“Why does this have to be so hard?!” Dash shouted.

“Don't give up! I know you can do it.” Twilight encouraged.

“Yeah, and besides, I haven't been able to see you do it yet.” Spike said, and then the mares glared at him.

Dash sighed. “What do you think, Twilight? Can any of your fancy egghead stuff help me figure this out?”

Twilight shot Dash an incredulous look. “The reason flying at the speed of sound is so difficult is because wind resistance increases at an exponential rate the faster you travel.”

“Expo-what?” Spike and Dash said in unison.

Twilight sighed and put a hoof to her face before continuing. “What you're trying to do practically defies the laws of physics, so you're going to have to use any advantage you can. You might be able to get the most speed by flying straight down and letting gravity help.”

“Duh, every pegasus knows that.” Dash replied, derping her eyes. “But if I fly straight down for too long, I'll totally kill myself by crashing into the ground!” she continued, waving her hooves over her head for emphasis.

“That still might be your only chance. Remember when you caught Rarity while she was falling? You flew completely vertically and were still able to pull up at the last second. While carrying four other ponies, no less!”

“Yeah, but don't you know that's practically suicide?! I never would have tried that if she wasn't in danger!”

Twilight placed her hoof on Dash's shoulder. “I'm your friend, and I believe in you.” She said. “You're the greatest flier in Equestria. You're the only pegasus in recorded history that has successfully performed a sonic rainboom. You can do this, Rainbow Dash.”

There was a moment of hesitation as Dash ran through the scenario in her head. Then her eyes narrowed with intensity and a smile crept across her face. It might require taking a few risks but, by Celestia, it was going to happen. No fear.

“Stand back you two, you're about to see a sonic rainboom.”

Twilight smiled back and let her friend go. Rainbow Dash spread her wings and leaped into the sky. She pounded her wings as hard as she could and flew straight up as her friends shouted encouragement from below. The atmosphere was thin at higher elevations, so not only was it harder to breathe, it was harder to push farther. As high as Cloudsdale is, it was not really safe for a pegasus – or any pony for that matter – to be any higher. She took in a deep breath as she reached the elevation that regular breathing would be impossible. After a moment's more of hard flying, Dash reached as high as she physically could.

Looking around, Dash could not only see Ponyville, but other villages all around her. She could see Canterlot with its massive, white marble buildings. She could even see Cloudsdale in the distance. She saw mountains and valleys and fields and forests as she continued to flap her wings for as long as possible.

“This is what it means to be a pegasus.” Rainbow Dash thought to herself, looking at the large stretch of Equestria all around her. “And I'm gonna be known as the fastest flier in history. Before I'm through, the Wonder Bolts are gonna idolize me!”

The view at that elevation was breathless, which only compounded the problem that Dash was rapidly running out of air.

Dash hesitated a moment too long at that height. Her consciousness ebbed for just a moment as she started to fall. All the way from the ground, Twilight and Spike had no idea the condition their friend was in, only that she had begun to descend. They cheered for her as she tumbled end over end at terminal velocity, struggling to break out of her stall.

“Come on, Dash, come on!” She shouted in her head, still short on air, but beginning to reach an elevation in which she could breathe.

Gasping, but alright, Dash was able to regain enough sense to spread her wings and figure out which direction was which. She was falling very fast, and had quite a distance to go before she would hit the ground, so she determined to stay on course and pick up speed for as long as possible.

Rainbow Dash held her front legs out to push against the buffeting wind instead of taking it directly to the face. She tucked her hind legs in to

reduce drag. She focused on the movement of every muscle in her wings to refine her flight path to perfection. Falling faster and faster, she was getting close to breaking the sound barrier. The roar of the wind became louder. She could feel the air on front of her becoming tighter and tighter like a wall. On the far side of that wall was her destiny.

In that fleeting moment, an instinct kicked in. A trained instinct that was drilled into her head at flight school. Even before a pegasus was taught how to fly, she's taught how to land and how to recognize when she was coming in too fast – and coming in fast she was.

A wave of panic hit Rainbow Dash harder than the wind was. She screamed as the ground came at her at hundreds of miles per hour and she pulled up. Having lost so much time in her free fall, Dash wasn't able to pick up enough speed for a sonic rainboom. The subconscious fear kept her from giving it her all on the way down. She might have been able to pull it off if she hadn't panicked. She was several yards above the ground when she started pulling up. Not paying attention to what direction she was flying next, she frantically tried to get away from the ground menacing her. Instead, she banked directly into Everfree forest.

It's impossible for a pegasus to brake and change direction simultaneously. Dash had to focus on evading the trees at near-sonic speeds instead of bringing herself to a stop. She continued to shout as she darted up and down and around tree trunks as she tried to head up through the treeline. Shadows from the trees and the blur of speed made tight evasion difficult. Branches whooshed past her body with dangerous proximity. Wind resistance was slowing her down, but she was still moving far too fast to land safely. Leaves left paper cuts on her sides and flanks as she blew by. "Almost there ... Almost there." Dash whispered to herself as she approached the treeline to safety.

Seeing a gap in the upper branches of the trees, Dash tried to make a sharp upwards turn, but she misjudged. Angling upwards, she flew straight past the hole that would have led to safety. The maneuver dropped a lot of momentum, but she still wasn't out of the woods. Nose up, she crashed head first into a sturdy branch.

The branch fractured, as did Dash's skull, but only a hairline. Three bones in her neck also dislocated, severing her brain stem. She was gone before

she knew what had happened. Her lifeless body tumbled through the air until she landed in a heap on the grassy floor. At least she landed on her side and didn't suffer even more injuries on impact.

Or, maybe it was less fortunate.

---

“She's in trouble!” Twilight had shouted when she heard Rainbow Dash scream and veer away into Everfree.

Spike was frozen. In the time he knew her, Dash had experienced a number of accidents. Some were scarier than others, but there had never been any serious injury. Something about that scream frightened him to the core, however.

Twilight immediately galloped off in the direction Dash flew. Out of a natural instinct of her own, her horn began to glow before she even attempted to use any magic. That didn't last long, however, as she immediately started punctuating her galloping with short-range teleportation, attempting to close the gap as fast as she could. She could teleport farther, but it wouldn't do any good if she didn't know where Dash was going to be.

Using her teleportation, Twilight didn't need to hesitate while chasing Dash through Everfree forest. In a series of flashes, she could move up and down branches and past bushes while galloping anywhere there was a clear stretch of soil. She could barely see Dash's body darting around in the branches, but it was no use; she couldn't keep up with her at the speed she was flying. She could still hear the shouting ahead of her. Not for help, but something more primal; she was shouting out of panic. Twilight tried to call back.

“Rainbow Dash! ... Rainbow Dash! ... Slow down! ... What are you doing?!” Twilight shouted between flashes of teleportation

Suddenly, somewhere out of sight, the screaming stopped. Twilight lost track of Dash for an instant, and then there was a crash, and a thud, and silence. She froze in fear, and then teleported to the highest branch over where she saw her last. She looked all around in a rush, but there was no sign of her.

“Rainbow Dash! ... Where are you?!”

Teleporting around a few more branches, Twilight finally found where Dash landed, her neck at an odd angle. She paused for a long moment as she watched her, hoping to see her make the slightest movement.

“Oh, Celestia, no.”

Twilight jumped down from the branch and teleported to the ground next to her friend. She looked over her body, or tried to through the tears beginning to swell in her eyes. She wanted to hold her, but was afraid to touch her.

*“... I just sense things. A fat lot of good it was doing us now! I kept telling her she would be alright soon, but she never said anything back. I just held her in my hooves. All I could do was sense ...”*

The quote from that soldier of old echoed through Twilight's memory, and she shut her eyes tight. When she opened them again, tears were streaming from them, and they shone with a brilliant white light.

“No!”

# Chapter 3

## Strange Ponies

Somewhere else, somewhere she didn't recognize, Rainbow Dash awoke in a daze and with a sharp pain in her neck. She tried rubbing it with her hoof, but that only made it sting more.

"Ow! What the, where the heck am I?!"

Slowly, the confusion started to fade, as did the pain. Rainbow Dash slowly stood and looked around. She was ... nowhere. All around her was a fog so dense she couldn't see farther than a few yards. She seemed to be lying on a platform of some kind. It was circular, and made of stone. Glowing green markings were engraved along the edges of it like some kind of language she didn't recognize. The ground all around here seemed to be made from the same stone.

Dash's first instinct was to start flying and exploring, but she still hurt a bit and didn't want to move around. She resigned herself to tapping and scratching at the stone with her hoof to try and figure out what it was made of.

"Well, if it isn't Rainbow Crash." A voice said.

The sudden noise scared Dash for a moment. "What? Who's there! Show yourself!" She jumped up on her hind legs and starting batting at the air with her front, but one more wave of pain knocked her on her stomach.

The voice simply chuckled. "I jest, of course, my dear. I hold you in nothing less than the highest of regards. That is why I am here to see to your care personally."

The voice was smooth, yet deep; a little intimidating and yet completely calm. It was definitely a stallion's voice.

"Care? What care? Is this some kind of crazy hospital?" Dash asked, looking around.



“On the contrary, my dear Rainbow Dash, this is not a place of life, this is a place of death.”

That last remark really caused Dash to panic, and she ignored any lingering pain she had and tried to fly away. But no matter how hard she flapped her wings, she couldn't gain any momentum more than a foot off the ground and couldn't move away from where she was. It was as though physics itself was different there.

“Be still, Rainbow Dash. There is no need to be afraid. You have my word that no harm shall ever befall you again.”

As he spoke Dash could hear hoofsteps approaching from beyond the fog. At least two ponies worth of hoofsteps. A ringing in her ears made it a little difficult to keep track. Then, a pony Dash never witnessed before came into her view. He was tall and slender, like the princesses, but he had neither wings nor a horn. He did, however, have a second set of legs. His whole body was blue, with his mane being a darker shade than his coat. It was also somewhat elongated to account for his extra limbs. His mane also seemed to be real hair, unlike whatever ethereal matter the princesses had. His eyes were orange with a slight glow. He had a cutie mark. It seemed to be a streak of fire that started towards the back of his flanks, and as it traveled forward it changed into a dark streak that spiraled in on itself.

“W-what are you?”

“I am Sleipnir.” The stallion said simply, bowing his head. “It is my solemn duty to foresee the conveyance of the souls of the dead to the afterlife.”

“The what?!” Dash shouted and then renewed her attempts to escape, although she still only flew in place where she was. “I'm not dead, and I don't wanna be dead!”

Sleipnir made no attempt to restrain Dash any more than she already was, nor did he insist that she stop. He simply waited quietly and lied down on the soft carpeting to watch.

After a moment, Dash had tired herself out and collapsed in the same spot she was already in. "Come on, let me out of here! What did I ever do to you, huh?!"

"You have faulted me not, though I understand your anger. You have found yourself in this strange realm, trapped on a dais you do not understand, and talking to a horse you've never met. However, I am in no position to return you to your world. Even if I were to send you back, your physical form is in no condition to keep you."

"My physical what?" Dash demanded.

The mysterious creature closed his eyes and chuckled a little. "It truly is a shame. In some of my more wishful moments I would have enjoyed challenging you to a race."

That word perked up Dash little. "A race? You're a racer?"

"Not by profession the way you aspire to be." Sleipnir said with a fair amount of pride. "But these legs of mine have their uses." He then counted with his legs, clopping each of his hooves against the floor in turn, going all the way up to eight.

"That's ... Okay, that's a little freaky." Dash admitted. "But I'll tell you what, you get me outta here, and we'll have that race. If I win, you gotta get me back to Ponyville. Whattya say?"

"I cannot send you back, my dear." Sleipnir replied sadly. "You are here because your body suffered a terrible injury, and could no longer sustain you. It was my duty, then, to rescue your soul before you simply faded into nothingness."

"Then ... how do I get back?" Dash said, her hopes weakened.

"There is no going back from here." Sleipnir said simply. "I can do only this."

The mysterious stallion walked up to the platform Dash was trapped on. He stepped onto it with one hoof and the markings stopped glowing. Then he turned to the side. "You may stay in this realm, lost and afraid. Or, you may

climb onto my back and I shall carry you to the afterlife. You will fall to no harm there, and in time, all of your friends will return to you.”

There was a sincerity in his voice. Dash wasn't sure what was going on, but she felt like she could trust him. She took a few cautious steps forward, and found that she was no longer held in place by that mysterious force. Then, once she carefully reached out a hoof to him, something stranger still occurred.

Sleipnir's calm face suddenly turned to surprise, and then quickly to anger. “What? What's happening?! Who's doing this?!”

---

When Twilight had written the instructions on reviving a pony, she had imagined it being done by a team of unicorns. She never anticipated doing it all herself. Holding on to the last spark of Dash's life force was difficult enough without trying to heal her neck at the same time. She wasn't a doctor, but Dash's body was in perfect shape as far as she could tell. Then it was time for the theoretical part. Magic power surged forth even stronger and Twilight pulled her head back as she tugged on Dash's life force. She was tiring out from using so much power and wasn't sure how much longer she could hold on to her friend's life. She reared up on her hind legs and pulled with her whole body.

---

Meanwhile, Rainbow Dash hadn't the slightest idea what was happening. She only knew that it felt like her body was collapsing into itself, and Sleipnir was becoming extremely agitated. It wasn't a painful experience, at least not compared to when she arrived in this strange place, but she was becoming very frightened.

“How dare they interfere with my work!” Sleipnir shouted as he paced anxiously around the dais Dash was standing on. “Don't they know the consequences of this?! Don't they know who I am?!”

As Dash's body shrunk, she had a harder time seeing and hearing Sleipnir. The next thing she knew, she was somewhere else again. She slowly opened her eyes and looked up, fearing what bizarre world she had entered now.

“ ... What happened? ... Where am I? ... Oh, and why does my neck hurt?”

“Don't touch it, Dash! You need to rest, just relax.” A shaky voiced pony said.

“ ... Twilight? ... Have you been crying?”

“It's okay now.” Twilight said with a great sigh of relief as she wiped her eye with a hoof. “You're okay. How do you feel?”

“My head is killing me.”

“That's perfectly normal. At least, I think it is. You hit your head really hard back there. I had to use a rev- I had to heal you.”

“Heal?” Dash asked, lifting her head up before immediately laying it back down again. “Ow! Since when can you heal?”

“I just learned it!” Twilight said sheepishly. “I know a lot of spells you've never seen me do before. Please, just stay still for a bit.” She collapsed on her own side across from Dash. “Ugh, I think I need to stay down for a while too. That spell took a lot out of me.”

“Wait, how big of a spell was that? How bad was I hurt?”

Twilight replied only with a soft snoring sound, having immediately passed out on the grass. The soil was even more pleasant than the leather binding of a good book.

“Oh man.” Dash lamented to herself. “That really must have been some epic wipe out. That was the craziest hallucination.

Rainbow Dash lied down her own head, adjusting her neck carefully into the most comfortable position she could and took a brief rest as well. She slept deeply but not without an unpleasant dream. It was about flying in a storm and falling into a forest and something about an eight legged pony. But by the time she would awaken both that dream and her experience in the other realm would have faded into a vague memory.

---

A short while later, Twilight was the first of the two to awaken to a sound in the distance.

“The first thing to do after falling asleep during a study session is to determine where you were before you passed out.” She muttered to herself in a groggy daze as she sat up.

Twilight looked around in a bit of confusion. “Wait, why was I studying in ... what appears to be the forest ... And without books?”

“Twilight! ... Rainbow Dash! ... Twilight! ... Rainbow Dash!” someone was shouting.

When her eyes fell on Dash, Twilight's mind snapped back into focus. She noticed that her friend didn't seem to be moving. “Dash? Dash! Wake up!” She cried, nudging her.

“Ah! What?! Where are they?! Ow! my neck!” Dash shouted as she was startled awake.

Rainbow Dash immediately jumped up and started to fly towards the threat she had imagined was shaking her, only to fly in a seemingly random direction. The pain in her neck brought her back to the ground almost as soon as she got up.

After another moment of confusion, shouting, and erratic flying, the two mares calmed down. The commotion had gotten the attention of the search party that was looking for them. Spike forced his way through some brush and came across the two ponies.

“There you mares are!” Spike said, jumping up to hug Twilight around the neck. “Do you have any idea how long I've been looking for you two?”

Twilight wrapped a leg around her assistant and hugged him back. “Sorry Spike, but we're fine. Right Dash?”

“Um ... Almost.” Dash replied.

The blue pegasus sat up from where she had crashed last. Dash rubbed the side of her mane with one hoof while her head was leaning slightly to the other side.

Both Spike and Twilight raised an eyebrow and similarly leaned their heads to the side as they watched Dash's odd stance. "Is something wrong?" Twilight asked.

"Yeah, I think I just napped funny. It feels like I pulled a muscle in my neck, or something."

Although she was certain she made no mistakes when reassembling her best friend's spine earlier, Twilight panicked on the inside when Dash mentioned the problem with her neck.

"Oh! Well, we have to get you to a doctor right away!" Twilight urged.

"Nah, it's cool. This isn't the first time I hurt myself." Dash said, getting up. "I may fly crooked for a few days before this heals up, but I'll manage. Ow! An ice pack would be nice, though."

