



By Fenix

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Chapter 1

Deviation

“Please come down from there, you’ll hurt your wing even more,” the yellow pegasus cried out. The azure hummingbird zipped around the room in random directions, trying to escape the cottage. After wincing at the bird’s attempts, the pegasus trotted towards the bird to try to calm it. She was able to help her hummingbird, Hummingway, before, but she couldn’t figure out why was this bird so fidgety around her. It was all she could do to not whimper out a scream in frustration.

All of the pegasus’ attempts to calm the rogue patient down were futile: she tried begging, and pleading, and beseeching, and even asking politely. With a few short bursts of energy later and several hits against the cottage walls, the bird finally landed on a counter top to tend to its wing. Slowly, the pegasus crept over, trying not to scare it into another frenzy. By the time she got there, the tuckered out bird fell asleep, exhausted from its strange escape attempts. She picked it up with her hoof and flew to its bed, lowering it gently and covered it with a blanket. With the ordeal over with for now she sighed and sat down on the floor.

Even with all the commotion, most of the other animals in the cottage slept soundly. The pegasus paced around the room, trying desperately to come up with a solution for her hummingbird problem. Except for her rabbit, Angel, nearly every animal in the house she had nursed back to health. This was the first time in a long while that her animal expertise had failed her, and that worried her. *‘Poor thing, it looked so scared. Diddid I scare it?’* she pondered, continuing to pace with signs of frustration contorting her expression. *‘No, I couldn’t have. But if I didn’t, what did?’* She couldn’t come up with an answer. Glancing out a window she caught a glimpse of a large oak tree in the distance with a door protruding from its base. She trotted closer and came up with a solution. *‘Oh, maybe Twilight has the answer. If she could help me with Filomena, then a hummingbird would be no problem.’* Quietly, she opened the door and made her way through Ponyville.

The sun shone brightly on the pastel-colored town of Ponyville, warming the filly's heart just a little. The dirt roads were fairly empty for this time of day she noticed; anything to make the trip quicker always helped. A cool small gust of wind brushed against her hide, bringing a smile to her face. It had been a while since Ponyville was so quiet and serene. With a new step of confidence, she trotted lively down the empty streets. It helped to take her mind of her patient for a little while at least. She needed this.

A few moments later she arrived at the tree. It was fully grown with its leaves still intact, but was completely hollow inside. She still had trouble trying to wrap her head around how it continued to thrive, but she always chalked it up to magic. She tapped her hoof on the door a few times and waited for an answer. Small sounds of crashes and some impossible to comprehend speech could be heard from within, as if someone stumbled over a large mess. *'Twilight must be busy studying. I hope she's not too busy.'* The door glowed with a purple aura and swung open, revealing a purplish grey unicorn with a dark violet mane and a streak of pink and lavender hair. She carried two thick books on her back and had a scroll magically held in the air.

"Oh hey, Fluttershy. What brings you here?" the unicorn asked as the door ceased to spark.

"Well, Twilight," Fluttershy squeaked, dipping her head down in embarrassment, "I'm having trouble with a new patient. Since you were so good with Filomena, I thought you might be able to help."

"I wouldn't say I was *good* with Filomena, but I'll see what I can do. Last time I tried to help you I thought you would've ended up in a dungeon," Twilight laughed as she set down her books. "Come on in." With that Fluttershy trotted in, thanking Twilight for her assistance. The unicorn's horn shone with a purple light as books on the floor started to fly into their correct shelf. The entire inside of the tree was a giant library, bookcase after bookcase of books lined the walls. The tree had two floors, the top being where her friend slept. There was an observatory connected the to bedroom with a telescope pointed towards the stars. Fluttershy loved the library, but never paid too much attention to it before Twilight came to town. With the books neatly away, Twilight turned to Fluttershy, puzzled. "So, what seems to be the problem?"

Fluttershy shuffled her hooves a bit in a nervous swipe. “You see I have a hummingbird that simply won’t let me help it. It’s acting like Filomena did, but whenever I try and get close it flies away.” She slowly started to pace around the library, peering at some of the books. “Would you happen to have a spell that would make me a little less, uh, intimidating?” She stopped for a moment, then quickly rebounded. “I mean, i-if you have one that is.”

Twilight let out a small chuckle and walked over to her reading stand. “I’m sure intimidation isn’t the problem, but you are the animal expert after all. I’ll see what I can find.” With that the unicorn went to work, bringing over as many spell books to her as she could find and scoured them thoroughly. Fluttershy fidgeted more the longer Twilight worked, but never said a word. Twilight was a pony that could get work done better in silence and she knew that all too well.

Several silent hours had passed since Twilight started, making Fluttershy anxious. She hasn’t been able to tend to her patients all day, but at any second Twilight could be finished. Fluttershy had to wait it out for her new feathered friend. Looking outside, she saw the sun set, giving way to Princess Luna’s night. All the ponies who were outside headed in for the night, making the village eerily quiet, even for her. She looked back at Twilight, who was now covered head to toe in a giant wall of texts and scrolls. With a spark, the candles in the library magically sprang to life, illuminating every corner of the tree’s interior.

“A-ha!” Twilight sang out in joy. She brushed all the closed books aside and carried the open book to where Fluttershy sat. The pegasus rubbed her eyes and stood up to see what the hours of waiting had brought her. Twilight flipped the book around to show Fluttershy and pointed at one of the parchment pages. “It’s what they call a ‘trust aura’ spell,” she explained. “With this you should have an easier time making that hummingbird trust you and able to give it treatment. Basically animals will perceive you as more trustworthy, not that you should need any help with that.”

'A 'trust aura'? That's strange.'

“One thing though.” Twilight interrupted Fluttershy’s train of thought, “This spell is quite old, and older spells are harder to cast without the

chance of deviation.” She brought the spell book back over to her, preparing herself to cast it. “This will take a lot of energy, so if it doesn’t work the first time come back in a few days.”

Fluttershy looked down nervously, “Deviation? W-what is that?”

“It’s nothing to worry about, with my skill there’s no chance anything will happen, I hope.”

“What about the library? Shouldn’t we go somewhere less... public?” Fluttershy asked.

“No one came in today, plus the library is closed now. There’s nothing to worry about.” With that Twilight planted her hooves firmly into the ground and her horn began to glow in a fierce purple light. The brightness of her horn eclipsed the the light of the candles, and pulses of energy caused the flames flicker and go out in puffs of smoke. The whole room became black as pitch with the exception of Twilight, Fluttershy and the book. Panting, Twilight focused all of the energy she could expend into her horn, causing the tree to tremor.

Fluttershy panicked, but she had to stay still. She didn’t want to risk a ‘deviation’ as Twilight called it. The purple aura continued to pulsate, sending waves of energy outwards, shaking the filly to her knees. Twilight started to yell out in exhaustion with beads of sweat running down her hide, but she couldn’t stop now. The aura collapsed into a single bright point and shot out towards Fluttershy. She yelped as she was struck by the spark; it immobilized her and caused her to glow in a shining yellow light. Every inch of her tried to move, but all she could manage was to watch her friend collapse in her spell book from exhaustion. Her breath quickened, and before she knew it her vision blurred and her head started to throb. She skipped straight from panic to fear as the whole world around her seemed to distort and shatter before her. Eventually her vision went completely black, causing her to fall unconscious.

Twilight’s eyes sprung open. Forcibly, she removed the covers from her body and stood straight up. She rubbed her forehead; her whole body felt weak from the night before, causing her to sink down again. The sun

shone into her room through the observatory, casting its warm rays onto the tired unicorn. Frustrated, she turned over, back towards the window. *'What happened? I don't remember going to sleep last night. Wait, wasn't Fluttershy-'*

Instantly she sprang from her bed as she realized what happened. Twilight rushed down the wooden spiral staircase, skipping her normal morning routine to check on the disaster that the library must have become. In the room, a small purple dragon with green back and head scales had just put away a book from the floor. There was still a large pile of sprawled out texts and scrolls, but it was a start. "Spike!" she called out, startling the baby dragon.

"Oh, Twilight, you're finally awake." He reached down for a few more books, "It's not like you to sleep on the floor like that. Must've been one crazy study session that night." He laughed to himself and went on cleaning.

"That's just it Spike; I didn't fall asleep, I went unconscious from performing a spell." Her horn glowed with magic, carrying the books back to the shelves, alleviating Spike from his workload. "Fluttershy was over, asking me for help with a patient-" she paused for a second. "Wait, what do you mean 'that night'? How long was I out?"

"A few days I think. I came home with some apples after seeing the tree strung up with lights. I didn't see anyone but you here. You were lying face down in a book, so I brought you upstairs."

Twilight scratched her head, "You came home right after that light faded and you didn't see Fluttershy at all?"

Spike began to walk up the stairs, yawning. "Nope, she must've been really sneaky when she left. She most likely didn't want to disturb anyone." Twilight watched Spike go out of view, then cocked her head to look out the window. Fluttershy's cottage was in the distance. She had to check on her; maybe the spell worked and everything was fine. Twilight could only hope.

Twilight burst out her door, dirt kicked up from the ground as she sped her way through the streets. She made quick maneuvers, but stumbled, nearly bowling over several ponies in her wake. "Excuse me!"

she yelled, tripping over a yellow pony who was planting carrots. The pony huffed as Twilight regained her footing and bolted again. She ducked her head in a full gallop, narrowly avoiding a low flying pegasus. A huge gust of wind passed as she went under, making her look back to see what had just missed her. In her distraction, she slammed neck first into an orange earth pony carrying a cart of apples down the street.

Face down in the road, she lifted her head and spat out the dirt she nearly ate from the fall. She shook her head and looked up at the pony. "What're you doin' runnin' down the road like that, Twi'?" The pony asked in a southern drawl.

Looking down at mess of apples that laid in the road, Twilight looked up, trying to hide her embarrassment. "I'm so sorry Applejack, I was just in a hurry to Fluttershy's." She got up to her feet and shook herself off. "Have you seen her around?"

Applejack looked up in thought, adjusting her weight to upright the fallen cart. "Can't say that ah' have. Did somethin' happen to her?"

Twilight's eyes darted back and forth, "Well, maybe. I tried to help her with a patient of hers. A few days ago I cast a spell to let animals perceive her better, but it took so much energy that I collapsed. I just woke up a little while ago." She looked over at the lone cottage, "I'm just going over to check if everything is alright."

"Hmm, well I guess ah' haven't seen y'all 'round here either these past few days." Applejack was curious now. "Hold on there sugar cube, I'll help you check on her. Who knows what your magic did," she scolded, picking up the last of the fallen apples.

"Thanks Applejack." Twilight said graciously. With Applejack worried, Twilight was more anxious than ever. On the way, she went over that night over and over in her head, meticulously combing over every last detail. Each calculation that flew through her head she combed over with a fine toothed comb. She was so invested in her own thoughts that she slammed into the front door of Fluttershy's cottage. She could hear Applejack snicker a little as she shook herself off and knocked on the door.

"Heheh, you ah'lrigh there?" Applejack prodded.

"I'll be fine." Twilight responded, brushing herself off for what seemed like the tenth time that day. A few moments later, Twilight tapped on the door again, hoping desperately that Fluttershy would answer. Some animal noises could be heard through the cracks of the doorway, but no sign of the pegasus. Twilight tried one more time. Nothing. "Now what do we do? She may not be home."

Applejack trotted to the window and peered in, her hat rising from being pushed against the glass. She squinted her eyes to see better and stared for a few good seconds. She turned towards Twilight and signaled her over to the window. "You might want t' see this." Twilight walked over and nudged Applejack to move. She planted herself in front of the window and looked inside. It was a disaster. Many of her patients were awake, messing with everything: cabinets were destroyed, the floor was a mess, the walls were covered with debris and the medicine canisters and beds were decimated. It was anarchy.

"Fluttershy must have never come home. She would never leave her animals alone for this long. That must mean..." Twilight paused, her eyes widening at what she thought. Quickly she turned to Applejack, "Applejack round up the girls. There's a huge problem, something must have gone wrong with the spell. We need to hurry."

"Ah' reckon we do." Applejack responded, tipping her hat forward. "Well ah'lright Twilight, ah'll help, but do you have any idea on what could'a went wrong?"

"I'll explain later. Meet me at the library, I have some research to do." With that Twilight rushed back to the library, hoping she could find an answer to her friend's apparent disappearance before it was too late.

A dull thump sent Fluttershy to full alert, causing her to look around in a panic. Everything was pitch black, except only a small sliver of light that shone from a small crack near the ground. She was dizzy from the spell and stumbled into a mess of boxes. Regaining her footing, she attempted to center herself but her headache caused her to double over in pain. The

ground seemed to be moving from underneath her, rumbling and shaking everything around in the cramped area.

Sitting down, she braced herself against the boxes trying to make sense of everything that had happened. She was alone in a dark, unknown, moving room with no way of communicating; it took all her effort not to scream. With no warning the room seemed to bank violently to the right causing everything to quickly shift to the left, Fluttershy included. She felt a slight pain as her flank slammed against an edge of a box. She rubbed it to try and soothe the pain, but something felt off to her.

'W-what is this.. cloth?'

The room suddenly stopped shaking and she only felt a small rumble. With a large clanking sound, a large rolling door opened up, flooding sunlight into the now visible tiny metal room. Fluttershy winced and raised her hoof, shielding her eyes from the blinding sunlight. As her pupils started to shrink, a silhouette of a larger mare came into view. She was terrified, unable to take in everything that had happened. Her eyes were transfixed on the mare as tears rolled down her cheeks. She shook and slunk back, trying to shield herself from her unknown assailant.

'N..no...'

Chapter 2

Down the Beaten Path

“Hey, are you alright back there? It might’ve gotten a little bumpy back there in the end,” the silhouette asked, poking her head into the room. Fluttershy lowered her hoof from her face and looked outside with her eyes finally adjusted to the sunlight. “Moving day’s always tough, huh May?” she said, laughing. The mare grabbed a cardboard box and carried it to a house where they had stopped. The mare was a blue-eyed earth pony with a yellow hide and a long brown mane. She wore an orange shirt and a red dress which covered her cutie mark. “Well, don’t you want to check out the house?”

