

Not Exactly as I Dreamed

By Trixie's Hat



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Chapter 1

"My faithful student, Twilight Sparkle,

A group of dedicated ponies at the Canterlot Academy have developed a magical device that, if successful, could revolutionize all of Equestria. However, this device is far from complete. I know that a unicorn of your caliber and mental aptitude would be a valuable asset to this project, and, at my recommendation, the head scientist has requested your assistance. Included is a signed travel pass to Canterlot, for you and your friends. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Princess Celestia"

Spike finished reading the letter. "So, Twilight," the baby dragon asked, "What kind of device do you think they're working on?"

"I don't know," the purple unicorn said, a contemplative expression on her face. "From the way Princess Celestia wrote the letter, I can't really tell what it could possibly be."

Spike shrugged. "Well, are you going to go?"

"I'll have to talk to everypony first to see if they want to go," Twilight turned and faced the door to the library in which she lived. "I know Rarity will definitely want to go to Canterlot, and Pinkie Pie might, too. But I'm not sure about the others," she sighed. "Especially Fluttershy." She opened the library door.

Not one instant later and three young fillies had charged past Twilight and into the library. "Cutie Mark Crusader Librarians! Yay!" they all shouted, faces rampant with enthusiasm.

"Sweetie Belle! Get back here this instant!" A frantic voice called out from behind them. Rarity was running up the path to the library, panting.

“Hey, Twilight!” Apple Bloom, younger sister to Twilight’s friend Applejack, ran up to her. “Wanna help us be librarians? Maybe we’ll find our special talent and earn our cutie marks!”

A tremendous crashing noise erupted from within the library. Twilight winced.

“Umm, I’d love to, Apple Bloom, but I’m pretty busy right now. Maybe some other time, okay?”

Sweetie Belle, a young white unicorn, and Scootaloo, a pegasus filly, bolted past again, this time chased by Spike, who was shouting some rather unfriendly things.

Rarity, clearly exhausted, finally walked through the library door. “Goodness me, where do they get all that energy?” she breathed. “Twilight, you must excuse me for this intrusion. It was just that I was watching over these girls as they played, when they suddenly decided to run off.”

“Oh, it’s no problem, Rarity,” Twilight smiled. Another crash sounded, followed by laughter. “Not that big a problem,” she amended gingerly.

“Girls!” Rarity called. “It’s time to leave!”

For a moment, the chaos ceased. “Awww, sis,” Sweetie Belle whined. “Can’t we play a little more?”

“I’m sorry, girls, but you heard Twilight. She’s very busy, and we must leave her in peace.”

“Actually, Rarity,” Twilight said, “I was meaning to talk to you. Princess Celestia has invited me to work on a scientific project at the Canterlot Academy. She sent a travel pass with the letter for my friends and I. So would you like to come with me?”

“Would I!” Rarity’s eyes lit up in excitement. “I’d love to go to Canterlot, darling. Just let me see these fillies home, and I’ll pack my things.”

“I thought you’d want to,” Twilight laughed. “Well, I’ll see you soon then!”

“Come, girls,” Rarity commanded in her usual regal demeanor. “It’s time to go home.”

“Awww,” came the youthful chorus.

Spike walked by. “Did Rarity leave yet?” he panted.

“Sorry, Spike, you just missed her.”

“Don’t worry, Twilight, we’ll clean up this mess. You go talk with the other ponies.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Twilight said.

“It’s no problem at all!” Spike puffed out his chest proudly. “What else is an assistant for?”

“Well, if you say so,” the unicorn laughed. “Well, I’m off then!”

It took only a few minutes to get to Sugarcube Corner. Twilight couldn’t help but smile at all the fun times she and her friends had had here. It never ceased to surprise her that even though it wasn’t really that long since Twilight had first arrived in Ponyville for the Summer Sun Celebration, she had experienced much more here than she ever had in Canterlot, her home city. The battle with Nightmare Moon, the grand harvest of Applebuck Season, the Running of the Leaves, and her first Winter Wrap-Up were only a few of the exciting adventures she had had.

“Whatcha thinking about, Twilight?” A high, perky voice interrupted her reverie. Pinkie Pie was standing right next to her.

“Huh? Oh, nothing, Pinkie,” Twilight laughed nervously.

“Nothing?” Pinkie asked, confused. “Well, if you were thinking about nothing, then you must be contemplating the vast vacuum of the void, into which nopony has ever vowed to venture. Very philosophical!”

Twilight stared.

“So, what brings you here? Are you hungry for something sweet and delicious?”

“No, Pinkie Pie,” Twilight shook her head. “I actually came to ask you about something.”

“Okey dokey lokey!” Pinkie Pie grinned from ear to ear.

“You see, Princess Celestia has invited me to work on a special scientific project at Canterlot.”

“Oooooooh!” The pink pony looked impressed.

“She also invited you and the rest of my friends to come with me. Would you like to come?” Twilight asked.

The pony thought for a moment. “Hmm... Sure! I’ll go get my stuff packed right away!”

“Okay, then. I’ll go talk to Applejack. See you in a bit, Pinkie!” But she was already bouncing into the bakery.

“That pony...” Twilight said. Then she decided to head over to Sweet Apple Acres.

Sweet Apple Acres, the large orchard owned and run by the Apple family, was past the outskirts of Ponyville. Once you entered through the gates, you could see hillsides and valleys, all bursting with verdant apple trees. The trees were festooned not with apples, though, but with many white blossoms. As she walked, Twilight wondered if the orchard always looked this beautiful in the springtime.

“Howdy, Twilight!” Apple Bloom, spotting the unicorn, trotted toward her. “Sorry we couldn’t help ya be librarians.”

Twilight couldn’t help but cringe slightly at the thought of the Cutie Mark Crusaders running wild in the library. “No, that’s quite all right,” she said. “Really.”

“Wait,” she suddenly remembered the reason she came to the orchard, “Do you know where Applejack is?”

“Hmm...” the filly thought for a second. “I think she was down by the barn.”

The two cantered down the path to the center of the farm, where Applejack was busy fixing up the barn. Springtime was when the Apple family did most of their cleaning and maintenance work around the orchard.

“Applejack!” Twilight called as she came into view.

“Howdy, Twi!” the earth pony shouted back. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Well,” Twilight said as she trotted closer, “I got a letter from Princess Celestia this morning, and basically, I’m going to take part in a major scientific project that she says will revolutionize Equestria. She’s invited us all to come to Canterlot.”

“All of us?” Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Even...” - she looked around for a minute before continuing- “Even Fluttershy?” she asked in a whisper.

“Well...” Twilight looked discomforted. “I haven’t asked Fluttershy yet.”

“I don’t know, sugarcube,” Applejack whispered. “She may not have recovered yet, ya know, from the incident. Going to Canterlot may not be the best thing for her, ya hear?”

“I know,” Twilight looked down at the dusty path. “But it would still be nice to ask her, right? I mean, it just wouldn’t be right to ask everyone but her.”

“Well, darlin’,” Applejack said in her usual voice, “I’d love to come with ya, but as ya can see,” she gestured to the nearby barn and farmhouse, “We still got a lotta work to do ‘round here. I gotta do my part ‘same as the rest of the family.”

“I understand,” Twilight said. “Farming sure is a busy life.”

“But, hey,” Applejack winked as Twilight turned to leave, “If ya get into a bind while you’re over there, just give me a note, and I’ll be there faster than you can bite an apple, okay?”

“Will do, Applejack!” Twilight smiled.

“Apple Bloom!” she could hear Applejack calling for her sister, “Could ya help me paint this barn?”

Now to talk to Fluttershy, Twilight thought.

Fluttershy's cottage was nearby, and Twilight didn't take long to get there. The leaf-covered house was quite large, as the kind pegasus kept a large number of animals there to take care of.

Twilight came to the door of the cottage and knocked three times. There was no answer. The unicorn knocked again, still to no avail. Twilight wondered if Fluttershy was out in the forest, looking for more animals to help.

"Fluttershy?" she called.

"Oh!" a small cry came from behind the treehouse. The yellow pegasus pony flitted over the cottage into view. "Oh, hello, Twilight," Fluttershy said softly. Fluttershy said most everything softly. "I'm sorry I didn't hear you knock. I was watering the flowers in my back garden." She lifted her right hoof to reveal a pink-painted watering can.

"That's okay, Fluttershy," Twilight gave a friendly smile. "I came to ask you a question..."

After Twilight had told her everything about Princess Celestia's letter and invitation, she asked, "Do you want to come with us?"

"Oh..." Fluttershy looked away, blushing. "I'm not sure, Twilight. Do you think it would be a good idea? I don't know if the princess wants me back after I ruined the Grand Galloping Gala."

"Fluttershy, the princess values your company just as much as anypony," Twilight attempted to reassure her friend. "But you should only come if you want to."

"Well, who else is going?" the pegasus asked. "You, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie? What about Rainbow Dash?"

"Um..." Twilight started to speak, but was interrupted by a multicolored blur of motion whooshing past.

“Hey, Twilight! Hey, Fluttershy!” Rainbow Dash greeted as she landed. “I just got done talking to Rarity and I heard the whole story. So I flew over here to say, ‘Count me in!’”

“I’ll go, too,” Fluttershy said. “I mean, if that’s okay with everyone else.”

“Are you sure?” Rainbow asked, incredulous.

“I want to be there for my friends,” Fluttershy continued. “And Angel can take care of the animals while I’m gone.”

“And Derpy Hooves can take care of the sky for me,” Rainbow Dash added. “We’ve got it all covered.”

“All right, then,” Twilight smiled. “I’ll let the princess know right away.”

“Dear Princess Celestia,

Today I learned that even if you think a friend will say no to an invitation, it’s still always good to ask them. I was sure that Fluttershy would be adamant against going to Canterlot with us, but she has decided to come and be with her friends. Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity are all coming as well. Applejack is busy at the orchard and, regrettably, is unable to make it. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle.”

“And done!” Spike exclaimed as he finished writing. “Shall I send it now?”

“Yes,” Twilight said. It was mid-afternoon, and Twilight had arrived back at the library to find Spike and Owlowiscious, her newest assistant, hard at work cleaning up the chaotic mess caused by the Cutie Mark Crusaders. After she helped them finish the job, she had Spike take a letter to send to Princess Celestia.

“All right,” Spike said. He took a deep breath, and exhaled a small jet of green flames, which consumed the letter. The resulting ashes flew through the open library window, toward the Princesses’ palace in Canterlot.

Not five minutes passed before a loud belching sound exploded from Spike’s mouth and another letter appeared. “Wow,” Twilight exclaimed in astonishment. “I didn’t think the Princess would respond that quickly.”

“My faithful student, Twilight Sparkle,” Spike narrated, holding the letter in his hands.

“My faithful student, Twilight Sparkle,

As always, I appreciate your input on the many wonders of friendship, and I am glad to see that you have accepted the invitation of the Canterlot Academy. I know you have the diligence and magical knowledge needed to help make this project a success.

I am also pleased to see that your friends are coming to Canterlot as well. I hope that they will enjoy their time here, and, if needed, provide you support in the coming days. I will send a coach with some of my most trusted guardsponies to retrieve you at dawn tomorrow. I look forward to seeing you soon, and wish you a safe journey.

Princess Celestia”

The five ponies met in front of the Ponyville library just as the sky was beginning to lighten. Twilight was up nearly all night in anticipation of what wonders the Canterlot Academy would have in store for her. She had barely gotten any sleep, though the excitement kept her alert in the chilly morning air. She had just woken Spike from his slumber to see them off, and the two came out of the library to find Rarity, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie waiting in front of the building.

Rarity had a large traveling case on the ground beside her, which Twilight suspected with great certainty was filled with all sorts of fancy attire. The rest of the group had a few saddlebags, each pony’s

emblazoned with their respective cutie marks. Twilight's own pack contained a good book for reading on the way to Canterlot, some various measuring instruments, a light breakfast of chocolate-chip muffins from Sugarcube Corner, some paper, an ink bottle, and two quill pens.

Rainbow Dash was antsy. She kept doing acrobatics a few feet off the ground, talking excitedly about whatever the scientific project was. Pinkie Pie was tossing out wild guesses between Rainbow Dash's backflips. Twilight smiled. "It seems everypony else is just as curious as we are," she told Spike.

"Yep," the baby dragon murmured. Still half-asleep, his eyelids were clearly droopy from fatigue.

Twilight went to speak to Rarity. "Will your shop be okay while you're gone?" she asked. Rarity was well-known in Ponyville for being a fashionable trend-setter, and her tailor shop reflected that aspect of her personality.

"Oh, don't worry," Rarity tossed her luxurious purple mane. "Sweetie Belle is watching over it." She stopped, as if realizing what she had just said. "Oh, dear," she shuddered.

The sky grew brighter. Rays of light began to appear as the sun peered over the horizon. Right on cue, the shape of a royal coach took form in the distance, approaching the ponies. The silvery coach, pulled by pegasus ponies clad in gold and blue armor, landed on the eastern road to Ponyville, driving until it finally came to a halt in front of Twilight and company.

"Are you Miss Twilight Sparkle?" one of the guards asked, standing rigidly at attention.

"Yes, I am," the unicorn answered. "I have the travel pass right here." Twilight's horn glowed, and the slip of paper floated telekinetically toward the guard who spoke.

The guard read it carefully, then looked back at Twilight. "Would all of these ponies be your companions, Miss?" he asked, gesturing toward her friends.

"Yes," Twilight answered.

“Very well,” the guard affirmed. “Then, please board the coach.”

Though Twilight had seemingly expected to read her book on the way to Canterlot, she ended up falling asleep in the seat shortly after the trip began. Rarity wondered how she could possibly sleep, with Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie still chattering enthusiastically.

“What if it’s a machine that makes food into candy?” Pinkie asked, grinning wildly.

“No way, Pinkie,” Rainbow Dash shook her head. “It’s something that’s going to revolutionize Equestria, not give it candy. I think it should be something powerful, like a weather control machine. Think about it. We would always have sunny days, and if we need rain, we got it!”

“Could the weather control machine make it rain candy?” Pinkie Pie squeaked.

Rainbow Dash responded by putting her head in her hooves.

Rarity finally spoke up. “No, darlings, you’ve got it all wrong. This device is obviously meant to turn raw, base materials into precious stones! We could be rid of ugly, useless rocks, and be surrounded by beauty!”

Rainbow Dash gave a sigh as she rolled her magenta eyes. “Come on,” she complained, “That would never happen. How would that revolutionize Equestria?”

“Well, what do you think it is, Fluttershy?” Rarity turned her attention to the pastel yellow pegasus.

“Oh, um, I don’t know,” she said, peeking through her long, pink mane. “But I hope that it’s something good, and not, um, you know, something bad.”

“Like that would happen,” Rainbow Dash scoffed. “As if the Princess would do something that would harm Equestria.”