Spike laughed. "Wouldn't that be fun to watch? Can you imagine her flying around in spirals from a busted neck?"

"No excuses!" Twilight said.

Rejuvenated from her nap, Twilight brought the power of her magic to bear one again. She levitated Spike onto her back, and then lifted Rainbow Dash into the air and held her there like she would a book.

"Woah, this is new." Dash said simply as she hung in the air wide-eyed and sideways.

"I'm taking you to a physician and that's that." Twilight said and turned back towards the edge of the forest.

The 180 degree turn also caused Dash's levitated form to swing around as well. "Wah!" She cried involuntarily, and in a flash of teleportation they were gone.

---

Twilight's teleportation spell was sufficient to get them all out of the forest, but she couldn't return them all the way to Ponyville. So, she intended to carry Dash the entire way there by telekinesis. Engrossed by the sensation, she didn't resist. At first. Although Twilight did have the capacity to carry her the entire distance, she decided to let her down after a few minutes of intense complaining, but only after making her Pinkie Swear to stay close and not fly.

A simple doctor's visit later, Dash checked out with a clean bill of health – save for the pulled muscle in her neck. As she said, it was going to heal itself after a few days. None of them were as relieved to hear that as Twilight. She didn't mention to anyone that Dash had technically been dead for several minutes, and Dash as a result didn't think it important to bring up the dream about the blue stallion with eight legs.

Again, Twilight's life slipped back into a sense of normalcy for a few more days, but her puzzle, once solved, had triggered a machine that could not be reversed.

---

Celestia had apparently concluded that it was proper to make that particular day particularly hot. Not even Twilight, her prized pupil, actually knew the reasoning behind why some days should be warmer and some cooler – beyond the inclinations of a given season. However, the sun was only one part of the complex weather system around Equestria, and the pegasi weather team had simply stacked some extra clouds in the sky to compensate with some shade. The resulting conditions were actually extremely pleasant, if a little dark for the daytime. There weren't any rains scheduled, but it wasn't unheard of for a pegasus to shout “Surprise!” at the top of her lungs and turn an otherwise cloudy day into a rainy one.

Regardless, Twilight took the opportunity to read a new book outside. As much as she loved living in a library, her new appreciation for life in the past few months dictated that she study elsewhere more often than before. She was laying on a bench in the middle of the park reading her new *Ancient Conflict: A History of Wars around Equestria*. Not even the

occasional gust of wind would disturb her, as she could telekinetically hold the page down whenever she felt one coming.

“Twilight, there is danger in the forest! Your friends must gather, faster, fastest!” Somepony called out, although Twilight was quick to identify her.

“Zecora? What's wrong?”

“I was out this morning gathering herbs, when I found a sight that greatly disturbs! Pegasus ponies in barding of silver, flying through the jungle and over the river! They carried bricks from a stone quarry, what they intended caused me to worry! I followed them low and sought to scout, what they were doing I planned to find out! They are gathering at a spot with mortar and clay, and are building a structure without delay!” Zecora said in a panic as she approached.

Twilight absorbed all of that for a moment as Zecora's unique speech pattern can sometimes be difficult to understand. “Armored pegasi ... building something in Everfree? I guess that's unusual, but it's no reason to panic.”

“You do not understand, student of Celestia; these pegasi warriors are not of Equestria!”

“Not of Equestria? You mean, you think we're being invaded?”

“I know not for what they came, but we must stop them all the same!”

“I don't know if violence is the right thing to do. But we do need to figure out what they're up to.” Twilight said, and thought for a moment. “Okay, here's the plan: You know where Fluttershy lives, right? Go find her there, and she can find Rainbow Dash. The three of you know the layout of the forest best, and can plot a way to wherever the pegasi are. I'll go through town to Sweet Apple Acres and pick up the others along the way.”

“The flying ponies I shall find. Hurry, so you do not fall behind.”

“I'll be there as fast as I can, Zecora. I won't stop to ... uh ... sniff the flora?”



Twilight had surprised herself. She wasn't sure how that sentence had managed to rhyme, and she was even less sure why she had tried to make it so. Zecora laughed at the attempt. "You spoke that phrase well, wise and young Twilight. Although your rhyming skill is still that of a neophyte." She said with a wink, before turning to gallop away.

---

Twilight's first stop was Carousel Boutique. After explaining the situation to her, Rarity agreed to come along but only after being given ample time to pack.

"There are things to consider like whether or not it will rain and how much it will rain if it does. Oh, and venturing into Everfree is always so dreadful. Do you even know the required preparation for the dirt and brush we'll be dealing with? And the mud! Goodness gracious, the mud! Can you imagine what kind of shape I'll be in between the rain and the mud?"

As Rarity continued to ramble on in this manner Twilight concluded that the best course of action was to pick her up last on the way back. She told her to just do what she had to do and that she'd come back for her later.

---

Pinkie Pie was easier to get a hold of. She literally tackled Twilight as she was coming through the front door to Sugarcube Corner.

"Twilight! Oh, I'm so glad you came! I was so bored! It's all dark and gloomy-woomy out there and no one was coming in to buy treats, but who wouldn't want to buy treats on a gloom-woomy day? It's the perfect thing to brighten up a day like this! In fact, I wrote a song about it I was so bored!"

Pinkie took in a deep breath of air as she was about to jump into another one of her patented songs, but Twilight stuck a hoof in it before she could begin. After explaining about Everfree to her too, she seemed practically overjoyed about a potentially dangerous mission if it meant getting outside instead of waiting for customers that probably weren't coming. She just had to stuff some balloons into her saddle bags and leave Mr. and Mrs. Cake a note, since they were out shopping for ingredients at the time.

Had Twilight stopped and read said note before they left, she would have found that it said only: "No sales so far, went to save the world! -Pinkie"

---

Applejack was next. Twilight and Pinkie caught up to her just as she was about to make the rounds through her fields to make sure all her trees were in good condition.

"Well, I'll be. Ah was a wonderin' when you'd mosey up my farm and tell me some monstrosity was gonna destroy all Equestria or some such threat of impendin' doom. It's been what, three months now? That must be some kind of record. Ah've seen blue ribbons given away at a county fair for less. Hold on, sugar cube, let me just go git my bags and lasso."

---

Twilight finally just needed to stop by her own home for supplies and to inform Spike what was happening. Along the way they picked up Rarity, who had settled on a light blue rain slicker that matched her mane immaculately. Her own saddle bags probably didn't have anything of value to the mission, but at least she was prepared to go. Arriving at her home, Twilight wasn't sure how long the journey would take, and she was worried about the time they had already spent gathering everyone together. She dictated a letter to Celestia for Spike on the matter as she gathered her things and departed immediately. Had she waited around a little longer, she would have seen the quick reply stating that it was imperative that they were not to enter Everfree until she arrived there personally to handle the matter. Spike tried to chase after them to relay this message, but they were too far gone and a baby dragon couldn't hope to catch up to a group of fully grown ponies.

# Chapter 4

## Everfree Expedition

Twilight, with Pinkie, Applejack, and Rarity in tow, finally arrived at Fluttershy's house by mid afternoon. Twilight only hoped that the others had formulated a plan to reach the invading army by then. That seemed to be the case, as they noticed Rainbow Dash idly doing stunts above Fluttershy's home as they arrived. Fluttershy and Zecora were sitting, apparently having a snack, around the small table in her front yard.

Upon seeing them, Dash bolted for the ground to fall in line with Twilight. "It's about time you girls showed up. I can't talk to Zecora with her rhymey speak, so I've had nothing to do out here."

"We're here now, RD, and I know what you mean. Bless her heart, but I can't understand that zebra for a hill of beans." Applejack interjected.

"Stop it, both of you." Twilight scolded. "She's the only one who knows how to find those ponies, so behave yourselves."

"Yes, ma'am." The two of them said in unison.

As they all closed in on Fluttershy and Zecora, Fluttershy smiled sweetly and waved at them. "Oh, hello girls. Would you care for some biscuits?"

"Would I?!" Pinkie shouted, zipping forward and slamming her face into the platter to start munching away.

"Please, show a little bit of manners, won't you?" Rarity asked. She then levitated a biscuit that fell on the table when Pinkie dive bombed them. "Thank you very much Fluttershy, that's very kind of you."

"Now, I hate interruptin' a meal as much as the next pony, but we've got work to do." Applejack said.

"Oh, uh, right. I'm sorry." Fluttershy apologized. "I spent some time talking to Zecora, and we know the very best way to get there."

“Excellent.” Twilight said, jumping up on her hind legs and ready to charge. “Saddle up, everypony, we’ve got-”

“Um, wait, please. Twilight?”

The purple unicorn sighed and collapsed down on her stomach. “What is it now?”

“There’s just, uh, one teensy tiny little thing you should know before we go. You know that quarry that Zecora said all the bricks were coming from. Well, uh, it’s not actually a quarry.” Fluttershy then interrupted her own story to give a quick apology to Zecora. “I’m sorry. It’s okay, though. I mean, you’re not from around here, so you just didn’t know-”

“Perhaps I best explain before their impatience turns to blisters.” Zecora offered with a smile. “The quarry I spoke of is the castle of the pony sisters.”

“They’re taking apart the old castle?!” Twilight shouted, jumping back to her hooves. “Don’t they know the historical significance of that place! It’s practically a national landmark!”

“Psh, that place is a dump anyway.” Dash said, hovering above them all. “What do we care if they take a bunch of dumb rocks?”

“The area around that place is like a magical dome.” Zecora said. “That is why I chose Everfree to make my home. Strong magic lives within those stones. Whatever they are building will be a spiritual zone.”

“Beg pardon?” Applejack asked, still a bit muddled by Zecora’s words.

“While I certainly would like to see that old place spruced up a bit.” Rarity said. “we simply can’t just let them do as they please. What say we head on over there give them what for, right ladies?”

Everypony nodded in agreement, except for Pinkie, who only just then lifted her head from the food tray and concurred in her own way. “Not only that, but we’ll give them what five! And what six! What seven even!” She cheered.

“On our way we must make one small detour.” Zecora added. “I must pick up a few potions and our victory will be sure.”

“Oh! Oh! What kind of potions?!” Dash couldn't contain her enthusiasm. “Will they give us super strength or super speed?”

“The potions I have in mind you must not ingest, if you wish for your health to stay at it's best.” Zecora replied with a sly smile.

---

A short while later, the group was galloping down the path towards Zecora's home. Dash wanted to scout out ahead, but it was decided that it was best that she didn't stray too far and that she definitely stay below the treeline. Dejected, she hung her limbs weakly as her wings kept her suspended in the air. Dash had to be in the skies at all times, she could barely stand not being able to move around whenever she wanted to. Trying to be stealthy was only tolerable for the sake of her friends.

Also, much to Rarity's joy and Pinkie's chagrin, the clouds had not yet begun to rain and there were no mud puddles to splash through.

“Incoming!” Dash shouted suddenly as she bolted towards the ground.

The others crouched down where they were, ready to fight if necessary, except for Pinkie who merely gawked at the sky and Fluttershy who squeaked and dove for a bush. In the air above them, a squadron of pegasi flew by, just as Zecora had said. They didn't seem to fly in any kind of formation, just one big flock of ponies.

The pegasi wore silver barding formed of overlapping scales with gold trim. It covered their necks and sides. Plates on their chests were black and shaped like birds, and plates on their flanks were engraved with swans. Their shaffrons however, were small and seemed to just decorate their faces instead of protecting them. Twilight and Zecora mentally took note of this in case it came to blows. Their coats were all white, and their manes all light blue. This was not as odd as it may have seemed, as Celestia's royal guard similarly dyed their hair the same color to promote unity. Unlike the royal guard, they were all female.

Each of the pegasi were also carrying large, yellowed stone bricks in their hooves. They seemed to either not notice or not care about the ponies on the ground and continued to fly past. However, a couple of the armored couriers did catch on and swooped down. They landed in a huddle as irregular as the formation they were flying in as their stone cargo slammed against the dirt.

The invaders then began to speak – all three of them at once, and not even in unison. That seemed to catch all of them off guard for a second before the one closest to Twilight and the others went ahead and continued. Her voice was a bit loud, but gentle and pretty, and could best be described as heroic.

“I am-! ... I am a valponie, and I claim this territory on behalf of all valponies. I mean no conflict, and I must ask you to turn back now.”

Applejack was having none of that. “Who do y'all think you are?! You come waltzin' in here and start takin' apart our history, and then make demands of us?! I outta buck you back to wherever the heck y'all came from!” She yelled, scratching at the dirt with her hoof, ready to charge up and deliver on her threat.

The Valponie were unimpressed. They lifted up their stones and flew back off. The one who spoke continued as they left. “You will not be asked again. The Valponies at the stronghold will not be so relenting.”

Dash, on the other hand, was more than willing to fulfill Applejack's threat anyway and rushed after them. Rarity's telekinesis brought a quick end to that.

“If you could put a hold on your brutish ways for just a moment, you'll find that we can't take on a stronghold by ourselves.”

“What if we had the elements of harmony?” Fluttershy suggested from behind her hiding spot.

“We gave them to Celestia, remember?” Twilight said. “We don't have time to get there and back. And we don't want to just pick a fight with them. We're trying to search, not fight. Figure out why they're here.”

"I think it's pretty darned clear why they're here." Applejack said.

"Then the least we can do is figure out how many there are." Twilight continued, looking across all her friends one by one. "Come on, together we've faced insurmountable odds before. Right now, we're the only ones that can get information on what's going on here and report to Princess Celestia." She then held out her hoof. "For Equestria."

The others agreed and each placed a hoof in the center, including Zecora who wasn't even a true Equestrian.

"For Equestria!" They all cheered together. Pinkie then blew on a party horn to celebrate.

Dash was excited to get moving again, especially after Twilight's speech, but she remembered that she had to stay low again. She was frustrated having to hold back so much for this mission.

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After a bit more traveling, the group managed to arrive at Zecora's house undetected by anymore valponies. Like Twilight's, Zecora's home was carved out from the inside of a tree, although this one wasn't nearly as big. The zebra herself was somewhat of a hermit, so her home was mostly utilitarian. A single carved wooden mask hung above the door, and a number of potions hung from branches, presumably to ferment or cure.

"Wait here, my friends, I'll be back in a flash." Zecora said. "Allow me to tap into my secret stash."

With that, Zecora trotted not towards her home, but towards a seemingly random tree that was nearby. There was nothing remarkable about it, save for being a bit wider around than the others nearby. She stood up on her hind legs and started pawing at the trunk with her front hooves like she was feeling for something. With a swift and sudden kick, the bark of the tree cracked and she stepped backwards. The bark then opened outwards like a closet, revealing a number of potions and jars hidden inside.

“Wow, that was amazing!” Pinkie cheered. “Do you have more super secret trees like that somewhere?” She then started darting from tree to nearby tree, bonking her head against them in an attempt to open one.

“These bottles contain much danger inside, so I keep them inside this tree to hide.” Zecora explained. While I pick out the brews that we will need, can you hand me that basket with the beads?”

“Oh, certainly.” Fluttershy said. She then flew gently over to pick up a wide wicker container decorated with azure beads resting against the tree house. She placed it next to Zecora before removing the lid for her.

Zecora picked up the basket and set it on two hanging branches nearby. Studying her cache of hazardous potions a bit longer, she finally picked out several and carefully set them inside. Unlike most of her creations, these bottles were clearly marked, but with symbols from her own language. Finally satisfied with her selection, she closed up the container and her secret tree again. She then lifted up the basket and balanced it effortlessly with her head – a feat that surprised the others almost as much as the discovery of her stash had in the first place.

“So, what is it you've got there now?” Dash asked.

“This is the result of the darker side of my craft. Those who fool with these potions are surely daft.”

“So, what is it you've got there now?” Applejack asked again.

“I think what she means is that those are poisons and acids.” Twilight said, a little fearfully. “I don't know if we really need all that.”

“I truly hope that we'll need them not.” Zecora explained. “But I shall bring them in case times get hot. The potions will not kill, but some injuries they can instill.”

“If you say so. Just be careful with those.”

Zecora nodded. How she did so without dropping the basket nopony knew, but it didn't mean it scared them any less.



As they all turned to leave, Rarity walked up beside Zecora. "Darling, may I ask you something? I know you come from a distant land and all, but wouldn't it be easier to carry that on your back instead of your head?"

Zecora responded with another sly smile back at Rarity. "A useful skill that draws respect, including from pony boys. Any mare who can balance so must be full of strength and poise." She answered, before trotting on ahead.

Rarity scratched her chin as she stopped to consider what Zecora said. Then she magically lifted her own saddlebags and suspended them over her head as she pondered the physics of what she was about to attempt. She straightened her neck and kept her head high as she carefully guided the strap between her horn and her mane. This was already causing problems as the bags now covered her eyes. Deciding to test out the balance part anyway, she released her telekinesis. She then squealed as the weight nearly tipped her over forward.

The others, looking back, had no idea about Rarity's little experiment, they only saw that she had spontaneously decided to wear her saddlebags on her face and that her hind legs were kicking about as they searched for ground, which she couldn't see. When she levitated her bags again, her first sight was her friends looking at her with confusion, except for Pinkie and Zecora who could barely contain their amusement.