After wiping the tears from her eyes, Fluttershy timidly jumped out of the room. She was confused by what she saw; there was flora and fauna that she had never seen in Equestria. Vast forests surrounded the small town, filled with wolves with grey and black patterns, striped ferrets, and tiny red spiked worms to name a few. The sight filled Fluttershy’s eyes with wonder. A loud thud snapped her out of her dreamy state, forcing her to turn her head. She watched as two blue stallions carried the last of the boxes out of the truck and brought them into the large house. Fluttershy trotted to the mare, just catching her before she went inside. “E-excuse me, miss? Where is this place?” She asked. The mare stared at her blankly, looking straight through her. Fluttershy stepped back. “I mean, do you know how I can get back to Ponyville from here?”

The mare laughed, greatly confusing Fluttershy. “Oh May, what are you talking about now? Did you bump your head in the truck?” she asked, examining Fluttershy’s head.

“Oh, you have the wrong pony. My name is Fluttershy.” she explained, trying to keep her composure.

“Is that what you’re calling yourself now?” The mare came closer, placing her hoof around the back of Fluttershy’s neck. Fluttershy shrank back in discomfort. Nothing in this town made any sense to her. She tried analyzing what happened as she was unknowingly dragged into the two-

story wooden house. Finally, Fluttershy snapped out of her train of thought and looked around the room. The home was filled with technology she had never seen before and pictures of strange creatures in picture frames. "All your stuff is in your room now, go get it ready," the mare explained, nudging Fluttershy up the stairs. Slowly she went up, her mind was on auto-pilot until she had time to absorb everything that had happened.

Down the hallway and to the right she found a room filled to the brim with cardboard boxes. *'This must be it.'* She trotted to the center of the room and sat on the floor. It was quiet: quiet enough for her to focus on her predicament. She closed her eyes and cleared her mind, something she had not done in weeks. *'Poor hummingbird, its wing is still damaged. How will I get back home? Will anyone even notice I'm gone? What about... that one pony that tried to help me?'* Fluttershy's eyes jolted open. She lifted both of her hooves to her face, trying to think of the pony's name. *'Oh my, how could I have forgotten her name?'* She started to shake, all the stress and anguish rushed back to her. *'Did I really forget her name? No, it's just the stress. What would Rainbow... something do?'* All she wanted to do was break down. Two names slipped past her. Even under stress, Fluttershy would never forget her childhood friend's name. She began to reach her breaking point. It was too much.

She raised her head from her hooves and saw something strange at the other side of the room. It was a simple mirror, but the reflection staring back at her seemed off. Getting up to her hooves, she trotted over and looked at herself. Between thinking and worrying about her new found problems, she never noticed the clothes that she had on. An orange sleeveless jacket with a black bent collar was secure on her body, a green tied back bandanna covered the top of her pink hair. She turned to see her flank, noticing a pair of black short pants with pink butterfly decorations sewn into both sides. A green satchel was secured to her back as well.

Before she could properly react, she heard the mare call out from downstairs, "Come down May, your father's on TV! Oh, and make sure you change your clock before you come down!"

"Coming down, Mom!" Without hesitation she slammed her hooves into her mouth. *'W-what's happening to me?'* was all she could think about as her legs carried her down the stairs, seemingly on their own. When she reached the bottom, a small stint of dizziness came over her, but she shook

it off and continued towards the mare. With a blank face, she turned to see the one she called 'mom' watching the 'TV'. The only image on screen was a news anchor who just finished talking about the event.

"You missed it," the mare pouted. "Oh, I know, you should go introduce yourself to the neighbors."

"I... I... no!" the pegasus squeaked in protest. Her cries went unanswered as the mare nudged her to leave. She sighed and lowered her head. It took all her strength to fight the path she had been given, and until she had some food and rest she decided to simply go with it. She arrived at the door, gulped, and knocked. There was no answer. She waited a few seconds and tried it again. Still nothing.

Sighing a breath of relief, she trotted around the corner to see what the rest of the town had to offer. Like Ponyville, which she was surprised she could even remember, the weather was balmy. A small breeze rustled every leaf on the trees; the sound calmed her down. Between the sound of the leaves, a loud yell took Fluttershy out of her serene state yet again. She looked around in a panic, waiting for the sound to come back again. After perking her ears up, she heard a second cry. '*Hel.... help?*' she thought she heard. Without hesitation her legs carried her to the northern path out of town to find the source of the voice.

"No, no, no!" Twilight yelled out in frustration. She took the hard-cover book and tossed it off her reading stand. It landed in a large pile on the floor where the rest of her books now sat. Nothing she read through came close to any explanation as to what had happened; Twilight didn't want to accept the ancient spell book's interpretation. There had to be another explanation. She hastily brought over more books to scour when she heard a knock on the door. After her next book arrived she yelled out, "Come in!" and started to browse through it. She ignored the squeak coming from the door, thinking of the best way to explain the whole situation.

"We're all here, Twilight." Applejack stated, walking in. She was followed closely by three other ponies: a unicorn, a pegasus and an earth pony like herself. Twilight finally turned around, seeing them stare at the mess of books that overtook her floor. "Now, what's goin' on here?"

Twilight gulped and looked at them all nervously. She has never had to deal with any type of deviation happening from any of her spells, and this one might have cost her her good friend. After tightly closing her eyes from stress, she opened them to confront the four ponies. "Something happened to Fluttershy a few days ago, and it's my fault," she could hear her friends' reactions. Sighing, she continued, "She came to my home and asked me for help. I found a spell to help her out, and something must've gone wrong."

"Wait, what kind of help?" The blue, rainbow-haired pegasus demanded.

"She wanted me to make her less threatening to help a patient. I found an old spell to help, but there was a risk of a deviation to occur."

"Fluttershy, threatening?" the pink frizzy-haired earth pony interrupted, "That's silly, what ever gave her that idea?"

"I don't know, just listen," all the interruptions began to frustrate her, but she didn't want to lose her cool. She was still scared of how her friends were going to react. "I performed a spell, and it took so much magic that I blacked out. When I woke up, Fluttershy was gone and no one has seen her since." She started pacing, "Her animals are even out of control!"

"Is that what that spectacular light show was?" The white, purple-maned unicorn asked in a refined tone. "I thought you were having an amazing soirée with an amazing light-show finalé."

"I wish it was. Now, when I did the spell, a deviation occurred. The spells in the book are so close together that one wrong calculation can make it a completely different spell."

"Then... what happened?" Applejack asked.

Twilight's ears dropped. She dreaded telling them what she had found in the old book, but she buried her fear and continued, "I only found two things that could've happened to her. Either we have a hollow, emotionless Fluttershy running around, or," She paused for a second. The

four ponies started whispering amongst themselves as they waited for her second option. "Or she was transported somewhere outside the space and time surrounding Equestria."

Her friends' mouths were agape. They looked at each other, trying to find a word to break the silence. "Uh, say what now?" Applejack finally responded.

"I don't know how to explain it. If that is what happened, she's somewhere we can't get to with normal means. Also the book doesn't have a counter spell for either of those options." Twilight lowered her head, choking up a little.

Applejack trotted forward and put her hoof on Twilight's back, causing Twilight to look up at her. "We all make mistakes. Now, have you thought of anything with that big brain of yours?"

Twilight's horn glowed, bringing a book that was still on her stand to her and opened it up. After flipping through about two-hundred pages she stopped and placed her hoof on a certain spell. She could feel all her friends' eyes on her, and she desperately didn't want to disappoint them. She heavily exhaled and turned the book around to show them. "This is a psychic communication spell. With it I should be able to contact Fluttershy. I tried it out earlier today, and I think it works, but I just need confirmation. Now, Pinkie Pie?"

"What is it, Twilight?" the pink pony responded.

"Did you hear me try to talk to you about thirty minutes ago in your head?"

"Oh yeah, I thought I was only hearing things." Pinkie stated, starting to hop around the library. "It was so amazing, I was baking some cupcakes and when I heard you I was like 'wha?' but I got back down and finished baking," she suddenly stopped bouncing. "When you talk to Fluttershy tell her Pinkie says 'Hi', okay Twilight?"

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief, "I'll do that Pinkie, but I don't know if this will work. We still don't know what really happened." She turned the spell book back around and skimmed over the text, absorbing every detail

of the spell's mannerisms and inner workings. "Alright, here I go," the unicorn stated, readying her stance. She focused her energy to her horn, concentrating on all the intricacies of the spell and Fluttershy herself.

'I hope this works.'

The forest was exactly as Fluttershy had figured; it dense with fully grown trees whose leaves blocked nearly every ray of sunlight. Small green sprouts dug through the leaves of the previous fall, vines creeping and wrapping themselves up some older trees. She could hear some of the animals' cries, the sound fighting for her ears' attention against the rustling leaves. The path she was on was cut in a specific manner, weaving through of the trees but it was still difficult to find where that cry for help came from.

"Help me!" the deep, accented voice howled. Fluttershy immediately stopped her admiration of the forest and burst out into a full gallop. She turned her head side to side, making sure the pony in peril wasn't in the forest's thicket. Just up ahead she saw a figure running around, something attached to its arm. She came in closer to get a better view, seeing a brown stallion with spiked back brown hair running around aimlessly. A long striped ferret creature was attached to his right forelimb, blood leaking from the bite. She noticed him turn towards her as she thought of what do to. "Could you help me? Please?" the pony desperately tried to shake the creature off. "There's a breifcase over there, if you would could you grab a Poké Ball and help me out? This thing just won't let go."

Fluttershy stood there, confused. She had never heard of a 'Poké Ball' before, but somehow it sounded familiar. She looked at the briefcase, her body telling her to move closer, but she ran towards the pony instead. "Hold still," she said calmly to the pony. He stopped shaking, but still winced in pain. She grabbed the ferret with her mouth on the back of its neck and tossed it aside gently. Before it could turn around, Fluttershy was in a wide stance, staring intensely at the creature. It turned and instantly froze in fear. "Don't you do something like that ever again, do you understand me?" she scolded. "It's not nice to hurt other creatures like that, and you know it." Her staring became more intense, causing the ferret to whimper and sit. She came closer, brushed its fur and patted it. "There you

go, now run off little guy,” and with that the ferret ran off into the thicket. She brought her head back up, closed her eyes and smiled. Suddenly a sharp pain jolted through her head, forcing her head into the grass. This had never happened before when using her stare, but as quickly as the pain came, it left.

“You did it with out a Pokemon, that’s amazing! I’ve never seen anything quite like that before. You have an amazing way with these creatures.” the brown stallion complemented her as he walked over to grab his briefcase. “What’s your name?”

Fluttershy lifted her head and shook it, trying to recoil from the pain. Glancing at the pony, she swore she had seen him before in Ponyville with the exact voice. He wore a lab coat with an hourglass symbol sewn into both sides like her shorts. “I’m, uh, Fluttershy,” she stated, thinking for a moment, “I think. I just moved in just south of here.” She lowered her head and ears in confusion.

“Fluttershy, interesting. I’ve never heard of a filly with a name like that. It’s quite a good name if you ask me. I’m the Professor. Professor Birch.” He shook his forehoof a little more. “You know what, take a Pokémon as a reward. Obviously you’re better with them than I could’ve imagined. Take any one, it’s fine by me,” the Professor said. There was that word was again: Pokémon. Like everything Fluttershy saw it seemed familiar, but was completely foreign to her at the same time. She slowly trotted over to the briefcase and pushed on the latches. Inside, on black cushions, were three red and white balls with a white circular button in the center divide. She picked one up and stared at it.

“Um, thank you.” she said sheepishly, “It’s... nice.”

The professor scratched his head, “Well you can’t see it if it’s still in its Poke Ball, that’s just isn’t how it works.”

Fluttershy looked at him confused. She had to know what this ‘Pokémon’ was and how it could fit inside such a tiny ball. She pressed the button with her nose and it opened, sending a shining white light from it. The light and sound startled her, causing her to drop it and step back. She watched as the light started to take form into an animal. Her wings opened in a defensive position as she stepped back. The light faded, revealing a

green upright standing gecko. It stared at her with its head cocked. "W-what is that?" Fluttershy demanded, not knowing what to think.

The brown pony stared in disbelief. "You've never seen a Treecko before? Everyone has seen it on the television in Hoenn or anywhere else." He shook his head and nudged the Treecko to get closer to Fluttershy. "Kids these days, so sheltered."

She got down near the Treecko and examined it for a little while. Something already told her that she already knew what it was. "Aren't you adorable?" she finally said. "I guess I need to name you, huh little guy?" The lizard came closer and rubbed its head through her mane. She could only smile; meeting a new type of creature after the past events' hardships lifted her spirits. "How did you even fit in something so tiny?"

The professor walked over, seeing Fluttershy lay there with her new Pokémon. He smiled and sat down next to her. "You have a great way with animals. I'm impressed."

"Thank you," she responded.

He dug through his bag, pulling out a thin red plastic tablet and gave it to Fluttershy. "This is a Pokedex. It will show you everything and anything you wanted to know about Pokemon and the region since you seem to be new to it. It's quite handy. Now take it, I need your help with something." He looked down at his right foreleg, small trickles of blood still pooling from the bite wound. "My son Brendan is out doing research. Brash boy, but I need him to come home. It's getting dark and as you can see I'm a little out of commission at the moment, so I need you to go in my stead. He's just north of Oldale Town which is just north of this forest. "

She nervously stood up, her ears drooping at the thought, "Oh no, I couldn't do that," she shuffled one of her forehooves in the grass, "I don't know enough about this place to do that."

"No, you can do it. Take that Treecko and run with it. Travel the world. You just moved here, you should be excited by all of this. Even if you can't get him home, which I'm sure he'll do anything necessary to avoid it, explore everything. Give it a chance."

She felt something tap her hide, the Treecko trying getting her attention. The amount of confidence in its face astounded her, trusting her completely within a minute of meeting her. "I guess her spell did work," she thought aloud, grabbing the Pokédex with her mouth and placed it in her bag. "I guess I can help."