Twilight stirred, turning over in her seat. Her eyelids ventured open as she sat up. “I fell asleep, didn’t I?” she asked.

The other ponies nodded.

"Looks like I didn't even need to bring my book," the unicorn sighed. Just then her stomach growled. "Although I suppose I could still use those muffins I packed." She moved the muffins out of her pack and set them on the seat next to her.

"Hey, we should all have breakfast!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed. She reached into her pack and began pulling out an array of baked goods that could not possibly have fit inside. There were scones, miniature pies, cupcakes, muffins, and cookies. At the sight of such a smorgasbord, everypony felt the twinge of hunger, and they quickly finished off the treats.

"Thanks, Pinkie Pie!" Rainbow Dash said after devouring the one remaining sugar cookie. "You sure do know how to feed a pony!"

"Aw, anything for my friends!" Pinkie Pie replied.

"Look!" Fluttershy pointed her hoof out the window. "We're here."

Sure enough, the coach was landing on a paved, white marble road and approached the royal city of Canterlot. The guardsponies continued until they reached the large palace of the two princesses of Equestria: Celestia, the raiser of the sun, and Luna, the ruler of the night.

"Miss Twilight Sparkle," one of the guards announced as the other opened the coach's door, "We have arrived at the palace. Please disembark and enter the palace."

The ponies did as they were told, exiting the coach. The guards continued to escort them to the royal chamber, where they met Princess Celestia.

"My little ponies, welcome back to Canterlot," the Princess addressed the group. Tall and white, Princess Celestia had large wings, broader than those of Rainbow Dash or Fluttershy, but on her head was a horn, similar to a unicorn's. Her flowing mane shone with all the colors of the early dawn. "Hello, my faithful student," she smiled at Twilight. "Did you have a pleasant journey here?"

"I did, Princess," Twilight looked around at her friends. She couldn't believe that only last year, she had only spent time studying in her room, all

alone except for Spike. She had believed that she did not need friends for anything. She had learned after she and the others had worked together to defeat Luna, then known as Nightmare Moon, that friendship was just as important to a pony's life as studying. She was grateful to Princess Celestia for teaching her about the magic of friendship.

Twilight suddenly remembered the reason they were here in the first place. "Excuse me, Princess," she ventured, "could we see the project now? I'd like to get to work on it right away."

"Of course," Princess Celestia smiled. "But I have had a breakfast made for you in honor of your visit. Wouldn't you like to rest from your journey from Ponyville?"

The ponies looked at each other. Each felt a spur of guilt, having already eaten.

"We're sorry, your majesty," Twilight said humbly, "but we have already had breakfast on the way here."

"That's quite all right," Princess Celestia assured the young unicorn. "I shall change the purpose of the breakfast to a charity gathering. Make it so," she said aside to a nearby guardspony.

"Now," the Princess announced, "Let us go to the Academy!"

The Canterlot Academy was an expansive complex, with ornately designed buildings, artistic fountains, and beautiful natural courtyards. Everypony was in awe of the place, even Twilight, who had studied here for much of her life.

As they passed various buildings, Rainbow Dash began to get impatient. "How much longer?" she groaned just out of the Princess's hearing range.

"Ah, this is it," Princess Celestia stopped in front of the door to a large tower. "This is the research and development building. Ponies here use science to learn and discover new things about the world around us. Follow me, if you please," she said, stepping inside.

The excitement from earlier that morning resurfaced inside of Twilight. She couldn't help but grin to see all the scientists working inside the large building. Each one was hard at work trying to understand the nature of magic and physics. The rules laid down by these fundamental forces of nature governed not only Equestria, but the whole world.

"Up these stairs now," Princess Celestia directed. The ponies followed her up the spiral staircase along the tower wall. Ten floors up, they finally stopped at the door to a room closed off from the rest of the tower.

The Princess knocked at the door. "It's Princess Celestia," she called. A moment passed, and they could hear shuffling from inside. The door was opened by a pale blue stallion wearing a lab coat and glasses.

"This is Professor Star Gazer," Princess Celestia introduced the scientist. "He's the pony in charge of the project I told you about."

"You're Twilight Sparkle?" the professor looked at Twilight, astonished. "How did such a young mare as yourself get the Princess's recommendation?"

"Now, now," Princess Celestia said calmly before Twilight could say anything, "You should know that this 'young mare' has my utmost confidence. She is one of Equestria's most brilliant minds, and I have unshakable faith in her intelligence and resourcefulness."

Star Gazer's expression humbled at the Princess's words. "Well, if you trust her, your majesty, I do as well."

Princess Celestia nodded in approval. "Professor, I have other duties to which I must attend. Could you show these ponies around your laboratory? I'm sure they're all very interested in what your team has been working on."

"Very well," Star Gazer bowed as Princess Celestia turned to leave. His attention turned to the group of friends that stood before him. "Come with me, if you please."

The ponies followed the professor into the chamber. In the middle of the laboratory was a large machine that vaguely resembled an arch made

of marble and steel. Various areas on the machine glowed with the aura of magic.

“Let me introduce you to my team,” Star Gazer motioned to the other ponies in the room.

“This is our mathematician, Dr. Test Tube,” he gestured to a green pony with an indigo mane and tail. Like Star Gazer, he wore a white lab coat. Test Tube sat at a desk by the wall that was covered in pieces of paper with various mathematical equations and formulas written on them.

“And here is our mechanic and device specialist, Magnet Pulse,” This was a yellow unicorn with jet black mane. Her lab coat had wide pockets on it which held screwdrivers, wrenches and other tools. She was leaning on the device casually, smiling at the newcomers.

“And this,” Star Gazer pointed to the last scientist, “is Dr. Solar Flare. She is in charge of theoretical research and with recording the progress of this project.” Solar Flare, a unicorn with a lavender coat and golden mane, seemed too busy to notice them. She was at a desk opposite Test Tube, writing something furiously.

“We have an intern, Summer Leaf,” the professor said, “but he has the day off today. He should be back tomorrow morning.”

“Excuse me, Professor,” Twilight spoke up. “But what exactly is it that you’re working on?”

Star Gazer drew himself up proudly. “This, Twilight Sparkle, is a transdimensional gate.”

Twilight’s eyes lit up in amazement. “A transdimensional gate? I thought those only existed in theory.” Suddenly she noticed that all her friends had confused looks on their faces. “Basically, it’s a magical portal that can lead to another world,” she explained.

Star Gazer nodded. “That is the layman’s explanation. Science has developed the theory of the transdimensional gate by observing similar forms of magic used by unicorns. We believe that the type of magic involved in a transdimensional gate is closely related to that of teleportation spells. The only problem is, the amount of magic needed is much too high for a unicorn to realistically create one on his or her own. That is why we

are developing this device: to facilitate the creation and maintenance of the gate without causing unnecessary strain on the user's magical powers."

"All right, that explains a lot," Twilight said thoughtfully. "I'd like to review your experimental notes, if that's okay."

"That's fine," the professor replied. "If you're going to work with us, you might as well understand what's going on."

"Wait a minute," said Rainbow Dash, "If you're making a magical gate that doesn't rely on unicorn magic, what does it use for power?"

"We haven't figured that part out just yet," Star Gazer admitted. "That's why a gate hasn't been made yet. But scientists are making new developments, and perhaps we can find a resource that can store a large amount of magic energy soon."

"Well, let's get to work, shall we?" Twilight asked enthusiastically.

As the ponies left Twilight to talk with the scientists some more, Pinkie Pie opened her mouth and a torrent of excited words burst forth.

"Oh my gosh! Can you believe it? Twilight's gonna help make a transdummy-thingy! We're gonna get to go to other worlds in the blink of an eye! It's gonna be so fun! And great! And fantastic! What do you think other worlds are like? Maybe there's a world made entirely out of chocolate! Or maybe a giant ocean where instead of ponies, there are friendly talking octopuses! Or maybe a place that's all shiny and made out of gold!"

Then, as Pinkie Pie was known to do on occasion, she broke into song.

*"Oh, I want to go
To a different world
And see what I can see
There'll be so much
To see and touch
And do and think and be!"*

*I'll show them how
To bake a cake
And how to eat candy
It'll all be great
And I can't wait
To have a transdimensional gate party!"*

Pinkie Pie suddenly noticed all the other ponies in the large building had stopped everything they were doing and were staring right at her. Rainbow Dash looked rather uncomfortable with the sudden attention. "Maybe we should take this somewhere else," she suggested cautiously. Rarity and Fluttershy agreed.

Days passed. Twilight and the scientists were hard at work, rarely taking breaks. Whenever Twilight wasn't working in the laboratory, she was busy reading scientific documents about the study of magic. She was certain that she could help, and she wouldn't let the Princess or her new colleagues down.

Twilight had gotten accustomed to the rest of the group. Although Star Gazer had seemed uptight at first, he actually had a good sense of humor, although it was often stifled by his sense of duty to scientific progress. Test Tube had a natural talent for math, as revealed by both his work and his pi-shaped cutie mark. Magnet Pulse was much more casual than the rest of the team, more apt to joke than the others. Solar Flare, on the other hand, was reserved, and the very paragon of seriousness. She rarely spoke to the other scientists unless it was in technical terms. Summer Leaf came in to help out most afternoons, doing odd jobs for the scientists when needed. He was a sky-blue pegasus pony with a short green mane, and his personality was much like Magnet Pulse, though he talked quite a bit more than the mechanic did.

Outside of the laboratory, however, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy were beginning to become bored with the halls of Canterlot. Rarity occupied her time by socializing with various celebrities, such as the famed fashion critic Hoity Toity, but it soon became apparent that they didn't think much of anything she had to say. Pinkie Pie had brought some board games along, which she played with Fluttershy and, later, Rarity. As

time went on, though, they were becoming more of, as Pinkie would say, “bored games.” Rainbow Dash practiced her acrobatic moves outside, hoping to catch the attention of the Wonderbolts in case they came around, but the only pony who consistently watched her was Fluttershy, who offered soft interjections of encouragement.

Finally, when the four ponies were all together in their hotel suite, idly playing Hooves and Ladders for the twenty-first time, there was a knock on the door.

Rainbow Dash jumped up and flew over to the door to open it. On the other side was Twilight.

“I have good news!” Twilight announced, entering the suite. “I think we may be finished!”

“Finished?” the other ponies gasped in unison.

“Yep. According to Dr. Test Tube and Dr. Solar Flare, the device should be able to open a transdimensional gate now. They said I could let you all see the first activation, so I came to ask if you wanted to see it.”

“Well, it’s about time!” Rainbow Dash flew into the air, excited.

Pinkie Pie jumped up as well, her face the perfect picture of glee. “Whoopee! Let’s go!”

“I quite agree,” Rarity added. “After waiting this long, it would be silly not to want to see it.”

One by one, the ponies walked past Twilight out of the room. The last one to leave was Fluttershy. “Um, Twilight?” she asked nervously. “Are you sure it’s a good idea to do this? I mean, what if, um, there was something, you know, scary on the other side of the gate? I’m worried that it won’t be as good as Pinkie Pie makes it out to be.”

“Don’t worry, Fluttershy,” Twilight reassured her friend. “We should also be able to close the gate in case of danger. There’s really nothing to worry about.”

“Oh,” Fluttershy broke eye contact to look at the floor. “Okay. As long as you know what you’re doing. I trust you, Twilight.”

The two friends followed the rest of the ponies to the laboratory.

Twilight knocked on the laboratory door. "I'm back," she called to the other scientists. "I brought my friends to see the demonstration."

Star Gazer opened the door. "Hello," he said. He bore an excited look on his face, a stark contrast to the stern expression he had when he had first met the ponies. "Please come inside!"

At the center of the lab stood the transdimensional gate. Magnet Pulse was in the middle of inspecting the machine, searching for loose parts. Solar Flare and Test Tube were off to the side, looking happily at the gate.

"So, Professor," Rarity asked as the other ponies were staring in awe at the completed device, "Did you figure out how to power the gate?"

Star Gazer grinned like a young schoolcolt who had received a perfect score on his final exams. "Yes, and the answer was simple once we thought of it. It was actually Miss Twilight Sparkle who came up with the idea. We used Catria Stones."

"Catria Stones?" Rainbow Dash asked, bemused. "What are those?"

"Catria Stones are a rare type of gemstone," Rarity explained. "Very few ponies have access to them, as they can only be found in remote locations."

"That is true, Miss," Star Gazer nodded, "but most ponies are unaware of some of the other properties of Catria Stones. For instance, they are strong conductors of magical energy, or what I mean is to say they can store a large amount of it. Much, much larger than what the average unicorn can generate without straining him or herself. In fact, some ponies theorize that the manifestations of the Elements of Harmony may very well take the form of Catria Stones."

"Two Catria Stones are stored here at the tower," Twilight added. "After we explained our situation, we were able to take them in order to power the transdimensional gate with their stored energy. Both of them are currently at maximum capacity, so we shouldn't have any problems."

"Well," Star Gazer looked toward Magnet Pulse, "Shall we start it up?"

“Everything’s all clear here, Sir,” the unicorn saluted with her right hoof. “The machine’s in top shape.”

“I’ve checked, double-checked, and triple-checked my math,” Test Tube added. “I even had Dr. Lewis Corral look it over. No errors.”

“And the magical part is taken care of,” Twilight declared confidently.

“All right.” The professor stomped with one hoof. “Magnet Pulse, please throw the switch.”

The yellow unicorn did so. The machine began to rumble. The lights in the room flickered as the two Catria Stones glowed a respective magenta and teal. At the center of the device, a distortion of the light appeared, oval in shape. For an instant, a landscape could be seen through the distortion, faintly visible. A split-second later, the image appeared again, clearer this time. Soon the image was as clear as life. The machine continued to hum as the clarity of the view stabilized.

“It works!” Star Gazer’s face wore an expression of pure triumph. “We’ve created a transdimensional gate!”

The lights all went out except for the two Catria Stones and the glow of the world beyond the gate. The other world appeared to be very similar to Equestria; the sky was blue, the land was covered in green grass, and there were trees that looked a lot like Equestrian trees.

“This is interesting,” Solar Flare observed. “It appears that we’ve come in contact with a parallel universe.”

“Interesting?” Test Tube remarked. “It’s absolutely mind-blowing!”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “Well, who’s going to be the first to go through it?”

Everypony stopped and looked at her. “Yeah,” Pinkie Pie added, “Who’s gonna be the first pony to go to the other world?”

“Wait,” Star Gazer said authoritatively. “We can’t be hasty in dealing with another world. For all we know, the atmosphere of that world could be poison. The life-forms there, if indeed there are any, could be hostile. Everything in that world has the possibility of being extremely dangerous.”

“Well, we’re never going to know unless somepony tries, are we?” Rainbow Dash argued.

“Rainbow Dash, listen,” Twilight tried to calm the bold pegasus. “Professor Star Gazer is right. We’ve only just discovered this world. There’s still so much we have to figure out before we can send ponies through the gate. And we don’t know if it’s safe.”