"My apologies, everyone." Rarity said, blushing profusely and returning the bags to their proper place. "I was just, um, testing my balance, that's all!" She said, laughing nervously. "Move along now, everypony, we have work to do!" She continued, dashing on ahead of everyone.

The sight of a pony running sparked an inner fire in Dash, and she started to fly faster ahead of Rarity, only for Twilight to remind her to slow down and stay with the group.

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As the group drew closer to the Valponies' stronghold, they were having a harder time staying hidden. It was nearing dark now, so the shadows were on their side, but they were running into more and more patrols. Over time,

they started to hear the sound of masonry in the distance, along with torch lights.

“Those Valponie are funny.” Pinkie commented to nopony in particular after another patrol passed. She said it in a tone that was unusually level for her.

“I don't think they're funny.” Fluttershy said. “I think they're scary.”

“You think everything's scary.” Dash interjected.

“Oh, no, no, no, I don't mean 'ha-ha' funny, I mean strange funny.” Pinkie said.

“How so?” Fluttershy asked.

Pinkie screwed up her face as she thought long and hard about what her muddled intuition was trying to tell her. “They're ... missing something.”

“Missing? Oh my, I hope they're alright. But, what are they missing, exactly?”

“I don't know ... My Pinkie sense has never sensed anything like 'em before. All I know is that they're not real ponies. They're faker-fakersons who try to look like ponies.”

Fluttershy started to shake a little bit more than she already was and moved to walk closer to Pinkie. “T-then ... W-w-what are they?”

Pinkie concentrated for a little bit longer. “Hmm ... I have no idea!” She decided, and went back to hopping merrily along.

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By the time the moon started to rise over the trees, the group found themselves on the verge of a field. In the center of it was a partially built stone wall surrounding some sort of camp. Fortunately, Luna decided to bless them with a full moon that night and they could still see clearly.

“Well, we made it, now what do we do?” Dash whispered.

“Run away?” Fluttershy suggested.

“No, we need to find out what's going on here first.” Twilight said.

“We can't just all sneak around in one bunch like this. We simply must split up.” Rarity advised.

“We'll be easier to spot than Big Macintosh in a field full of fillies.” Applejack added.

“You're right.” Twilight said, and then thought for a moment. “ ... Okay, here's the plan: Fluttershy, see if you can get one of your animal friends to get inside and count how many valponies there are. Rarity, you stay with her. I don't want anypony going anywhere alone. Applejack, you and Zecora go that way around the stronghold.” She said, pointing down one side of the field. “Pinkie, do you think you can be stealthy?”

“I'm already behind you.” Pinkie whispered, thoroughly terrifying Twilight so much that she almost gave away their position.

After a few panicked breaths, Twilight calmed down enough to continue with her plan. “Alright then, you go with them. Remember, the important thing is to stay out of sight.”

“What about me, Twi?” Dash asked.

“You're coming with me. We're going to pass by the other way around the stronghold. We're going to pass by Applejack's team on the other side, and we're all going to circle around back here. After that, we're all going to head home before anypony knew we were here. Got that?”

“Oh man, I should just do a super-speed flyover.” Dash complained. “I'll be all 'bam!' take a look around, and 'bam!' be out of there before anypony knows what happened.”

“No, we can't take that risk. They could be faster than you, for all we know.”

Rainbow Dash seemed visibly offended by that possibility. “Say what? How could- Seriously? Faster than-?”

“Focus, Dash. I need you on this.”

Dash sighed deeply and hung her limbs weakly again, but agreed. “Fine. If you need me on the ground, I'll stay grounded. But just this once.”

“Great. Does everyone know what they're doing?”

Everyone nodded in agreement, and went ahead with the plan. Fluttershy turned back and started calling softly for a bird's favor as Rarity followed. Applejack rounded up her team and headed one direction while Dash and Twilight went another.

Tensions were high as they split up, but one among them was so eager to rush out there that she could burst. Unfortunately, explosions aren't always useful in a stealth mission.

# Chapter 5

## Stronghold Siege

Twilight sneaked as quietly as she could around the valpony fortress. The moon was already starting to ride high in the night sky, but the moonlight was thankfully bright enough to see, for the most part. Despite being so late, the army inside still seemed to be hard at work. She could see movement just over the walls and hear the distinct sound of stone being chiseled.

“How dare they!” Twilight thought to herself. “Every chip on those stones is damage to our history!”

Dash hung in the air, fidgeting, but Twilight didn't notice.

Continuing around, Twilight noticed that the walls were still being built. As she moved along, she could see around gaps that had yet to be filled in. The entire area of the complex was about the size of a sports stadium. There didn't seem to be any buildings inside as of yet, but some foundations of stone did seem to be in place. There was some kind of monument being erected in the center of the stronghold, but she couldn't tell what it was from there.

“Darn it, here comes another one.” Dash whispered.

With a brief surge of adrenaline, Twilight darted as silently as possible around a few trees to get into a hiding spot, fortunately, the dark hue of her coat and mane lent itself easily to hiding. She couldn't see above the treeline from there, but that also meant anypony above the treeline couldn't see her. She definitely heard the wing beats of a pegasus, though. Looking back out, she noticed her friend wasn't making a motion to hide as well. “Dash, get down!” she whispered urgently.

“Hold on, I got this one.” Dash said, coiling up like she was preparing to jump straight into the air.

“Are you crazy? Get back here!”

"You there!" The guard overhead shouted, making Twilight's blood run cold.  
"Show your-!"

In a rainbow colored streak, Dash shot upwards, hoof outstretched. She delivered the most powerful uppercut she could muster, contacting square against the guard's jaw with a crack. The valpony spiraled backwards in midair before she collapsed face down on the ground.

"Yeah, you better stay down."

Twilight jumped out of her hiding place as the valpony landed and immediately used her telekinesis to pull the body back into the trees and out of sight. Relieved of her tension, Dash trotted in after her, a big smile plastered on her face. "Did you see that?" Dash asked proudly "One hit, and pow! Light's out."

"Do you have any idea what you've done?!" Twilight whispered angrily.  
"You've blown our cover! This pony knows we're here now!"

"But she's knocked out! She's not gonna tell anypony!"

"For now! This guard is supposed to report in to somepony, and when she doesn't they're going to come looking for her."

"Okay, okay, fine. So, what do we do with her now, then? Oh! I say we interrogate her! We came all the way out here for info anyway, right?"

"We can't interrogate her when she's unconscious!" Twilight yelled as loudly as she could while whispering.

"Oh, right, my bad." Dash laughed nervously.

Twilight sighed in exasperation and turned to face their captive. She was very clearly dead to the world, but she was breathing. A little bit of blood dribbled out of her mouth. She likely lost a tooth from the impact, but it was far from fatal. She looked just the same as all the other valponies besides that, with the heavy, intricate armor, and even the same coat and mane coloring. This one was even armed. A spear was hooked to the side of her

barding. Twilight levitated it away from her and held it out to Dash, who was hovering overhead to watch. "Here, hold on to this."

"Awesome!" Dash said, taking the weapon. She swung it around a few times, testing out the weight. "If only we had a some of these back at Appleoosa instead of a bunch of silly pies."

"Please, that was the last thing we needed back there," Twilight said irritably, still studying the valpony.

Noticing a few buckles on the backside of the pagasus' armor, Twilight decided to try and remove it. If she were lucky, there might be some personal belongings tucked underneath it she could learn from. Naturally, she concluded, the flanks would be the best place to secure pegasus armor. From the air, pegasi warriors could be attacked from any direction, but so long as they kept flying forward their backsides would be the hardest to hit. Feeling around the plating with her telekinesis, she unbuckled all of it and was able to lift it off of her.

That's when Twilight noticed that the valponie didn't have a cutie mark.

"Dash! Look at this!"

Rainbow Dash then stabbed the tip of her new spear into the ground and balanced herself on the butt of it, looking down at the valponie. "Man, what kind of lamer do you have to be to not have a cutie mark at that age?"

"I ... don't know. It's completely unheard of."

"So, what are we going to do with that, then?"

Twilight looked over and saw that Dash was pointing at the heap of barding she had left on the ground. The she got an idea.

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Applejack's group finished circling around and came across Twilight, Dash, and the valpony a few minutes later. They were not expecting to see an

unfamiliar pegasus unconscious on the ground, nor were they expecting to see Dash wearing her armor.

“Well, how does it fit? Can you fly like that?” Twilight asked.

“What in tarnation's goin' on here?” Applejack asked, causing Twilight to flinch again. She had just about enough surprises for one evening.

“I'm gonna sneak in there!” Dash said excitedly, as she tried to fly upwards. She wasn't used to having so much weight on her, but she could still manage.

“You are?!” Pinkie shouted.

“Didn't I tell ya' to keep it down?” Applejack said, stomping her hoof. Pinkie bowed her head and smiled bashfully, and AJ turned back to Twilight. “It looks like Fluttershy's pullin' through for us after all. We saw some kind of owl swoopin' about there like he knew somethin'. We didn't see much from our end, just a bunch of pegasi buildin' some kind of wall.”

“Did you see that thing they were building in the center?”

“Not really. The wall's pretty high up there on the far side. We could hardly see a darned thing.”

“Well then, it looks like it's up to me to check it out,” Dash said, finally getting the hang of flying around in heavy barding. She made a few quick turns and sweeps through the air. “I'll be able to get a better look anyway. Who would you guys rather trust, me or some feathered birdbrain?”

They all resisted the urge to state the obvious, Pinkie less so than the others as she chocked back a chortle.

Zecora set down her basket between two branches like she did before so she could open it up and search for a potion. “Take this and hide it in your peytral,” She said, picking up a bottle in her mouth and holding it out to Dash. “Throw it down should chaos starts to fall.”

“Hide it in my what?”



"It's the plate covering your chest," Twilight said, using her telekinesis to stash it under the armor for her. "Just don't forget the plan," She reminded her, levitating the spear and hooking it back on as well.

Dash saluted, and with a few strained wing flaps she gained enough momentum to clear the trees overhead. Together, the rest of the ponies made their way back to where they started to meet up with Fluttershy and Rarity, Zecora picking up the potion supply as they did.

Rainbow Dash made her way purposefully towards the stronghold. She kept her cool, or rather it was forcefully restricted by the armor. It didn't fit quite right, and she fidgeted as it started to chafe in a few places. As she approached the wall, she tried to imitate the way Rarity carried herself, hoping that might pass off as a refined, military stance. The barding mostly covered her spectral mane and sky blue coat, so she hoped she wouldn't be recognized.

"You there! Who are you, and where did you get that armor?!" The first valponie shouted that caught sight of her.

"So much for the plan!" Dash shouted, and immediately bolted back to her friends.

"Return here at once!" The valpony shouted, and started to give chase. A few other valponies noticed the commotion, and started to make their ways over the wall as well.

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A moment later, the rest of the group noticed Dash incoming with a battalion in tow as they met up at the corner of the field. "Oh, what did she do now?!" Twilight shouted, stomping her hooves. "Everypony! Get ready to fight!"

Applejack and Pinkie formed up on both sides of Twilight, facing down the advancing valponies. Zecora and Rarity stood behind them, and Fluttershy dove for the bushes again. As the battle began, each pony fought with whatever abilities were available to her. Although here described in turn, many events took place simultaneously.

Twilight was the first to act, having the advantage of magic on her side. She didn't know a lot of combat spells, but she still had that flare. It wouldn't kill anypony, she admitted to herself, but silently she admitted that she really didn't want to kill anypony either. Bracing herself in a similar stance as before, she fired a couple bolts of magic from her horn. The valpony leading the charge didn't expect it, and was thrown from the air by the impact. The next few missed as the advancing line started to spread. As one got within striking range, she teleported out of the way and continued firing.

By this point, the valponies were starting to draw their spears as they approached. Applejack knew that the strength of her world-famous buck would be at a disadvantage against a weapon with range, so she would have to be careful. As the first valpony singled in on her, she rounded on her front hooves to strike. With a carefully timed side kick she pushed the spear tip outwards, which had the resulting effect of jerking its wielder's body off balance. With her other hoof, she bucked into the center of her attacker's peytral, causing the valpony to spiral off and away from her.

"Catch me if you can!" Pinkie shouted, leaping into the air. She leaped over the first valpony to rush her, and sailed over the pagasus' head onto her back. Mid jump, she pulled a party popper out of her saddlebags and popped it into the back of the valponie's head. Springing upwards again, she forced the valpony into the ground. Her next target didn't see her coming as she bounced off the side of the warrior pony's armor and flung her into yet another valpony. She continued her ascent, leaping from one pagasus to the next, bursting poppers or throwing confetti as she flew. She wasn't doing any real harm to them, but was making a dent in the organization of their ranks.

Rainbow Dash careened into the ground past the front line and landed next to Rarity. "Quick, you gotta get me outta this thing! I can barely fly!" she begged.

Rarity was not a fighting unicorn either. She had neither Twilight's raw magical ability nor Applejack's brute strength, but she had advanced telekinetic powers, control over clothing, and a quick mind. Her first thought was to interfere with the valponies' armor, but her power didn't lend itself to reforming metal. However, each of those plates were held together with

leather and buckles, which she could easily manipulate. Not all at once, but enough to interfere with one or two at a time.

Dash's plea came first, however, and she had to help her out of that hunk of metal. "Hold still!" she shouted and using her magic to unbuckle the straps and trim the leather support. The barding collapsed off of Dash like molting feathers.

"Yeah, now we're talking!" Dash shouted, jumping up and stretching her limbs freely.

Rarity was just about to say 'you're welcome' to Dash until the valpony Applejack had just sent spiraling away then landed between the two of them. The pegasi was followed immediately after by one Pinky jumped from. Catching sight of even more hostile approaching, the two of them got to work.

Dash dug through the pile of scrap metal for the spear, and lifted off with it. By now, the valponies were starting to fight with more focus. Dash didn't have any training with the weapon, but her speed and agility far exceeded that of her armored opponents. Using her weapon more like a club than a lance, she darted from one target to the next, smacking them as she flew by. Most blows glanced harmlessly off their armor, but some managed to graze by unarmored areas along necks and heads. As Rarity began dislocating valpony armor, her strikes became more effective. Noticing how effective her fighting was, some of the valponies veered upwards in an attempt to chase her down.

None of the Equestrians present in the battle had killed anypony before. Some of them lacked the intent or the ability to do so. As Dash flew through the battle with her weapon, she was the first to draw blood of any of them. Before she even realized it, she was also the first to end a life. There was no time for her then to think about such things, she was having too much fun with the exhilaration of flight as she swung her favorite new toy.

As all of this was occurring, Zecora picked a potion from her basket and watched the battle unfold with careful eyes. As valponies continued to fly in from the stronghold, they started to circle around her friends. There were too many enemies, and the seven of them would not be able to hold a line.

The best course of action, then, was to thin out the numbers.

With a large swing of her neck, Zecora flung one of her bottles out over the field towards the advancing valponies. It spiraled through the air, small and largely unnoticed by the approaching pagasi. It landed on the back of one and shattered.

The resulting explosion instantly killed three valponies, and scattered a few more. There was confusion among everypony around, as nopony but Zecora knew where the explosion came from. Several valponies realized it was her and landed on all sides. They poised their spears to strike.

Zecora picked up another bottle from her basket. Unable to carry all of them at once, she was effectively rooted to that location. "If you want to take me, come get some!" She shouted through her teeth, waving the bottle menacingly. "The first one here shall be blasted to kingdom come!"

Suddenly, a flock of owls emerged from the corner of the woods where Fluttershy had been hiding. By her insistence, they joined the battle, pecking and clawing at the valponies. She hated fighting more than anything else, but she knew that she couldn't just stand by and do nothing. She could do nothing else, though, and simply watched in fear and apprehension from her hiding place.

A dozen or so valponies had been incapacitated to some degree or another, but there were still tens more all around. Some pursued Dash, Pinkie, and the owls through the air, the others circled around the ponies on the ground. At least Rarity has disarmed most of them. Twilight was starting to teleport more often than she was attacking, and some were very close calls. She had taken a few jabs to the side, and a reactive instinct would kick in and teleport her in the opposite direction, whichever way that happened to be.

Another blade struck Twilight, and she teleported again. The stress was getting to her, and she was having a hard time focusing on what would be the most logical action. In an act of desperation, she projected a barrier a few meters wide around herself, pushing everything away. Fortunately, she only ended up hitting valponies in the expansion of magic.

"Twilight! Let me inside! Help!" a voice managed to ring through to Twilight's mind over the din.

The purple unicorn turned and saw Rarity banging on her barrier. She was wounded as well, but only once to the leg. She seemed to have been stabbed in the shoulder, and blood ran down her otherwise pristine white coat. Twilight opened a gap in the barrier to let her limp inside.

"We must get out of here! We can't fight all of them!" Rarity shouted. She used her magic and a scarf from her saddlebags to bandage her wound. She winced as she tightened the fabric around the cut to stem the bleeding.

"There's still too many! We have to at least make an opening first! Do what you can for now, I'll keep us safe!"

Rarity collapsed on the ground and let her injured leg stretch out. She whimpered a little as a few tears slipped from her tightly shut eyes. Another one of Zecora's bombs exploded nearby, the shock wave threw a valpony against Twilight's shield. She knew what she had to do.