"Great." Birch stated, hobbling back into town. "Hopefully the trip will help you get your head straight." Fluttershy watched him as he limped off with his briefcase back into the forest. "If you need anything from me just ask. I'll be in my lab in Littleroot Town. I'm sure you'll be fine without me, but if you ever need my help, I'm sure I can provide it." The wind blew through the trees, the calming sound of the leaves reaching her ears. She let out a small sigh and looked at her new gecko friend.

"If you're going to join me, I'll have to give you a name." Fluttershy looked up in thought. "How about Treecky?" The gecko scoffed and turned its head. "Oh, maybe Leaf?" It sneered, huffing out from its nose. "Alerce?" It thought for a moment, and looked up at her with content. "Good. Now climb on my back and I'll fly us over, at least I'll try." Alerce leaped into the air, landing with a small impact onto Fluttershy. "Gently," she said, unfolding her wings. She took a couple seconds to adjust her wings for flight again and took off. The forest was so thick that branches and leaves obstructed her path. Slowly, she dodged and made her way around them without any harm done to her or the forest. Hovering, she checked to see if Alerce was alright. He was a little woozy she noticed, so she flew at a slow pace to not upset him any more. "I'm sorry about that," she reconciled quickly.

Soaring above the forest Fluttershy looked over the massive expanse of land and sea. She'd never seen so many towns and villages so close together, even when looking down from her old filly-home in Cloudsdale. It was a long time since she flew up to this height. The sun was setting, the sky was painted with rich yellows, oranges, and purples. Flocks of blue and red birds flew along side her, squawking with delight. Fluttershy smiled back, happy with the wind flowing, messing up her hair. She felt less anxious about the task she was given, trying her hardest to enjoy herself as she soared.

Down below was a small town with only a handful of buildings. If Fluttershy was correct, this was the town that Birch told her of. With a flutter

of her wings, she slowly made her decent near the northern pathway out of town. After landing, Alerce hopped off Fluttershy's back dazed from the flight. "Are you alright?" she asked, getting closer to see if anything had happened. Alerce shook his head and body, getting rid of the woozy feeling he had. With that, he started to walk down the small path north. Fluttershy followed.

The path looked exactly like the forest outside of the town she ended up in. She still thought having no memory of this place when waking up in the back of the truck was odd, but she simply chalked it up as stress. After scaling a rock ledge, she saw a young earth pony with several bags of supplies hunched over, studying some of the small creatures in the grass. Fluttershy trotted over nervously. She didn't even know this was Birch's son. "E-excuse me, I'm so sorry for bothering you, but are you Brendan?" She slunk back a little.

The light brown pony turned around to face her. He wore a strange headband and white hat combination with a black and orange jacket, his shorts were vertically separated black and dark-grey with a strange gold square with a cross through it stitched on the sides. "Yeah, who are you?"

Fluttershy stood erect, trying to appear more confident. "I'm... uh....." she thought maybe it was the mountains of stress or a strange lapse in thought, but she had trouble even recalling her own name. "I... just moved in next door to you."

The colt looked at her with suspicion. She caught him staring at Alerce, squinting his eyes to get a more focused view. "That's my father's Treecko. He normally has those under lock and key." He lifted his head and walked towards a Poké Ball that lay in the short grass. He hit the circle button, sending out his Pokémon. A small orange bird with three large feathers sticking out of its head popped out and chirped. "I know what's going on."

Fluttershy looked at him confused, but went forward to examine the bird. "Oh my, you're so adorable." The bird rubbed up against her in a similar fashion of Alerce. "What's your name little guy?" she rubbed the bird's head and smiled..

“That’s Torchic, and if you would step away from my Pokémon so we can do this the right way, that would be helpful.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, lowering her head and ears, backing away. Torchic stood in an attacking position, staring down Alerce. She looked at the colt who looked as if everything was completely fine.

“Alright, let’s get this battle underway, shall we?” Brendan smirked, watching his Torchic prepare itself.

“Battle? Oh no, I could never do that.” Fluttershy said nervously. She couldn’t tell if he was serious, but she didn’t want to take any chances. She looked down at Alerce who also donned a fighting position. “Alerce no, we have t-” Before she even could finish, she felt a throbbing headache come on, one more intense than the other outbreaks that day. Every synapse in her brain told her she had to fight, that she had no choice. She ducked her head into the ground trying to hold on desperately to her pacifist ways. *‘Why is this happening, I don’t want to fight.... I can’t take this...’*

With her head still buried in the ground, she heard a strange but familiar voice pierce her head, “Fl....rsh..... is that you? Please, if you can hear me say something!”

“Please leave me alone,” she fought back, not knowing how to respond.

“It’s me, Twilight. Are you alright? We’re so worried about you.”

Tears rolled down Fluttershy’s cheeks, burning on their way down. Her body shook as she sobbed in the grass, “Please, I don’t want to fight. Whoever you are, please make it stop!” The voice went away as fast as it came. Still shaking, she got up, grabbed Alerce with her hoof and planted him on her back. Her vision flashed white and in front of her was a strange figure. The tears in her eyes blurred her eye-sight, but there in front of her was a ghostly wisp with the same clothes she wore. She had brown hair and pale skin, with the same bandanna she had and a similar looking Treecko. She couldn’t make out exactly what she was, but closed her eyes and shook her head. The ghostly figure disappeared from view.

She flew off with massive speed from the path. The urge to battle that raced through her head had subsided, leaving her head clear. She sighed

and with one last body twitch she felt completely fine. Her tears dried as streaks on her face, but it didn't bother her. She was able to fight it.

She landed in a nearby patch of grass and watched the sun set behind the forest canopy. Alerce lay down and fell to sleep, Fluttershy smiling as she took a blanket from her bag. She had no idea how she knew it was there, but she began to trust her new instincts. She laid the blanket on her and Alerce, preparing for the night. The life she thought she knew now felt like a bad dream brought on from being in the moving truck for too long. She took a look around her new surroundings, knowing that this is what she wanted all along and was disappointed that it took her this long to figure it out. She finally forgot the dream world of Equestria that she had imagined long ago.

With her new friend in the grass and the wind carrying her worries away on the open road, Fluttershy knew she was finally home.

Twilight's horn stopped glowing. She drooped down, the spell took more out of her than she had anticipated. "Well Twilight, dear? Were you about to talk to her?" The white unicorn asked.

"I think so Rarity, but she didn't recognize me," she started to pace, "It sounded like she was crying, and said something about fighting. At least we know she still has emotions. Though, I think she could be in huge trouble." The other ponies looked worried. The situation was dire: they didn't know what happened to Fluttershy and had no way to bring her back.

The blue pegasus spread her wings and flew up in the air. "Hey, I know how to take care of this," she stated.

"Rainbow Dash?" Twilight started, "We don't have the spell to bring her back, what could you possibly have in mind."

Dash scratched her head, "Eh, well this won't really bring her back, but I want you to bring me to her. You know to comfort her and all."

"Are you crazy? The last time I did the spell it was just a deviation. Who knows what the deviation of the space-time rift spell is!"

Rainbow Dash hovered in thought, "Can't you just do the same thing to me that you tried to do to Fluttershy? I mean if you can do it once, I'm sure you can do it again."

Twilight turned to think. She didn't want to risk the safety of another friend, but Rainbow Dash seemed confident enough to the point that it started to rub off on her. She turned to her friends who waited patiently for her answer. "I don't want to do this, but do any of you have any problems with this?"

"It may be a tad risky," Applejack said, "but right now Fluttershy needs someone t' help her. Who knows what she going through right now."

"Yeah, plus it would be super fun to see ponies she know, right? Ooo, maybe I can get some-"

Rarity cut her off, trying to talk about over Pinkie's ramblings. "Well, I don't see how it could hurt. Rainbow Dash, I should make you something before you leave, it might be frigid there."

"I'll be fine," Dash said, landing and folding her wings to her body. "I'm sure you girls can come up with something while I'm gone."

Twilight was shocked at the responses she got. Every one of her friends were in agreement of Rainbow's brash plan. Twilight had to admit, she was running out of options. "Actually," Twilight pondered. "I do know Canterlot's library has a book by the same author, maybe the spell to bring her back is in there."

"Great, you go to Canterlot and I'll hang out with Fluttershy. I can't leave my friend from Cloudsdale alone in some weird place." she stood in front of Twilight, waiting for her to cast the spell. "I'm ready when you are!"

Looking around, all the ponies seemed to be in agreement. She took the book, found the spell, and focused on Rainbow Dash. "Alright." She readied herself, planting her hooves. She was still apprehensive about this plan, her breath shortened just thinking about it. Finally she closed her eyes, focusing all of her energy on Rainbow Dash. Her horn started to glow in the intense purple light of the previous attempt. She went over every

calculation in her head, checking for any discrepancies to make sure this went as smoothly as possible. The last thing she wanted to do was to lose another friend.

“Hey Rainbow Da-” Pinkie started, but Twilight could only hear that much as all her sense of her surroundings disappeared. The light from the sun seemed to fade as the light from her horn eclipsed everything else. Tremors shook the library, but she ignored them, concentrating and keeping her eyes closed in strained effort. Her knees shook as the tremors vibrated through the tree, sweat dripping down her hide. Panting, she could feel the energy reach a singular point on her horn. This was it. With the last of her energy she let go of the spell, launching it towards Rainbow Dash. Exhausted, Twilight’s body went limp and she passed out face first into the old text.

Chapter 3

Memories

Rainbow Dash awoke with a throbbing headache. She lied there for a moment, dazed; the reality of what happened now dawned on her. Feeling something heavy pushing her into the dirt she squirmed her way out from underneath. One hoof after the other she got to a good point of leverage and shook the weight off, her body now free to stretch. She closed her eyes and spread her wings, taking away some of the pressure and aches her body felt from the trip. Sighing, she turned around and opened her eyes. Quickly she stepped back in confusion and noticed an unconscious pink lump where she laid. She trotted over and poked it.

“Pinkie Pie, did you really have to follow me here?” she asked, ceasing to poke the pink pony. Sighing, she realized Pinkie was still asleep and looked around at her new surroundings. There were a lot more trees than she had anticipated, especially after hearing how distraught Fluttershy was. Surely that would’ve been the reason, if any, she thought. Looking up she noticed how oddly positioned the clouds were especially around a town. There were no pegasi in the sky taking care of or placing the cumulonimbus cloud in the distance, nor any of the cumulus or the arcus clouds. *‘That’s weird, it’s almost as if-’*

“Hey Rainbow Dash!” Pinkie Pie yelled out in excitement, causing Rainbow to stagger forward in shock. Rainbow quickly turned around to see the pink pony already bouncing around as if nothing happened. “You’re finally awake! That’s good because you weren’t when I found you so I decided to continue sleeping while you had your little nap.”

Rainbow Dash groaned, “Wait, you slept on top of me on purpose?” She shook her head, “Never mind that, why did you follow me in?”

“So you wouldn’t be alone, silly!” she continued bouncing to Rainbow’s dismay.

Sighing, she tried to find a sign or clue as to where they were. Many earth ponies were about, seeming aloof to the entire situation. For reasons

Rainbow couldn't comprehend they were all wearing clothes, something almost never seen back in Equestria except for higher class gatherings. They were mostly very dull colored, a striking contrast to both her and Pinkie's bright color schemes. Upon closer inspection they were wearing belts with strange red and white balls on them, followed closely by other animals. The houses were all earth colors with red roofs, none of them stood out at all as far as the ones normally seen in Ponyville. Two stood out to her though, two buildings with blue and red roofs with a strange white symbol garnering their fronts.

"Hey Pinkie Pie," this took Pinkie out of her bouncing path. '*She has to be as shaken up as I am, I mean I can't be the only one,*' she assumed, but continued to pester. "I'm going to fly around and check out where we are, could you find a sign or something that tells us what town we're in?"

"Okie dokie Loki!" Pinkie confirmed, looking at Rainbow intensely with her hoof at salute. Afterwards, she giggled and hopped around and started her search. Rainbow looked up at the sky, spreading her wings to start her ascent. With a bend of the knees she took off, soaring high enough to reach the start of the clouds. She looked at them puzzled, noticing the strange properties of the puffy cumulus clouds. They were fifty times as big as the ones in Ponyville and she could see right through them, only a light fog covered her view past it. With no delay she turned away from the cloud and kicked back as hard as she could, but her legs went straight through. She stumbled back from lack of contact. She pulled them out, realizing they were also strangely wet for not being a rain cloud. Stunned, she quickly shook her hooves and continued her ascent.

Above the cumulus clouds, the thunderhead loomed in the distance, arcus clouds formed a perimeter, but Rainbow didn't care. The sun shone brightly on the pegasus' wings as she surveyed the area. Large expanses of water surrounded what seemed to be a multitude of islands. She noticed a few mountain and volcano chains in the north, no snow on their peaks. Rainbow started panting, a large wave of humidity swept through the air from the west, making it hard for her wings to function properly. Confident that she had everything she needed, she started to head back down towards Pinkie who was talking to an older grey mare.

"Pinkie!" she called out, knocking Pinkie out of her string of rapid-fire conversations. With her hooves now safely planted on one of the dirt roads,

she trotted over. The mare quickly broke off and left as Rainbow got closer. "Did you find out anything?"

"Yeah! According to this one lady we're in... what was it..." she paused to think, "Oh, 'Pendalfurg Town!" Pinkie closed her eyes and smiled.

Rainbow scratched her head, "Uh, are you sure Pinkie Pie? That's a really weird name for a town."

"Oh, I'm completely sure!" Pinkie stated confidently.

Rainbow turned her head and noticed a sign near the eastern path out of town. It was just out of sight for her to read it, so she squinted and inched closer. After only a few steps it came into focus and printed in black type, 'You are now leaving Petalburg Town. Entering Route 102 to Oldale Town'. She brought her head back and turned to Pinkie who was still smiling her somewhat dopey smile. "Uh, Pinkie Pie? The name is the town is on that sign over there."

"That's weird, I must've missed it," Pinkie said, her smile fading to thoughtful gaze.