“Are you kidding me?” Rainbow Dash threw up her hooves in frustration. “All this work and energy gone into this thing, and you won’t even use it? This was supposed to revolutionize Equestria, and you’re just going to let it sit there? Are you serious? That’s crazy!”

“Rainbow Dash,” a small voice revealed herself in the midst of the uproar. “Please don’t do this,” Fluttershy squeaked. “You should listen to Twilight and the rest of the scientists. Please.”

“I’ll listen when they stop being cowards!” Rainbow Dash shouted. “I’m gonna fly through there and show you there’s nothing to worry about!”

“Rainbow, no!” Pinkie Pie yelled, but it was too late. The pegasus had bolted across the room, leaving a polychromatic trail. Within a second, she had gone through the transdimensional gate.

“Rainbow!” the ponies cried out in unison.

The sound of laughter emerged from beyond the gate. The ponies looked through and saw Rainbow Dash, hovering in the air of the other world, completely unfazed by the travel.

“You’re all right!” Twilight exclaimed in relief.

“Of course I’m all right!” Rainbow Dash looked sure of herself. “What did you think was going to happen? I couldn’t be more-”

She suddenly disappeared, along with the rest of the other world. Somehow the transdimensional gate had closed. The machine had powered off.

“Rainbow?” Twilight asked, in shock. “Rainbow? Rainbow!”

“-safe.”

Chapter 2

Rainbow Dash faltered as she witnessed the gateway disappear before her eyes. “Okay, guys,” she said to the space where the portal had been just a moment ago. “That’s really funny. Turn the gate back on and I’ll come back through.” She paused for a few seconds, waiting for a reply. Nothing happened.

“Guys?” She was starting to get anxious. “Guys, I’m serious. Let me back through! Guys!”

Panic began to set in. Was the gate really gone? How long would it be to get it working again? What if... What if they turned it off on purpose?

Rainbow Dash shook her head in disbelief. No. There was no way her friends would abandon her like that. They really did seem to be concerned when she flew into the transdimensional gate. She would just have to wait here for a while until the ponies on the other side fixed it and could let her through again.

She flew a few feet away and perched on a nearby tree branch. “See?” she reassured herself. “Any moment now. They’re smart ponies. It’ll only take a few minutes to get the gate fixed.”

She waited. As she did, she took in the surroundings. The air was strange-smelling; the scent of the trees mingled with the acrid smell of oil and smoke. Rainbow Dash looked around for a fire, but she couldn’t find any. The sky was blue, just like in Equestria, but it seemed just a shade darker, and the sun seemed to be just a bit hotter. There was a slight breeze in the air. Well, at least she could breathe the air. Twilight was wrong about that.

There was a constant sound of... something in the distance. Rainbow Dash couldn’t identify the cause of it. She could also make out a slight humming noise from the same direction. What was going on over there? Rainbow Dash wondered, but she didn’t want to leave in case the gate reopened. She sighed. So much for being the first pony to explore a new world.

As the minutes passed, Rainbow Dash remained sitting on the tree branch. The transdimensional gate still hadn't reopened, and she was starting to get tired of waiting. More importantly, she was beginning to worry about what was going on in Equestria. Doubt crept into her thoughts, and she wondered if Twilight and the others even knew how to get the machine back working.

A sudden noise interrupted Rainbow Dash's thoughts. Startled, she looked around below her. She noticed there was a path along the ground. The thought occurred to her that one of the inhabitants of this world might be near. And coming this way. Rainbow Dash remembered Twilight's admonishment before she recklessly crossed over:

"The life-forms there, if indeed there are any, could be hostile. Everything in that world has the possibility of being extremely dangerous."

Rainbow Dash crept a bit deeper into the trees, suddenly aware that her cyan coat and multicolored mane stood out like a sore hoof among the green and brown of the forest. If whatever was approaching was looking for her, she would be an easy target. She watched cautiously, worried about what could be coming around the trail. What appeared both surprised and shocked her.

The creature walked on its two hind legs. It appeared to be dressed in strange clothes; or, if they weren't clothes, very oddly-patterned fur. Its mane seemed to be cut very short, so much so that it was difficult to tell what color it was. Rainbow Dash realized its posture was similar to that of Spike; it stood upright, and its forelegs ended in long-fingered hands rather than hooves. She assumed it was about as tall as one-and-a-half ponies.

As the creature turned along the trail, Rainbow Dash got a view of the creature's face. It was alien, unlike anything Rainbow Dash had seen before, yet similar enough to give her a shock. The creature had two eyes, small and beady, yet fortunately appearing not to notice her in the trees. It had no snout, just a simple mouth on its face with a protrusion that seemed to serve as its nose. Its ears were rounded, not pointed like those of a pony, and flat against the sides of its head. Rainbow Dash noted that the creature had no fur on its face aside from the almost-nonexistent mane and the stuff on its body, which she assumed was probably clothing anyway.

Rainbow Dash trembled at the sight of the creature: at its hideous visage, its overall... unnaturalness. She hid, careful not to make a sound or move a muscle until it was well out of sight. Then she bolted.

Rainbow Dash didn't think about the transdimensional gate. She didn't think of her friends back home. She didn't think about the fact that she had no idea where she was. All she knew was that she had to get away from that place. She didn't know why, but everything about that creature radiated danger. So she flew. She flew over the forest, over stretches over black stone that carried large metallic beasts of varying colors, over settlements that looked horrifyingly similar to Ponyville.

She then realized that she could hide in the clouds overhead. She never noticed before that they appeared to be much the same as they were in Equestria. Rainbow Dash soared up, higher in the sky until she was right above a cloud. Finally feeling secure, she let herself drop down onto it, anticipating the soft landing.

Instead, she fell right through. The cloud didn't even bear her weight, as light a pegasus as she was. Confused, Rainbow Dash tried again. The same result happened; she sunk down through the cloud as if it weren't even there. Feeling panicked once more, she tried a different cloud, and another, to no avail. Finally, Rainbow Dash gave up and allowed herself to drift downward in disappointment.

It was then she noticed a group of ponies on the ground below. They were roaming aimlessly around a field, underneath a series of metal-frame towers connected by humming cables. She flew down towards them, careful not to touch the mysterious wires.

"Hey!" Rainbow Dash called out to them. "What's going on here? Where am I? What is this place?"

The ponies below didn't seem to notice her voice. She landed in the midst of them, refusing to let this opportunity go to waste. "I'm Rainbow Dash, from Equestria," she shouted, trying to get their attention. "I got lost here through some magical gate thingy. I need help. Please."

Rainbow Dash still received no response. The ponies looked at her for a while, silent, as if unsure what she was. Rainbow Dash then realized that these ponies, although they looked a little like Equestrian ponies from a distance, were quite different. They were not at all colorful, mostly just

varying shades of brown. No blues, greens or reds were there to be seen. The ponies here were also much taller, almost twice Rainbow Dash's height. Finally, Rainbow Dash noticed that they had no cutie marks. Every single pony here except Rainbow Dash had completely featureless flanks.

Tears began to form in Rainbow Dash's eyes as it hit her that these ponies didn't even seem to have the ability to speak, or even understand her at all. They were little more than ordinary, unintelligent animals. "What in the world is this horrible place?" her voice broke as she took off once more, searching for some refuge from the madness.

She finally found herself in a forested area, different from the one into which she had arrived in this world. Tired, both physically and emotionally weary, she dropped onto the mossy, leaf-covered ground. There she threw off all pride and let herself cry. She was absolutely lost. No pony would ever find her here, even if they got the transdimensional gate to work again. She herself didn't think she remembered what direction she had flown to get to where she was now. The creatures in this world were terrifying with their uncanny aura of danger, and the ponies... the ponies... Rainbow Dash broke into sobs once more when she thought of them. Warped, twisted, a sick perversion of what a pony should be.

There was no hope. Everything back in her world that she had dreamed of: becoming the best flyer in all Equestria, joining the Wonderbolts, living the life of a world-famous star athlete; there was no way of achieving those goals now. There was nothing left for her now that Equestria was gone forever. There was no reason to live. Rainbow Dash gave herself in to despair.

How long she had slept she didn't know. She looked around. The sky around her was dark. The chirping of crickets and the peeping of frogs surrounded her. Rainbow Dash assumed that night had fallen.

"Well, what now?" she asked herself. "If I'm stuck in this world forever, what am I going to do about it?"

After several long minutes of consideration, she made her decision: she would survive. Even if no pony was coming to rescue her, she wasn't

the kind of pegasus to just give up when the going got tough. Rainbow Dash was no quitter.

Although her life in Ponyville had conditioned her to such luxuries as professionally prepared meals and running water, Rainbow Dash knew she could eat tree leaves and grasses in a pinch, and she could drink natural water if she found a stream. Maybe it would rain if she was lucky; after all, she didn't know if it even rained in this world.

Rainbow Dash set off on foot to find a source of water. She was getting thirsty, and she knew from an old flight school lesson that it was important to stay hydrated. She journeyed down toward the foot of the hill. It was rather steep, and the moss-covered ground was slippery in places. Rainbow Dash had to struggle to maintain her footing. She relied on trees to brace herself and prevent going downward too fast. Carefully, she made it to the bottom of the hill. Seeing what looked like a narrow creek bed, she walked toward it.

A sudden bright light blazed in her eyes. She stopped, so surprised and frightened that she could no longer think to move. All she could do was stare into the light, cursing her muscles for not working when she needed to escape.

The light grew closer. Rainbow Dash could barely make out the shape of one of the creatures that had terrified her soon after she arrived here. Still immobilized, she could do nothing but anticipate her fate.

Without warning the creature spoke in a language identical to Equestrian. "Are... are you... Rainbow Dash?" it asked.

Chapter 3

The ponies were in shock at what had just happened. Twilight, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and Fluttershy had just watched their close friend vanish, lost in another world. The gate had given no sign of failure beforehand, no flickering, no shrinking, nothing. It was there one moment, and in the next, it simply... wasn't.

Star Gazer was the first to break the silence. "Magnet Pulse," he ordered, his voice shaking, "Status report, please."

The yellow unicorn shook her head and began inspecting the transdimensional gate machine. After a few moments, she answered back, "We've lost all power. The Catria Stones have run completely dry. There's no magic left in them."

"You're kidding!" Twilight gasped. "There's no way they could have run out of magic in such a short amount of time! Those things were fully charged!"

"Twilight," Test Tube reminded, "Remember that we just did what was previously thought impossible. It takes a lot of magic to open a gate to another world, and I'd put forth a pretty safe bet that it takes much more to maintain that gate. It doesn't take a big stretch of imagination."

"You..." a soft yet darkly threatening voice rose up among the discussion. "How can you talk so calmly about this? One of our friends is missing and all you can do is talk about how the gate closed?"

Fluttershy, who had been previously timid and unassuming, now flew straight into Test Tube's face. Her eyes were wild, mad with indignation. The mathematician, shocked by the sudden intrusion, could only look into the pegasus's furious stare. "Let me tell you something, mister," she warned. "All of you are going to get Rainbow Dash back. You will not rest. You will not take breaks. And you will not! Abandon! My! Friend!"

"Fluttershy!" Rarity called. "That's quite enough. All of us are concerned for Rainbow Dash's safety. Let the poor pony go."

Rarity's words snapped Fluttershy out of her rage. She backed off, looking quite ashamed of herself. Her face a deep shade of red, Fluttershy crept out of the laboratory.

Twilight's mouth opened to call Fluttershy back, but Rarity stopped her. "Let her go, Twilight. We are all of us emotionally stressed. Let her deal with it in her own way."

Twilight sighed, understanding Rarity's point. Then she noticed another pony had become absent. "Where did Pinkie Pie go?" she asked.

Everypony looked around the lab, but there was no sign of the pink mare. Twilight bowed her head in hopelessness. "It looks like everypony's just disappearing today," she muttered to herself.

"Hey, Professor?" she looked up at Star Gazer. "Would it be all right if I looked for Pinkie Pie?"

"That's fine," Star Gazer answered. "We'll see if we can get this thing working again."

"Thank you." Twilight bowed as she turned to leave.

Twilight knocked on the door to their suite. "Pinkie Pie? Are you in there?" she called.

She cautiously opened the door, peering inside. It was dark. All the window blinds had been drawn, and the lights were all out. Twilight opened the door and stepped into the suite. Turning on the lights, she saw Pinkie Pie huddled in the corner. "Pinkie?" she asked.

The pink earth pony turned to face Twilight. Her mane, which had previously been wild with curls, had fallen into flat, straight locks. She must have been crying, because her eyes had reddened with tears. Her expression was nothing like Pinkie Pie's normal buoyancy. She glared at Twilight for a moment and then said flatly, "Only my true friends get to call me Pinkie. You may refer to me by my full name: Pinkamena Diane Pie."

"What?" The unicorn was bewildered. "Pinkie, stop being ridiculous."

“You let Rainbow Dash go in there, even though you knew it was dangerous.” Pinkie’s cold accusation hit Twilight hard. “You told everypony all the things that could hurt them in the other world. Why didn’t you stop her when you knew she was going to fly through the gate?” she asked. “You could have turned the machine off. You could have blocked her way. But no. You just let her fly into that big scary dangerous world. That’s not something a friend would do. And if you’re a bad friend to Rainbow Dash, then you’re not a friend to me!”

“Pinkie,” Twilight started to say, but her throat choked on the words.

“Don’t call me that anymore!” the earth pony shouted, her voice suddenly raised. “And don’t come back. I don’t want to see you here one more time.”

Solar Flare looked up from her paperwork. “A word, Professor, if I may?” she asked.

Star Gazer sighed. “You don’t need my permission to speak, Doctor.”

“What do you think we should do?” the mare asked. “We don’t have any more Catria Stones. We will need to get in touch with Argali if we want to procure more.”

“And you know those Argalians,” Magnet Pulse interjected. “They’re a hard-nosed bunch, and you can’t get them to agree on anything. Well, other than their disdain for Equestria.”

“I understand, Magnet,” Star Gazer gave the mechanic a stern glance. “Please continue, Dr. Solar Flare.”

“Yes, sir,” the unicorn nodded. “Convincing the Argalians to give us any number of Catria Stones would take a very long time. Time the lost pegasus has to discover a multitude of ways to end up injured or even killed in the other universe. And that’s the least of our worries.

“According to the notes I took, the magic of a fully charged Catria Stone can only maintain the transdimensional gate for two minutes and thirty seconds. Even if we can acquire enough stones to power the gate, that doesn’t give us a large time window to work with. In addition to that,

we will have to factor in the probability of locations in which the gate will open in the other world, and then the probability that the lost pegasus will be in that location, or be able to arrive there within the timeframe. I'm sure Dr. Test Tube would be able to give a definite number, but what I'm saying, Professor, is that things really don't look good in terms of a rescue mission."