Rarity lifted her head high and furrowed her brows as she brought as much of her magic as she could to bear. She used her power to separate one of the discarded armors into a swarm of metal scales. Some of the valponies who witnessed that, by then on to the friend's abilities, flew away from them as fast as they could. The scales veered off after them, each chasing a target.

Some of the valponies tried to break through Twilight's barrier to stop Rarity's telekinesis. They couldn't break the wall, but each impact deformed it a bit, causing Twilight to flinch as she struggled to maintain its form. Those that paused to do so were easier targets for Rarity's scales. The valponies there that still had armor were protected from the projectiles, but the rest found themselves with scale bullets in their backs. Spot of red blood landed on Twilight's purple shield.

Applejack wasn't faring much better. Trying to fight with her bare hooves was a challenge when faced with armed opponents. She had plenty of spear scrapes, but she was tough enough to shrug most of them off. They circled around her as well. They all knew that the first one to rush her would likely be bucked to the face while only making a scratch on her, and they

were hesitant to take that chance. She turned quickly, facing each of them, scowling and snorting, daring them to make a move.

Applejack decided that she had to use a lasso on one of them and quickly pulled the rope out of her bags. Getting a hold of an intelligent pony was much more difficult than a bull rampaging in a single direction. Her first couple shots missed and the opening in her guard left her vulnerable to a few jabs. Applejack was surprised to realize that valpony weaponry wasn't incredibly sharp. Each of her many blows were drawing blood, but no single one was life threatening.

Finally, Applejack managed to rope one around the neck. Shocked, the valpony tried to lift off into the sky, but the orange pony jerked down on the rope causing the warrior to plummet back down again head first. There was an audible snap as she hit the dirt. Rearing back and pulling with the strength of an earth pony farm worker, Applejack flung the body around herself in a full circle, knocking it into the other valponies surrounding her before the rope snapped at the loop.

Applejack considered running for the shelter of Twilight's barrier when she saw it, but there were too many valponies between them, and she knew she'd be useless inside that bubble anyway. There was fighting to be done, and the worst thing she could do was not help out, even if it was risky. Another one of Zecora's potions exploded, and she only hoped that zebra had a throwing neck as strong as her own to not be in range of that blast.

As the valponies recovered from the swing, another blade left a gash on Applejack's side, a good sized one that time. She bucked instinctively and made contact with a jaw. She was running out of steam, but they would literally have to kill her to make her stop trying to protect her friends.

At the same time, Pinkie continued to ricochet between the valponies in the air. They were catching on to her antics as well and beginning to hold out their spears at her as she dived at them. A little bit of deft maneuvering and pinkie sense was protecting her so far, but she was definitely having less fun than when she started. She had already run out of streamers and poppers anyway. She dove for a valpony that didn't seem to have noticed her, but realized her approach mid jump. The warrior's spear was thrown up defensively. Surprised, Pinkie grabbed on to the shaft of the spear with her hooves, and tried push herself off to the side. The maneuver cost her a

gash to the chest, but at least she avoided skewering herself completely. Unprepared to take a hit, she tumbled into the valpony instead of bouncing off of her. The two of them fell through the air towards the ground. Pinkie was the first to recover, and jumped away from the valpony to land. She hit the ground with a tumble, but was mostly unhurt. The valpony spread her wings to try and slow her decent, but landed straight on her outstretched legs, causing them to buckle beneath her. She hit the ground with a crunch and collapsed.

Pinkie wobbled to her hooves and inspected her wound. She looked with fear at the splotch on her coat that was a much darker shade of red than it should have been. She glanced around over the battle around her in horror, seeing valponies lying in the ground in pain and all of her friends hurt in some way even as they continued fighting. Zecora threw a third potion bomb with great effect. The bodies of valponies thrown by the explosion arched over her line of sight, and she watched them fall back to the ground. Then, something changed inside the happy, pink pony.

The look of dread on Pinkie's face slowly changed to that of determination as she started to charge in Applejack's direction as the orange pony was swinging a valpony by the neck. As she crossed the distance the air let out of her mane and tail. Her normally bouncy curls flattened out into a much straighter style.

By the time Pinkie reached Applejack, the lasso had snapped at the knot, reducing it to a normal rope. She immediately bit into the end of it and held on tight, much to the farmer's surprise.

"Pinkie?! What are ya' – yer mane!" Applejack stammered.

"Swing me!" Pinkie screamed.

"What?!"

"Do it!"

Pinkie started to run in a circle around Applejack, still gripping the rope, building up momentum until Applejack would do what she told her. She jumped over and under a few valponies who were recovering from the

Applejack's previous swing. Her straight hair billowed like a banner behind her.

Pushing aside the pain from her several wounds, Applejack pulled on the rope and started trying to swing Pinkie around like she did the valpony. The rope held this time, and the pink pony was circling around her like a wrecking ball, kicking at any enemy within reach. Although she was worried for Pinkie's safety, she finally had a weapon with range that outmatched the spears.

Back in the air, Dash was beginning to master the use of her spear. She knew that she couldn't face the valponies one on one – they still proved to be more skilled than she was – but she tried them anyway. She would approach one and attempt to clash weapons with her. Her heightened perception developed from years of flying at incredible speeds allowed her to quickly determine when a duel was going against her, and she would dart away before taking a hit. Out of all of the friends, she was one of the two who had yet to be hurt. Pinkie was doing an excellent job of being a distraction while she was up in the air with her, but the blue pegasus started to feel crowded with extra hostiles focusing on her when Pinkie fell. A flock of owls had appeared out of seemingly nowhere and were joining her in the fight for the air. The valponies seemed to be having an ever harder time fighting them off, but it wasn't enough.

With most airborne valponies locked on to her, Dash had to switch into evasive mode. Spear tips closed in around her from all directions, and she weaved and rolled over as many of them as she could. It was during this moment that she finally received some scrapes from their attacks. The sensation of being cut on her sides while dodging like that reminded her of the accident from a few months previous. The weight of the danger finally sunk in.

Dash had a fleeting vision of crashing into a branch, of meeting a blue pony with eight legs, of that pony telling her she was dead.

Panic flowed over Dash again. With one big burst of speed, she fled from the battle entirely. The valponies, knowing full well that they couldn't catch her, resigned to descending on the rest of the friends on the ground.



In a continuing wave of emotion, Rainbow Dash knew she couldn't just abandon her friends like that. She banked around and started to head back. On her approach, she saw spears lunging at the purple bubble protecting the unicorns. Zecora had also found her way inside somewhere along the way. She had one last potion in her mouth. The three of them were bandaged up with stylish clothes from Rarity's saddlebags. Applejack had apparently collapsed where she stood a dozen meters away, Pinkie stood protectively over her and growled at the encroaching valponies.

They needed a miracle, and Dash could only think of one.

Dash poured every bit of strength and energy into her flight. She tucked in her limbs to improve her aerodynamics. She focused on every motion of her wings to refine them as much as possible. She approached the sound barrier, with felt like it was growing thicker the faster she moved.

Try as she might, Rainbow Dash couldn't break through that barrier. She didn't need to, however. The compressed cone of air forming around her was enough of a battering ram to scatter many of the valponies. With a roar of sound, the compressed air shook the field. Those also in the sky were particularly vulnerable to the air cone, and were launched away, unable to right themselves. The owls were also scattered and did not return. Those on the ground were knocked backwards and away from the friends. Everypony inside Twilight's barrier was safe even as the cone popped it. Applejack and Pinkie's hunkered positions allowed them to fare better than the valponies, but they were still knocked back some. In fact, they were shoved along the ground closer to the others.

As Dash swooped overhead to decelerate and land with the rest of the friends, they were arguing about their next move. Rarity immediately started using the last of her clothes to mend Applejack the best she could.

"We must go now, hurry and take flight," Zecora said. "If we stay, we will not survive this night."

"Ah can ... Ah can fight," Applejack murmured as she lay on the dirt with her eyes shut tight. She had taking the most punishment of anypony. "Jus' ... jus' get me mah lasso"

“We can't go on. We have to get out of here!” Rarity shouted, kneeling at Applejack's side. Then, she shrieked when she saw the remaining valponies get back up. “Quick, we must go!”

“How are we supposed to get out of here, huh?!” Pinkie screamed. The anger in her voice was a disturbing thing for her friends to hear. “You two can barely move, and those ponies will be on us any second!”

Fluttershy finally emerged from her hiding spot and hurried back to her friends. “Oh, I'll, I'll carry somepony!” she said, trying to be helpful.

“Don't worry, I'm here now! I can get us outta here as fast as a sonic rainboom!” Dash exaggerated, but she fully intended to get them all out.

“No need, I've got this!” Twilight shouted.

As the others were shouting, Twilight was focusing all the magic power she had left. She was once been able to teleport Spike alongside with her, but the baby dragon had been slightly singed by the magical burnoff. She had never attempted moving an entire party in that way, but she had recently learned of a few techniques that granted her powers she never knew she had – Powers she never thought any pony could have.

Twilight's horn burned with purple unicorn magic as she readied the activation of her mass teleportation. The valponies all around were rising to their hooves and readied their weapons. Twilight reared up on her hind legs and groaned audibly as she was about to release the spell. The valponies charged at the friends for one final rush to finish them off. Twilight stomped her hooves down hard and a flash of brilliant white light emanated from her horn, blinding everypony in sight. As the light vanished, so did the friends.

The valponies came to a stop as the light seemed to surround them. When their sight returned, they looked around, greatly confused.

A couple of valponies then said a single line. It was not said in unison, more like they had each thought to say it at the same time.

“I must tell father,” was that line.

# Chapter 6

## Dissolution

Twilight's head was spinning when the group rematerialized elsewhere in Everfree Forest. She had expended so much energy during the fight between shooting flares and maintaining that bubble shield. Her new techniques allowed her to tap into more of her body's energy and use it more efficiently, but she still had the same amount of energy she always had. The mass teleportation was incredibly draining, quite literally.

*"... It is difficult to verify what it is like to continue to increase the power of a spell with this kind of suicidal intensity as unicorns have forfeited their lives in this manner,"* Twilight recalled from her guide.

Voices were arguing around Twilight, but for the moment they were all swirling and unfamiliar, much like her vision. Her heartbeat was fast, and her breathing slow and ragged. Some of her extremities were feeling numb as though she was surrounded by a blizzard, when in fact it had been a fairly warm night. She suddenly realized that she had fallen over sometime after the teleportation was complete. She tried to get back to her hooves, but the dirt was like jelly moving around beneath her. Somehow she pulled off this stunt and was able to sit upright. Something warm and fuzzy gripped her, but she wasn't entirely sure what it was at first. Her vision started to stabilize, and the dual colored blob directly in front of her reformed into Fluttershy, who was apparently the warm and fuzzy thing keeping her upright. Well, it mostly looked like Fluttershy.

*"Careful now, little one. It's not your time yet. We have plenty of things to discuss, let me assure you, but this is not the time,"* a voice said clearly, but Twilight didn't recognize that one.

"Di-discuss?" Twilight mumbled. "What time is it?"

The thing that was probably Fluttershy mumbled something else in reply.

"W-what?"

“Oh, I'm so sorry, I said I don't know what time it is,” Fluttershy whimpered, burying her face in her friend's neck. “I really wish I could tell you, Twilight, I really, really, wish I could!” she pleaded.

Almost completely recovered from her nausea, Twilight flopped her hooves around Fluttershy and hugged her back. “I'm ... I'm okay ... Just give me a minute.”

Rainbow Dash hovered over, placing a hoof on both of them. “Ease up a bit, will ya?” she said. “Give Twilight a little breathing room.”

“No...” Fluttershy said weakly.

Sighing, Dash continued. “Fine. Keep holding her. Just stop crowding her head, alright?”

Fluttershy nodded, nudging her face against Twilight's neck some more as she did. She moved over to hold on to her friend's side instead of her neck. She even kept a wing wrapped around her for security. Whether it was for the unicorn's security or her own, she probably wouldn't have been able to answer.

Dash landed with her side facing Twilight. Then she flapped her wings up and down randomly for a few seconds before stopping abruptly. “How many wings do you see?”

Twilight focused for a moment before answering. “ ... Three. No, wait, that doesn't make sense ... Two. Definitely two.”

“Good.” Dash said, lowering her wings again. “Now just keep still. Don't move so much.”

“An herb for you head I shall find,” Zecora said, “Stay here and do not leave me behind!” she then dashed off into the forest.

“Girls!” Rarity shouted. “I'm as worried about Twilight as the rest of you, but Applejack urgently needs help!”

Dash flew off to hover above the downed earth pony and Twilight, with Fluttershy's help, stumbled over as well. Applejack was lying on her side.

She was very still, but still breathing slowly. Very slowly. Her sides and flanks were covered with a dozen puncture wounds, each of which wrapped and secured firmly with some article of Rarity's clothing that had been magically formed to her body, stemming the blood loss. Each bandage was a different brightly colored design and material, save for the matching blood stains. Fortunately, she wasn't injured on her head and neck, where she was most vulnerable. Rarity was laying down in front of her, looking over her carefully.

"It's okay," Twilight said, "I can heal her."

Twilight illuminated her horn to begin using the recovery spells she knew before Dash clamped on it with her hooves. Doing so wouldn't actually interfere with the casting of a spell had she not jerked the unicorn's head around a little bit.

"Hold on there, magic girl. I can't let you do that!"

"You can't be serious!" Rarity protested, rising to her three good hooves. "Applejack could die if she doesn't get help soon! Goodness know where we are right now, and there's no telling how long until we can get her to a hospital."

"I don't know squat about unicorn magic, but look at Twilight! She's in just as bad a shape as Applejack. Believe me, I know a thing or two about head injuries."

"Using her magic is not going to kill her. Not using her magic will kill Applejack!"

"They should both be resting, or Twilight's just gonna get worse!"

The two friends were literally butting heads at that point, shoving back and forth with each point. They didn't even realize that the orange pony in question was already glowing with purple magic. Fluttershy noticed this, still clinging to Twilight's side, but didn't object, she just held on to her a little tighter.

"Will you two stop fighting!" Pinkie shouted, finally speaking up. He hair had still not returned to normal.

Rarity and Dash looked at Pinkie, only to follow her outstretched hoof to Applejack. The last of Twilight's magic faded away as they did. The earth pony let out a deep breath as the healing spells faded as though a weight was lifted off her lungs. She began to breathe more steadily, but her eyes remained closed.

"I ... told you I would be fine," Twilight lied with a smile, her vision going blurry again.

"Okay, fine, don't listen to me!" Dash pouted. "But if you try doing any more magic, I'm taking that horn from you. You got that?!" She waved a hoof menacingly at Twilight.

Twilight continued smiling and nodded. The world started to spin in a whole new direction as she did.

"So it's settled then. Hey, Pinkie, help me carry this workhorse glory hog and we can get out of here."

Pinkie nodded and stood next to Applejack's resting form so Dash could lift her onto her back.

"You're going to have to help me walk for just a little while," Twilight whispered to Fluttershy, "don't tell the others, okay?" The pegasus nodded and nuzzled her neck again.

"Does anypony know where in Equestria we are?" Rarity asked.

"We are a thousand paces north of where we fought," Zecora said, emerging from the forest with a leafy plant in her mouth. "Can the valponies find us here? I think not." She walked up to Twilight and extended the plant to her. "Chew on this, but you must not swallow. The juices will make your head feel less hollow."

Twilight wasn't entirely sure what to make of that last rhyme, but she knew to trust Zecora's judgment – especially when it came to herbs and medicines. She took the plant gratefully and starting chewing it.

“We must continue north back to Ponyville.” Zecora continued. “Though we are far, the valponies might search for us still.”

“Nonsense! No pony is going anywhere until you're all bandaged. Ow!” Rarity said, whimpering as she accidentally stepped on her injured leg. “We're only going to make ourselves worse if we all try hobbling off like this.”

The rest of the group agreed to that. And after Rarity tore apart the last of the clothes in her saddlebags for wrapping they continued their journey homeward. Twilight managed to wobble her way through with Fluttershy's support. Dash took to the treeline to keep an aerial eye out for anypony following them. Zecora, being in the best shape, took point to find the best path for her injured companions.

Rarity made herself a sling for her leg. It wasn't long before she was able to adjust her stance to be able to walk gracefully with only three good legs. By then, all that mud she had complained about earlier seemed inconsequential. She considered asking Twilight to heal it as well, but she didn't want to be a bother. It wasn't so bad, she could hardly feel any pain in her leg at all.

Pinkie carried Applejack the entire way. She didn't say much, and her head hung as low as her mane. None of them said much of anything, really. They were all very tired, and they had much to think about.

A little over an hour later, Ponyville's local physician, Nurse Redheart, had an abrupt awakening in the middle of the night. She hadn't encountered so many ponies in such bad shape at once since the “baked bads” incident, and she called in assistance from a neighboring village for that one. A bunch of ponies with sick tummies was one thing, but half the group that showed up at her door that night needed surgery – stat. There was no way she could get assistance for that one. She lived in her own wing of Ponyville's little hospital, so she was able to get right to work as soon as she got up.