"Did you at least find something about Fluttershy?" Rainbow started pacing, trying to shake off the humidity.

"Not too much. Somepony told me that they saw a yellow pegasus flying in the east last night, but that could've been anypony!" Pinkie said, gazing east, seemingly trying to point Rainbow Dash in that direction.

Rainbow followed her cue and cocked her head, "Well If that's all we've got I say we go for it," she turned to Pinkie confidently. "Alright, I'll fly up and check it out. You search on the ground and we'll meet in the next town over, got it?"

"Got it!" Pinkie exclaimed, then promptly hopped off into the forest. Rainbow spread her wings and rocketed into the air, trying to keep the humidity out of mind. She turned with the western wind and began her search.

Fluttershy jolted awake, panting. She sighed, letting the morning sun warm her coat. Placing her hoof on her forehead, she tried to alleviate the headache her dream must've caused, but something felt off. She took her hoof off her head and looked at it, her eyes widening at the sight. It was pink and fleshy, with five fingers jutting from the outside. It was garnered with a green fingerless cloth with a white collar. Her breathing became heavier and heavier as she stared. She blinked, and her hoof reappeared where the hand once was. Breathing a sigh of relief, she lied back down into the grass and looked at the canopy. The yellow light of the sun created a halo of light surrounding the trees. Fluttershy had seen this many times, but it seemed to be dancing with color that morning. A light western wind blew through her hair, letting her mind work out her already frantic morning.

Beside her she heard a small rustle in the grass. She turned her head and noticed Alerce still sleeping soundly underneath the blanket. '*Oh, how could I have forgotten about Alerce?*' Fluttershy thought. Her mind was still racing from events from yesterday, so much so that her Treecko seemed to be inconsequential. She lifted her hoof and tapped lightly on the blanket, "It's time to wake up, it's a brand new-" she paused. '*T-that's strange,*' she tapped the blanket once more, feeling a hard shell underneath. Confused, she grabbed the blanket with her teeth and lifted it slowly. Rays of light illuminated the creature making Fluttershy take a step back, the blanket now completely torn off. It was a small green turtle with a yellow underbelly and a hard brown and black striped shell lying on its back. A small sprout made its place on the top of its head. Fluttershy went in closer to investigate. "A-Alerce? Is that... you?"

The turtle's eyes slowly opened. It turned its head to Fluttershy and it smiled at her. "Twii~!" it let out, standing and getting closer to the timid pegasus. It reached her right foreleg and started rubbing its head against her.

She looked down and smiled, "Oh yes, you must be him." At that moment her stomach began to rumble violently, causing her to take notice. "With how hectic yesterday was I must've forgotten to get food," she said to Alerce and herself. Fluttershy didn't seem to be bothered by the complete species change her new friend went through. She thought that must be normal for the types of creatures she found, but must've forgotten during the truck ride. "Come on, let's go get some food. There must be some in

Petalburg.” she clamored, scooping up Alerce and the blanket and placed them on her back. Facing away from the rising sun, she made her way through the new set of dirt roads, opting not to fly with her new, more fragile friend.

The path was very similar to the two she had already been down, but she saw many more ponies walking around. She tried to walk through unnoticed, the last encounter with a pony with a ‘Pokémon’ wasn’t the most pleasant. A dark-blue pony was in the distance with a striped ferret, battling some wild animal. She was shocked, trying to slip by as she was distracted. Hoping that even with her less than functional camouflage she wouldn’t be seen, but she jumped back as the filly cried out, “Hey you! You with the Turtwig!” Fluttershy looked away and continued walking. “Hey, I’m talking to you! Let’s see what that Turtwig is made of!” the filly continued to shout.

Fluttershy turned to the filly, “I’m sorry, I don’t fight.” The filly stood dumbfounded. She huffed and trotted away, continuing her hunt. Fluttershy made sure to avoid every other encounter along the way, dashing into shrubbery and flying over rock faces to stay out of view. Slowly but surely she made her way through the forest path.

The sun was reaching the apex of the sky. Fluttershy turned back to see how far she had gone, and Oldale Town was nowhere in sight. Looking ahead there wasn’t a single pony to be found. She breathed a sigh of relief then lied down. The lack of food and rest made her trip arduous. The whole world seemed to be spinning for her, the events of the past few days still fresh in her mind. Whenever she tried to think of what happened before the ride in the truck she couldn’t recall a single memory, it was as if her life started in that pitch black room. She buried her head into her hooves, exhausted and confused. Ever since she woke up she felt as if there was always something amiss, as if the world was shifting around her.

Alerce started calling out towards the west. Fluttershy popped her head out from her hooves and looked over to the distance. She squinted, noticing something pink bouncing towards her. She shook herself off and stood up, trying to get out of the way before she found herself being hounded for another fight. The weakness she felt in her knees made it hard to get up. One hoof after the other she finally got up, but her knees shook causing her to not be able to move. She started panting with worry,

watching the bouncing pink object come closer. With one hoof she broke her stable footing and took one step, but fell face first into the dirt. When she finally got her head off the ground, the pink pony was standing right above her, giving her a strange but calming look.

“Hey Fluttershy! What are you doing playing in the dirt?” the filly clamoured, hopping around Fluttershy.

‘F-Flutter...shy?’ she thought. The name sounded familiar to her, but was foreign all the same. She tried to keep up with the pony’s bouncing, but had trouble, “I’m sorry, you have the wrong pony,” she stated, hoping this would cause the pony to leave her alone.

“Don’t be silly, of course I have the right pony!” she took in a large gasp, “Oh, I know! You’re playing a game aren’t you? I didn’t know you for being such a good game player, Fluttershy. Ooo, what are we playing? Wait don’t tell me, let me guess. Uh... ‘Ponies and Griffons’! Or...”

Fluttershy cut her off, “No, please stop. I-I’m not trying to play anything, just don’t ask me to fight you. Please.” Something was very odd about this pony she thought. She wasn’t wearing any clothes and was much more brightly colored than any of the ponies she saw on the trail. Her pink mane contrasted her blue and yellow balloon marks on her flank, her curled frizzy pink hair bouncing around as she did.

“Fight? I know you don’t fight, what kind of friend would I be to not know that? I’m so glad I found you so quickly, we were so worried back at Twilight’s that I had to come help find you!

“I... still don’t know what you’re talking about. My name’s May, not Fluttershy,” she responded, causing the pink pony to slow down. “Excuse me, but I have to get going,” she wobbled back up to her hooves dug down enough to start moving. She slowly made her way past the pony, but she could already see her start to follow. “Please, leave me alone,” she squeaked, moving as fast as her hooves could take her.

“Fluttershy, are you alright? It’s me, Pinkie Pie!” The name hit Fluttershy like a ton of bricks, but she kept going. ‘Pinkie Pike’ seemed so familiar to her as did the name ‘Fluttershy’, but it hurt to think about it. She

just kept moving. A few hundred yards of chase left her even more exhausted, so much so that she slammed into a low flying pegasus. She bowled over backwards, sending Alerce flying into the tall grass. Dizzy, she tried to get back up, but her vision started to double and wobble. She tried to shake it off, but her mental and physical exhaustion was too much.

“Whoops, sorry abou-” was all she heard before she collapsed into the grass.

Incomprehensible noises began to make their way to Fluttershy's ears. She felt consciousness returning to her once more. Her eyes slowly opened, seeing a blue pegasus with rainbow-colored hair looking down at her. She quietly grunted, exerting all her effort to get up. Oddly her knees weren't shaking like they were before, and her hunger and thirst seemed to be less of an issue. “Fluttershy, you're awake! Finally,” the pegasus said excitedly, but cool. “Sorry for bumping into you earlier, I must've been going faster than I thought and wasn't paying attention.”

“It's... quite alright,” she whispered, overwhelmed by the pegasus's presence. “If you would excuse me, I need to get to get to Petalburg Town, I haven't had any food or water for a few days now.”

The pegasus looked at her with a skewed look, “Fluttershy, are you alright? You sound kinda... off.”

“Oh, she did that to me when I found her. I think she's just playing a game or something.” Pinkie assured the pegasus.

“I-I'm not playing a game!” Fluttershy tried to yell, wings opened, but shrunk back and folded them, “Just say you want to fight so you can leave me alone afterwards.” she squeaked, continuing to try shaking her followers. “Also my name's not Fluttershy, it's May.”

The pegasus groaned, “Alright fine, you aren't Fluttershy. I'll let you play your game,” she said, trotting closer. “My name's Rainbow Dash, how are you?” she groaned even louder, “Man, why am I even doing this?”

Fluttershy stepped back into a defensive position. Rainbow Dash. The name stuck out to her, more so than Pinkie Pie's did. *'Wait, 'Rainbow Dash', where have I heard that...'*

'Did I really forget her name? No, it's just the stress. What would Rainbow Dash do?'

She let out a small scream. Her head felt like it split into two; visions, voices and events furiously flashed through her head. She saw a city in the clouds: movable clouds. She could feel herself falling from the sky into a pack of butterflies. The explosion of the Sonic Rainboom blasted her ear drums, and the joy of gaining her cuite mark filled her heart with glee. She saw Ponyville, her cottage where the sick animals she cared for laid to rest in their beds. The day she opened up to Twilight, facing down the Manticore and Nightmare Moon, it all filled her vision as clear as day. Tears formed in her eyes as she ducked her head into her chest. She could feel her bunny Angel thumping his foot into her leg, her stare down with a giant dragon on a mountaintop, Princess Celestia's phoenix Filomena turning to ash in her hands. Everything. Tears burned down her cheeks as she let out one final scream. Her mind finally went blank, causing her to collapse.

She was out of breath, but her mind finally stabilized. She violently shook her head and forced her eyes open. Her breath sharply stopped, the world around her seemed brighter, sounds clearer and crisper. Slowly she breathed normally again, smiling. She looked to Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie, who were looking at each other with worry in their eyes. "Sorry for scaring you, I've... had a rough few days."

They both looked over and breathed sighs of relief. "A-are you alright, Fluttershy? Do you recognize me?" Rainbow Dash asked, her wings still open in a defensive position.

"Oh yes, both you and Pinkie Pie," she shuffled her forehoof, but perked her ears up.

"So... why'd you go all crazy on us? Missed us too much already?" Rainbow Dash asked, lightly hitting Fluttershy's back, causing a small "Ow" to escape the fragile pegasus's mouth. "Come on, we'll help you get some food. We aren't too far off from... Pendalfurg I think?" She caught herself and groaned. "Well, whatever. Tell us, what happened back there?"

Fluttershy lowered her head, going over everything that happened. Two strings of memories fought for attention in her mind, but she was able to separate the two even with her fading energy. "I'll talk about it after I get some food, I'm so hungry," she said, looking around for where Alerce went off to. Alerce popped his head out from the tall grass and ran as fast as he could over to Fluttershy. He stopped, and looked at the two other ponies, smiling. "I guess he likes you two."

"Great, now we don't have to introduce ourselves!" Pinkie Pie responded gleefully and started hopping down the path to Petalburg.

"So... what's with the turtle? I mean I wouldn't put it past you to immediately start talking to animals when you came here." Rainbow Dash joked, glancing over at Alerce.

"He's... a Turtwig, I guess," Fluttershy explained, "At least that's what those other ponies called him. I never actually got a chance to check." They continued with Petalburg Town drawing ever closer. They could see the red rooftops in the distance and faint silhouettes of ponies trotting around and conversing. Pinkie Pie was already at the edge of town, looking around for someplace to grab some food. The rest of the trip was rather quiet, neither pony wanting to waste Fluttershy's breath before she even got into town.

Details of the town showed themselves to Fluttershy, her wobbly legs working frantically to get her in. "Over here! I found something!" Pinkie Pie shouted, hopping slowly towards a building the middle of town. After a few more yards, the trail came to a stop, merging into the dirt roads of the town.

"We're coming Pinkie Pie, just hold on!" Rainbow Dash yelled, continuing to watch over Fluttershy. "Almost there, just a little more."

Fluttershy took her first step into Petalburg relieved, "Thanks Rainbo-" she was cut off by a loud ringing coming from her backpack. She jumped, Alerce following suit. Rainbow quickly looked over, wings spread. "What's going on? Is that from my bag?"

"Well, I don't have anything on me, so it must be," Rainbow responded, beginning to rummage through her bag. She grabbed the Pokédex and felt it vibrating, causing her teeth to chatter. "I 'hink 'his ih' id"

she said, the flat casing still in her mouth. She set it down and studied it, the blue light on the side constantly blinking.

"I think you open it like this," Fluttershy said, hitting the button, causing the front to flip open. It revealed a small screen and set of speakers. The beeping stopped and a strange monotone voice began to relay from it.

[[TRAINER (78342 MA.....FLUTTE.....SH..), YOU HAVE A GYM FIGHT AT (PETALBURG GYM) SCHEDULED FOR (9:30 PM) (TONIGHT). REMINDER: FAILURE TO SHOW UP AT YOUR SCHEDULED TIME IS GROUNDS FOR DISQUALIFICATION IN THE HOENN LEAGUE AND YOU MUST WAIT THREE DAYS TO APPEAL YOUR CASE.]]

The Pokédex beeped and the message stopped. Both of the pegasus looked at each other confused. "Wait, is this what that fighting thing was all about?" Rainbow asked, breaking the silence

"A league...?" Fluttershy couldn't imagine what it's like. Shuddered just thinking about it.

"That sounds... so awesome!" Rainbow yelled out, shocking Fluttershy, "A whole competitive league set up with automated messages when just entering towns? I have to come watch this."

"Can we just get some food please?" Fluttershy demanded, trying to break Rainbow's train of thought.

"Oh, right," Rainbow said, folding her wings back down. They continued on in silence to the building Pinkie was waiting by. A small twinge of pain coursed through Fluttershy's head. She ran through the memories of the girl thoroughly, but couldn't find an answer as to why the pain reemerged. She decided to let it go and tried not to pay any attention to anything until she had something in her stomach. "By the way, you might want to clean up a bit first. When you were knocked out we tried carrying you back to town, but we kinda dragged you a bit."