Star Gazer put his head in his hooves, feeling the weight of his colleagues' words exhaust him. "I was afraid of that."

Twilight opened the door and entered the lab, also bearing a heavy heart. "This has just exploded into a huge mess," she groaned. "Rainbow Dash is gone, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie have gone completely off the deep end, and I'm just waiting for Rarity to snap. What have I missed?"

Star Gazer shook his head sadly.

"Oh." Twilight looked down, understanding the motion. Why didn't she stop Rainbow Dash? Why didn't she make them turn it off? Maybe Pinkie was right. Maybe she was a bad friend.

Twilight sat alone in the laboratory. After discussing options with the other scientists and informing the Princess on what had happened that day, the ponies had reluctantly called it a day. Night had fallen in Equestria.

The transdimensional gate stood dark and silent in the center of the room. Twilight stared at it, trying to formulate a plan. How could she rescue Rainbow Dash? Pinkie Pie had totally abandoned her, refusing even to acknowledge Twilight as her friend. Fluttershy was too emotionally unstable at this point to be reliable. Princess Celestia had ordered extra guardsponies around the royal garden in case she tried to get inside. The only ponies she could still count on were Rarity and Applejack, and the latter was back in Ponyville. She hadn't yet received word from Canterlot; she was most likely blissfully unaware that anything had gone wrong. Twilight sighed. Maybe it was hopeless after all.

"I thought I might find you here," said a voice from the laboratory's doorway. Twilight looked in the direction of the voice and saw the Night Princess, Luna.

“My sister told me what had happened,” Luna said, approaching. “I came to offer what support I could. Since you and the other Elements of Harmony rescued me from a millennium of darkness and hatred, I thought it was only natural for me to want to repay the favor somehow.”

Twilight sighed. “Well, unless you can make this machine work again, I don’t know how you can help.”

Luna knelt in front of the unicorn. “For all your brains, it takes you a while to see the clear solution,” she gave a reassuring smile. “Not all power comes from magic, Twilight Sparkle. You know there is a much greater resource upon which you can draw.”

“What do you mean?” Twilight was confused.

“You have in your possession a magnificent power which most ponies take for granted,” the princess spoke. “You have the magic of friendship!”

Twilight was still perplexed by Luna’s words. Her face must have shown it, because Luna chuckled slightly.

“Through the friendship you grew to understand during your time in Ponyville, you have grown to know many ponies,” Luna explained. “And because of your analytical mind, you know each one’s capabilities, talents, and flaws better than anypony. Remember how you first stopped me with the Elements of Harmony? You couldn’t do it alone. You relied on your friends to support you, no matter what.”

For the first time since the transdimensional gate closed, Twilight’s eyes lit up with the flame of an idea. “That’s it!” she exclaimed. “Thank you, Princess Luna! I think I know how to save Rainbow Dash now!”

Luna smiled widely. “You understand, then. You know, Twilight Sparkle, you may be Celestia’s student, but I would like to think I can teach you a few things as well.” She walked out the door, leaving Twilight to put her new plan into motion.

Twilight eagerly set to work, bringing to her some paper and a pen. Furiously she scribbled down a long letter, writing tirelessly the ideas forming in her head. For almost an hour she worked, until finally she was finished.

When Twilight finally left the tower, the dawn had already arrived. Seeing the sun rising in the sky, she noted to herself that this was the second sleepless night in a row she had had. But sleep could wait for the time being. She had to find Rarity. Finding her walking out of their suite, she called to the white unicorn. "Rarity! Could we talk?"

Rarity turned at the sound of her name, and then gaped at Twilight as if in horror. "Twilight, darling, have you been up all night?" she asked, concern clearly evident in her tone. "You've missed out on your beauty sleep!" Rarity herself, though she didn't admit it, had had trouble sleeping as well. Though she had often disapproved of Rainbow Dash's brusque demeanor and unladylike personality, she did miss the way she always made life more exciting. It was hard to believe that the pegasus might be gone forever. Properly applied make-up, however, had done well to hide the sleeplessness from her face.

"I've been really busy," Twilight admitted. "But I think I have an idea that can help get Rainbow Dash back."

"Why, that's marvelous!" Rarity exclaimed, hope filling her heart. "What is it, Twilight?"

"I'm going to need you to return to Ponyville with this letter," Twilight instructed, showing Rarity the sealed document. "Talk to Applejack and tell her what has happened. Then I want you to show her the letter and follow what it says. Can you do this for me, please? I'm relying on you."

"You need not worry," Rarity assured her friend. "I will carry out this task to the best of my ability. For Rainbow Dash's sake."

"Thank you so much," Twilight sighed in relief. "I couldn't have managed it without you."

"All right. Everypony here?"

"Eeyup."

"I'm ready! Derpy Hooves never fails a mission!"

“I’m here, but I still don’t see why you can’t get somepony other than the Great and Powerful Trixie.”

“And you know I’m here, darling. You know it simply wouldn’t do to just leave you hanging, Applejack.”

“A simple yes would’ve sufficed.” Applejack rolled her eyes at Rarity’s answer. She looked at the assembled ponies. I sure hope Twilight knows what she’s doin’, she thought to herself.

“Well, Okey-doke! Y’all understand what we gotta do? Then let’s head on out to Argali!”

Chapter 4

Rainbow Dash was motionless. The only signs that she was still alive were her pounding heartbeat and the intense shivering of her body. She was too afraid to move her legs or her wings, and she couldn't manage to make a sound to answer the creature's question.

"Man, I don't believe this," the creature continued. "This is awesome! A real pony! Oh, man!"

What was going on? Rainbow Dash was expecting the creature to attack her while she was defenseless, but instead he seemed to be celebrating, relishing in the fact that he had caught her. That, and he kept shining that bright light in her face. But what was he going to do with her when he was done partying? And how did he know her name?

As she thought these things, the creature abruptly stopped what he was doing. "Oh, crap, what am I doing?" he said, slapping himself with his hand. "You're crying, aren't you?"

Rainbow Dash realized that tears were indeed streaming down her face.

The creature cursed under his breath. "I am so sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Are you okay? Can... can you understand me? Can you say anything?"

Something had changed. Why was he apologizing now? He came up to her, scared her half to death with that light, celebrated about it, and now he's sorry? Rainbow Dash couldn't take it any longer.

"Would you mind telling me," she finally managed to speak, "what the *hay* is going on here!"

He appeared to be taken aback. Rainbow Dash noticed this and immediately went on the offensive. "You sneak up on me in the middle of the night, shine that bright light right in my eyes, do some insane kind of celebration about it, and then you have the nerve to ask me if I'm okay? Well, I'm not okay! I haven't been less okay in my entire life! I'm stuck in

this world, against my will, and I'll probably be here forever, and the last thing I ever wanted is one of you around! Got it?" She stopped to catch her breath, realizing that she was hovering right in his hideous face.

The creature looked away, obviously ashamed of himself. "I... I don't know what to say," he said. "I don't want to hurt you. It's just... I've never seen a real pony like you before, and I guess I got a bit too excited."

"A real pony?" Rainbow Dash gritted her teeth as she spoke. "Why don't you go see one of those ponies out there? Those ones you creatures twisted somehow? What did you do to them? Huh? Answer me!"

"Hold on a minute!" He held his hands up, trying to keep his distance from her. His voice was shaking, as if he was on the verge of tears. "I think... I think we should take this conversation somewhere else. My house is pretty close."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Rainbow Dash sneered.

"Trust me," he pleaded. "It will be a lot safer in there than out here."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Fine. But I've got my eye on you!" she added.

She followed him around the hill, to a somewhat small house with what looked like vinyl siding. Opening the door, he entered the house and invited Rainbow Dash to follow him. As he flipped the light switch on the wall, the dark room was filled with light. He sat down on a sofa, unzipped the jacket he was wearing, and pulled it off of himself.

"You said you were stuck here?" he asked.

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash answered. "What's it to you?"

"I want to tell you about this world," the creature said, "and what is in it, I guess."

"First of all, this world is called Earth. I suppose it's a lot like Equestria, only with less ponies and friendship and more--"

“Wait,” Rainbow Dash interrupted. “How do you know so much about us, when we’ve never known this place existed?”

“Um,” the creature faltered. “It’s kinda hard to explain. I’ll get to it later, okay?”

“Anyway, Earth is the home of humans. Human beings, like me.” He gestured toward his chest, appearing as if he were explaining to somepony like Snips or Snails.

“By the way, my name’s Mason. I’m sorry; I should have started with that.” He hung his head and exhaled. “I’m really, really bad at this. I’ve honestly never thought of telling someone all about Earth.”

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. How could she have been so afraid of this guy? When you got down to it, he was just some chump. “Go on,” she said impatiently.

Mason took a deep breath. “Well, we do a lot of things here. There are scientists, farmers, office workers, doctors... There are way too many jobs to talk about.

“Oh, yeah, we get places by driving cars. You go inside them and they take you places. Well,” he amended, “you have to make them go. Sorry.”

“For the love of flying, will you quit apologizing?” Rainbow Dash couldn’t take his weak attitude anymore. “Just tell me how you know about us.”

“Well...” Mason thought long and hard about it. “Well, you see there’s this TV show... I’ll tell you what that is later; anyway, the show’s called My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic. It’s about, well, ponies and stuff.”

The pegasus was absolutely baffled. “A what? What in the hay are you talking about?”

“You know what,” Mason got up. “It’ll be easier to just show you.” The human walked into another room, moved some things around, and came out holding some weird metallic book. He sat back on the couch and opened it. The interior was odd to Rainbow Dash, who had never seen

such a thing before. On one section was a set of buttons with letters, numbers, and other symbols on them. When Mason pressed one, the dark gray rectangle on the other section lit up and revealed a vision that seemed oddly familiar to the pony.

“You have a transdimensional gate?” she asked.

“Huh?” Mason gave a quizzical look. “No, this is a computer. It processes data and can connect with other computers around the world. Look.” He manipulated the image on the screen, and in a few minutes, he showed her a series of images of... her. Her and her friends.

“I’m gonna show you one of the episodes,” he announced as he moved the arrow to one of the pictures. He tapped the computer. “This is episode 16: Sonic Rainboom.”

The images were replaced by a single moving picture. Rainbow Dash immediately recognized the scene. It was her, trying unsuccessfully to coach Fluttershy to cheer louder. The memories flooded back as if the events had happened yesterday. She was practicing for the Best Young Flyers Competition that had been held in Cloudsdale last summer. At that contest, she had performed a sonic rainboom in order to rescue Rarity and the Wonderbolts. She watched for twenty-two minutes, seeing every scene there, almost exactly, no, perfectly like they had happened in her memories.

“How is this possible?” she asked, almost too quietly to be heard. “Everything that happened on that thing... it was all true.”

“That is pretty interesting,” Mason looked thoughtful.

“Interesting?” the pony asked skeptically. “It’s crazy! How can something like this even happen? You watch us on this... thing, and you think it’s interesting when it turns out to be true? I just don’t understand you.”

Mason stepped back, blushing slightly. His eyes drifted toward the clock. “Wow, it’s gotten pretty late,” he realized. “I should probably get some sleep. You can sleep on this couch. I’ll get a blanket for you if you need it.”

"I'm not a foal, you know," Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes while she jumped up onto the sofa. "I can take care of myself."

"All right," Mason sighed. "Hey, don't worry if you hear thunder, okay? There's supposed to be a storm coming in?"

"Wait a second," Rainbow Dash said. "How do you have weather if you don't have ponies? I mean, don't pegasus ponies usually move the clouds?"

Another deep breath. Mason thought carefully, and then said, "We don't have magic here. Something I probably should have mentioned earlier, but forgot. Stuff sorta just... happens on its own. And the things that don't, usually run on electricity. Like the computer and the light switch," he gestured toward the appliances.

"Well, I'm off to bed." Mason turned to leave, and then added, as an afterthought, "Please don't run off tonight. Um, or fly off. I honestly want to help you."

"Fine," the pony sighed.

Mason threw himself down onto the bed. He had absolutely no idea what he should be thinking. I mean, Rainbow Dash, my favorite pony, just came out of nowhere, he thought. He should be glad, right? Freaking Rainbow. Dash. Stuff like this didn't happen everyday. Shouldn't he feel like the luckiest person in the world?

So why didn't he?

At first he did. Surprised and amazed at the sudden appearance of what he thought to be the coolest fictional character ever, he initially thought of taking her home and being her best friend.

But that wouldn't work, would it? The more he thought about it, the more he saw it. Rainbow Dash had been scared out of her wits. She was lost, lonely, and completely ignorant to the ways of this world. As far as he knew, none of the other ponies had come with her. Without a doubt, he knew she missed them. There was no possible way she could ever be happy here.

And, he thought in horror, if Rainbow Dash isn't in Equestria, what does that mean for the show?

He also had noticed the way she looked at him. Rainbow Dash was a cute pony. She lived in a world full of cute ponies. She had never seen a human before in her life. To her, humans must look the same way that movie aliens look to humans. Every moment she spent in here was another moment spent with monsters. That was no way to live.

Mason made up his mind. Somehow, some way, he would help Rainbow Dash get back home.

The next morning, Mason woke up to see the pegasus staring at his laptop, poking it with her hoof.

"Um, what are you doing?" he asked.

"Nothing!" She quickly jumped back away from the computer. "I wasn't doing anything!"

"It's okay," Mason said, trying to calm Rainbow Dash down. "What did you want to do?"

The blue pony was silent for a moment. Finally, she said, "I was wondering... if you could show me more of that. What you showed me on that thing." She tentatively pointed to the computer again.

"Sure, that's fine," Mason answered. "Just let me set it up for you." He picked up the laptop, turned it on, and logged in. He then clicked on Firefox and went to YouTube. He found the playlist he was looking for, and clicked on it.

"Here you go," he said, setting down on the hardwood floor in front of Rainbow Dash. "It should be set to play all the episodes in order. I kinda need to go to work today, so I'm going to get ready, and then I'll leave. I should be back this afternoon. Okay?"

"Sure, whatever," came the pegasus's reply. "Later."

"All right," Mason said. "Take care of yourself."

“Hey, Mason! What’s up?”

Mason shrugged, stepping behind the counter. “Not much, I guess,” he lied. Just had a visit from a cartoon pony, he added silently.

The interior of the GameStop store was familiar to Mason. Having worked here for about a year now, he had gotten used to the environment. Soon, the place would be inhabited by gamers searching for their next conquests and parents just looking for a birthday present for their kids. Mason tried to put aside the events of last night and this morning for the time being, and, as he usually did, he set to work.

“Hey, you hear about the weird rainbow sighting yesterday?” Phil Osgood, his coworker, asked.

Mason stopped in his tracks. What was he talking about? Could he be talking about Rainbow Dash? What would happen if someone found her? Mason knew it definitely wouldn’t be good.

“No, I didn’t hear about that,” he said.