Redheart quickly diagnosed Twilight with magical exhaustion and sent her to her own room along with Fluttershy and Zecora, whom she showed where some food could be found. Twilight desperately wanted to see

Spike, but she knew that he would be sleeping like a rock at that hour and nothing less than a sonic rainboom would wake him up.

Applejack was placed in a bed adjacent to Twilight in the same room. She was still unresponsive, but stable. Redheart then brought Pinkie, Dash, and Rarity into the emergency wing to prep them for stitching. As Fluttershy and Zecora gathered some fruits, veggies, and even a few flowers for Twilight to eat, all she could do was stare at the comatose workhorse and will her to wake up.

"I'm sorry, Applejack," Twilight whispered. "I shouldn't have taken you all along with me." She tried to hide her face under the covers, but felt just as guilty not watching over her friend and poked her head out again.

Zecora returned with a tray of food balanced immaculately on her head and Fluttershy behind her. The novel of watching her do so had not worn off on the pegasus. Twilight was lost in thought watching Applejack that she didn't realize they had returned until Zecora placed the tray down on the side table in front of her face.

"Here you go, Twilight," Fluttershy said, picking up a bunch of grapes and holding it out to her. "I know you're really, really, sleepy, but you have to eat at least a little before you do, please."

The yellow pegasus looked like she was about to fall asleep herself. Her eyelids and tail were sagging low. Even her mane seemed to be drooping. It seemed like the only thing keeping her going was her concern for her friends.

Twilight initially tried to use her telekinesis to lift the fruit Fluttershy was offering her, but she found that her magic wasn't responding. Her horn glowed faintly and produced a few small sparks. Fluttershy almost dropped the grapes on the floor as she grabbed Twilight's horn to make her stop. "Oh! No, no, Nurse Redheart said no more magic. Here, use your hooves," She cooed, taking her limbs from beneath the sheets to pick up the fruit for her.

Having her horn snatched for the second time that night was almost as irritating as having her hooves held like that. Twilight also didn't appreciate being spoken to like a filly, but she knew her friend was only trying to help.



She forced a tired smile and pulled her hooves free from the pegasus' grasp. "Thank you Fluttershy, I think I can manage."

"Oh, um, okay. I'll be over here if you need anything." Fluttershy said with a worried smile, taking a few steps back. "Really. Um, any-anything at all. Just name it and I'll be there. I promise, I'll-" She stammered.

Fluttershy was always helpful and eager to please, but the way she was acting seemed strangely clingy to Twilight. "It's okay, really. You just go sit down and have something to eat too, alright?" she said, still trying to smile warmly.

"O-Okay. Whatever you say!" Fluttershy snatched an apple from the tray with her mouth and hurried over to one of the benches that lined the wall across from the beds to lie down. Although Applejack could down an entire apple in one motion, Fluttershy nibbled at it in small bites. Zecora had already taken a couple of carrots and started eating by herself. She wasn't trying to be unsocial, she just had a tendency to do things on her own away from other ponies. Normally so used to holding everything with magic, Twilight fumbled a bit gripping her meal.

They all ate in silence until Fluttershy offered a question.

"Twilight?" She squeaked softly.

"Yes, Fluttershy?"

"... That spark thing you used earlier ... where did you learn that?" She asked. She didn't look up as she spoke, but stared directly at her half-eaten apple instead.

"You mean that flare? I actually looked that one up myself after Trixie came through Ponyville. She may have been a selfish show-off, but her fireworks were pretty. I thought it might be neat to be able to do that myself."

"Did it take a long time to learn? Is it hard?"

"Well, that's two different things." Twilight put a hoof to her chin for a moment as she thought about the best way to explain magic to somepony who wasn't a unicorn. "It is kinda tricky to have a flare sparkle and explode,

since you have to give it the power to do that before you release it. A lot of spells are like that, so I have some practice. As far as it being hard..." She contemplated for a beat more. "I can make it as big or as small as I want, it's all about how much energy I put into it. Kinda like running, or flying I suppose, you can go faster by trying harder. To make a flare strong enough to ... to ..."

Twilight trailed off on her lecture, thinking back to the sight of valponies being singed and broken by her spells. Fluttershy continued to stare silently into her apple as Twilight spoke, reluctant to face anypony else.

"So, to really fight other ponies, you just have to try real hard?"

Twilight was surprised by the gentle natured pagasus' questions. Even Zecora craned her head around to see what she was getting at.

"... Uh ... yeah ... Yeah, I guess so."

"So ... So if I can't fight other ponies ... That means that I didn't t-try hard enough. T-That I didn't c-care enough about my f-f-friends..."

Fluttershy began to cry. Zecora, somewhat unfamiliar on how to handle an outpouring of emotions, hesitated before jumping up to her side. Twilight did so immediately, almost knocking over the side table as she did. Fortunately, she had long since recovered enough mental clarity to make this maneuver, or getting all the way over to her would have been impossible. She hugged her distraught friend tightly as she cried into her mane. Zecora rested a hoof reassuringly on Fluttershy's back.

"No, no, sweetie, that's not true! I've seen you stand up for yourself, for all of us before. Like the manticore, and the dragon. You stood up to a real, live dragon! You won a staring contest against a cockatrice! I'd be the Princess' cherished lawn ornament standing next to Discord right now if you hadn't done that! You are so brave, Fluttershy."

The kind pegasus smiled just a little bit as Twilight explained all that and managed to control her tears. "T-that's different..."

"How? How is that different?"

Fluttershy raised her head to look Twilight in the eyes. "It's not me, it was them. The manticore was just upset, and the dragon and the cockatrice were being meanies. But the valponies ... They weren't just being mean, they were really trying to kill us." She glanced over in Applejack's direction. "And they almost did. I can calm down an angry creature, even make one behave if he's being rude, but to change a pony's mind when she's out to kill? I-I can't stop that."

"It's okay. If only more ponies were gentle like you, then maybe we wouldn't have had a to fight at all."

"You think so?"

"Regrets and fears are like a poison for the soul," Zecora interjected. "Lament on them too long and you'll turn dark as coal. If you disapprove of what you did yesterday, look to tomorrow and find another way."

Fluttershy closed her eyes tight for moment, taking Zecora's word in, then shook her head. She then broke free from her friends. She flapped her wings and fluttered to the ground a few steps away. "I'm sorry. I think I'm just going to take a walk now, okay?" She turned and left before anypony could stop her.

Twilight stood up to catch up to her friend, but Zecora held out a hoof and stopped her. "Our words have been said. The rest is up to her instead."

Zecora led Twilight back to her bed and insisted that she sleep. She protested a little and insisted that someone go after Fluttershy. The moment her head touched the pillow, however, she was out like a light. It was even more comfortable than the leather binding of an old book and a grassy knoll.

Twilight's rest was shattered at mid morning the next day to the sound of chaos in the next room.

"What do you mean, severed?!" A high pitched voice shrieked. "Why can't I move my leg!?"

The sudden disturbance shocked Twilight, causing her to flail about and fall out of bed. A midnight snack and a good rest being an excellent cure for magical exhaustion, she leaped up, horn glowing, to investigate the disturbance. She galloped out the door and turned to face down the hall where the racket was coming from.

Nurse Redheart was backing out of the room next door. She was holding up a leg to shield her face from a flurry of objects that were emerging with her. A bedpan rolled noisily across the floor. Rolls of gauze bounced off of her head and leg. A lamp flew at a high arc out the door and sailed over her head before crashing against a wall. The voice continued to shout from inside.

"I am an artist! Don't you know that I need all of my hooves?! How am I supposed to perform my craft like this?! And look at these stitches! They're hideous! And you call yourself a professional?! Why couldn't you fix me?"

*"Why couldn't you save us, Twilight?"* The broken, echoing voice from Twilight's nightmare repeated in her head.

Twilight jumped up next to Redheart and projected a shield around both of them, blockading the door. This proved somewhat useless as the only thing Rarity had left to telekinetically throw in their direction was a couple of pillows from the neighboring bed. Out of ammunition, she collapsed back on her bed and cried.

"Rarity!" Twilight shouted.

"Leave me alone!" Rarity shouted, slamming the door with her magic.

"There was nothing I can do." Redheart explained to Twilight. "Whatever cut her like that went straight through the nerve. I'm an Earth Pony, I can't heal that."

"I have healing magic, I can-"

"It's not that simple. Even if you could repair the nerves in her arm, it's far too late to heal her now. Maybe if you did just after the injury, but not half a day later. The cells have already begun to decay. I'm sorry. Really, I am."

“You mean she's paralyzed?!”

“With physical therapy she can get most of it back in time. She should consider herself fortunate that she still has the leg after walking on it all the way back here. Even more so that she has magic in the meantime.”

Twilight's head was spinning at the thought of Rarity being an amputee. She grabbed Nurse Redheart's head. “What about Pinkie?! How's Rainbow Dash?!”

Redheart pulled herself from Twilight's grip. “They're both fine. Rarity is the only one that had any kind of complication. They're both resting on the other side of the hall if you want to see them.”

“No, this is all wrong ...” Twilight said, shaking her head. “This is all my fault. I should never have brought them with me!”

Twilight turned tail and bolted. She ran down the hall and teleported outside, startling a few ponies who were out on the street that morning. She continued running for home, teleporting past and around anypony in her way. Once her library tree was in sight, she teleported one last time to arrive on the highest balcony. She collapsed there and buried her face in her hooves.

“This is all my fault ... “

*“Why couldn't you save us, Twilight?”*

# Chapter 7

## Arrival

Celestia, from the back of her sister and her's royal pegasus drawn carriage, sat still. Very still. Her expression stony and tense as she stared intently straight ahead. She was stern and intense, focused deeply on the task at hand, carefully foreseeing every possible outcome of the scenario before her. By the time they arrived in Ponyville to assess this so called "invasion," she would have developed a fool-proof course of action that stood no chance of failure.

At least, that's what anypony else would see by looking at the princess. Her slightly less ancient sister sitting next to her knew full well that she was panicking like a filly behind that highly developed poker face. As serious as the situation was, it was somewhat amusing to the Princess of the Moon watching her sister like that and knowing she was the only pony in the world that saw the truth.

That's not to say she didn't care about the fates of Twilight and her friends. To the contrary, she felt indebted to the six of them for purging her dark side with the Elements of Harmony the year before, not to mention helping her find a new meaning for the dreaded "Nightmare Night Festival."

However, spending a millennium in exile taught Luna patience, among other things, including the habit of repeating thoughts to herself to fill up empty time. They had been out with a division of pegasus soldiers flying their way to Ponyville since early morning. Three more divisions of earth ponies and a handful of specialist unicorn squads were to follow them on hoof and would take an extra day to arrive. There wasn't anything she could tell her sister to ease the strain of the situation so she just let her be for the moment. There was plenty of empty time here to ruminate on things she already knew so she went about it again

Luna closed her eyes, exhaled deeply, and relaxed, lying down on her stomach. In a kind of meditative state, she recalled the events of the past day one more time.

*"Yesterday afternoon, Sister received a message that some hostile force arrived in Everfree Forest. Neither of us could imagine who, as there are no standing conflicts with anyone. There isn't even a hint of citizens being disgruntled, let alone forming an army in Everfree. That place was always very special and ominous though, even back in thine own time. Nothing good comes out of those woods.*

*"Well, that's not entirely true," Luna thought to herself with a faint smile that she tried to hide from Celestia, "One good thing went in there once.*

*"It twas precisely that reason that Celestia didn't want them going into Everfree in the first place. She's spent nearly two decades grooming that talented young mare, and she doth not wish to lose her there to some wayward monster while she could help it. Granted, they had been sent on dangerous and important missions before, but only because she anticipated exactly how the six of them would respond to the situation and more or less predetermined that they would be fine. Well, not so much predetermination as it was precognition.*

*"That is the wonderful thing about being immortal: there's so much time to plan. After the first millennium or two one hath pretty much seen everything, so nothing surprises one so much anymore either way. Sister knew exactly why that dragon was perched on that mountain when she received the report on it, she knew exactly what it would take to make him leave, and she knew exactly that the six friends had what it took to make him do so. They would figure it out for themselves once the time came.*

*"It was in that same manner that she orchestrated Nightmare Moon's, er, our final downfall. She had many centuries to prepare and we did leave a very clear prophesy. Had our thoughts been a bit more ... composed during that time perhaps all might have turned out differently. But then again, she likely would have anticipated that as well. She always does ..." Luna sighed and furrowed her brows.*

*"She hath also predicted what would happen if she took that dying phoenix down there as well," Luna thought, rolling her closed eyes. "She doth so much enjoy showing off like that.*

*"That is the difference between her and us. She is the the brightest being in the sky, and she'll make absolutely certain that everypony knows it, even if*

*it means creating a heat wave that everypony would have been perfectly fine without.*

*“We, on the other hand, are the moon. We assume nothing and demand little, save respect. We do not shine as bright or speak as loudly as Sister – Well, maybe not so much now as she hath abandoned the royal voice. Oh, if only that Twilight Sparkle had heard her declarations instead of ours...”* Luna added with a slight chuckle to herself, *“We are more passive and subtle.*

*“But we're digressing, aren't we? Back to the matter at hand, Sister did not anticipate this turn of events, which is why she is so distraught now. She ordered that Twilight Sparkle and her friends to refrain from venturing into the forest until we arrive to handle the matter ourselves. Even as she penned her response to stay put, she told me that the lot of them were long gone, and that her draconic assistant would be unable to catch them.*

*“With a royal declaration, we awoke a handful of soldier divisions and deployed them to Ponyville. With all deliberate speed we are now making our way there as well with the hopes that they're all still alright.”* Luna finally concluded to herself with a short nod.

“Are you finished?” Celestia asked.

“Hmm?” Luna replied, opening her eyes.

The elder sister watched her sibling from the corner of her eye. “You've been lying there making faces to yourself for half an hour. Are you meditating again?”

“We are taking this opportunity to enjoy the journey. We have nothing to engage ourselves for the time being, so we are giving ourselves to the wind in our mane.” The younger sister replied, brushing a hoof through her hair with a disinterested expression.

“Your mane is ethereal.” Celestia said flatly. “The wind cannot touch it.”

“All the more reason to concentrate. We must make it billow in the wind's stead.”



“Such an act is without purpose. Have you nothing better to occupy your mind?”

“Beauty is a purpose unto itself. You must agree, otherwise you would not cause your own mane to flow as well.”

“Very well then, I shall cease,” Celestia said and immediately did so. Not just her mane but her tail both instantly stopped moving and hung in the air. “Does this make you happy?”

“Only if it makes you happy, dearest sister,” Luna said with a warm smile while nuzzling her elder's side with her nose. “Of course, that leaves the full burden of ethereal mane waving on our shoulders alone. Nonetheless, we shall persevere,” she continued, holding the back of her hoof to her forehead dramatically. After a second of pretend concentration, her mane and tail began to billow and flow even more than it had before.

The two sisters stared at each other for a moment. One's hair was immobile as stone while the other's flapped about erratically like flags in a hurricane.

Then they laughed, and their respective mane motions returned to normal.

“Thank you for that.” Celestia said, returning the nuzzle her sister had given her.

“We shall always be at your service, defying your orders and instigating needless arguments.” Luna said before they both burst out laughing again.

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As per her usual routine, Rainbow Dash awoke sometime around noon. Finding herself laying on her stomach, she rolled over. A series of sharp pains shot through her side, and she immediately rolled back.

“Ow! What? Oh.” Dash stammered as she remembered where she was and why. She stretched out her legs and wings and sat up in bed, causing the sheets to slip off her shoulders. She was in the hospital bed she went to sleep in last night. Looking around, she noticed that Pinkie Pie was still in

the next bed. Or, she assumed that was Pinkie. Whoever was under those covers was buried so deep in them it was like she was hiding.

Dash looked down to inspect her stitches. She had a couple shaved spots on her sides that exposed her closed up wounds. She stuck her tongue out in disgust. They were a bit unsightly, but looking at them more she thought they looked kind of cool. She had her own set of battle scars. Vanity wasn't exactly her strong point, but she did love attention. She could make them work for her.

After doing a quick routine of wing calisthenics, Dash lifted up out of bed and flew over to the mysterious hiding pony at the other side of the room. Her body was sore but at least her wings were intact. She preferred flying everywhere anyway.

"Hey Pinks, is that you?" Dash asked, poking the hiding form on what she assumed was the head.

A pink leg untangled itself from the pile of blankets and swung blindly at Rainbow Dash. "Leave me alone!" Pinkie whined.

"Sorry. Did I hurt ya? Are you still banged up down there?"

"I'm fine." Pinkie pouted.

"Hmm ... You know what? I think we need breakfast. Whattya think? Wanna head on over to Sugarcube Corner and get something to eat?"

"No."

"Whattya mean 'no'? I've never known you to turn down a treat. Come on, let's go have some of Ms. Cake's blueberry pancakes." Dash said, reaching down to pull on Pinkie's sheets.

The depressed party pony responded by hunkering down under her blankets even tighter. This only encouraged Dash to pull harder. After a brief tug of war, the pegasus had lifted the sheets entirely into the air with Pinkie dangling from them by her teeth. Her tail and mane were still straightened.