Fluttershy ignored the comment and caught up to Pinkie Pie. The building she was waiting by was a red roofed building like all the others, but had an outside terrace with iron-lace tables and chairs with small cushions.

Many a pony were dining on exotic fruits and grains, neither of them had ever seen. A stallion exited the building and cleared his throat, grabbing the attention of the three, "Are you madams waiting for a table? We have no wait time this afternoon."

"Oh, great." Fluttershy spoke up and trotted to the closest empty table and sat down. "How about here? ...if that's fine with you girls," she called, hoping that they wouldn't object.

Looks fine," Rainbow commented, flying over to sit next to her friend. Pinkie Pie followed suit. "So... do you have any money in that strange bag you've got there?"

Fluttershy paused for a moment, then quickly rummaged through her bag. Alerce stepped off, letting her check every nook and cranny. Before long, she stumbled upon a small bag that jangled with the sound of metal. "This must be it, I knew there would be some in here." She took it and placed it on the table, untwisting the tie to get it open. Alerce climbed back on top of the bag and waited patiently for his food.

"So who gave you that anyway?" Rainbow pried as the waiter brought the three menus.

"A mare who is, I guess supposed to be my mother," Fluttershy said, scanning the menu. "I woke up in the back of a moving truck and she started talking to me as if I were her daughter."

"Ooo, they have a 'Citrus Berry Medley'. That sounds tasty," Pinkie spouted, then looked up at the two pegasus. "Oh, were you talking about your trip here? Keep talking, I want to hear more!"

"That does sound pretty good," Fluttershy responded. "Anyway, she brought me into the house that the truck was parked in front of. Initially I refused, but she dragged me in. I really think that people believe me to be this 'May' girl," she continued browsing, Rainbow and Pinkie were at full attention. "Every time I did something that my new memories were telling me I shouldn't do I always felt a slight pain in my head. It started off small, but gradually became worse, especially when I refused to fight that colt."

Rainbow Dash interrupted, "Wait, a colt? Why would he want to fight you?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure. Maybe it has something to do with the league my device talked about earlier." Glasses of water were delivered to their table. Fluttershy stirred around the ice in the glass as she continued, "Also he didn't want to fight me, but Alerce whom I got from the colt's father. He seemed ready to fight, but I just couldn't. During the middle of that crisis was when Twilight contacted me. That's probably why I sounded like I was in danger."

"Wait, your turtle was ready to fight? Like... without being provoked?" Rainbow asked, sipping her water.

"Maybe that's how they play; they must love roughhousing," Pinkie added.

Fluttershy looked down at Alerce, thinking back to last night, "Maybe..." quickly she scrambled back up and brushed her hair aside, "By the way, when did you two get here?"

"This morning, well at least daybreak," Pinkie said, looking around trying to find the waiter.

Fluttershy started thinking. *'Did they cause all this weird stuff to happen by coming here this morning? No, I can't blame them, but it is strange considering the timing.'* She looked at them both, then glanced down at Alerce, "You know Alerce here? He was a gecko yesterday."

Rainbow Dash's mouth dropped open. She closed it and looked at Fluttershy with a hint of skepticism. Pinkie set down her menu, looking at Fluttershy with a sense of wonder. "That can't happen, you know that." Rainbow said, her voice cracking.

The waiter approached the table, interrupting the three's talk and took their orders. The earth pony scribbled down their requests and left, leaving the three to continue. The humidity had dropped as the sun began arcing down towards the horizon. "It's true, when I woke up this morning, Alerce had become a turtle. It was surprising to say the least." She sipped some more of her water and continued, "Anyway, what's happening in Ponyville?"

How did you even get here, or why did you risk coming to come get me?" She couldn't imagine why it took her so long to ask.

"Originally it was just Rainbow Dash who volunteered to get sent by Twilight, saying something like, 'I don't want to leave my bestest friend behind!'" Pinkie opened with a mocking tone.

"Hey!" Rainbow shouted, staring at Pinkie.

Pinkie giggled, then continued, "Sorry Rainbow. Anyway, Twilight said that she's seen the book at Canterlot's library so the rest of the girls are going to go there and find the missing spell pages."

Fluttershy spat out her drink, getting some on the others. "Twilight doesn't have the spell to bring us back? W-We're stuck here until she finds it?"

"Don't worry," Rainbow said, kicking her legs up onto the table. "I'm sure she'll find it in no time. Why don't we just relax while we're here and just enjoy ourselves."

"Yes, but my animals..."

"Yeah, it'll be fun. Maybe we can see how that league thing goes," Pinkie interrupted, eyeing the waiter coming with plates full of food. She sharply gasped, "The food's here, let's dig in!" the waiter rolled his eyes and sighed at Pinkie's enthusiasm, setting the plates down in front of them. Fluttershy had never seen food like this before, a normal meal in Ponyville seemed plain in comparison. The salad was filled with bright yellow, red, blue and orange fruits of all different shapes, the lettuce with a crisp dark green drizzled in what appeared to be a red vinaigrette with multitude of visible herbs and spices. She immediately started digging into it, trying to savor every bite. With her ravenous hunger depleting, she had nearly forgot about Alerce whose small meal was still on the table.

"Oh, I'm sorry Alerce," Fluttershy apologized softly, grabbing the plate and setting it on the ground near the hungry Turtwig. The instant the plate touched the ground Alerce started chowing down. Fluttershy smiled and rose up to finish her meal, taking in the little amount of solace she could find before the moon rose on her inevitable fight.

With a groan Twilight blocked the light that was shining in her eyes with her hoof and sat up. She was brought to her bed again she noticed, lifting off her bedsheets. She opened her eyes and checked the mirror. Her hair was a mess, but she expected that. Using her horn, she magically grabbed her hairbrush and started her morning routine. Her left ear perked up from murmurs coming from downstairs. With striking efficiency she finished her routine and slowly trotted downstairs, still groggy from her sleep.

She looked around the library's main room and saw Applejack, Rarity and Spike talking amongst themselves. Owloysius, her owl, was resting on his perch near the window sleeping from a long night's patrol of the home. Applejack looked up at Twilight and hollered, "Look who's finally 'wake."

"Hey girls... and Spike. How long was I out? Did everything go alright?"

"You were only out for the night, Oh, and it went *perfectly*, darling," Rarity answered, flipping her mane. "I must say the light show was much better inside than in my boutique."

Twilight looked at the three, puzzled, "Where's Pinkie? Is she coming later?"

Rarity and Applejack looked at each other, worried. "Uh, Twi', Pinkie was whisked off with Rainbow."

"What!?" Twilight's eyes shrunk as shock and terror stuck her, "Oh no no no no, this is bad," she started pacing, "I don't even know if the spell I used was the right deviation, and it I only know it to work on one pony. What if... what if sending two over screws everything up? I might've killed my two friends..." Twilight buried her head in her hooves, trying to go over everything in her head again. "Why did I even do this?"

"Well, Rainbow's confidence rubs off quite easy. Don't worry about it Twi', I'm sure with Rainbow's stubbornness they'll find a way to survive.

‘Sides, we need you to be at your best when we go to find that spell,’ Applejack assured her.

Twilight brought her head back up, “You’re right. I need to write to Princess Celestia about getting into the royal archives,” she felt her stomach rumble as she spoke. “Ugh, I need to get some food before we plan anything.”

“I’ve got ‘cha covered sugar cube,” Applejack proudly stated, trotting to a cart full of apples and tossed some over to Twilight.

“Thanks Applejack,” Twilight said, biting down on one of the large red apples. “Alright, I need to write a letter to the princess to request access to the royal library. In the mean time you two I’d get at least enough supplies for a day’s trip. I’ll meet you outside near the main road out of town when I’m ready.”

“You got it Twi,” Applejack said, making her way out of the library and back to her home in Sweet Apple Acres.

“I’ll be sure to pack for everything,” Rarity stated, walking out the door.

“Make sure you don’t over pack!” Twilight yelled, just getting her message out before she heard the loud thud of a wooden door closing. She sighed and turned to Spike who had already taken out an empty scroll and quill to relay her message. “Good, now take a note,” Spike started writing out her message.

‘Dear Princess Celestia,

I’m writing to you to request access to the Royal Archives in Canterlot. My studies have brought me to a dead end and the edition of the book I have been using is incomplete. This study is of utmost importance and it is imperative that I finish my research on this spell as quickly as possible. My friends’ safety hinges on the information in the complete copies of Professor Arcan Griswald’s texts, and I do not wish to endanger their livelihoods.

I urgently await your answer.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle.'

With that, Spike rolled up the scroll and blew fire on it, turning it into a purple mist that flew out of the cracks of the window. Twilight went back upstairs and grabbed pair of saddle bags with a purple six-pointed star garnering its front and slipped it on. After getting the strap snug she met up again with Spike who was holding another scroll. "She responded really quickly this time." Spike said, preparing to read it. "My faithful student Twilight, of course you can use the royal library, you are my student after all." Spike stopped, "She doesn't sound too worried."

"You know the Princess," Twilight said, sticking apples, small flasks of water and some blankets into her bags, "She's probably just confident enough in my abilities and trusts I'll get things taken care of." She turned to Spike, "Spike, could you take care of Fluttershy's animals while we're away?"

"You know what happened last time Twilight," Spike returned, shrugging his shoulders. "I guess it wouldn't hurt."

"Great, make sure to lock up when you leave." Twilight reminded him, opening the the front door. "I shouldn't be gone for more than two days. If anything does happen I'll write you a letter, alright?"

"Good luck!" Spike yelled out as Twilight left the house. She heard a small hoot and an apology from inside. She laughed and headed towards the eastern path out of town. The sky was covered with a thick overcast and a cool wind pierced Twilight's coat. She sat and waited patiently for the other two to arrive. Taking a pink and white striped scarf out from her bag and wrapping it around her neck, she readied herself for the three's journey to Canterlot.

Chapter 4

Royal Archives

"I can see Canterlot's main gates from here," Twilight called out. The city was perched on the edge of a mountain cliff with waterfalls above, creating a natural moat that spilled down to the land below. Ivory towers rose above the main wall with golden spires at their peaks. Lush gardens garnered the outer walls with evergreens scattered throughout. The massive city was awe inspiring, but it was nothing new to Twilight. One doesn't forget their home so easily. The sun shone brightly and a warm wind complimented the inviting, yet regal stature of the capitol.

"I've never seen the city in daylight this close before," Rarity said, taking one last sip of her water. "The way the sun glistens throughout; it's marvelous!"

"It definitely woke you up in the morning, that's for sure," Twilight joked, giving Rarity and Applejack a small chuckle as they approached the draw bridge. The bridge was as crowded as Twilight remembered. There were always ponies coming in and out of the city: merchants with supplies to sell in stores and the streets, dignitaries with audiences with the royal sisters, and visitors staring in awe as one does in the celestial sisters' city.

On the drawbridge they could see almost the whole of Equestria. The entire westward expansion was drenched in golden light as the sun descended towards the horizon. Several unicorn fillies ran through the legs of travelers off to play silly games, something Twilight never did as at that age. She spent her time studying magic under Princess Celestia's wing, trying desperately to prove her worth to the alicorn.

"Watch out Twi'!" Applejack shouted, knocking Twilight out from her thoughts as she ran into the back of a colt. He was helping to move a crop of baked goods into Canterlot. She stepped back and shook her head, tripping over her own hooves in the process.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Twilight said, rubbing her forehead. The colt snorted and turned away, continuing on with his haul. It had been a while since

Twilight was in such a crowded area, and her lack of attention showed. She sighed and continued walking, trying to slink away from embarrassment.

“Why tha’ nerve of that guy,” Applejack huffed. “Are ya alright Twi’?”

“Yeah, I just lost my focus for a second,” Twilight responded, seeing the interior of the city. The inside was much bigger than the outside suggested, in fact, much bigger. Large white buildings scattered across the expanse of land, surrounded by massive parks with ponds and deciduous trees that provided much needed contrast to the crowded area surrounding the castle. Shops and houses crammed along the street towards the alicorns’ palace. It was easy to lose your place in a conversation since the street-trotters and merchants were so loud. Everything in Equestria was available for purchase: produce, magic spell books, saddlebags, the fanciest jewelry a pony could buy, dresses and other practical clothing, housewares. Twilight could never remember everything on that street, she mostly just visited the old bookstore on the corner.

“So where are we going first? Maybe shop for a few things on our way to the castle?” Rarity asked. “I want to see what the designers up here are up to, see if it can spark a few ideas.”

“Later,” Twilight said, turning right off the main road, heading towards a more communal part of the city.

“Wait, where are you going?” Rarity wondered, trotting quicker to catch up.

“Yeah, weren’t we supposed t’ go see Celestia?” Applejack prodded.

Twilight turned her head back and stopped, making sure this time that she wouldn’t run into another pony. “Yeah, but I want to stop at my old house beforehand. The library back at Ponyville doesn’t have quite as many books as my old place so I want to check it before bothering the princess.”

“Well we never did get t’ see your old place when we went t’ the gala,” Applejack thought aloud. “Oh what the hay, let’s go.” Twilight nodded and galloped down the stone road with Applejack and Rarity following close behind.

Past parks and ponds, Twilight's old home towered off the stone road. A spiral staircase wrapped around the tower to the massive main room with its enormous glass outer wall. It was just as Twilight had remembered it. She stepped off the road and made her way up the staircase, oblivious to the lack of hooves behind her. Magically one of the saddlebags opened and Twilight dug around for her old key. After poking around she found it, grabbed it and opened the back door. The elegance of the blue interior provided a massive contrast to the down to earth feel of Twilight's home in Ponyville. It was a refreshing change. She looked back to see the other girls, but they didn't follow her in. Twilight made her way down to find Rarity and Applejack standing at the front of the house, conversing. "What are you girls doing? Come on in."

"Rarity and ah' were just talkin', and," Applejack started. "Is this really your ol' place?" she quickly caught her mistake, "Ah mean, it looks a little... pricey."

Twilight stood dumbfounded. She thought for a moment and realized the problem. "Oh, well it does look a little expensive but that is the norm here," Twilight assured Applejack. "I'm still paying on the rent during my stay in Ponyville."