“That’s weird,” Phil looked a bit perplexed. “It happened somewhere around our area. It was a really weird rainbow going in like a straight line across the sky. One of my friends said he saw a UFO or something make it. Pretty crazy, huh?”

“Yeah,” Mason said, giving a nervous chuckle. “Crazy.”

Later that afternoon, Mason pulled into his driveway. Finally home from his day shift, he went into his house to check on Rainbow Dash.

When he entered the living room, he found the pony silently curled up on the sofa. She didn’t look at him, or even seem to notice Mason was there. *Was she asleep?* Mason wondered. His laptop was still on the floor, having finished playing the episodes and now showing only a screensaver. Quietly he stepped over to it to pick it up. Doing so, he entered in the username and password for his email.

He paused for a moment. What would he say? It would be hard to convince anyone that Rainbow Dash was real and living in his house. Not to mention he probably got all kinds of spam that was a lot like this. Sighing softly to himself, he went ahead and typed "sethisto@gmail.com" in the address bar. I might as well just type as I think of things, he thought. Here goes nothing.

Seth,

We have a major problem. I know you're probably not going to believe me, but I have to tell somebody. Rainbow Dash is in my house. Apparently, she came here from Equestria through some sort of gate. Not that I hate her or anything, in fact, she's my favorite pony, but I think she really needs to go back. She hasn't said that much to me, but it's pretty clear she hates it here. If you can help, or know anyone that can help, please send a reply. If you don't believe me, I can send pictures at a later time.

Please help us. I don't know what will happen if she doesn't get back to Equestria soon.

Mason Shaw

Hopefully, Mason thought to himself as he clicked the send button, that should work. He looked back toward the pony on the couch. Still asleep? Maybe he should wake her up. As he approached, Rainbow Dash stirred, waking up. Taking in a deep breath, she lifted her head.

"Huh? Oh, it's you again," she sighed. Looking toward the computer, she crossed her front legs, seeming to be deep in thought.

"Is there something wrong?" Mason asked. "Um, besides the obvious."

Rainbow Dash exhaled forcefully. "Was I really that mean to everypony?"

"What do you mean?" Mason asked.

"I was watching that thing there," she motioned toward the laptop. "All of that, at least, the parts where I was in it, that really happened. I don't know how, but everything there was real. I remember it all. But I only saw from my point of view, I guess. Watching it from outside myself... I could see how everypony else felt and what they did. And I suppose... I really wasn't that nice to them."

Rainbow Dash looked down, ashamed. "Maybe it was for the best that I got trapped in this world. Maybe everypony else is over there, much better off without me." She paused, realization apparent on her face. "I don't know if they even miss me," she said. "Maybe they just left me here. I mean, it's even my own fault I'm here in the first place. They probably don't even want me back after all I've done to them."

"Rainbow Dash," Mason spoke up, standing as he did so. "You might have done some kinda mean things to your friends. But when you think about it, doesn't everyone? I mean, Pinkie Pie also pranks ponies. And you know Rarity's a bit stuck-up too, right? So it doesn't matter what you've done to them. Think more about what you've done for them."

"That's right!" Rainbow Dash understood what the human was saying. Not everything she did was mean. Even though she wanted her own glory, she had put it aside to help the other ponies defeat Nightmare Moon. And, although she was unsuccessful, she had tried her best to help Apple Bloom find her cutie mark back when she was worried about that cutceañera. She always helped keep the weather just right in Ponyville. And it was her sonic rainboom that helped each of her friends find their own special talent. She was one of the Elements of Harmony, for crying out loud! If that didn't count for something, what would?

"So..." Mason changed the subject. "There's this website called Equestria Daily. It's where fans of My Little Pony go to talk about stuff. I sent a message to the guy who runs it, and hopefully he'll help."

"What can he do?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"I don't know," Mason admitted. "But somehow, we've got to get you back to Equestria."

“I don’t know how that’s going to happen,” Rainbow Dash shrugged. “I have no idea what happened to the transdimensional gate in Equestria.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Mason said suddenly. “You never told me what happened that got you here in the first place.”

“Well, it’s kind of a long story,” Rainbow Dash said. “So you might want to get comfortable...”

Chapter 5

"My dear friend, Applejack,

It is with great sadness that I write you from Canterlot. The project upon which I helped work was a success, but at great cost. Through a series of events too complicated to describe here, our friend Rainbow Dash has become trapped in another world. We are trying to find a way to bring her back to ours, but in order to power the machine that we are using, we need Catria Stones, natural sources of great magical energy.

Unfortunately, we can only obtain Catria Stones by negotiating with the nation of Argali, known for their dislike of Equestrians. This is where I need your help. If Princess Celestia's negotiations fail, I will need you and a small group of other ponies to go to Argali and acquire some, by any means possible.

I will send a follow-up letter after the Princess gets a reply. I trust you, Applejack, and I know you will do anything to help us.

Your friend,

Twilight Sparkle."

Applejack read the letter in disbelief. Rainbow Dash? Gone? "Is it true?" she asked aloud. It had to be. Twilight's words were serious, and she would never joke about something like this.

"I'm afraid it is," answered Rarity. "I was there when it happened. Twilight sent me here to inform you."

It was early afternoon, and the two ponies were at Sweet Apple Acres. Rarity had just arrived in Ponyville after leaving Canterlot with Twilight's letter. She had been so preoccupied with finding Applejack that she had yet to go to her boutique and find out what havoc Sweetie Belle had wrought on the place.

"So what do ya think we should do?" the orange earth pony asked.

"We should await Twilight's next letter," Rarity stated. "I know she'll have a more detailed plan by then."

"I guess," Applejack sighed. "Sure am nervous, though. I hope she sends word soon."

"I'm sure we have nothing to worry about." The unicorn looked confident. "I have faith in Twilight. I am positive she won't let us down!"

Sure enough, that very evening, Spike had belched up another letter. Eagerly he had hurried to Applejack's orchard to deliver it.

"Hey, Applejack!" he called as he ran into the farmhouse. "Twilight just sent you a letter!"

"Thank ya, Spike," the pony gave a smile of relief as she took the letter from Spike's outstretched hand. "Let's see what it says."

She read it carefully, with Rarity anxiously reading over her shoulder.

"Applejack,

I am writing to tell you that King Monolith of Argali has declined to grant the Princess's request for the Catria Stones. That being the situation, I must ask you to carefully read the following instructions. I implore you to do your best to help us. The fate of Rainbow Dash depends upon it.

First, you must gather a group of ponies who live in Ponyville. You should be familiar with them. The group should include you, Rarity, Big Macintosh, Trixie, and Derpy Hooves..."

That had happened yesterday. Applejack and Rarity had recruited each pony mentioned in the letter's instructions. Big Macintosh had agreed right away, willing to help out his sister. Derpy Hooves wasn't sure about going at first, but was easily swayed by the promise of muffins when it was all over.

Trixie had been the most difficult. Both Applejack and Rarity remembered her obnoxious boasting when she first came to Ponyville, and they also held a bit of a grudge from the way she had made foals of them both. Trixie had mellowed out since then after the Ursa Minor incident, but not by much. Applejack and Rarity had had to convince her that she would be performing abroad to get her to even consider it. Thankfully, she had come around.

The next morning, the group had set off toward the Argali border. It was a long way from Ponyville, and it took the better portion of the day to get there on hoof. At long last, the mountains of Argali came into view as they approached. Soon the border wall was visible.

"All right, everypony," Applejack whispered, gathering the ponies into a group. "Argali's just past that wall. Twilight said there'd most likely be guards stationed at the gate. Derpy, you'll be in charge of scoutin'. Ya need to fly up there and see if there's any on duty."

"Sure!" Derpy gave a salute and lifted off.

"Be careful, though," the earth pony warned. "Ya gotta make sure they don't see ya."

"Okey-dokey! I'll be right back!" The gray pegasus flew up into a nearby tree. Stealthily she maneuvered around branches until she was almost to the top. Peering out at the border gate, Derpy Hooves could see the guards. There were two of them, big and broad. But they didn't look much like ponies. Derpy supposed they might just be big unicorns, but she didn't think she knew any unicorns with two large curved horns on the sides of their heads. She tried to look past the gate, but the wall blocked most of her view. Scouting complete, she let herself drop to the ground.

Derpy landed clumsily in the midst of the group. Picking herself up, she said dizzily, "They're... sheep?"

Everypony was surprised. Everypony, that is, except Rarity. "Well, yes," she said. Looking at the other ponies' confused expressions, she explained. "Being a fashionista, I consider it my duty to know everything

about precious stones. And Argali happens to be primarily a mining economy. I've known since I first learned of it that Argali is populated by mountain sheep, not ponies."

Applejack looked at Rarity with suspicion. "And ya didn't bother telling us before because..."

"I didn't think much of it at the time," Rarity defended. "Honestly, Applejack, such a lack of trust."

"Excuse me," came Big Macintosh's baritone voice. "But I think we best leave our arguments until our job here's done."

"All right," Rarity and Applejack said in unison.

"Good." Turning to face the whole group, Big Macintosh began instructing. "Trixie, can you use your magic to disguise us as a package?"

"Well, of course I can," the blue unicorn drew herself up proudly. "I can do anything with my magic!"

Applejack raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Big Macintosh nodded toward the group. "Applejack, Rarity, gather 'round Trixie 'n' me. We're gonna begin."

The ponies did as instructed. Trixie concentrated, squeezing her eyes tight together. Within a few seconds, a large cardboard box had materialized around the four ponies. Derpy Hooves looked on as the box appeared around them.

"Now, Derpy," the package said. "Continue as we planned."

"Right!" The pegasus soared behind the box and began to push it along the path. It was difficult to do with the weight of four ponies. "Is there any way you could get lighter?"

"Good idea," Rarity said. "I'm going to try and lift you, Applejack. It should make poor Derpy's burden lighter."

"Okay- Whoa!" Applejack gave a yelp of surprise as she floated off the ground.

“Do try to let yourself relax, dear,” Rarity whispered. “It’s just for a moment.”

Outside, Derpy managed to move the box before the gate. Within a couple of seconds, the Argali guards appeared, blocking her progress.

“Halt!” the larger sheep barked. “What is your business?”

Derpy poked her head over the top of the box. “Hiya, sheep!” she said cheerfully. “Just delivering this package! I’m a mail-mare, you know! It’s my job!”

“Hmm...” The guards stared at the package and the pegasus suspiciously. “And just what’s in the package?”

“Umm...” Derpy hadn’t planned for this. Quickly she thought of the first thing that came to her mind. “Muffins!”

The smaller guard tilted his head, looking straight into Derpy Hooves’ cockeyed face. “Muffins?”

“Yep!” Derpy could feel sweat forming as her words sped up. “Sweet, tasty blueberry muffins! So delicious! But not for me. They’re for the mines! The mine workers, I mean! They must be hungry!”

Inside the box, Applejack placed a hoof firmly into her forehead. Rarity let her down so she could think more clearly. “Are you hearing this, Trixie?” the earth pony asked, her voice hushed.

A small sigh came from Trixie’s direction in response. “I’m on it.” The inside of the box was illuminated by the glow of Trixie’s horn. “This illusion spell should make us look just like... muffins... to anyone who looks inside this box.”

“Excellent work,” Rarity whispered. “You’re good for something after all.”

“Hush, everypony,” Big Macintosh ordered.

“Miss, we’ll have to check the inside of the box,” the larger guard spoke gruffly. “Rock Jumper, open it.”

“No, wait!” Derpy pleaded. “Don’t open it! I mean, if you open the box, they could go bad! And the miners don’t want to eat bad muffins! Neither do I,” she added to herself.

“We have to,” the guard known as Rock Jumper said. “Our orders are to investigate everything that comes through the border.”

“Oh...” Derpy gritted her teeth in frustration. What could she do to stop them?

It was too late. Rock Jumper had opened the box. Lifting his head, he peered inside...

...And found a pile of muffins.

“Huh?” Derpy flew up, looking over the mountain sheep’s shoulder. “That’s weird.”

“What?” Rock Jumper turned to look at the pegasus.

“I could have sworn they were blueberry muffins. These are chocolate chip.”

The large guard snorted, annoyed. “Very well. You can pass through.” He moved out of the way, and then ordered his comrade to do the same.

“Yay!” Derpy cheered. “See ya later, sheep!” Then she fluttered back to the box, contemplated taking a muffin, thought better of it, closed the box, and continued pushing it along the road.

Once they were out of sight, Trixie deactivated her spells. The box disintegrated, revealing the four ponies inside. “That’s enough for Trixie,” she said. “I am exhausted.”

“Oh, come on,” Applejack sighed. “Can’t ya keep going a little more?”

Trixie let out an indignant sigh. “You may not know this, being an earth pony, but using magic is just as tiring as physical labor. Trixie has been walking all day, and she is quite fatigued.”

Applejack opened her mouth to retort, but Rarity stopped her. “Trixie is quite right, Applejack,” she said. “We have been going all day. We unicorns just aren’t built for this type of exercise. It would be best if we rested for a bit. It won’t do any good carrying out the mission with tired ponies.”

“Eeyup,” Big Macintosh replied laconically.

“All right, then,” Applejack gave in. “Let’s find someplace outta the way, and somepony should keep watch. I’ll volunteer to go first.”

Big Macintosh examined the area around. The cloudless sky had darkened, showing the stars and moon. This might be good for us, the stallion thought to himself. With those bright stars and waxing moon, we’ll be able to see pretty well tonight. Then again, we’ll be more visible, too.

An hour ago, he had taken over for his sister so she could get some rest too. He glanced in her direction. Applejack was slouched, leaning against a tree with her trademark cowpony hat over her face. Big Macintosh thought over what Twilight’s instructions to him were.

“Big Macintosh, your strong and sturdy constitution should allow you to support anypony that needs it, but that’s not the main purpose for which I need you. I know you’re smarter than you let on, and with that in mind, I want you to be the main strategist under Applejack’s leadership. You should know a little bit about each of the other ponies in the group and have a basic idea of their strong points. Make sure Applejack doesn’t get too ahead of herself, and try to keep the rest of them in line. If you lose your ability to work as a team, then all is lost.”

The red earth pony turned his gaze to the night sky one more time. It was time to get moving again. He stepped toward his sister.

“Wake up, Applejack,” he said, his voice low as he nudged her with his muzzle. “We’ve had plenty of time to rest.”

“Aw, just five more minutes,” Applejack mumbled, rolling over.

“Come on, sis,” Big Macintosh said, more firmly this time. “We gotta get goin’,”

Reluctantly, Applejack woke herself up. She looked around at the other ponies. Trixie was lying dormant on one side of the thicket, and on the other side, so was Rarity. Derpy was belly up in a nearby tree.

One by one, Applejack and her brother woke up the rest of the group. Groggily, they stood and waited for somepony to say something. Finally, Big Macintosh spoke up.