With a sigh, Dash let go and Pinkie landed on her rump back on the bed. The sheets draped over her as they fell.

“What's your problem? I haven't seen you like this since –“ Dash started, then stopped with a gasp. “Since your surprise party! You're not going to replace me with a pile of rocks again, are you?” she added, eying Pinkie suspiciously.

Pinkie growled in frustration and pulled the sheets off her head. “I'm not going to replace you all this time! It's just that ... that ...” She trailed off.

Dash landed and rested her forelegs on Pinkie's bedside. “Come on, whatever's bothering you, I'm sure it's nothing a breakfast muffin with extra blueberries with rose petal frosting can fix!”

The pink pony closed her eyes tight and gritted her teeth. Then she exploded. “It's just wrong! Everything's wrong! And everything's always been wrong and I just never knew it! It's like when you throw a party and you get everyone you know invited and they all come and it's super duper fun but there's other ponies who don't get invited, not that you wouldn't invite them you just didn't know them so they didn't come, but even if you did invite them they wouldn't come because they're all grumpy un-party ponies or even anti-party ponies and that's the worst kind!”

Pinkie panted, almost worn out from her run-on sentence. The exertion tugged at the stitches on her chest, and she held a hoof to them.

“Do what now?” Dash asked, dumbfounded.

“How can there be anti-party ponies!?” Pinkie demanded, tearing up just a little and ignoring the pegasus' question. “Sure, we met all kinds of meany-pants creatures before, like Discord and Nightmare Moon. Except Nightmare Moon was just Luna being sad and grumpy, and Discord was having his own kind of party. And don't even get me started on Gilda! She's the closest I've met to an anti-party pony, and she's not even a pony! How can she not like parties? How can anypony not like parties?! It makes no sense!

Still clutching her wound, Pinkie kept panting heavily. She stared at Rainbow Dash as though she could answer her questions.

“Okay, I have no idea what you're talking about.” Dash said “Who said anything about parties? Does this have something to do with the valponies?”

“This has everything to do with the valponies!” Pinkie shouted, jumping into the air and flailing her legs. Dash jumped back in surprise.

“Alright, alright, just chill. I'll tell you what, I'll go get us some waffles with a side of daisies and you can stay here and ... figure out ... something ... whatever it was you just said,” Dash suggested, slowly backing up with an awkward smile. She made a bolt for it as soon as she was outside the door.

Pinkie growled in frustration and burrowed herself under the covers again. “Parties make ponies happy.” she whispered to herself. “Happiness is life. If somepony doesn't like parties, then that means ... ”

The lonely pony buried her head under the pillow. She touched a hoof to her wound one more time. “How can anypony not like life?”

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Twilight splayed herself out on the wooden floor of the highest balcony of her library tree house. She tried desperately to think of anything other than the events of the past day. She tried going through a mental map of Ponyville as if to consider a better layout of the village, but the thoughts of each of her friends' homes stuck out menacingly in her mind. She tried going through an inventory of all the spells she knew, even attempting to do so in alphabetical order.

She got as far as the 'D's with *Detect Gemstone* before an unpleasant image crept into her imagination: Rarity limping through crags on three legs as she struggled to pull a wagon of gemstones behind her. Then came *Detect Life Force* and the vivid memory of reassembling one of her best friend's spinal cord.

“Stop it! Think of something else.” Twilight told herself and rolled over, facing the sky.

Being shortly past noon, Twilight found herself staring directly upwards facing into the sun. She squinted and held a hoof out to shield her eyes. The weather pegasi must have cleared out the gloomy clouds from the day before and the full force of Celestia's blessing was smiting her retinas.

“Oh no, Princess Celestia ...” Twilight moaned to herself, covering her face with her hooves. “What will she think? She'll probably be upset with me for getting my friends hurt. She'll be so disappointed. After all the things I've written to her about the importance of friendship and all I've learned about magic, she would understand more than anypony how I should have known better.”

Twilight got up and cowered into the shade of the branches closer to the inside of her house. Getting out of the shining rays of Celestia's condemnation coming from the sun made her feel a little less guilty. The movement of something inside caught her attention. She looked down and saw Spike walking across the main floor of their house, shelving books. She watched him move about the room, climbing up and down that ladder and shifting books around.

“Oh, Spike, you dependable little squirt.” Twilight whispered to herself with a smile as a tear formed in her eye. “No matter what happens you're always right there helping me out. At least you're okay.” She leaned over to rest against the glass of the window. “Maybe you might have been better off if I hadn't hatched you ... Where would you be now if I hadn't? Probably an assistant to some other pony. I know that test wasn't really about hatching the egg, there's not enough dragon eggs lying around for everypony in that academy, but somepony else might have been able to hatch him. Somepony who was as good with magic as I am, just a bit more dependable.”

Twilight pushed off against the window so she could lie back down again. As she did, a stray splinter wedged itself into a sensitive spot near one of her wounds from the night before, causing her to flinch and yelp. Her scratches were minor compared to the others, so Nurse Redheart had only spent a few minutes to bandage her up while diagnosing her with exhaustion. Twilight removed the offending piece of wood with her telekinesis and tossed it off the edge of the balcony. She took a moment then to heal her wounds and clean the dried blood. So as not to disturb Spike, she teleported a wash towel from the kitchen downstairs to clean

herself. As she removed the bandages she bundled them up, wrapped them in the towel, and set them aside. She hissed in pain repeatedly as the medical tape tugged at her coat when she telekinetically peeled them off.

The sound of a creaking metal hinge caught the unicorn off guard.  
“Twilight? You're here!”

Spinning around, Twilight saw that Spike had come upstairs and opened the door to the balcony she was on. He immediately threw himself at her and hugged her neck. She was deeply grateful that he didn't have to see her covered in bandages, but she still had the evidence balled up behind her. “Oh! Hello Spike. I was just getting some fresh air. It's nice and sunny out here, isn't it?” She replied with a nervous smile.

“Nice day?” Spike asked, surprised. “Is that all you have to say? Where have you been?!” He demanded, flailing his arms around.

“You know where I was. You sent the letter to Celestia herself.”

“But you didn't hang around long enough to get her reply. She didn't want you to go. She said it was too dangerous!”

Twilight hung her head. Her ears lied flat against her head and her tail drooped. “Oh, I know Spike, it's a disaster!”

The unicorn took a deep breath, preparing to unload everything on her mind and about what happened. But then she stopped. She thought about what she had just said to herself. *“Where would you be now if I hadn't? Probably an assistant to some other pony. Somepony who was just as good at magic as I am, just a bit more dependable.”*

“You know what? It's nothing you need to worry about.” Twilight said at last.

“Nothing? Whattya mean, 'nothing!’”

“I said, it's nothing you need to worry about. I'll take care of it, Spike.” Twilight said. She then magically picked up the wad of bandages and went back inside. She made certain to keep herself between them and Spike so he wouldn't see what she had.

“What are you up to?” Spike said, following her.

“I'm not up to anything.”

“I know you're up to something right now. Your horn is glowing.”

Spike followed Twilight as she walked down the stairs, still keeping the evidence from the previous night out of sight. She didn't answer him.

“What was that? Are you hiding something?”

Spike tried to clamber onto Twilight's back so he could get a better look at what she was doing with her magic. She bucked gently and knocked him off. He bumped against the floor as he fell, but she knew a knock like that wouldn't hurt him. She giggled as he glared at her. “Come on, Spike, you'll have to try better than that!”

“Oh, no you don't. You're not getting away that easily!”

Spike pounced at her again, managing to cling to her rump. She galloped in a circle around the room as fast she could trying to dislodge him, laughing all the way. Spike practically forgot why he was trying to catch her in the fun of the moment. During one pass, the unicorn dropped the bandages into a trash can and telekinetically pushed them to the bottom.

Suddenly, Spike shouted out and let go. Thrown by the centrifugal force of Twilight's running, he rolled end over end until he hit a bookshelf. A couple books fell from their places, one of which landed on his head. Pulled from their momentary revelry, the unicorn galloped up to the fallen dragon.

“Spike! Are you okay?”

“Me?! What about you?!” His expression was one of deep concern.

“What about me?”

“You're bleeding!”

Twilight briefly panicked at the thought of having missed one of her cuts and letting Spike see. She glanced over herself and saw a small batch of

dried blood on her flank. Apparently she was interrupted before she could clean that one off back on the balcony. "Ah! That's from, uh, I was-"

"I'm so sorry, Twilight! I didn't mean to scratch you! Dragon claws, you know? They really sharp. I try to trim them. Well, sometimes ..." The baby dragon stammered, hiding his hands behind his back.

Suddenly, a hoof pounded on the front door.

"Don't worry Spike, this wasn't you, I promise. You just go get the door and I'll go clean up, okay?" Twilight said, then headed towards the kitchen to get a damp cloth.

"Oh, if you say so," Spike replied, heading towards the door. "Wait, then where did that come from?!"

"The door, Spike!"

The baby dragon threw his arms up in exasperation and went to answer the door anyway. When he did, he was met by a stony faced pegasus guard.

"Spike the Dragon? Princess Celestia requests the presence of Twilight Sparkle immediately at the town hall."

Spike stared at the soldier for a moment in dumb silence. Of all the ponies he could have predicted to arrive at that time, a royal guard was not one of them. "Uh, sure. Wait here, I'll get her," he said with an uncomfortable grin before slamming the door and running to the unicorn in question.

By the time he got to her, Twilight had finished cleaning herself off and tossed a towel into the laundry. "Who was it? Did you just leave them at the door? You know that's very-"

"What did you do Twilight?!" Spike demanded as he grabbed her face and pulled it down to his. "There is a royal Equestrian guard here to arrest you and take you to Celestia himself!"

"Arrest me?! Why would he arrest me?!"



“Okay, maybe he didn't use the word 'arrest,’” Spike said, letting go of Twilight's head. “But he said he was going to take you to see Celestia at the town hall.”

“Princess Celestia is here?!” Twilight screamed, frazzling some of the hair in her mane. “Why in Equestria would she be here?!”

“Oh yeah, she said she'd be. Didn't I tell you that?” Spike asked sheepishly and turning away. “It was in the letter from yesterday. You're usually around when I read them the first time, so I just kinda felt like you already – oh.” He started to explain before realize that the pony he was talking to had already teleported away. In fact, she had gone to the restroom to freshen up, comb her mane back down, and returned to the door before he had finished talking.

---

While the royal guard escorted Twilight to Ponyville's town hall, she was a nervous wreck. Her mane kept curling outwards in odd directions as she rolled over the different possible outcomes in her head. She kept stopping to brush it down with a hoof but it did little good.

*“Okay, nothing's really wrong. She's just here to receive my report on what happened. She doesn't know that everypony's hurt because of me. Yet. She doesn't know yet. I am going to tell her now, and then she'll know. And then I'll be in serious trouble. But right now, I'm not. That's a good thing, right? That means she won't banish me and throw me in a dungeon in the place she banishes me to. At least not immediately. I should enjoy these last few moments of daylight before I find myself in the center of the moon. Luna will help me escape from the moon, won't she? Sure she will, we're friends. Except for that one time I threw the power of the elements of harmony at her. Well, she appreciated that afterward. Maybe after a thousand years or so Princess Celestia will let me come back. If I live that long. Maybe Luna can show me how to do that too.”*

*“No! No. Princess Celestia is not going to banish me. Probably. Most likely. Fifty-fifty. At any rate, I should really just be prepared to explain what happened in a calm, level headed manner. I just need a few minutes to put my thoughts together.”*

“We're here. The Princesses are awaiting you inside.” The guard said, coming to a stop in front of the porch around the town hall across from another armored pegasus.

A few more strands of Twilight's hair went haywire and she mentally shouted an expletive she didn't commonly use.

# Chapter 8

## Interrogation

The mayor of Ponyville had been most apologetic about not being able to provide proper seating for Celestia and Luna. The princesses insisted that it was alright, for they knew that alicorns were much larger than the normal pony. Of course, the mayor had great difficulty figuring out the most tactful way to say as much. The sisters simply had the cushions from the carriage brought in with them, much to the relief of the mayor.

The royal sisters sat next to each other in the center of the circular hall next to a large table that was also brought in for their use. A map of Ponyville and Everfree Forest was unraveled across it, and Celestia was studying it carefully. Luna had returned to her mind once again, and the elder sister ignored her. She knew that the princess of the night was tired as much as she was bored; she was nocturnal by nature and being awake at this time of day was a bit of a strain for her.

The first thing Celestia had done when they arrived was deploy her guards all around the forest. She wasn't sure what was going on in there and she believed information gathering was the most important first step. The pegasi they brought were to observe the skies above and around but were ordered not to engage hostiles unless absolutely necessary.

The elder sister scrutinized the map carefully. A series of 'X's had been marked by her quill in red ink signifying where all the patrols were to be. She knew full well the range of her guard's ability, so that part didn't concern her as much as the unknowns. Twilight's message said that the zebra who lived in the forest said that the invading force was deconstructing their old palace and moving the blocks to another location. Where were they taking them? Was the location important? Why bother moving them? Even the minor detail of the zebra's home being unknown was an annoyance.

Of course, the princess of the sun showed no outward emotion while studying the map and worrying about variables she didn't know. Luna chuckled about something again, momentarily distracting her. Her sister's

relaxed expression calmed her a little as well. If all else fails, the power of the two of them, as well as the elements of harmony which they brought, would be enough to level the forest itself. She shuddered at the thought of doing so, unable to completely mask her disdain for the idea.

The large double doors of the hall opened up, and a familiar purple unicorn slowly made her way inside. She noticed that Twilight's hair seemed to be a bit disheveled, but she wasn't hurt. Celestia nudged her younger sister with a hoof from underneath the table to draw her back to earth before calling out to the unicorn.

"Twilight Sparkle, my faithful student. I am so very pleased to see you are well."

"Thank you princess. I'm glad to see you again too. And you, Luna. I just wish it wasn't under these circumstances."

"Our dearest friend, Twilight," Luna said, "your poor mane is unkempt. Is this a result of your journey?"

"Oh! No. Well, yes. Kind of." Twilight floundered, pawing at her hair again.

"Please, have a seat." Celestia said, gesturing towards one of the other cushions across the table. "Tell me, where are your friends?"

Twilight sat down and tried to make herself comfortable. Her heart, head, ears, and tail all sank at once with the mention of the others. She hesitated for a moment as though she were preparing for a physical blow. "Oh, a-about that ..."

"Are they all well?" Celestia asked sternly.

"Y-yes, Princess. They are. T-there was a ... a fight, you see." Twilight said, visibly squirming. "W-we all made it out okay, all of us. Applejack and Rarity were hurt really bad, though. I expect they're all still recovering at the hospital." The unicorn couldn't seem to bring herself to look up at the alicorns.

“You are all very strong ponies.” Luna offered. “We've seen that for ourselves firsthand. We are confident that they shall pull through, Twilight Sparkle.”

“If they need further medical attention, I will send for a doctor from Canterlot right away.” Celestia said.

“No, uh, thank you, but I don't think that will help.” Twilight interrupted. “They're all stable for now, and Nurse Redheart is an excellent physician. And, uh, I-I can actually heal most of their injuries myself.”

This came as a surprise to the royal sisters. Celestia practically hoof-built Twilight's lesson plans since she was a filly, and she never included any sort of medical magic. The unicorn would frequently add to her own studies voluntarily, but she always mentioned what she was reading and what she learned from it. Although Luna wasn't quite as invested in the mare's studies, she was at least familiar with her talents. Twilight had never mentioned learning how to heal.

“Since when could you do that?” Celestia asked.

“And why did thou not do so already?” Luna added.

“I-I-I couldn't.” Twilight struggled to say, answering one question. “Magical exhaustion. Right after the fight, I could barely stand. Fluttershy practically had to carry me back.”

Celestia took a deep breath and sat back down. “Perhaps we're getting ahead of ourselves. Why don't you tell us about what happened right after you sent the letter?”

“O-okay.” Twilight said, and took a deep breath. After a moment, she composed herself enough to give a clear story. “I'll make this as short as I can, since we all have a lot to do. I gathered the other elements, as well as Zecora, to scout the camp that she claimed she saw. Along the way, we found our enemies. The first group we saw were just carrying stones. They were all white pegasi. They wore silver barding, and called themselves 'Valponies-'"

It was that final word that came as almost a physical impact to the royal sisters. Luna, who was up until then slightly groggy, was completely surprised into full consciousness. Her head jerked back, eyes widened, and she chuckled once before stifling the rest. Celestia stood up, but otherwise retained her composure. The two of them exchanged a look before returning to Twilight.

“Art thou certain?” Luna asked.

“O-of course.” Twilight said, startled and concerned by the princess' reactions. “They told us that we shouldn't interfere with them. We tried to stay low as we kept searching for the base Zecora told us about. Once we did, we searched around the perimeter, but we couldn't see over their walls.”

“You found the valpony base? Can you mark it on this map?” Celestia asked.

“Oh, um...” Twilight said as her eyes glanced over the chart unfolded in front of her. She was able to estimate the path they had taken following the ancient road and a couple landmarks. “It should be about ... here.” She added, magically picking up a quill from a nearby inkwell and marking the spot with a castle icon.