Applejack blinked, "Why, how d' you get the money t' pay for... that?"

Rarity broke off from the group and trotted up the stairs, "You two can argue about this all day, but I'm going to go inside. If this is normal for Canterlot, it must be extravagant." She turned the corner and escaped from Twilight's view.

Twilight turned back to Applejack who looked like she was crunching numbers in her head. "Well, I get some government grants for my research which helps to pay for my old place," Twilight explained, wanting to end this so she could commence her search. "Never mind that, I need to find my older copies of Grizwald's books," she galloped back up to the library. "Are you coming?" Applejack followed. They entered to the sight of Rarity inspecting every nook and cranny of the building. Twilight decided to ignore her musings and began her search.

The library glowed with the warm purple light of Twilight's magic as books flew off the shelves and floated around her. One by one she searched for the spell books. It had been a while since she had been here and the layout of the library back in Ponyville was conflicting with her old collection's whereabouts. Applejack and Rarity ducked and weaved through the volley of texts until they all suddenly dropped to the ground. "Found it!" Twilight exclaimed, beginning to skim through the pages.

"That was rather quick." Rarity said, dusting herself off.

"I know it's been a while since I've been here, but I don't forget things that easily," Twilight responded, digging through "Arcane Alchemy and Dubious Divination". She chuckled as she browsed through, just now remembering that Grizwald's texts had a famous humorous side to them. Page by page, Twilight found spells she had never imagined to be truly possible, especially before sending someone outside the realm of space and time. She reached the end of the book, and the spell to bring someone back from where Fluttershy was was nowhere to be found. "Argh! How is it not in here? This is the latest copy of the book," Twilight yelled, slamming her head into the pages in frustration.

"I'm sure the castle has the original edition. No other place would." Rarity insisted.

Sighing, Twilight took her head out of the book and closed it. "I know," Twilight said apprehensively. "To be honest I've never been in the royal archives. Everyone who's seen it said it's absolutely massive. It could take us days just to find even *one* of Grizwald's texts." She set all the books back on the shelf and looked through her bag, grabbing a gold card with silver text.

"Well, there's no use stayin' here then," Applejack stated, heading out the door.

"Wait Applejack!" Twilight hollered, stopping Applejack in her tracks. "You can't just walk in, you'd need an audience with the princess." She stood up and walked over to the girls. "This card will let us in. They can't say no to the princess's own prized student." With that, she put the card back into her bag and headed out the door, hoping that the rumors of the archive weren't true.

The three galloped back the way they came, trying to make up for lost ground. Their hooves could be heard from the main street causing onlookers to take notice. Twilight slowed down as they approached the merge onto the main road so they wouldn't attract attention, at least not as much as they already had. Rarity and Applejack followed suit and merged in with the massive crowd of unicorns and earth ponies.. Twilight made sure to keep her eyes ahead of her. All she could think about was what could be lurking in the archives. The amount of knowledge it could contain only excited her, but what kind of ancient secrets and tomes would there be that no pony was to see? The more she thought about it, the crazier her predictions became.

"So, what do ya' reckon is in that archive anyway?" Applejack asked, breaking Twilight out of her train of thought.

"Well every time I've been in the castle and asked about it I've only told about how large and dark it is. Apparently every book that's ever been written is in there. I don't quite believe them, but I've never seen it myself so there's no way for me to really know," Twilight explained. Slowly but surely they made their way through the massive crowd until the castle came squarely into view. Twilight noticed Rarity eyeing the glass fronts of stores and boutiques, making mental notes of other designers' techniques and designs. She was sure that once all of her friends returned to Ponyville she wouldn't see Rarity for an entire week; she chuckled a little just thinking about it.

The crown jewel of the city, the celestial sisters' castle, stood near the edge of town just looking over the mountain. Celestia's afternoon sun made the outer walls glisten, contrasting with the overcast that still loomed over Ponyville. Twilight and the others turned down to the smooth-stone path whose sides were lined with perfectly groomed, richly leaved trees. Several dignitaries waited with concerns and proposals at the front gates, hoping the guards would see them in.

"Next!" one of the guards yelled. A grey stallion lurched forward and presented his case to the guards. They both nodded and stepped out of the way to let the stallion in, then stepped back again. The line was completely empty in front of Twilight, so she approached the guards, her card floating in the air beside her. Both Rarity and Applejack were completely silent,

waiting patiently for Twilight to get them in. The guards were a white pegasus with a blue mane and tail and a grey unicorn with a white mane and tail. Both were clad in solid gold armor with swooping curved designs garnering their fronts and a galeas in their manes' colors covered their heads. They looked down at Twilight as she approached, stoic and unflinching. This put her a little on edge, but she had visited the castle enough times to know their act.

Twilight cleared her throat and began, "My name is Twilight Sparkle, personal protege of Princess Celestia." She floated the card in front of the two guards; it bore the royal crest and Twilight's name. "I have written permission from the princess to conduct research in the royal archives. These two ponies will be accompanying me and helping me in my studies."

The two guards scanned over the card. They looked at each other and stepped to the side, allowing Twilight and her friends to pass. "One of the guards inside will escort you to the archives," the unicorn guard stated roughly.

"Thank you sirs," Twilight said, motioning over to the girls to go through. The doors were wooden with a red lacquer which towered over them as they went through the archway. The interior still held the class and elegance that it had during the gala; the walls were painted a pastel purple with golden trimmings, thick red carpet draped across the floor with a large symbol of the sun in the middle of the crossroad. The stairs in front of Twilight was graced with stainedglass windows of the day and night cycles which cast their colored light on the black and white checkered floor. Applejack and Rarity were too busy during the night of the gala to truly look at the castle, but they were taking their opportunity now. Although they had just seen ponies walk into the castle, the main hall was completely empty save themselves.

A royal guard came out from under large archway and called out to the girls, "Are you Miss Twilight Sparkle?"

Twilight looked over, eyeing the unicorn guard, "Yes, I am."

"The princess told me of your arrival and sent me to escort you to the archives. The princess is busy with other matters so a casual visit will not be possible." He motioned them over and trotted down a long hallway. The

three made their way to the guard, traveling to a section of the castle none of them had ever been. It seemed to go on forever; neither of the three ponies said a word as the guard continued his route. Twilight bit her lower lip, anxiously waiting for them to arrive at the end of the hall.

After a few more minutes of pacing, the guard stopped in front of an archway on the side of the hallway. Twilight gained speed to see what the guard was doing. He looked over at the three girls, opened a wooden door and waited for them to arrive. "The archives are down this staircase. It's a long way down so please watch your step."

Twilight caught up and stared into the doorway, "Uh, did you say it's... down?" The hallway sloped down at what looked like the angle of the cliff face for a few hundred feet under the city. At the end of the hallway she saw the stairs curve clockwise down into the mountain. She couldn't fathom how far down the staircase might go down into the rock, but she would soon find out. She looked back at the guard who simply stared back at her with his continued stoic pose. After taking a deep breath she motioned over to the girls and started her way down the hallway. When they finally made their pace she heard the door close behind them, causing her to snap her head back. She closed her eyes, took another deep breath and continued.

Step by step, they descended into the mountain, traveling down countless flights of redcarpeted stairs. Each flight was separated with a small track of flat land to make sure one didn't fall down several thousand stairs without pause. Twilight panted. It was the most physical exercise that she had had in a long time, and the emotional stress of her three friends' situation didn't help her in the least. She opened up her water and took a large gulp. Rarity was fairing as well as Twilight, while Applejack kept a swift pace with no sign of exhaustion. "How are you girls holding up?" Twilight asked, closing her water bottle and storing it.

"Ah'm fine. Nothin' these legs can't handle," Applejack stated.

"I'm a little tired and sweaty," Rarity said. "Do you have any idea how much further we have to go? Not only that, but I don't want to know what it's going to be like to have to go all the way back up."

Twilight hadn't thought about the trip back up, but she was too eager to see what was in the archives to care. The more she thought about it, the

less she noticed the painted walls being replaced with stone and the red carpet's immediate stop. The lights still shone like the ones near the top, but it seemed more ominous. The stairwell wasn't finished. After what felt like hours, Twilight saw two large wooden doors ahead of her. They towered over them, being at least twelve feet high. She could feel her hooves shake in anticipation. "This is it."

"Hopefully it isn't too big," Rarity said, staring at the behemoth doors. "For all we know we could be down here for days."

"It's a good thing ah' brought enough food for y'all." Applejack replied, comforting Rarity just a little.

"Well, here we go." Twilight said, pushing one of the doors open. It was much heavier than she thought. She tensed every muscle in her body and threw all her weight into opening it. It grinded to a halt and was open enough for the three to fit through. "Can someone find a light switch or anything?" she asked as she entered the room. It was a nearly black inside the circular room with torches illuminating the perimeter near the twelve-story high ceiling. Bookshelves lined the outside walls with a maze of them leading to the center of the room on the floor. Twilight couldn't make out what the floor was made from, but she felt it was stone. Rarity was right, she thought, she could easily be lost in the massive cylindrical library.

"What do ya' reckon we do, Twi?" Applejack asked, still trying to make out the size of the room.

"Well we could split up and cover more ground, or stay together," Twilight started. "I'm sure if one of us finds something we can yell loud enough for each other to hear."

"Sounds fine by me," Rarity said as she headed off to the left. "If I find anything I'll make sure to say something right away. It is 'Grizwald' that we're looking for, correct?"

"Yeah," Twilight confirmed then looked over to Applejack. "You take the right and I'll head to the center."

“Can do!” Applejack responded then headed off, leaving Twilight by herself.

Twilight took a deep breath and trotted forward into the maze of bookshelves. There were so many books, most without labels or labels in languages she had never seen. She simply browsed through the mass of book spines, trying to find a book she was able to understand. After thirty bookshelves, she stopped to think about how to tackle this predicament. She was gaining quite a bit of ground, but almost every book was incomprehensible. *‘What did I get myself into?’* she thought as her enthusiasm dropped after every useless bookshelf. She closed her eyes to think, but was interrupted by a small noise. It sounded like somepony breathing. Twilight’s breath became quicker as she tip-hooved around the shelves to investigate. She poked her head out from a shelf and saw the silhouette of a pony, head down into an open book. There was a mountain of books on the sides of the desk obscuring her view of her culprit. *‘Wait, who could that be? Who else would have access to the archives?’* she thought, inching closer the pony.

The candles on the desk showed the pony to be a unicorn with a blue coat and a light blue mane. A dark blue chest-piece covered its chest. She could only see details on the unicorn’s head. With caution she stopped her approach, wondering what to do next. “Excuse me?” Twilight called out, startling the pony out of her sleep. She saw the pony stretch with a silhouette of a wing covering its face for a short second, then folding back in. Twilight swore she was seeing things as the pony looked over to her, its teal eyes staring back at her. “Umm, could you help me find something in here? I’ve never been in the archives before,” she said, nervously laughing a little as she spat it out.

The pony sat up and trotted towards Twilight, spreading her wings. Twilight stepped back, intimidated by the sight. She hadn’t seen anything unusual when she saw it the first time; the pony was an alicorn. She could still make out little of the pony as it approached, the light still behind it. It stopped and folded its wings back, its long shadow casting itself on Twilight. “You are the Element of Magic, are you not?” it asked. Twilight swore she had heard the pony’s voice somewhere but couldn’t quite place it.

“Um, yes. Yes I am,” Twilight responded, not knowing where the pony was going with this. “How do you know who I am?”

“I’m sorry, I seem to always forget to properly introduce myself,” it said, her long azure horn glowing and illuminating the archive. Twilight blocked out the light with her hoof and slowly lowered it to see the alicorn in her full regal majesty. “I am Princess Luna, bringer of the night. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to introduce myself to you in the old castle,” she took a step back in defense. “Please forgive my actions on that night, I wish you no harm,” her voice had a hint of despair as she retracted from her formal speech.

Twilight took a step back, confused, “Hurt you? Why would I-” she stopped to remember what happened the last time they met. “Of course I won’t hurt you, you’re Princess Celestia’s sister. My name is Twilight Sparkle. I’m glad to finally meet you.”

“Twilight...” Luna started. “I’ve heard much about you from Celes. She often shows me the letters you send her about your studies. They’re very interesting,” she said, pacing.

“She shows you those?” Twilight gasped, her face flush red from embarrassment. “What are you doing down here, don’t you have to raise the moon soon?”

Luna turned and closed all her books with her magic, “I always come down here. Ever since it was built I came down when I was awake so I could study. I couldn’t handle the voices I heard when sitting on the throne,” she sighed, continuing to clean.

“Voices?” Twilight interrupted, intrigued by Luna’s story.

“Yes. When Celes and I sit on the throne we can hear the voices of our subjects in Equestria. The voices I heard... they were never very pleasant.”

“Oh,” Twilight muttered, trying not to upset the alicorn. “Since you know your way around the archives, could you help me find a certain spell? It’s very important that I find this right away.”

“Do you know who crafted it?” Luna asked, trotting back over to Twilight.

“It’s a spell from Arcan Grizwald. Have you heard of him before?”

Luna lightly laughed, “I’m very aware of Professor Grizwald’s work. In fact the first offering Celes and I got as rulers was one of his texts. During my reign before I was banished, I tried to use a spell that would make flowers grow in moonlight. What resulted was the destruction of the entire eastern half of the castle.”

Twilight couldn’t help but laugh at Luna’s silly tale, “So, even you had deviations occur? I thought only inexperienced magic users had that happen to them.”

“Oh no, Grizwald’s spells are the most intricate spells known to ponykind. Even the most powerful unicorn would have problems with his spells,” Luna explained, trotting into the hallway. “Come, I’ll see which of his books I can find.” The two made their way down the path Twilight took to get in. Luna was able to decipher all the texts’ names for Twilight, making her feel a little better about browsing the selection. It was ghastly quiet in the room, only the sound of hooves hitting stone and the flicker of flames could be heard. “Well none of them seem to be here,” Luna said, looking over to Twilight. “They’re probably along the inner wall. Knowing how old they are they shouldn’t be up too high.”