“All right, here’s the plan,” he announced so everypony could hear. “What we gotta do is infiltrate a mine and get at least five Catria Stones. We’ll divide into two sub-groups once we find a mine. The first sub-group is Trixie and Derpy Hooves. You’re in charge of scouting and diversion. Got it?”

“Of course,” Trixie replied nonchalantly.

“You can count on me!” Derpy’s answer was much more enthusiastic.

Big Macintosh nodded. “The second sub-group will have Applejack, Rarity, and myself. We’re gonna be finding the stones and diggin’ em up.”

“Right,” Rarity and Applejack said in unison.

“Rarity, would you happen to know what an Argalian mine looks like?” the stallion asked.

“I’m not entirely sure,” the unicorn admitted. “But I would imagine they would be large caverns with square openings, much like Equestrian mines.”

“Do ya hear that, Derpy?” Big Macintosh turned toward the pegasus. “I’m gonna need you to find a cave that looks how Rarity says. Can ya do it?”

“I’ll see if I can find one!” Derpy eagerly flew up high toward the looming mountains.

After waiting a while, Derpy returned with a big grin on her face. “I found a mine cave!” she announced proudly. “Right there! On the tallest mountain!” She pointed a gray hoof toward the peak in question.

“All right, then,” Big Macintosh answered. “Let’s head out!”

The moon shone high in the sky as the ponies ventured up the mountain. Even with the light, it was difficult to see where they were going. More than a few times, somepony’s hoof slipped on the dusty rock and the group had to stop to make sure they were okay. It took what seemed like an hour to climb to the mine’s entrance. Sure enough, another pair of mountain sheep guarded the cave. Quickly the ponies hid out of sight.

“What do we do now?” Rarity asked, her voice hushed.

Applejack gave an amused smile. “Trixie,” she said, “I reckon it’s time for yer opening performance.”

“Finally.” Trixie’s eyes lit up at the thought of performing. “I’ll show them the marvelous talents of the Great and Powerful Trixie!”

“Trixie, I know we have had our differences in the past, but you do have a talent for magic, especially the art of illusion. We will need these skills if we want to infiltrate Argali. My greatest concern for you, however, is whether or not you still hold a grudge against my friends and me. Therefore, I ask you to help us, not for our sake, but for the sake of a fellow pony who is most likely in grave danger. To abandon us is to abandon her. I ask you humbly, please help us. Help Rainbow Dash.”

“Behold!” Trixie cried out as she bounded in front of the two guards, illuminated by a series of magical fireworks. “Stand in amazement as the Great and Powerful Trixie performs feats of amazement, the likes of which you’ve never seen!”

The two mountain sheep looked at each other, seemingly unsure what to make of this surprise. They certainly didn’t seem all that impressed.

“Very well, then,” Trixie said. Finally, she was in her element. What better place was there for her other than a stage in front of onlookers? Trixie was nothing if not a showmare. “You shall observe and stand witness to the tale of how the Great and Powerful Trixie rescued Ponyville from a dreaded Ursa Major!” More pyrotechnics punctuated her exclamation.

“Gag me with a boot,” Applejack hissed from around the corner. “She’s just stealin’ the thunder from when Twilight beat that Ursa Minor.”

“Hey, if it works, I ain’t complainin’,” Big Macintosh whispered in reply.

“Are the guards distracted yet?” Rarity asked impatiently.

“I can’t quite tell yet,” Applejack answered.

“...And, with her awe-inspiring powers, the Great and Powerful Trixie moved the entire container, full of fresh milk, into the now-sleepy Ursa Major’s open arms, then carried it all the way back to its cave in the Everfree Forest!” Trixie struck a dramatic pose, finishing the story.

The guards remained stone-faced, though they did look a little more interested in what Trixie was doing.

The unicorn noticed this and eagerly went on to the next act. “For my first trick of the night, I shall require an assistant,” she announced. She waited for her assistant to appear. No pony showed up. “I said, I require my assistant!” she declared, louder this time.

“Oh, right!” Derpy Hooves said as she flew up and landed next to Trixie. “I’ll be your assistant!” she grinned, excited. “I have that deck of cards you wanted!”

“Thank you, Derpy,” Trixie replied, as she took the cards, magically shuffled them, and put them back together. “I will have this pegasus randomly take a card, and without looking at it, I will use my astonishing skills of extrasensory perception to determine what it is!”

Derpy picked up the top card with her mouth. Her face was beaming.

“Now, you in the audience,” Trixie instructed at the mountain sheep, “You must look very carefully at this card, to ensure that you know what it is. Stare at it. Memorize every detail!”

“I think that’s our cue,” Big Macintosh whispered. “Follow me.” He ventured out around the corner, and seeing that the guards’ attention was entirely on Trixie’s act, snuck quietly into the open cave mouth. Applejack and Rarity came behind, careful not to make any loud noises.

They made it into the mine without a problem. Trixie’s obnoxious voice could still be heard from outside. “I think we’re far in enough to risk a little light,” Rarity said, her horn beginning to glow. “Goodness, this mountain is just full of gems, isn’t it?”

“I don’t see any,” Big Macintosh said.

“Rarity can sense gems,” his sister reminded him. “Can ya tell which ones are Catria Stones?” she asked.

“I’ll need to concentrate,” Rarity said, “But I can do it.” She closed her eyes, and instead of the cave walls, she could feel little pinpricks of light all around her, within the walls of the cavern. She tried to block out the weaker lights and focused more on the stronger forces. She turned herself toward the nearest one.

“All right.” She began walking, eyes still shut. “Follow me, and try not to let me walk into any walls, if you please?”

After a few minutes of descent, and of Applejack nudging Rarity away from the cave walls, the unicorn stopped. “We’re standing right in front of

it,” Rarity stated, opening her eyes. “There is a Catria Stone right here.” She pointed to the spot on the nearest wall with her horn.

“Then let’s get to diggin’!” Applejack exclaimed, rearing on her hind legs as she and Big Macintosh prepared to excavate.

“Now, is your card... the Six of Hearts?” Trixie asked confidently.

The two mountain sheep looked at each other. “It is,” one said. “How did you do that?”

Trixie struck yet another dramatic pose. “A true magician never reveals her secrets,” she answered. “But I’d like to thank you for being such a great audience. May I ask your names, fans-to-be?”

The same guard replied to the question. “I am Sureshot. This is Steel Wool. What more can you do?”

The other guard nudged Sureshot angrily. “What are you doing?” he whispered viciously.

“She’s such a good magician, much better than any of ours,” Sureshot whispered back.

“You have let her cast a spell over you!” Steel Wool hissed. “Something is not right. Why is a pony of Equestria here, appearing out of nowhere and dazzling us with these... parlor tricks!”

“Parlor tricks?” Trixie gaped, overhearing the phrase. “The Great and Powerful Trixie does not deal in mere parlor tricks! Only the highest levels of magic are reserved for such a skilled, capable unicorn as the Great and Powerful Trixie! Observe!”

A glow of her horn and the sky exploded in a flash of gold and silver embers. The sparks descended upon the mountainside, igniting into blue flames when they touched the ground. Derpy watched the spectacle in awe.

Trixie drew herself up proudly amidst the aftermath of the illusion. “How do you like that?” she asked, smug. “Who else could wield such awesome spells?”

“I’ve seen enough.” Steel Wool jumped to his hooves and lowered his head threateningly. “Let’s see if your tricks can get you out of an Argalian prison.”

The two guards charged toward Trixie with a speed that she would have never thought possible for creatures of their size. Her mind raced as they approached, trying futilely to think of a spell that would save her. There wasn’t enough time to prepare any escape spells.

They hit her. The mountain sheep’s horns slammed into Trixie’s side, knocking the wind out of her. She crumpled to the ground, unable to keep on her feet. She suddenly felt what seemed like ropes lash around her, binding her hooves together. She tried to use a spell, any spell, to get out of there, but somehow, she couldn’t focus any magic.

“These ropes are made from the fibers of a special breed of cave vine,” Sureshot said. “They can naturally suppress magical energy. Don’t even try to use any of your magic now. It will not work. Please do not resist. It will only make things harder.”

What could Trixie do? She had counted on her magic to save them. Without it, what was she? She had no other talents. Or did she?

“Derpy!” she cried out in her loudest, most strident voice. “Canterlot! Find Twilight! Get help! Quick-”

Steel Wool put a wad of cloth in Trixie’s mouth, effectively silencing her. The two guards dragged the unicorn toward the entrance of the mine. “I told you not to resist,” Sureshot scolded. “You shall be taken to the Ironcells.”

In the distance, Trixie saw Derpy Hooves flying away, as fast as her wings could carry her. Steel Wool cursed. “Ballast. The pegasus escaped. But I doubt she will be back. She did not seem the brave type.”

Anypony who knew her well did not judge Derpy Hooves by appearances. Though she often let her eyes drift apart when relaxed, they were now focused and intent. Trixie’s panicked commands still echoed in her ears, and Derpy’s heart burned with urgency. She would get to Canterlot even if it killed her. She had to.

Chapter 6

Pinkamena Diane Pie sat contemplatively at a table, in her suite at Canterlot. Silly Twilight, she thought. Rainbow Dash was obviously lost forever. And yet she still tried futilely to rescue her? How foalish. She chuckled quietly to herself.

She glanced over at Fluttershy. How sad. The yellow pegasus had barely moved since Pinkamena looked at her last. Poor thing. She had been depressed all day yesterday, and the depression had persisted all day today as well. But Pinkamena recalled something she overheard some of the guards talking about. Something that might cheer her up. Anything to help out a friend, right?

“Hey, Fluttershy,” Pinkamena called. “Are you awake?”

Fluttershy slowly looked up at Pinkamena before answering. “I’m awake. What is it?” Her vocal tone was flat, dejected. Pinkamena just couldn’t stand her friend being so sad.

“I know a secret way into the Royal Garden,” she coaxed, giving a playful smile. “Would you like me to show you?”

Fluttershy hesitated. Pinkie Pie had never mentioned going to the Royal Garden before. And she was acting rather strangely lately. She knew that everypony had been affected by Rainbow Dash’s disappearance, but not as much as Pinkie Pie. It had hurt her so much it even affected her mane. Fluttershy could understand; after all, Pinkie and Rainbow Dash had been very close friends.

But why was Pinkie Pie talking about taking her to the garden? Didn’t she remember that that was the cause of the Grand Galloping Gala’s collapse? Fluttershy also remembered that Twilight had suggested putting more guards around the garden. If they were caught, who knew what might happen?

Fluttershy just couldn't decide. She wanted to go there so badly, despite the risks. She wanted to meet those adorable little animals and try to make amends for last time. But it was wrong. She knew it, Twilight knew it, and... she couldn't take the chance.

"You know, Twilight just wants to keep you from enjoying yourself," Pinkie Pie said softly. "I bet she wants you to feel bad. She let Rainbow Dash get lost in that other world, remember? Come on, Fluttershy... I know you want to."

"I do want to." Fluttershy's voice was barely audible. "But it's not what Rainbow Dash would have wanted."

"What?" Pinkie asked, clearly shocked by Fluttershy's answer. "You can't be serious!"

"I want to go to that garden so badly, you have no idea." Tears began to form in Fluttershy's eyes. "But I just... I just can't. There's no way I could let Rainbow down like that, even if she is... gone."

Pinkie Pie's gaze narrowed to a glare. "Now you just listen," she growled, "I'm in charge here. I make the decisions. You? You're just weak. Helpless. Fluttershy. I could-"

She was suddenly interrupted by a knock on the door.

Twilight opened the suite door to find Pinkie Pie scowling at Fluttershy, who was backing away in fear. Both turned to look at Twilight as she stood in the doorway.

"Pinkie Pie, what is going on here?" Twilight asked.

The earth pony tilted her head, letting a straightened lock of hair fall away from her face. "I told you," she said with gritted teeth, "to call me Pinkamena."

"Pinkie, this isn't like you at all." Twilight was firm. "I think we need to talk to the Princess."

"I said, call me Pinkamena!" she screamed.

Twilight took a step back. "I really think we need to talk to the Princess," she amended.

"Oh, that's right," Pinkamena smiled wryly. "Run to your Princess and hope she'll make everything all better. Well, she won't! It'll just be a waste of time."

Something in Twilight's head snapped. "That does it. You can insult me all you like. But you don't. Insult. The Princess!" She focused her magic and levitated the pink pony into the air. "You're coming with me whether you like it or not!"

Twilight ended up carrying Pinkamena all the way to the palace. Pinkamena had struggled the whole time, kicking out toward ponies she couldn't reach, and shouting all sorts of unfriendly words. Fluttershy timidly followed about four feet behind, still in shock. Finally they made it to Princess Celestia's throne room.

"Twilight Sparkle!" the Princess greeted, though her expression changed when she saw Pinkamena. "What is the matter?"

"Pinkie Pie-"

"PINKAMENA!" Twilight was cut short by the scream. Sighing, Twilight continued.

"Something's wrong with her. Really wrong, and I have no idea what to do. We need your help. Please?"

The Princess nodded. "Very well. Twilight, Fluttershy, you are dismissed. I must be alone with her."

Twilight set Pinkamena down, and then she and Fluttershy left the chamber. Pinkamena turned to follow them, but Princess Celestia stopped her. "Stay right there, Pinkamena Diane Pie," she said, steel in her voice. "I still have business with you."

Pinkamena stepped back to face the Princess. "What kind of business, your Highness?" she sneered.

“I know what you are,” Celestia said. “You are the spirit of loneliness and hate that has lurked within the soul of an innocent pony for years. I am sure that Pinkie Pie knew of you from the beginning, and in all honesty, I find it surprising that she has kept you buried within for so long.”

“Yeah?” Pinkamena said, feeling bolder now that she was alone with the Princess. “So what?”

“You took advantage of her emotional weakness after Rainbow Dash became lost,” Celestia continued. “You had your chance to take over. I don’t know what you are planning, but I know it isn’t good.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Pinkamena grinned madly. “You can’t hurt me without punishing your precious little Pinkie Pie. What will happen to your Element of Laughter then? Face it, your Majesty, I’m untouchable!”

“You’re right,” Celestia admitted. “I cannot destroy you without destroying the body you inhabit. But, there is one thing I can do.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

Celestia stepped forward. “I can remove you from Pinkie Pie’s body temporarily.”

“Short-term won’t work against me either,” Pinkamena laughed callously.

“Who said anything about short-term?” Celestia’s eyes narrowed, full of intention. Her body began to glow as she spread her wings wide. “You forget to whom you speak. I am Princess Celestia, ruler of Equestria and the day. I may not be able to destroy you, but I can ensure you will be gone for a long time. Starting now, you will spend a thousand years in agony, as you suffer the blinding brightness and consuming flame of the Sun!”

Twilight and Fluttershy stood in the adjacent hallway. Fluttershy was still trembling.

"I hope the Princess can help," Twilight sighed. She looked toward her pegasus friend. "If you want to talk, you can," she said softly. "I guess we all need to let our feelings out."