The two sisters leaned forward to watch the unicorn's quill. The exchanged another glance as they sat back again.

“A patrol found us, but Dash managed to stop her before she could alert any of the others.” Twilight continued. “We tried disguising Dash as one of them, using the patrol's barding, but she was immediately found out. We had to fight before we could escape. We, uh, we did manage to, to kill a lot of them, though...” She trailed off.

This time it was Luna's turn to stand. She walked around the table and rested a wing around Twilight. “To kill is not a simple feat. Not even for a unicorn of thou's power.”

“Actually, the really scary part was that it was.” She replied, looking up with her big, lavender eyes.

“Did you return straight here after you escaped?” Celestia asked.

“We did. We immediately all checked into the hospital as soon as we returned.” Twilight hesitated before continuing. “ ... Would you like me to report on their status?”

Celestia stood again. “That will not be necessary. If you say you can heal them yourself, then I entrust their recovery to you and Nurse Redheart.”

“Right. I'll go find them right away.” Twilight said, standing as well. Luna retracted her wing. “What will you two do?”

“I believe we have enough information now to prepare for our next move.” Celestia said. Luna nodded in agreement. “We will prepare to head into the forest to negotiate with them ourselves.”

“You can't!” Twilight shouted. “They'll kill both of you! You don't understand, they barely let us talk before-”

Celestia held up a hoof to silence her pupil. “Don't worry, my faithful student, everything will be alright,” she spoke in a calming voice. “They will not harm us, and they would have great difficulty besting the two of us together even if they wanted to, isn't that right sister?”

Luna nodded encouragingly. “That is correct. Do not forget that we defeated Discord himself long ago. These valponies shall be no trouble.”

“If you say so. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Celesta corrected. “Your information has been invaluable. I just need your help on one last thing.”

“Anything!” Twilight said enthusiastically. The thought of helping out the princess always brightened her mood.

“For future records, can you mark this map with the location of Zecora's home as well?” Celestia said, nodding her head towards the table.

“Of course!” Twilight galloped up to the chart and glanced over it again. After a few seconds of following the old trail, she picked up the quill again

and marked it. She drew the symbol of a tree with Zecora's cutie mark on it. "It's right here. You can't miss it."

Luna rolled her eyes as her sister leaned over Twilight's shoulder to watch. "Thank you, Twilight Sparkle. That shall be all. We will send a guard for you when we need your services again." the night princess said.

"Okay. I'll go find my friends now." Twilight turned and galloped away, heading out the giant doors of the hall.

"Dost thou feel better?" Luna asked her older sister, still facing the door.

"Do you mean about my pupil, or about the situation?" Celestia replied, studying the map.

"I mean about the zebra's home. How it must have bothered you not knowing that minor detail."

"No details are minor. Everything is important."

Luna smiled. "Whatever you say, Sister. About your student, however, she never ceases to surprise us. We would not have thought her capable of violence. Her powers are great, but killing does not come easy to our little ponies."

Celestia sighed deeply. "You're right. I never taught her how to fight, nor how to heal for that matter. Do you suppose she knows something we don't?"

"If she has, I suppose thou art halfway to deducing what it is." Luna replied, smiling again.

Celestia ignored her sister's smart remark. Luna returned to her spot behind the table lounged down on the pillow once more to rest her eyes.

"... Do you believe you can face him with a level head?" Celestia asked suddenly.

Luna smiled from her resting spot, then giggled like a schoolfilly. "Dost thou not trust us?"



"I'm being serious, Luna."

"Thou art always serious. Worry not, for I shall remain in your shadow, as I always have. Well, almost always." she continued, still smiling widely.

Not expecting a straight answer if she pursued the matter further, Celestia simply let her sister get some sleep.

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As Twilight left the town hall, the first thing she saw was Rainbow Dash flying over a crowd of ponies in the square, waving a tree branch around. Twilight made her way forward to get her attention.

"And then wham! Pow! Ker-pow!" Dash shouted, swinging her stick at some imaginary things floating alongside her. "Fwoosh, wham!" She continued, spinning around in a circle, swinging her stick outward, and then swung downward at a single target. "I thought I got the last valpony around me, but then one snuck up behind and got me right in the flank! Anypony wanna see the stitches?!"

Dash landed in the middle of the crowd to show off her battle scars to anypony who cared to look. Some ponies in the crowd were curious enough to get a closer look. Others back away with a mixture of fear and nausea. Once Twilight heard the pegasus mention the word "valpony," she forced her way into the center a little bit harder. As the show pony was about to land, Twilight telekinetically grabbed her by the tail and started pulling her outward.

"Sorry, everypony, nothing to see here!" Twilight said, pushing her way back out. "Don't mind her, she's just telling stories again!" Dash struggled for her freedom for a moment but then resigned to being pulled. She kept her wings going so as to stay floating through the air.

The crowd of ponies started to disband as the show came to an abrupt end. Twilight continued to ferry Dash into a nearby alleyway before letting her go. "Why did you go spouting all of that to everypony in Ponyville!?" She demanded.

“What?! Everypony has a right to know what's going on. Even more importantly, everypony has a right to know how awesome I was while it was happening.” Dash said proudly, still fluttering in the air.

Twilight had to fight the urge to ground her friend with magic, which would have likely torn open a few stitches.

“They need to know that everything's going to be okay, not that the valponies are trying to kill ponies!”

“Alright, alright. So when this all blows over, I can share my war stories, right?”

Twilight facehoofed. “Fine. When this is over, you can tell your story. But so help me Celestia, if I catch you leaking this to anypony else, I will heal the stitches right out of you, you got that?” She warned, waving her hoof menacingly.

Dash gasped, and tried to cover her wounds, which only ended up hurting herself a bit more. “Ow! You wouldn't dare!”

“Not. One. Trace. Of a scar.” The unicorn dictated slowly and deliberately, her eyes narrow slits.

“Okay, okay, you win!” Dash surrendered, darting behind a nearby trash can like it would help protect her.

“Good,” Twilight said, her expression softening. “Now, I need your help. The others are still at the hospital, aren't they?”

“I dunno.” Dash said, scratching the back of he head. “Pinkie was last time I saw her. She's looking pretty depressed again. And AJ's not goin' anywhere...”

“Than that just leaves Fluttershy and Rarity. And somepony needs to tell Macintosh and Apple Bloom...”

Dash hesitated awkwardly. “ ... I will ground myself for a month if you tell them.”

Twilight shook her head. "Don't worry, Rainbow, I'll do it. I just need you to go find Fluttershy, and I'll handle the rest."

Dash saluted, and started to fly off before stopping herself. "Right. I'm on it. Wait, what do you want me to do with her?"

"Do what you can to cheer her up. You've known her the longest. She feels really bad about not being able to fight last night. But, most importantly, I need you to get her to come over to my house by nine o'clock."

"What happens at nine?"

"I'm gonna get Pinkie to throw us a party. I think it's just what we need to get everyone out of this slump."

Dash stared at the unicorn for a moment. "So let me get this straight: you're going to talk to Rarity, who's probably flipping out over crippling her leg, tell the Apple family that their sister is in a coma, and convince Grouchy Pie to throw a party?"

"Exactly." Twilight said with grim determination.

"... And all I have to do is go find Fluttershy?"

"Yes."

"... Alrighty then! Good luck with that. Watch out for buckets of turnips, buckets of apples, and buckets of whatever food Rarity's gonna throw at you."

"I will. Thanks, Dash." Twilight said before turning to run towards the hospital.

"That mare is crazy." Dash commented before flying off in the direction of Fluttershy's home.

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"All units have reported in, your majesty." A guard informed Princess Celestia a short while later.

“Very good. What is the status of Everfree Forest?” the Alicorn replied.

The guard glanced, very briefly, to the side as something behind the princess caught his attention. “There are various creatures at all points along the forest's edge. However, all troops have been informed of the possible dangers as you have informed them and are managing their positions. One report mentions a cockatrice that was difficult to fight, but that's the worst one. Almost none of these creatures seem to want to leave the forest's edge, so most squads are maintaining their posts beyond the treeline.”

“That's fine. Any sign of the enemy?”

“No, your highness. No report has mentioned the presence of hostile pegasi.”

“They are there, we've confirmed that. We don't know what they're planning, but they may emerge at any moment. Inform each squad to keep watch over the forest at all times. Post four is directly between their base and Ponyville, so keep them on high alert. If they spot an army on the move, send word to all squads to converge on them. Do not let them out of the forest if you can.”

“At once.” The guard said, spreading his wings.

“Luna and I will now head into the forest personally and attempt to negotiate with them. These are your orders until we return.”

The guard opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. “Yes, your highness,” he said finally.

Celestia nodded, and the guard turned to canter out of the hall to convey the message.

The princess of the sun turned to her sister who was still napping behind the table. She had rolled over in her sleep, and two of her legs were sticking up into the air. Walking around to get a better look, Celestia found her sister's neck also at an odd angle along with a wing. Her tiara had

fallen off and rolled under the table. Celestia was certain the sight was what had briefly distracted the guard.

“Luna.” Celestia said softly, looking down at her sister.

The princess of the night snorted and rolled over on her side. Her wing tucked back in and all her hooves pointed in the same direction again. She still dozed soundly, however, and mumbled a word that sounded like “sleeper”

“Luna.” Celestia repeated.

The younger sister blinked her eyes a few times and she slowly awoke. She tucked her legs up underneath herself and sat up.

“Have you slept well? You seemed quite comfortable.” Celestia said flatly.

“Wonderfully.” Luna said, stretching her head and six limbs out. “What have we missed?”

“The guards are in place and they have their standing orders. It's time for us to go.”

Luna took her time standing up, continuing to stretch herself and adjust her hair which, despite being ethereal, had still managed to wrap itself around her body. “Have thou told the guards already? We would like to see their reaction when thou told them we were going ourselves.”

“I have, but there was only one. He remembered himself before voicing a protest.”

“How dull. We're disappointed,” Luna said, looking around for her tiara.

“As am I,” Celestia said, allowing herself a smile.

Finding her crown, Luna telekinetically lifted her crown from beneath the table and rested it on her head. “There, we are ready.”

“Your slipper.” Celestia said simply.

Luna looked down at her hooves and noticed that she had lost the shoe on her hind left leg. It was resting on the floor behind her. A half step backwards returned it to its rightful place. "There, now we are ready," she said with a bright smile.

The royal sisters shared a laugh and proceeded out of the hall together.

---

A few hours later, while Twilight and Rainbow Dash were gathering their friends, Celestia and Luna were approaching the field around the valpony stronghold. Contrary to the local lore, there were actually quite few dangerous creatures in Everfree Forest. Those that were present were extremely dangerous, but they were still uncommon. Like the elements of harmony before them the night before, their journey into the forest was unassailed by vicious, clawed monstrosities.

"We have seen no trace of the valponies thus far." Luna commented.

"Indeed. We didn't come from the direction of our old home, so we have no way of knowing if they're still taking it apart." Celestia replied.

"How many can there be? How many of our hallowed walls do they need? The questions are endless."

"I will not leave this forest until I find out."

"We had best hurry. We would be remiss if we were late to rise the moon. Your sun has almost set."

"If all goes well, this won't take long at all."

Celestia, walking a few steps ahead of her sister, was the first to emerge into the clearing and see the full height of what seemed to be the completed stronghold. It was as large as the Cloudiseum, and stood just as high. The entire structure was built from yellowed stones. Not the stones the old castle was built with, the sisters noted, but the ones that were stored there for a very specific purpose. A purpose that the blocks were now preparing to serve, it seemed. In the evening light, runes could be

seen engraved on each of them, etchings that could have been easily missed during the night and at a distance.

As the sisters approached the fortress, a group of pagasi rose out from the guarded walls. Brandishing their spears, they immediately rushed towards the intruders. Luna took a step back, but Celestia didn't so much as flinch. The valponies charged towards the princesses up until they realized who they were.

In short order, each of the white pegasi lowered their weapons and dropped to the ground. Their expressions abruptly changed from intense determination to surprised elation.

"Auntie Tia! Auntie Luna!" The valponies cheered.

Luna couldn't suppress a laugh, as odd and unexpected as it was. Celestia simply glowered.

"This is a joke ... I can't believe he went to all this trouble for a joke!" the princess of the sun said angrily.

There was a brief moment of confusion and muddled speech as several of the valponies gathered around attempted to speak at once. Then, the one who just so happened to be nearest the princesses spoke up.

"Oh, this is no joke. I have never had the opportunity to meet our family, father's work is too important."

"Why are you here?" Celestia demanded, pawing at the ground with a hoof.

"I have been sent here to build the portal for father."

"That's no answer. He knows better than to interfere with the world like this. His portion of the covenant states-"

"The covenant has been broken."

The valponie's words hung in the air for a moment as the sisters froze.

"What did thou sayest?" Luna asked.

“The covenant has been broken.” The valpony said simply. “By the two of you even. That's why he made no contact and decided to build the portal.”

“We have done no such thing!” Celestia said. Although she remained her composure, her stern voice would have made almost any of her own ponies cower.

“Which of the covenant's laws have been broken?” Luna interjected again.

“Any mortal crossing the threshold of death is not to return to the world of the living without consent.”

“Impossible. Although a magical pony could use a spell to do such a thing, we've made certain that nopony has studied such magic. I've watched the research of medical magic closely to uphold our end of the covenant.”

“Nonetheless, it has happened.”

“How is that so? There's only been a hoofful of unicorns in the history of ponykind that have even had the potential to heal the-”

All at once, everything clicked into place. Celestia's eyes widened, and she was stopped in her tracks again. “ ... How much longer until the portal for Lord Sleipnir is ready?” she asked.

“It has been completed and is drawing power as we speak, but requires more time. He can visit you in Ponyville by noon tomorrow.”

“You pupil never ceases to amaze us, Sister.” Luna said.



# Chapter 9

## Reconstruction

While the princesses were still preparing for their own journey into Everfree, Twilight Sparkle was preparing for a trial of her own. She stood at the outer gates of Sweet Apple Acres completely inert.

*“What am I going to tell them?” the unicorn kept thinking to herself. “Why is this so terrifying? How many creatures have I stared down now, and this is what stops me? I have a running list back home, but I can’t get it now. A manticore, ursa minor, two dragons – or was it three? I’m losing track.” A slow, creaking sound went unnoticed behind her. “There was the cockatrice, but staring him down wasn’t my brightest idea. Oh yes, and then there’s Nightmare Moon and Discord. I mustn’t forget them.”*

Twilight’s internal monologue was interrupted by a voice. “Hey, I know you. Midnight, right?”

The lavender unicorn flinched and jumped into the air, caught by surprise. Her first response was to rush her apology. “Ah! I’m sorry! I couldn’t help it! I – what?”

The startled unicorn turned her head to find the Apple family’s field hoof, Caramel, pulling a wagon of lumber up from town. He took a step backwards and held up a leg in defense as Twilight panicked.

“Sorry? Uh, sorry for what?”

Twilight sighed and hung her head. “I have really bad news for Macintosh.”

“Oh, is that all?” Caramel said with a laugh. “Shoot, if it’s for Macintosh, don’t worry too much. He’s a pretty level headed stallion. If you were tellin’ Applejack bad news, well, just be prepared in case you have to duck!” Twilight groaned, but Caramel continued chatting. “One time, Big Mac accidentally bucked a tree in half and she hit him so hard in the ribs he was out of work for a week. She had to buck the entire grove herself after that.

Kept tellin' ponies Mac hurt himself, but I know what happened. Come on, Midnight, I'll walk with you up to the house so you can tell him. Strength in numbers, right?"

"Thanks, Caramel." Twilight said as she headed up the road together. "And I'm not Midnight, my name is Twilight Sparkle."

"Oh, real sorry 'bout that, Ms. Sparkle." Caramel said with another laugh, this time a little awkwardly. "I don't think we've ever had a chat before. Applejack mentioned you once or twice, so I recognized you by your coat and mane, but I just couldn't get your name I guess. Oh! I know I've seen you at some of Pinkie Pie's parties before. Along with that Rarity from next door."

"Don't you mean Pinkie Pie?"

"Yeah, that's her!" Caramel said, laughing awkwardly again and scratching the back of his mane. "Heheh, I forget things sometimes."

Twilight raised an eyebrow at her traveling companion and then looked up. They were already a few yards from the Apple family farmhouse. Sure enough, the heavy, crimson form of Big Macintosh stood sentinel at the front of the porch, waiting for his sister's return and sitting on his haunches. His ever present harness rested over his bulky shoulders like a mantle of strength.

Taking a deep breath and stepping forward, Twilight began her apology. She closed her eyes as she spoke, not wanting to face the brother's inevitable glare of hatred. "Macintosh, I have bad news. As you know, Applejack and the rest of us went into Everfree last night to investigate a possible threat to Equestria. We found an army there and, well, we were discovered." she began to shut her eyes tighter. "There was a fight. We all did the best we could and got away but Applejack got hurt. Really bad. She's at the hospital right now. ... She's in a coma."

"He's asleep" Caramel added from behind.

Twilight blinked a few times and turned back to face the sandy earth pony. "Did you forget Applejack's gender this time?"

“What? No, I'm talkin' about Mac. Look.” He said, pointing up to the big red pony.