As they left the maze, Twilight couldn’t keep herself as her curiosity got the best of her, “So Princess, could I ask you something personal?”

Luna stopped to look over to Twilight, “Yes, what is it?” Twilight noticed her trying to regain her proper tone of voice.

“Well,” Twilight started. She had no idea how the princess would react to this question. She took a few deep breaths and continued. “Is... is what the history books say about your fight with Princess Celestia accurate?”

Luna looked down ashamed. Twilight took a step back, still wary about how the princess was going to act. “Yes, technically,” she finally said, breaking the tension around the two. “I just want to say that I was never

jealous of my sister's abilities or work, only the constant ill-gotten praise she received. I was angry at the rest of my subjects, and I still am." Luna started trotting again. Twilight could only watch as the armor-clad alicorn started to ramble. "My sister was always the one who loved to be in the spotlight. She was a ponies' pony. The Summer Sun Celebration was just her way of going out and seeing Equestria. Every year, I would make my way to my chambers to sleep through the day, and I would hear people celebrating that the night was over. I would hear fillies cry at night because they couldn't play outside since the night was 'too scary'-" Twilight started to sweat, becoming very uncomfortable around the princess, but her curiosity was peaked. "I never needed any praise for raising the moon. I never wanted that much attention. I know ponies need sleep, but it was their words that slayed me. Every winter solstice I would put my soul and everything I could into the night sky: a bright moon, a multitude of stars, the Milky Way was visible as well as the aurora borealis. I sat at the throne and heard nothing. They only cried about their lament that winter had come and the nights were too cold. They only wanted my sister's sun. Nothing I did ever made them happy-" The books on the shelves started to rumble, causing Twilight to become more nervous and jumpy. "Even when I was banished they wouldn't stop. They called me a demon and mocked me from the land I called home. They then had the nerve to completely forget about me and treat me as some monster they would use to scare their children into going to sleep. Even so much as to assume I was merely myth. Every time I would begin to forget about what they did I would hear them again; their hatred of me still haunted me, even on my own moon-" The ground started shaking. In her emotional whirlwind, Luna's magic began to spiral out of control. "*Why!? I gave up everything for them! Why did they hate me so much!?*"

"Luna! Stop!" Twilight yelled. The room's shaking came to a halt and the princess lowered her head. The last of the teetering books fell to the ground and filled the room with sound of them landing. The library was sick with the sound of silence.

"I-I'm sorry," Luna said, the archives now absent of light. "I've just never talked to anyone about this before. I shouldn't have exploded like that."

Twilight got closer, "Do you regret what happened then? I'm so sorry for prying."

Luna lifted her head and looked at Twilight with tears streaming down her cheeks, "I only regret getting my sister involved. She shouldn't have had to defend those ungrateful monsters." After gaining her composure, she trotted to the outer wall and lifted twenty books from the shelves to scan. "It's got to be around here somewhere..." she said to herself, trailing off mid-sentence.

An uncomfortable air around the princess filled the room, causing Twilight to stay a good distance away. She had no idea that Equestria was like how Luna described a thousand years ago, and she hoped that things were better now. She didn't want to fight Luna again, and Luna would be better prepared. Twilight shook off those thoughts. All that mattered with getting Fluttershy and the rest of her friends back home. With that in mind, Twilight took a look at the books Luna had brought out. "Some of these should be in Equestrian. The blue one is one of Grizwald's."

"Alright, I'll take a look," Twilight said, feverishly taking control of the book and setting it on the ground. She scanned through the pages as Luna hunted down more copies. Every one of the spells in the text Twilight recognized, it seemed to be a smaller version of the book she had back at her home. She read deeper, hoping to find at least a hint of where the spell could be found, but everything was word-for-word like book she had read already. She closed it and looked up at Luna who had found three other texts.

"So, did you find what you needed?" Luna asked.

"No, it's just a condensed version of the book I have at home," Twilight responded. "Hopefully these other ones have something."

"Most of these are older if that helps. I think there's two more around here somewhere." Luna explained, heading off again. Once again, Twilight delved into the texts. There were a few new spells near the end of the books, but most of them were repeats. Even 'The Completely Complete Essential Spell Book by Professor Arcan S. Grizwald: The Compendium' held nothing.

Twilight yelled out in frustration. Every other spell in the books had a counter-spell. Even ones as complicated as animal/inanimate object gene

splicing had a fix, but not the transportation spell. She opened her bag and had a drink of her water. Twilight was exhausted by the hours that seemed to slip by in the archive. Over to her right she saw Luna coming with an old leather-bound book with frayed and loose pages. Applejack and Rarity were following behind her, talking to each other and Luna.

"This is it," Luna called out, setting the book down in front of Twilight. "This is the book that Celes and I received as a gift when Equestria was remade. It is thousands of years old, so please take good care of it."

The book was leather bound and quite thick. There were upholstered letters stitched into the cover that spelled out "Spells of Arcan Grizwald". The pages inside were parchment with both Equestrian writing and a language Twilight had never seen. Many of the spells were the same, but it was the original copy; those spells were bound to be in it. The book started on page seven which stood out to her, but she didn't pay too much attention to it. Each page had calculations and very specific instructions for pose and technique to perform each spell. The illustrations showed something standing on its hind legs to demonstrate. Twilight had never seen anything like it before, but she continued her hunt unabated. After a few hundred pages of spells, the book suddenly stopped. Nothing. "Are you sure this is all you have? I still can't find anything," Twilight said, exasperated.

"Really? That's the book where that spell originally came from." Luna explained. She started to pace, thinking. "What-" she started, still in thought, "What exactly is the spell you're looking for?"

"...and it was the most disgusting thing I've ever-" Twilight heard Rarity say as Luna cut out her conversation. Rarity perked her ears up to hear what was happening between the other unicorns.

"It's a spell that sends one outside of the realm of space and time," Twilight explained. "A deviation happened and my friends were accidentally sent somewhere and I can't bring them back," she started to get choked up, the guilt of that night returning to her. "I need the spell to reverse it."

Luna began pacing. "Oh, that spell. I know that one," she stopped and lifted the old book and scanned through the pages. She brought her head back with a sneer, "Huh, the preface and back have ripped out."

"What!?" the three exclaimed, staring at each other in disbelief.

With a distraught look Luna flipped through the book again. Twilight bit her lower lip anxiously and turned to Rarity and Applejack, "If those pages were ripped out, what are we going to do?" Her chest suddenly became heavy. "How are we supposed to bring them back now?"

"Ah' don't know," Applejack bluntly stated. "That spell has t' be somewhere, a copy of it had t' have been made at some point."

Twilight perked up, "That... is possible. The problem is who would have access to that first book and why wouldn't the copy be in the archives in the first place?" she started to think.

"Hey!" Luna called out. "I have an idea about what happened," the three turned her heads to see the alicorn digging through an old shelf filled with scrolls. "Someone had to have come here at some point to steal those pages. I come down here every day, so I would've noticed something wrong right away." She opened the scroll revealing a map and glanced over it. Her eyes widened as she scanned it. "Oh, I know," Luna said with a small tinge of malice in her voice. "Take a look at this," she motioned the girls closer.

"What is it?" Rarity asked as she approached. "Did you find that spell?"

"No, but I have a pretty good idea where the thieves who took it are from," she placed her hoof near the northern sea. "See that country? That's Ventia. It's quite the distance away from Equestria but I have a good feeling about my odds." She moved her hoof to a small dot a little north of the country name, "This city right here is Mistral City. This is where all of Grizwald's spells came from."

Twilight was taken back, "Is that why those spells are so hard to do? Is it because they're not Equestrian?"

"If there's any other reason for it than just being advanced then 'yes'," the princess responded. "Now, Mistral City has some strange properties to it. It's where space and time converge in this world, and that creates a city filled with different time periods and cultures. Unfortunately it's filled not too

friendly characters.” She looked up at the three with a stern look in her eyes. “It’s known as the ‘City of the Damned’.” Luna took the scroll and rolled it up, placing it in front of Twilight. “If the spells are anywhere, they are in that city. I have a feeling on why they either stole or destroyed ours, but that doesn’t matter. A full copy should be there.”

With a quick snap, Twilight took the map and examined it. “So, you think we should leave Equestria?” she said with a nervous tick. She looked over to the girls who both stared back at her with worry in their eyes. “Is it safe? What’s out there? What happens if they don’t have a copy?” She asked, placing the scroll in her bag.

“You should be fine, you have the physical representations of the Elements of Harmony. Those will help you out quite a bit.”

“Actually, we don’t have them.” Rarity interrupted. “As much as I adore it, I haven’t touched it in months.”

“Same,” Applejack joined in. “Ah’ reckoned ah’ di’nt need any fancy necklace on this trip.”

“I’m guess you didn’t either?” Luna volleyed over to Twilight who simply shook her head. “Well I can retrieve them for you; I did help to create them after all. I don’t know why you wouldn’t carry them around more often, they enhance your special talents in a pinch or high-adrenaline situations.” She stopped. “So, what are you going to do?”

The three looked at each other again, trying to read each others facial expressions. Twilight noticed her friends’ nervous looks which just added to her anxiety.

After a long pause, Luna finally spoke up, “Here let me make this easier on you.” Her horn started to glow, enveloping the three in a bright white light. “I’ll send you to the guest rooms so you can sleep on it. If you want to go, I will summon your element charms and give you a note on where to go. If you don’t want to go, the pegasi will bring you back to Ponyville.” The light got brighter as Twilight felt her hooves leave the ground. She scrambled to get them back on the floor. “If you do decide to go the guards will bring you to the northern Equestrian border. You have to make the rest of the trip on foot.”

“Wait, what happens if-” Twilight called out, but she her vision started to blur, startling her. The light became brighter, causing her body to tingle. She looked over to Luna who was simply staring back at her with a thoughtful look on her face.

“Good luck,” the alicorn said as the light fully enveloped Twilight. She could feel her consciousness slipping as she felt her whole body lightly compressed.

A mere moment later, the white light disappeared revealing a red painted room with three beds and large windows that showed the sun still setting over Equestria. They had landed in the guest room. The three stood in silence, trying to let everything that Luna had described sink in. “So, what do you girls think? Should we go? The spell might not even be there,” Twilight asked, starting to pace nervously.

“Do we really have a choice?” Rarity asked, inspecting her new living quarters. “No pony I know of has ever been outside of Equestria so I don’t really know what to expect, but we have to go regardless.”

“It can’t be too different from Equestria.” Applejack said reassuringly. “If we do I just need to make sure Big Mac knows I’ll be away for a while longer. Applebuck season’s coming.”

After a long pause, Twilight spoke up, “Well, if that city is truly where space and time can converge, Luna may be right. There might be no other place where this spell could be.” She thought aloud. “Who knows what that city will be like, we could walk into a door and find Fluttershy for all we know.” With a sigh she stopped and turned to Applejack. “Alright, I still need to write that letter to Spike, so I’ll mention something in there about the Apple family.” Twilight said, taking a quill, ink and parchment from her bag and set up on the nearest flat surface. She began to write:

‘Dear Spike,

Tomorrow the girls and I are heading to the country of Ventia in search of the spell we need to bring Fluttershy back. I don’t know when I’ll be back, so please continue to watch over Fluttershy’s

cottage. If you can feed Gummy and tell Mr. and Mrs. Cake that Pinkie is gone it would really help.

Applejack needs you to tell her family that she's gone. Apparently it's close to Applebuck Season again so they need that information right away.

Thank you so much for helping at such a short notice. I promise I'll be back as soon as I can.

Twilight.'

With her writing supplies neatly put away, she slid the letter under the door for the mail pony to collect then sat in her bed. She was still anxious about her coming travels, but she agreed with her friends. She had no choice but to leave. Twilight looked over at the other girls who were both sound asleep. The room had become dark as the sun fully set, letting the moon rise over the horizon. She slipped into the thick covers and closed her eyes, drifting off to sleep.

Twilight arose with the sun's rays hitting her square in the face. She rubbed her eyes and looked over to the nightstand; the crown with her six-star purple cutie mark was there with a note. She grabbed the note and read it, noticing instructions on where the chariots would be and when they would depart. Rarity and Applejack were still sound asleep. "Girls, wake up!" Twilight hollered, causing the two to shuffle. She grabbed the crown from the nightstand, set it in her bag and opened the set of doors. They were situated at the end of a long hallway that made its way to the main hall, so it wouldn't take too long to leave. She heard small mutters of the other girls waking up as she went into her bag and grabbed an apple to eat.

"S't mornin' already?" Applejack asked, groggy from her sleep.

"Yes it is. I'm going to get some supplies for our trip, you girls meet me where that map says we need to be." Twilight stated, heading out the door.

"Ah'lright," Applejack yawned, grabbing her element neck piece.

Twilight made her way down the hall and out of the castle. The sun had just rose, making the whole town glow in a pale yellow light. In the courtyard she could see a chariot being set up with several pegasus guards getting strapped in for the flight. She made a mental note of the location and trotted along the main street that was near void of ponies.

Shops were just setting up for the day as Twilight noticed a small shop was set up on a street corner. It was a market store with fresh fruits, vegetables and grains. Twilight looked over the immense amounts of produce, making sure it was cost effective for their trip. She had no idea what kind of food would be on the outside so she didn't want to take any chances.

After picking up more food than they probably needed, Twilight made her way back to the castle. She saw several dignitaries had already started to bother the guards to enter the castle as she noticed Applejack and Rarity were standing near the chariot, all ready to go. Rarity was already wearing her element proudly. The pegasi were almost finished preparing for the trip as Twilight arrived, setting down the bag of groceries, "This should be enough for a while at least."

"Ah'm sure if we run out there'll be some towns along the road to pick up more." Applejack said.

"That is if they take bits as currency," Rarity interrupted. "Personally I wouldn't want to eat in a potentially disgusting road town, but if we must I'm willing to make an exception."

"We're ready to depart, Miss Sparkle," one of the guards stated, preparing to head to the skies. After rationing the food between themselves, they headed on the chariot. They made sure they were all securely then and took off at an astounding speed. Applejack looked down and gulped.