"I've never seen Pinkie Pie like that before," Fluttershy squeaked. "Except maybe that one time... at her birthday. But it wasn't like this. She never called me weak before. Oh, it was just so scary, Twilight." Her voice broke.

A sudden flash of brilliant golden light from the Princess's chamber cut short the conversation.

"What just happened?" Twilight asked.

"Are they all right?" Fluttershy yelped.

The two rushed inside to find Celestia standing over an unconscious pink pony.

"Pinkie Pie!" they exclaimed in fear.

"Don't worry," the Princess said with a calming tone. "Your friend will wake up in a few moments, much better than she has been as of late. Be assured that I did nothing to harm her. She has been troubled, as I think you may have suspected, and so I have taken the heavy burden off of her heart."

Fluttershy looked up at the Princess, not exactly sure what had just happened. "Um..." she cautiously began to ask. "Are you sure she'll be okay?"

"You have my word, Fluttershy," Celestia said with a smile. "You may take Pinkie Pie back to your suite."

Pinkie Pie stirred, lifting her head up. "Ugh..." she moaned. "What just happened? I remember... Wait!" The earth pony jumped to her feet, eyes suddenly wide with surprise. "It's gone! I don't feel it anymore!" She looked toward the Princess, who smiled kindly. "Thank you so much!" she exclaimed, jumping up and wrapping Celestia in a huge hug.

"And we thank you too, Princess," Twilight said as she and Fluttershy bowed ceremoniously.

“I do what I must to help.” Celestia nodded. “You are dismissed now, my faithful student and loyal subjects.”

The three friends left the chamber, together. Once they were outside, Pinkie Pie looked up and gasped. “What’s that in the sky?” she cried.

Twilight and Fluttershy followed Pinkie’s gaze. “And what’s that noise?” Twilight asked. Sure enough, there was a faint, yet distinct sound coming from the object in the sky. And it was getting louder.

“Twiiight!”

A gray and yellow blur crashed to the ground in front of the ponies.

“Derpy?” Twilight asked in shock as the pegasus picked herself up. “What are you doing here?”

Derpy Hooves was obviously exhausted. Her words came out in between wheezes. “Trixie... in trouble... Get... Twilight... Help...”

Twilight was stunned. She shook herself out of it; this was no time to panic. She lifted Derpy with her magic and hurried back to their suite. “Catch your breath, Derpy. When we get inside, I want you to tell me everything!”

Applejack peered around the corner of the tunnel. The sheep was still there, standing completely still at his post. “Still hasn’t moved,” she whispered to the other two ponies.

“I’m beginning to think he’s asleep,” Rarity murmured back.

“I ain’t gonna risk it,” Applejack sighed. “Besides, his eyes are open.”

Big Macintosh remained silent.

How much time had passed since they entered, nopony knew. When they had heard Trixie’s screams echoed through the mineshaft, Applejack knew the original plan was done for. They had found a hiding place just in time to see the two mountain sheep dragging the unicorn down the tunnel, her muffled protests following. They had tried to find Trixie, but the mine

was a maze, and there were guards around every corner. Including this one.

Big Macintosh finally spoke, his voice low. "What we need is a distraction."

"I dunno," Applejack replied. "If he's that dedicated to standin' still, I doubt anything's gonna distract him. As far as I can see, we're stuck here. That or we take him head-on."

"Well, we should think of something quick," said Rarity. "I can't imagine what they could be doing to Trixie right now."

Applejack's mind raced. Rarity was right. Time was running out. Not to mention the longer they took, the longer Rainbow Dash was stuck in the other world.

"Aw, forget it," she said finally, "I'm going out there!" She leapt out from behind the corner and bucked the guard with all her strength, her back hooves bulleting into the sheep's ribs. The guard landed three feet away, moaning faintly.

"That worked better than I thought," Applejack noted, looking down at the fallen guard.

Rarity and Big Macintosh stepped out. "Rarity," Applejack said, her voice serious. "I want you to go back outside and take the Catria Stones we have to Twilight. Big Macintosh an' I'll go save Trixie."

"No." Rarity shook her head. "I will not abandon you two. Besides, we only have three Catria Stones. We'll go together."

The Ironcells formed a large underground complex, lined with rows of prison chambers. Each cell was separated by thick, metal bars, giving the area its name. The place was swarming with armor-clad mountain sheep.

One of the cells held Trixie, still gagged and bound by the magic-suppressing cave vines. The unicorn was anxious. How long would she be kept in this place? What would happen when they decided to let her out? Would she be free, or would they give her an even worse punishment? Did the others hear her screaming and find a way to hide, or

were they trapped here somewhere, too? Trixie had no way of knowing anything.

Suddenly, there was a rattling noise coming from the cell door. Trixie looked and saw that the door was open, and two guards stood in the doorway. Trixie thought she recognized one of them as Sureshot, but she didn't know who the other was. "It is time to stand before the trial," Sureshot said. "Please come with us."

They walked in a single file, Trixie between the two sheep. There were so many things Trixie wanted to say, but she was still gagged, and the vines were still wrapped around her body, limiting her movement. The three came to a fork in the caverns, and there was a sudden noise.

"Now!"

Two pairs of hooves shot out like lightning, throwing the two guards against the stone wall. Trixie gasped, then choked on the gag she inadvertently sucked into her throat. Applejack and Big Macintosh came to help her. The unicorn eventually coughed out the piece of cloth.

"You rescued me," she said as her breath returned.

"Of course we did," Applejack replied. "We'd never leave a friend behind."

"Excuse me!" another voice sounded further into the cave. "There's no time to talk! We have to get out of here!"

"Right," Applejack answered. "It looks like they're comin' for us." She bit through the vines binding Trixie, and they fell off of her. "Now let's hurry!"

The three ponies galloped toward the mouth of the cave, soon joined by Rarity. It wasn't long before the mountain sheep could be heard running after them. "We won't make it!" cried Trixie, glancing behind her at the quickly gaining sheep.

"We'll make it!" Applejack shouted back. "I think we're almost there!"

Sure enough, they could see the light of the dawn outside shining ahead. "Just a little more!" Rarity exclaimed.

The light was suddenly blocked. The dark shapes of three rams stood in front of the exit. They lowered their horned heads threateningly. "Horse apples!" Applejack cursed. "They done trapped us." The ponies were forced to stop.

"Any plans now, anypony?" Rarity asked.

"I got nothing," Big Macintosh sighed.

"This is it, then," Trixie said.

Applejack said nothing. She merely looked out of the mineshaft, past the guards, at a purple shape floating toward them.

"What is that?" Trixie asked, noticing it too.

"I think," Applejack said, squinting in the light, "it's Twilight's balloon."

The hot-air balloon landed just outside of the mine opening. Twilight, Pinkie Pie, and Derpy jumped out of the gondola and walked toward the crowd of sheep. They all turned around to face the newcomers.

"Would somebody please explain to me the meaning of this?" one of the mountain sheep asked, clearly aggravated. "Why do all these of ponies insist on disgracing us with their presence?"

"Please let me explain!" Twilight shouted over the voices of the Argalians. The sheep hushed to listen to her. "My name is Twilight Sparkle of Equestria, and I am a student of Princess Celestia herself. I was recently part of a scientific project that could allow travel between worlds. Unfortunately, the first activation of the machine resulted in one of my dear friends becoming trapped in another dimension. We need Catria Stones in order to provide the magical energy required to get her back, but your King Monolith has forcefully denied our request. Because we could not obtain them with his permission, I organized an operation to covertly take Catria Stones from this mine. I sent these ponies here for that reason."

A loud grumbling erupted among the Argalians.

"You are thieves!"

“Why steal from us?”

“Arrest them!”

Twilight raised a hoof. “Please hear me out. I realize now that I was wrong to organize this. We had no right to come to your land and take your Catria Stones. My friends, it was selfish of me to ask you to do all of this. We have wrongfully invaded the land of Argali.

“But,” Twilight asked, “what else was there to do? I beg you to think about it. If there were somebody that you really, truly cared about, wouldn’t you do anything to save them? Even if you know it was wrong? If you want somepony to blame, arrest me, because all of this is my fault. But please. Please don’t let Rainbow Dash die!” Her voice broke on the last word.

The crowd of mountain sheep was silent. They didn’t move toward her, nor did they turn away. Finally, one voice spoke.

“The unicorn is right.” One of the guards stepped forward and faced the others. “I am pledged to be wedded in three weeks. If my beloved Snow Peak were taken from me, I would go to whatever lengths it would take to get her back. I say we should help these ponies.”

“I agree as well,” said another mountain sheep, also coming forward. “If anything were to happen to my two lambs, I would ensure their protection... or vengeance. I too will do what I can to help them.”

Slowly, other Argalians began to speak words of agreement.

“It is settled, then.” A loud baritone voice sounded amidst the sheep. A tall, sturdily built ram stepped out of the crowd and stood before Twilight. “It appears your words have won over the hearts of my soldiers,” he said. “I am Storm Bolt, commander of the Argalian National Army and chief of the guard in this area. Every decision made in this regiment must either be issued by me or approved by me. I have listened carefully to your plight, and I have therefore reached a conclusion.”

Twilight looked up into the eyes of the commander. “May I ask what sort of conclusion?”

Storm Bolt returned her gaze. "I have decided that we of this mine will provide you with your needed materials, no more, and no less. Then you all will leave this country."

"I see," Twilight nodded. "You are too kind, Sir. Thank you for your generosity."

"There is another part," Storm Bolt continued. "Despite your reasons for doing so, you and your companions have still committed crimes against Argali law. Among these are unlawful crossing of the national border, theft, and assault against three Argalian Mine Guards. All of the offenders must be punished for these transgressions. Do you understand this?"

"I understand," Twilight said, bowing her head in guilt.

The commander went on. "However, in Argali, we have a custom that allows the leader of the accused to take on the sentences of the entire group if he or she desires it. Here you have proven you have a noble heart; would you prefer to bear the punishments of all of these, your friends?"

Twilight looked at her friends. Applejack, Rarity, Big Macintosh, Trixie, Pinkie Pie, Derpy Hooves, and Fluttershy, who was timidly peeking her head over the rim of the gondola. "I'll do it," she said finally.

"Are you sure?" Storm Bolt asked. "The punishment for a single theft is ten whips. For non-lethal assault, it is five. The punishment for unlawful entry is forceful expulsion. All of these shall be sentenced upon you if you accept."

"No, Twilight, you can't!" Pinkie Pie cried out suddenly. "No pony here wants you to get hurt!"

Twilight shook her head. "Pinkie Pie, I must. All of this is my fault. Even the creation of the transdimensional gate. I'll bear the consequences for all of this, so no pony else has to."

Storm Bolt nodded, then turned around. "Very well. Follow me, Equestrian."

Twilight did as she was told. "Don't worry," she said to her friends. "I'll be fine. This is nothing compared to what Rainbow Dash has had to go through."

Chapter 7

"I can't take it anymore," Rainbow Dash groaned. "I've gotta go out and fly."

"Rainbow Dash, I already told you why that's impossible," Mason argued. "If you get caught, who knows what will happen?"

"Oh, for crying out loud! You caught me, and I know exactly what happened; you've kept me in this house for two days straight and I can't go anywhere!"

Mason sighed. He seemed to be doing that a lot. "People have already seen the rainbow trail you blazed across the sky three days ago," he said. "Phil keeps bugging me about it, and even the My Little Brony site made some ridiculous joke about Rainbooms. I'm surprised the Men In Black haven't shown up at my doorstep yet."

"The who?" the pony asked.

"Never mind!" Mason threw up his hands and stormed out of the room.

Rainbow Dash snorted, forelegs crossed in annoyance. "Coward."

At that moment she remembered. *"I'll listen when they stop being cowards! I'm gonna fly through there and show you there's nothing to worry about!"*

That was what she had said to her friends just before she flew through the transdimensional gate. *What was I even thinking?* she thought. *Such an idiot!* She looked at the closed door to Mason's bedroom. He was a loser, but maybe he had a point. After all, he was the one who lived here. She hovered over to the door and knocked. It was a few seconds' wait before Mason opened the door.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Listen," the pegasus said, contritely rubbing the back of her neck with a hoof. "You probably already know this, but Pegasi are creatures of

the sky. It's really hard to stay on the ground for too long. We just get restless. No offense, but I'm gonna have to get out of this house sometime. I mean, you're great and all, but I gotta get in the air every once in a while. You know?"

Mason sat down on his bed. "I just don't know what I'm supposed to do," he said. "Nothing in my life has ever prepared me for anything like this. I mean, this is the first time a talking, flying, rainbow-colored pony has ever come to Earth." Mason was silent for a moment before continuing. "I've seen it in movies and TV all the time. An alien lands on Earth. The government hunts it down. They bring it to a lab and do an autopsy on it. Take it apart. Find out how it works. When I think about the possibility of that happening to you... it makes me sick. It's awful how little faith in my own species I have. And that's... I guess that's why I became a brony. You've got a world that's better than anyone could ever hope to accomplish here. This place isn't right for you. It never was, and probably never will be."

Mason paused again. "It's so wrong. I want you to get home, but at the same time, I don't want you to leave. I know it's selfish, but it's true. I just keep thinking, 'There's no way you can get back home.' We don't have the power to travel across worlds, and unless some brony at MIT makes a portal to Equestria, which, judging by Sethisto's lack of response, hasn't happened, we're pretty much screwed."

Rainbow Dash stepped closer to Mason's bed. "I know," she said. "I feel just as helpless as you do. But, even if I'm stuck here forever..." She looked the human in the face. "...I bet I could have done a lot worse for a prison-mate."

Mason scoffed. "Could do a lot better, too. I bet Cereal Velocity would just love to have you in his home."

The pony had to stifle a chuckle at that. "Cereal Velocity? You guys sure have some ridiculous names."

Back in Equestria, Twilight's hot-air balloon was floating through the air, on its way to Canterlot. The mine guards had provided the ponies with the Catria Stones they needed. After they released Twilight, the Argalians

had sent them on their way. Now, as they drifted along, the spires of Canterlot's building came into view.

It was quite cramped in the gondola, as seven mares and a large stallion were sharing the space. Fluttershy and Derpy would jump out at times and fly alongside to give the others more room. Twilight was still recovering, so Pinkie Pie had taken over the duty of flying the balloon. As the balloon drifted into the midst of the city, she guided it to a safe landing. Princess Celestia was there to greet them.

Fluttershy and Applejack were the first to disembark. They bowed before the Princess as she began to speak. "Greetings, my loyal ponies. When Twilight left without warning, I was worried, but I am glad to see you safe and..."

Princess Celestia trailed off when she saw Applejack and Fluttershy helping Twilight onto the ground. The unicorn took a few tentative steps, wincing at the pain.

"Twilight, my faithful student!" Celestia gasped in shock. "What happened to you?"