Following Caramel's gesture, Twilight confirmed that Macintosh was indeed sleeping. He let out a deep snore. “He must have been waiting here all night for her.” Twilight said and reached out to poke him lightly.

Macintosh snorted as Twilight's hoof nudged him, and he began to tip over sideways. He regained consciousness just fast enough to catch himself before falling hard on the wooden floor.

“Hm? What? What happened?” Macintosh said, looking around in a suddenly awakened stupor. “Oh, Twilight, It's you. How's AJ?”

“She's, uh, well...” Twilight stammered, having lost her composure and spent all her initiative.

“There was a big fight in Everfree.” Caramel offered. “She's hurt and in the hospital.”

Twilight braced herself, yet Macintosh just sighed and shook his mane. Then he stood up and walked past Twilight, heading down the road towards Ponyville. “Confounded mare.” He mumbled.

Big Mac's dual words cut Twilight deeper than any valpony spear had. “I'm so sorry, Macintosh!” Twilight shouted.

The big stallion stopped and glanced over his shoulder back at the unicorn. “What are you sorry for?”

“B-because I was there and, and I should have-”

“Just hold it right there, missy.” Mac said, holding up a hoof. “Don't tell me, I reckon I can guess what happened. Ya'll were out there fightin'. Probably kicking flank too, I'd wager. Especially AJ. The thing is that she was fightin' too hard, wasn't she? There was probably some safe spot she should have been runnin' to but she wouldn't have any of it. It wouldn't even surprise me if she got hurt jumpin' in the way to save somepony else. Any of this soundin' accurate?”

“Well ... Yes, but-”

“Then you have nothing to apologize for,” Mac went in in his slow, deep-voiced drawl. “Believe me, I know my sister better than anypony else. This ain't the first time she's been in the hospital. And it certainly ain't the first time she's been hurt doing somethin' she ought to have known not to do, as well intentioned she was a the time. I appreciate you coming all the way up here to tell me in pony, but now I've got to go and try talkin' some sense into her again.”

“She's in a coma...” Twilight said.

There was a brief flash of deeper concern in Macintosh's eyes. “... I still need to get goin' regardless,” he said, then addresses his field hoof. “Caramel, go unload that lumber over in the barn. Looks like the repairs are gonna have to be delayed a spell. Then, I want you to do some apple buckin'. I know you ain't as hardy and AJ me, but do what you can until I get back.”

“You got it, boss!” Caramel said with a salute and started hauling the wood away.

“So, you're not angry with me?” Twilight asked hesitantly.

“I reckon AJ will forgive you when she wakes up, if she blames you at all,” the red pony said over his shoulder as he continued walking. “I might could let you alone too.”

Twilight brightened immensely. “Thank you so much, Macintosh!” she shouted.

The unicorn jumped up and gave Mac a big hug around the neck, almost knowing him down again. He let out as surprised “Oof!” in response, but Twilight galloped back towards town before he could say anything else.

---

On the far side of Ponyville, Rainbow Dash arrived at Fluttershy's forest side cottage. A number of adorable critters covered in fur and feathers were roaming around the gardens, but none of them were Fluttershy

herself. Dash looked around and noticed that the whole place was in a bit of disarray. Most of the animals roamed about. Part of the chicken fence had been knocked over and the chickens themselves were pecking at some burrows across the yard. Birds of all shapes and sizes were fighting squirrels over tree space. Some of the pet houses around were knocked over. Angel Bunny was wielding a carrot like a sword to keep an angry cat out of his.

Dash could have searched throughout Fluttershy's entire commune in approximately seventeen seconds, but she had one idea that was even faster.

“FLUTTERSHY!” The pegasus bellowed.

There was a squeak from inside the chicken coop and a thump as something hard hit wood. “Ow...” whimpered a soft voice from within.

“There she is.” Dash said, sweeping down to find her friend.

Squeezing her way into the coop, the azure pegasus found Fluttershy with her head in one of the cubbyholes where the chickens slept. Her eyes rattled as she pulled her head out.

“Oh, hello Rainbow Dash. I – Oh, are you alright?” Fluttershy said, distracted by Dash's stitches.

“Buck yeah, I feel awesome! A little sore, but I'm starting to totally dig these scars. My wings are still in good shape, so I can fly with my normal amount of radicalness. It's just as well you didn't do any fighting. It might scare off some of your pets if you looked like this.”

“Um ... Yeah, I guess so...” Fluttershy said, averting her eyes and taking a few steps backwards. “I'm so sorry, but I have so much to do. The chickens broke their coop and escaped again and-”

Dash rolled her eyes. It was messy out there, but “chaos” was a bit of an exaggeration. “Sure thing. Just make sure you finish in time to be at Twilight's at nine.”

“What's happening at nine?”

"Pinkie and her are gonna throw a party to celebrate our awesome victory over the valponies!"

Fluttershy cowered at the thought of attending the party. More so than she cowered at the thought of normal things, Dash noted. "Oh, that's... nice. But I really shouldn't go. I... I didn't really do anything..." she said, looking away again.

The azure pagasus held out a hoof in protest. "Oh, no you don't. Twilight said to make sure you show up, so you're coming if I have to drag you by your tail. I did it to Pinkie once and you're a heck of a lot lighter than she is."

"Well, I, uh.. I have a lot of work to do around here. Chickens escaping, creatures fighting, I really shouldn't be away for any longer than I have."

A sly smile worked its way across Dash's face. "So, you have a lot of ground to cover in a short amount of time, huh?"

"Yes." Fluttershy said proudly, thinking she had an ironclad excuse. It wasn't until too late before she realized what she was unleashing.

Dash squeezed herself back out of the coop. She took her starting line stance just outside on the ground: head down, rump up, wings out. "I can get everything in this place put together in no time flat," she said with determination, "and then you'll be clear to go to the party."

Fluttershy tried to make a grab for Dash's tail, but she couldn't fit herself through the door of the coop in time. In a flash of rainbow colors, she was off on her newest objective. Fluttershy tried calling for her, but to no avail.

The first thing Dash did was mend the fence where a post had been knocked over. She grabbed the loose post as she flew by. She nosed up and arched backwards, stretching out the chicken wire and partially pulling up the surrounding fence posts. She then slammed the post she was holding into the ground, planting it back in place. The resulting shockwave knocked over the loosened posts down the line. Some nearby chickens began to scatter and a couple gophers bailed from their dens.

Fluttershy galloped up to try and replace the posts. Before she could fumble the first one back into place, the blue pegasus was off to her next task. "Oh no. Dash, wait. Please?" Fluttershy whispered in protest.

Continuing her flight around Fluttershy's cottage, Rainbow Dash started lining up the pet houses that had been knocked over. The resulting wind current of a pegasus flying by ended up knocking just as many back over. Cats, dogs, and rabbits all fled from their homes to escape her. Fluttershy tried her best to keep up, setting houses back up straight, but she could never hope to match Dash's speed.

"Oh, no. No, no, no. Dash, wait." The yellow pegasus pleaded quietly.

Her second task presumably done, Rainbow turned her attention to the Squirrel / Bird conflict in the trees. She made a dive for the nearest contested branch. Making a mess of her property was one thing, but Fluttershy couldn't let her rush into a group of defenseless creatures. It was more than likely she'd hurt one of them, even if she didn't mean to.

"WAIT!" Fluttershy finally managed to shout, flying up between Dash and her creatures. She grabbed on to Dash's haunches as she flew by and dragged her to the ground.

Dash groaned as the dust settled from their landing. "Okay, I take it back. Now I'm kinda in pain."

Fluttershy jumped up and started brushing her friend off using her wing. "I'm so sorry, Dash! I really really didn't mean to hurt you. I just had to stop you from hurting the birds and the squirrels and-"

"Alright, alright, I get it," Dash said, getting up. "I'll be fine, knock it off." She tried pushing Fluttershy away, gently of course, with a leg but only managed to hurt herself a little more. She instead waved a wing wildly at her. "If you want to do it the slow way, have at it. But you better show up at Twilight's tonight or I'll bring you there myself!" she added, lifting into the air again.

"I can't Dash. I'm really sorry, but I have too much to do." Fluttershy said.

Rainbow swung low and glared at the yellow pegasus with one eye. "Are you ignoring my orders?"

"No. Um, I mean, yes. These creatures need me." Fluttershy insisted.

Dash raised an eyebrow. "So, you're standing up to somepony big and tough because some smaller creatures need your help?"

"Um... yes?" Fluttershy answered, not sure what her friend was getting at.

Laughing, Dash eased back. "See? You can be tough when you have to be."

"Huh?"

Dash laughed some more. "Think about it. And don't sweat last night. And seriously, get to work on your stuff here, 'cuz I'm coming for you later."

With that, Rainbow Dash flew off to do whatever she does with her vast free time. Fluttershy briefly puzzled over her words before realizing: "You know, you could just stay and help me..." She suggested quietly, despite the blue pegasus being too far away.

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Twilight returned to the hospital after galloping all the way from Sweet Apple Acres. She had to stop at the front door to catch her breath after the journey and then made her way inside. She chatted briefly with Nurse Redheart to learn where Pinkie and Rarity were.

"They're both still in their rooms." Redheart answered. "They're not doing too well from an emotional standpoint. Pinkie hasn't eaten and refuses to get out of bed. Rarity brought in her sewing supplies and is holed up in her room. She won't let me go in there."

"Yeah, she can be hard headed sometimes. Would it be alright if I tried talking to them?"

"Be my guest. Pinkie's room is the closest, right down the hall." Redheart replied, gesturing in the direction.



Twilight trotted in the direction the nurse indicated and found Pinkie's room. The door was left open. "Pinkie Pie? How are you feeling?"

There was a mumbled reply from a pony buried under a heap of blankets on the bed. A rolling cart next to it had a salad of mixed greens and a glass of fruit juice.

"Now I see why you haven't eaten." Twilight said. "This meal doesn't have nearly enough sugar in it for your tastes, does it?"

There was no reply from the huddled pony that time.

"Gee, I've never seen you like this before. Well, the least I can do is heal up those stitches. Hold still."

Pinkie, despite her friend's suggestion, hadn't actually moved since she came in. Regardless, Twilight leaned in with her horn. She had to use a little bit of her life force detecting spell to sense where Pinkie's injuries were from underneath the sheets, but was able to heal them easily once she did. She pulled the tissue together and sealed them up with magic while easing out the thread. Afterward, she floated the extra stitching into a nearby ponyhazard bin.

"There. How's that feel?"

"... Better." Pinkie finally managed to say clearly.

"Great! And now you're talking too. We'll have you back to your old, crazy self in no time." Twilight said enthusiastically.

There was a long, awkward silence as Pinkie didn't reply.

"Okay, can you do me a favor? Just get out from under those covers for a minute. I want to make sure that healing spell worked," Twilight lied. She knew it worked fine, she just wanted to coax her friend into the open.

Pinkie sat up on her haunches and looked at her, and the sheets slid off down her back. The first thing the unicorn noticed about her was that her hair had fallen flat somehow. Twilight realized that it had been like that

since sometime last night, but that was the first time she really noticed it. The second surprising thing was the pony's lack of emotion. Her face was dull. Twilight had seen her sad and even angry a few times, so a negative emotion wasn't entirely unheard of. But even during those times she was full of energy while feeling them. Pinkie not being enthusiastic about whatever she was doing was ... unnatural.

“Good, good. You look great!” Twilight said, forcing a smile. “I don't really have a spell that can make your coat grow back around the wounds, but that should come back in a few days. There was this one time I accidentally used a hair falling out spell once. Would you like to hear that story?”

Surprisingly, Pinkie didn't show enthusiasm for the story that Twilight had long ago sworn never to tell anypony ever. The pony simply sighed and lied her chin back down on the pillow. She tried to pull the covers back over herself again but a well timed telekinesis spell prevented that from happening.

“Okay, listen.” Twilight said. “Everypony's been in a slump since last night. It was really hard on all of us, but we need to stick together now more than ever, as friends. Don't you agree?”

Pinkie looked over at the unicorn with one eye without lifting her head. She still didn't show any enthusiasm, but at least she was watching her expectantly. Twilight continued.

“We need to remind each other that we're still best friends, now matter what happened before and whatever happens next. And I need your help. I need you to throw us a party.”

At the word 'party,' Pinkie's eyes widened and her mane burst back into curly life with a loud pop. But then she scowled and pawed at it again with her front hooves until it went down flat again. “You want to do what?!” She shouted.

“*Well, at least she's emoting again,*” Twilight thought to herself, recoiling.

“Don't you know what the definitions of a party is!?” Pinkie continued, flailing her hooves around. “Well, maybe I've never actually looked it up either, but I know! A party is to celebrate good times! We're not having

good times! This is the worst time in the history of worst times ever! How can I throw a party when there are so many un-party feelings?!"

"What un-party feelings?"

"The ones from the valponies! And all the other ponies I've never even heard of! How many are there? Are they everywhere and I just never knew!? You know everything Twilight, why didn't you tell me?!"

"Tell you what?" Twilight asked, frightened by Pinkie's outburst. "I don't understand!"

"Neither do I!" the pony declared and collapsed sobbing into her pillow again.

Twilight paused for a moment to try and figure out what Pinkie was trying to explain. Her excitable nature sometimes made her hard to understand. The unicorn had no clue what to say, so she tried to do what her own mother used to do when she was upset. She wrapped a leg around Pinkie's shoulder carefully in case she tried to lash out again. When she didn't, she rested her chin on the pony's mane and nuzzled it a little.

"I know it looks bad right now, but we have to keep fighting for each other. Just like that time with Discord, right?"

Pinkie lifted her head out of the pillow and wiped her tears away. "I ... guess so. So what do we do now?"

"You tell me. You're the party expert." Twilight replied, her chin still on the back of the pony's neck.

Tapping a hoof to her chin, Pinkie thought deeply for a moment. "We're going to need hugs," she said finally. "I remember there being lots of hugs. Oh! And Applejack gave me a cart ride! That was fun!"

As Pinkie thought back to happier times, her mane started to inflate again. This startled Twilight, whose face was still resting in it. As the curls sprung back to life once more, her head got entangled. She let out an involuntary squeak as she found herself stuck in her friend's hair. She pressed her

hooves against Pinkie's neck to dislodge herself and stumbled back against the wall. The party pony continued planning unabated.

“I also remember there being lots and lots of rope. Fluttershy got hogtied, and then Rarity and I got tangled up, and then Applejack kept lassoing Rainbow Dash. I had fun with the tangling part, but Rarity didn't. That's a shame, it was like flying! I love flying! Do you think we should bring rope? No, that would be preposterous! Who's every heard of a rope party? I haven't, that's who! And I'm a party expert!”

Twilight shook her head to clear out the stars swirling around her from hitting the wall. “Wait a minute, Applejack and I captured Fluttershy before we found you. How did you know we hogtied her?”

“That's not important! What's important is that we need streamers, lots of them! And enough balloons to lift a pony! And we have to do this fast. Oh! I'll go get my party cannon!”

“Party cannon? What's a party cannon?”

Pinkie rubbed her hooves together like an evil mastermind and narrowed her eyes. “It's my secret weapon. The howitzer of happiness, the falconet of fun, the culverin of craziness, the mortar of merriment, capable of firing twenty eight calibers of concentrated party at a distance of a hundred yards, for I'm awesome at alliteration!” She declared. “I'll go get it!”

Twilight had no idea what the party pony was talking about. In fact all that talk about heavy artillery made her deeply nervous, but she decided to let Pinkie do what she thought was best anyway. She was in a much better mood, at least. As she bounced out the door, the unicorn noticed one more strange thing about her.

“Pinkie, your tail's still flat.”

After glancing back at herself, Pinkie spun around and tried to hide her limp tail as though she was uncomfortable about it. “Oh, heehee, don't worry about that. I'm feeling much better, so don't you worry!”

Twilight didn't understand what Pinkie's feeling had to do with the state of her tail. But then again, she didn't know how it kept springing up and down

earlier either, so she just chalked it up to Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie. This used to be the kind of thing she would investigate, but she had learned after the Hydra incident that some things were best left unexplored.

*“Oh yeah, the Hydra. I think I forgot to add that to my mental list of giant, fearsome creatures I’ve stared down.”* Twilight thought to herself as she left Pinkie’s room. *“I’ve certainly led an exciting life since moving to Ponyville. I wonder if all friendships inherently carry that kind of risk. I’ll have to investigate that and send a letter to Celestia on my findings.”*

“That was very well done.” Nurse Redheart said with a smile. “I saw the whole thing from out here. Are you a psychologist by chance?”

“Oh. No, I’m not.” Twilight answered, a little bit surprised. “I read a book or two on the subject before, but I was just trying to be a good friend.”

“You think you can coax out my other patient as well?”

“I think so. Rarity’s a drama queen, or maybe a drama empress, but I’m certain I can reason with her.”

“Go right ahead. Good luck.”

Twilight stood in front of the door to Rarity’s room. She hadn’t heard anything from it since she arrived, and she wondered if Rarity heard anything either. The stylish unicorn did have a way of exaggerating the smallest of problems so Twilight was a little apprehensive to see how she would react to being partially crippled. There was no going back though, her friend needed her.

She raised a hoof and knocked on the door.