"It's not important," Twilight grimaced. "We have the Catria Stones. We have to get to the transdimensional gate. Quickly!" She and the other ponies hurried toward the academy, Fluttershy anxiously hovering alongside the unicorn.

"I can't help but think," Mason said as he opened the oven door, "that this is probably the worst possible meeting between a pony and a human. Remember when I first met you? In this world, I mean. How freaking idiotic could I be?" He reached in and pulled out a tray of cookies.

Rainbow Dash groaned. "Will you stop doing that?"

"What?"

"Talking bad about yourself like that." The pegasus rolled her magenta eyes. "We've already established you're an idiot. Fine. Let's talk about something else."

“Fine,” Mason replied, setting the tray on the table. “This is only my first time making this recipe, but I guess I did all right. Want to try one? Oh, I guess we should let them cool for a bit.”

“Sure,” Rainbow Dash said, shrugging. “They smell pretty good.”

“Yeah.” Mason took off his oven mitts. “Sometimes I surprise myself.”

Twilight, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and Fluttershy galloped into the laboratory. “Twilight!” Star Gazer exclaimed, seeing the unicorn’s bruised body. “What happened?”

“It’s a long story,” Twilight continued past the professor. “We have the Catria Stones. Did Magnet Pulse reconfigure the gate to accommodate five stones?”

“We did,” the engineer answered, walking around the machine. “It should be all ready.”

“All the team’s here,” came a voice from above. Summer Leaf was flying overhead. At the desk were Solar Flare and Test Tube. “I think we should fire this baby up!”

“Not yet!” Twilight said. She lifted four golden necklaces and a tiara from her saddlebags. “I asked Princess Celestia to lend us the Elements of Harmony. If we work together, the strength of our friendship should be able to establish a connection between us and Rainbow Dash. Let’s put them on now.”

Twilight and her friends each donned their own respective Element. “Is everything ready?” she asked Star Gazer.

“We’re plugging the Catria Stones in right now,” he replied.

Test Tube stepped toward Twilight. “Even with the extra stones,” he told her, “I’m afraid our time window won’t be much wider. Magnet Pulse will be monitoring the power supply, but I wouldn’t hope for keeping the gate open for much more than five minutes.”

"I understand, Doctor," Twilight nodded. "All right. Let's get this gate open."

Star Gazer stepped forward, looking at each pony in the laboratory. Test Tube. Solar Flare. Summer Leaf. Magnet Pulse. Pinkie Pie. Applejack. Rarity. Fluttershy. Twilight Sparkle. "Gentlemares," he spoke. "Gentlecolts. If I may, I'd like to say a few words before we begin. I know that our first try with this didn't exactly go as we hoped it would. But no matter what happens next, I just want to say that it's been a great honor working with all of you. Miss Twilight Sparkle," he added. "The Princess was right about you. You've proven my first impressions wrong. Now let's see if we can prove you right about this. Magnet Pulse, if you would, activate the gate."

The yellow unicorn flipped the switch, and the machine rumbled, just as it did the first time it was activated. It wasn't long before the space began to distort inside the gateway.

"Everypony!" Twilight called out. "When the gate opens, I need you to focus on Rainbow Dash! Try to see her in your mind!"

As the other world became visible, the Elements of Harmony began to glow brightly. Twilight closed her eyes and tried to push her thoughts through the portal, into the other world.

The voice came into Rainbow Dash's head loud and clear.

"Rainbow! Rainbow Dash, can you hear me?"

"Twilight?" Rainbow Dash gasped, jumping to her feet. "Where are you?"

"We've opened the gate," Twilight's voice called. *"We don't know how long it will stay open. Follow my words and find it. Hurry!"*

"What's going on?" Mason looked up from the tray of cookies at the pegasus.

"I gotta go," Rainbow Dash said quickly, running to the front door. "I gotta get home!"

“Wait, now?” Mason asked, worry seeping into his voice.

“Yeah!” the pony shouted. “Open this door so I can go!”

“All right, I’ll get it!” Mason hurried to the door and turned the knob. No sooner did he open the door before Rainbow Dash bolted through the entryway, rainbow-colored trail left behind.

Mason frantically grabbed his car keys and jumped into his car. He followed the pegasus, going as fast as he legally could.

“*Come on, Rainbow Dash, where are you?*” Twilight’s voice was getting more panicked. “*We’re almost out of Catria Stones!*”

“I’m doing my best!” Rainbow Dash shouted to the open air. She was flying as fast as her wings would let her, staving off fatigue and anxiety. She had to get to the portal.

“*Come on, sugarcube. You can do it.*” That was Applejack’s voice. “*Keep her steady.*”

Pinkie Pie’s voice went through her mind next. “*Come on come on come on! Hurry!*”

Finally, she came to a familiar landscape. This must be it, she thought. This has to be where the gate is. Sure enough, she could see a distortion in the air over the trees.

“*There you are!*” Relief flooded through Twilight’s tone. “*Now hurry, Rainbow Dash! There’s not much time left!*”

There was no time left. Rainbow Dash knew it somehow. The gate was going to close any moment now. There was only one thing she could do to get there faster.

Mason couldn’t keep up with Rainbow Dash’s speed, even in his car. He knew it was a lost cause to try and follow her, but he did it anyway. Rainbow Dash, the real one, some gift from the universe and whatever god was out there, was leaving, probably forever.

Wasn't this what he wanted? An Equestrian pony had no reason to like it here, in this pitiful world. But still... he had wanted her to stay just a little longer. Even though she was kind of mean to him, he had enjoyed her company for the three days she was here.

Suddenly the sky went bright and an explosion shook the car. Mason quickly stopped the car and got out. In the sky was a colossal rainbow, a wave that caused the very earth to tremble. Mason stood in awe of the sight, but his heart sank, knowing that Rainbow Dash was now gone forever.

An abrupt thought gripped him. Mason got back into the car, driving toward the place where the Sonic Rainboom had happened. In a few minutes, he found himself in a wooded area. Some of the trees had fallen down, and there was a definite imprint where the shockwave had hit the ground. Then Mason saw something among the fallen leaves. Bending down, he picked it up. He held in his hands a single feather, an iridescent sky blue color. He looked upward at the partly cloudy sky. "Thank you," he said. To whom he said it, he had no idea, but he was glad he did.

The shockwave of the Sonic Rainboom erupted into the laboratory with a great noise. Blowing papers everywhere and shaking lab equipment, the entire room shuddered. Everypony looked up at the transdimensional gate. Twilight's heart sank to find that the gate had shut. There was no visible sign of the other world within the gate.

"She didn't make it," Twilight said, bowing her head in dismay.

"Of course I did," came a clearly exhausted voice from outside of the lab. Rainbow Dash staggered through the doorway, panting heavily. The door had been blown off its hinges and was now lying on the floor in pieces. "If I didn't make it... then... I'm just... gonna... go to sleep," she mumbled shortly before she collapsed.

Rainbow Dash woke up with a pounding headache. Mustering the willpower to sit up, she looked around the room. All her friends were there, watching over her. Twilight, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Applejack were all around her. Behind them were Star Gazer and Summer Leaf.

“You’re awake!” Twilight exclaimed happily. “We were so worried!”

“What’s going on?” Rainbow Dash asked. Then she noticed the dark bruises on the unicorn’s body, the way she tried to hide the pain with her smile. “Twilight...”

Twilight laughed a bit, then grimaced slightly. “We had a bit of trouble, finding a way to get you home. Argalians aren’t exactly known for their leniency. But Fluttershy’s been tending to me, and...”

Rainbow Dash looked downward, ashamed. “I caused all this. None of the trouble everypony’s had would have happened if I weren’t so stupid.”

“Rainbow Dash, it’s all right now.” Applejack said. “You’re home safe now. That’s all that matters.”

“Hey, I have an idea!” Pinkie Pie suddenly shouted, jumping up and down. “You know what should do now that Dashie’s back?”

The pegasus ventured a guess. “Have a-”

“Have a party!”

Sure enough, even in Canterlot, Pinkie Pie could organize and throw a party in a matter of mere hours. Everypony she could manage to invite was gathered in a large, festively decorated building. All of the six friends were there, as were Star Gazer, his team, Big Macintosh, Derpy, Trixie, and Princess Celestia.

Pinkie Pie bounced up to Rainbow Dash’s side. “Well?” she asked excitedly. “What do you think?”

Rainbow Dash grinned widely. “I’ve never been happier to see one of your parties in my entire life,” she said.

“That’s just what I thought you’d say!” Pinkie laughed. Glancing toward the door, she let out a gasp. “Oh my! Looks like more guests have arrived!” With that, the pink pony bounded off to greet them.

The pegasus looked around at the party. She spotted Twilight standing by the punch bowl, talking with Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash trotted over to them.

“...yes, Fluttershy, I’ll be sure to get lots of rest, as soon as we get home. Oh, hi, Rainbow Dash,” Twilight greeted.

“What’s up, Twilight?” Rainbow Dash asked. “I thought I saw you talking with that one unicorn a few minutes ago.”

“Oh, Magnet Pulse?” Fluttershy suggested. “She’s really nice. A little chatty, but nice.”

Twilight agreed. “She was just telling me she had to leave. Princess Celestia said we should dismantle the transdimensional gate, so she went to go work on that.”

Rainbow Dash was surprised. “Dismantle it? Whatever happened to ‘revolutionizing Equestria?’”

“She’s apparently decided it’s too dangerous to use,” Twilight replied.

“Well, that I can believe,” Rainbow Dash nodded.

“Oh, by the way,” Fluttershy said. “The Princess said she wanted to see you in private sometime, Rainbow Dash.”

“I wonder what that’s about.” Rainbow Dash hesitated, then took a deep breath. “Listen. I know that I haven’t been the best of friends this past year. Especially to you two.”

“What’s this all of a sudden?” Twilight asked, bewildered.

“When I was in the other world, I had an opportunity to... reflect on things,” Rainbow Dash said. “I just want to apologize, and I want to make an effort to be a better friend from now on.” She was about to say more, but Twilight and Fluttershy wrapped her in a tight hug.

“You’re already a better friend than most ponies could ask for,” Twilight said. “Just promise you won’t leave us ever again.”

Rainbow Dash brushed a teardrop out of her eye. “I promise.”

Epilogue

Rainbow Dash stepped into Princess Celestia's chamber. "Excuse me, Princess," she said. "You wanted to see me?"

"I do," Celestia nodded. "Thank you for meeting with me."

"Did you want to know about what happened to me in the other world?" the pegasus asked, walking closer toward the Princess. As she went, she shut the door behind her.

"Yes, if you want to talk about it," Celestia nodded. "I would like to know what you've experienced there. What was it like?"

Rainbow Dash was silent for a long time. Finally, she said, "I don't know. It was really scary. Instead of ponies, there are these creatures called humans. They look really weird, but I guess they're not horrible. They've done a lot of things to their world, but I guess it's because they don't have magic there. I couldn't feel comfortable there at all, and all I wanted to do was come home." She shrugged. "It wasn't exactly what I expected it to be. Actually, I don't even know what I expected it to be."

Princess Celestia closed her eyes in thought. "I understand. Is there anything else?"

The pegasus hesitated for a while. "Well, there is one thing. This thing called television they have there... It shows us. It shows our lives in Equestria, from the time when we beat Nightmare Moon up to the Grand Galloping Gala. I don't know how it works, and Mason said he couldn't figure it out either."

"Who is Mason? A... human, you called them?"

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash nodded. "He helped me when I was over there. He did his best to keep me safe and stuff. You know... I never really thanked him for that." Her ears and tail drooped.

"I'm sure he knows how you feel," Princess Celestia said soothingly. She paused a moment before saying, "Rainbow Dash. I want to tell you a

story that is thousands of years old, that Luna and I have kept secret for most of our lives.”

“What kind of story?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“A tale that tells of the creation of Equestria,” Celestia explained. “Back in my youth, I was visited by one of these humans in a dream. She didn’t appear in her true form, though. She took the shape of an alicorn, like Luna or myself. She told me her name was Lauren, and that she created our land of Equestria.

“You see, on Earth, for that was what she said her world was, there is a magic greater than what you would consider powerful here. Humans can cultivate worlds of their own through their own imagination. They work together to bring these worlds to life, and then they share them with others so they can enjoy them as well. Lauren told me of her desire to share our world with others of her kind to help the magic of friendship grow in their world. For, as I’m sure you know, the power of friendship is weak there. There are many humans who live with love in their hearts, but many more never grow to know of it. Our world was made to help theirs. And, interestingly, from what you told me, their world helped ours.”

“How is that?” Rainbow Dash asked, confused.

“The human Mason, who cared for you when you had nowhere to turn... I think he played a major part in ensuring that you returned to our world safely.”

“You’re right,” Rainbow Dash agreed. “It makes me wish I could go back there, just for a moment, to say thank you.”

“I know how it feels, my little pony,” Princess Celestia lowered her head to nuzzle the pegasus. “I was lonely for much of the millennium that passed after I had to send Luna to the moon. I longed for the company of my sister, though I knew I could not see her. Luckily, ponies like you and your wonderful friends have made it worthwhile. Many ponies have missed you in your absence, Rainbow Dash. Friendship is a treasure that is more valuable than the strongest magic or all the gold in the world. Cherish it closely.”

“I will, Princess,” Rainbow Dash promised as she looked up toward Celestia’s eyes.

“Thank you,” Celestia said. “That is all. You may go.”

Rainbow Dash bowed and walked out of the room, eyes glistening.

After seeing the pegasus leave, Celestia turned and stepped toward the nearby balcony. The moon was low in the western sky. “Luna, our dream was true,” she uttered in a hushed voice.

“You didn’t tell her?” a voice from above asked. Luna dove down next to Celestia on the balcony, landing gracefully. “You didn’t tell her that that was the reason you organized that project to begin with?”

Celestia shut her eyes in contemplation. “I didn’t tell her because I realize that I was selfish. I wanted to see for myself what Lauren’s world was like. But after all this has happened, it is folly to keep pursuing it at the risk of others.”

“You can find a way, Tia,” Luna nudged her sister reassuringly. “I know you can.”

“No, sister,” Celestia sighed. “I cannot continue this project. It is not right for us to be in their world. They are not ready for us, nor we for them. Rainbow Dash was fortunate to find a human with a good heart there. I doubt that anypony else could be so lucky. From what I’ve heard from her, it is a fearsome place. I honestly believe it was for the best that the transdimensional gate was destroyed.”

Luna considered her sister’s words. “We should continue this discussion some other time. As for me, I think I shall retire. The night is just about over. See you in the evening.” With a loving smile, she spread her wings and flew off.

Celestia eyes followed Luna as she returned to her quarters. “See you in the evening,” she whispered as the moon sunk below the horizon. Then, her horn blazing white, she raised her head high. The sky’s colors bloomed and grew brighter. As she had for millennia, the Princess raised the sun, heralding the dawn. It was a new day in Equestria.