"Ahah've never been on a flyin' chariot before." Applejack stated nervously.

"It'll be fine," Twilight assured her. She knew Applejack wasn't afraid of heights: she'd walked on clouds before. The prospect of leaving

Equestria must have been getting to her. "I've been on these many times. It'll be over before you know it."

As they left Canterlot, the three could see a large expanse of forest on the earth, covering most of what they could see. Small specks of pony towns spotted the landscape as mountains threatened the carefully placed clouds. At the horizon they could see a large expanse of plains and rivers as narrow roads snaked their way across the ground. Twilight's breathing became heavy, the altitude's lower density of oxygen getting to her. She looked down over the edge of the chariot and saw just how fast they were going. Anything she saw just flashed by her and traveled off into the distance. Before they knew it the chariot began to slow down.

"So, what was that city called that Luna told us about?" she asked, looking over to Twilight.

"I think it was Mistral City," Twilight responded. "What confused me is what she called it. The 'city of the damned'. I wonder what that's about."

Rarity winced as the chariot started to descend, "Whatever the reason I would rather not find out why."

The chariot made its way through the canopy and landed on an earthy forest trail. "We have been instructed to drop you three off here at the northern border. If you would exit off the back we can make our way back to the castle," one of the guards explained. The three hopped off, Rarity trying to shake a loose clod of dirt off of her hoof. The pegasi flew off back south, leaving the three on their own. The forest was dense, with a little amount of light able to penetrate the canopy. It felt just like the Everfree Forest. Twilight noticed they were close to the exit and trotted down the path to see where it took them.

"So, this is it, huh?" Twilight stated as she stared out into the open grasslands and blue sky ahead of her. Apprehensively, the three trotted down the path into the wide expanse, leaving the safety of their home of Equestria and began their hike to Ventia on hoof.

Chapter 5

Legacy

Beep *beep* *beep* Fluttershy's Pokédex began beeping as the clock stuck nine o'clock. Petalburg Gym was lit up to illuminate the path for aspiring trainers and to welcome them to the Pokémon League. Fluttershy was not one of them. The sun had set hours ago, giving way to the moon and stars whose light was drowned out by the buzzing city lights. As she stood near the building, a group of young ponies opened the doors and entered with a large blue mudskipper with orange body protrusions and two dark blue fins on its head. It made Alerce look like a small chew toy in comparison, which caused Fluttershy to shiver.

"Hey, is it time for your fight yet?" Rainbow Dash asked, excitedly. It had been a few hours since their meal at the 'Horse du Jour' and she seemed very antsy for something interesting to happen. "Also, did you see all those ponies staring at me and Pinkie? We must be so cool here!"

"Maybe it's because you aren't wearing any clothes," remarked Fluttershy as she glanced at Rainbow's exposed hide. She shook her head and looked back at the gym, "Anyway I'm not fighting. I didn't fight that colt near Oldale Town, so why would I fight a league member?" At that moment she felt Alerce rub its head against her leg, making her feel a little less anxious.

"If you aren't going to do anything then why are we waiting here? We could be doing so many other things like exploring those woods over there, or we could see what else is in this town," Pinkie argued. She looked around, surveying her surroundings for anything better to do, at least that's what Fluttershy thought she was doing.

"Those memories I have from that girl is telling me I have to go to the gym while I'm here. If I don't then those headaches will come back," Fluttershy preemptively rubbed her head, then quickly set her hoof back down. "While I'm here I'd like things to be as calm as possible."

Tension filled minutes slowly ticked by as the three waited. The night was quiet; the bustle of the small town had halted leaving only lit windows and illuminated business signs for any of them to take notice of. The forests were pitch black due to the town's lights which caused Fluttershy to feel cramped and tense. Back in Ponyville, the moon's light would dance across the ground with help of the stars, allowing all of Equestria to be seen at night. Even the Everfree Forest, which Fluttershy steered clear of, felt more inviting than the oppressive void that the forests had become.

A few moments later the group of ponies came out from the gym, ecstatic. The blue unicorn was holding a case with several pins in the air with his mouth, hollering and jumping around with excitement. Fluttershy watched as they entered a building with a light red roof to celebrate. She took a deep breath and checked the time on her Pokédex. 9:27 pm. After closing the device she set it back in her bag and headed towards the door in silence with Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie following in suit. She took one last deep breath and entered the gym.

The inside felt much more massive than the outside had implied. It was built like a fighting dojo: punching bags attached to the ceiling with chains, mats and a hardwood floor with two distinct sides separating it. A Poké Ball design was placed in the center of the gym floor; it seemed to be the theme in this town. Red bleachers covered the perimeter with several ponies in the crowd with signs, bright white florescent lights hung from the ceilings. It was a little much Fluttershy thought. "Wow, this place is huge!" Pinkie Pie said excitedly.

"Welcome to Petalburg Gym!" a voice bellowed from the other side of the gym. A light brown stallion with a short black mane approached the three with a smile on his face. "Congratulations on getting-" he paused and started a quick gallop over to Fluttershy. "May, you're my 9:30 challenger? The computer must've screwed something up. Your name came up as a weird mess of characters. I'm surprised they let you come here so early." He hugged her, making her shrink back. "How was the move?"

"Um, my name's not-" Fluttershy started and was halted by a short twinge of pain. After squeezing her eyes shut, she opened them and squeaked, "It was... fine," she paused. "Dad."

"Uh, Fluttershy? What are you-"

“So, who are your two,” the stallion asked, cutting Rainbow Dash short. He looked at them with a puzzled look. “Your two naked friends?”

Fluttershy regained her composure. She could feel the confidence of the girl her memories were from coming through as she talked to the stallion. “This is Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie,” she pointed to both of them, then looked down at Alerce. “...and this is Alerce, my, uh, Turtwig?” Her face went flush. She couldn’t stand not knowing what an animal was called and she had no way of remembering if she was wrong, and the stress was making it hard for her to remember.

“Haha, that is a Turtwig, I assure you. I’m surprised Birch gave you a Pokémon all the way from Sinnoh.” He said, trotting back to the opposite side of the arena.

“Um, actually he was a Treecko fir-”

“Alright, let’s see what your Turtwig can do.” The stallion said, facing them with a Poké Ball at the ground. “My name is Norman, the fifth gym leader of Hoenn’s Pokémon League. I humbly accept your challenge.”

Fluttershy’s eyes widened, “F-f-f-fifth?” she began to shake. ‘*How could this be happening,*’ she thought. “I-I won’t fight you-” she tried to say as her vision became white and she felt a wave of dizziness rush over her. She wobbled back and forth and fell over.

She heard a faint voice to her left reverberating through her head. “*Hey dad!*” Fluttershy quickly opened her eyes and turned her head. The girl from the day before was standing right next to her. She could see her in much better detail than before, but her body was still wispy and translucent. Her face was like that of a monkey’s, but it was sleek with a pointer chain and smaller nose. Her hair was only on the top of her head flowing down like a mane. The spirit’s eyes were much smaller on her head proportion wise than Fluttershy and she was a little taller than her as well. Fluttershy looked around frantically for something familiar, but Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie were gone. The bleachers were empty as well.

“*May, I didn’t expect to see you here,*” the strange looking Norman said, hugging May. He was wearing a red jacket and black pants like he

had outside the vision. He towered over Fluttershy, making her a little anxious. *"How was the move? Did you get your Pokémon yet?"*

"Yeah!" she shouted as she grabbed a Poké Ball from her belt and released a Treecko. *"I got him from Professor Birch for saving him from a Zigzagoon."* Fluttershy couldn't believe what she was seeing. May still had her Treecko in tact. Why Alerce changed into a Turtwig that morning was all she could think about as this transpired.

Norman bent down and patted the Treecko on the head, *"He looks like a strong one. Maybe we can battle some day when you get stronger."* He looked up at May and placed his hands on her shoulders. *"We have a legacy to uphold, May. Do the best you can and have fun. I'll be rooting for you."*

"Thanks dad." May responded, sending the Treecko back into the Poké Ball. She turned away and headed towards the doors.

"Wait, there's a boy outside. It's Wally, I think. Could you show him how to catch a Pokémon? It would really make the kid's day."

"Uh, sure." May responded as she closed the doors behind her.

"Good luck!" Norman yelled as Fluttershy's vision went white again. She shivered, trying to make sense of the scene.

Before she knew it her vision was perfectly clear again. She was head down into her hooves and the arena was completely silent. Embarrassed, she slowly lifted her head, seeing all the ponies in the gym staring at her with concern contorting their expressions. She got up to her four hooves and quickly uttered an apology.

"Are you alright Fluttershy? You had us worried for a bit there," Rainbow Dash asked, but got no response. Fluttershy could only think about the vision and how everything in this situation felt wrong. Norman was waiting with a white feral monkey with a red tuft of hair on its forehead out on the field. She couldn't help but notice its large black claws as well.

After a deep breath, Fluttershy called out, "I won't fight y-" a sharp pain coursed through her head, causing her to double over. She took some quick breaths and let the pain subside. '*Why is the pain coming back? I'm not supposed to fight him,*' she thought, trying to deny Norman again. After feeling another shot of pain coming on she decided enough was enough. "Alright, I'll fight you."

She heard the crowd roar. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Pinkie asked. It was the first time Fluttershy had seen Pinkie upset since her surprise birthday fiasco, but she had no other choice.

"I-I'm fine," she stated coldly. "Alerce, please be careful" The small turtle make his way onto the field and looked back with a smile on his face. The crowd roared, streamers flew as air horns were let off.

"Let the next chapter of our legacy begin, May," Norman said, pointing out to the monkey. "Vigoroth, use Focus Punch!" At that moment Vigoroth's right fist started to glow white. Fluttershy could see the raw fire in its eyes. Panicking, she dug through her bag and whipped out her Pokédex. She opened it up, hoping it could give her some answers. It beeped as it was opened and the screen began to glow. It showed a screen with an image of Alerce with a list of attacks he had skill enough to perform. One attack stuck out to her. It was the only one she was willing to do.

"Alerce, use Withdraw!" Fluttershy commanded, hoping it was enough to ward off whatever that beast was going to do. Alerce nodded and shielded himself.

Not a moment later, the Vigoroth sprung forward, arching its arm back and slammed its fist into Alerce and the ground, sending him flying and tumbling across the room. It stood there arched over with look of malice as it clenched its teeth. Bound after bound, Alerce slammed into the ground, Fluttershy's heart missing a beat with every crunch that she heard. Her lower lip began quivering as Alerce finally stopped sliding across the ground. He wasn't moving. "A-Alerce?" Fluttershy squeaked, rushing towards the Turtwig. Her throat began to close and tears welled up in her eyes. She tried to say something else as she examined Alerce's mangled body, but nothing came out.

“Turtwig is unable to battle!” a pony in a black and white striped shirt announced. Fluttershy’s body trembled and small audible sobs were drowned out by the exuberant cheering of the crowd. She nudged Alerce with her hoof, trying desperately to find out the damage he took. There were multiple bruises on his head and legs with several scrapes as well. There was a faint smile on his face, but Fluttershy couldn’t keep her composure any longer.

“F-Fluttershy?” Rainbow Dash asked, placing her hoof on Fluttershy’s back.

“I... I...” Fluttershy squeaked as she picked up Alerce. “I’m sorry!” she cried out as he bolted out the door with tears streaming down her face.

“Fluttershy, wait!” Pinkie Pie yelled out galloping out of the gym with her.

“What did you do!?” Fluttershy heard Rainbow yell out at Norman, but that’s all she could hear before she powered her way through the town and into the forest. After landing on a small dew covered patch of grass she let down Alerce and quickly went through her bag. Inside was a few rolls of cloth bandages and patches laced with herbal antiseptics. She started to tape Alerce’s wounds, trying her hardest to see through the veil of tears in her eyes. After all the wounds were wrapped, she bowed her head, letting all the emotions she had bottled up rush to her at once.

“Fluttershy, are you alright? You left so quickly I didn’t see what happened,” Pinkie asked, trying to comfort her.

“I-I don’t think I can save him,” Fluttershy sobbed, looking up at Pinkie.

“What do you mean?” the worry in Pinkie’s voice only made Fluttershy more ashamed.

“Turtles are fragile creatures and with the impact of that punch, there’s probably internal bleeding, and I can’t-” Fluttershy felt her heart break in two. “HeHe’s going to die just because I didn’t want another headache,” she let her head sink into her hooves and just cried. “T-they even cheered...”

"It'll be alright," Pinkie stated, trying to comfort her bawling friend. "It's not your fault they made you fight the fifth guy." All Pinkie could do was watch Fluttershy wail in the grass. There was nothing she could do for her. She trotted around Fluttershy and looked at Alerce. His eyes were open, and was trying to move. He shook his head, looking as if he was just trying to shake it off. "Are you alright Alerce, that looked like that hurt," Pinkie tried saying to the Turtwig. He turned to her and slightly smiled, still obviously in pain. "You don't look like your dying, but I've never seen anyone die so I wouldn't know. Hey Fluttershy, do dying animals normally walk around like this?"

Fluttershy's head snapped up at Pinkie's inquiry. She took her hoof and wiped the tears from her eyes and saw Alerce struggling to move around, but he was moving nonetheless. "W-wha? How is he?" she sniffed, moving closer to see him better. She couldn't understand it. In all the years she had been a veterinarian she had never seen an animal make such a miraculous recovery with no medicine so quickly.

"Hey, there you two are," Rainbow Dash said as she flew towards the two. "What happened, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, and so is Alerce amazingly." Fluttershy responded, picking up Alerce. "I have no idea how he survived that hit, but he seems to be making a good recovery."

"That's what I figured after talking to that Norman guy. He was saying something about how, uh, 'polka-men' are resilient so Alerce was easily able to take a hit like that. He was wondering why you left in such a hurry."

"Wait, when did you talk to Norman?" Fluttershy asked, confused.

"After I was done yelling at him. He told me a lot actually. He also gave me this chip to put into your computer thing," Rainbow took a small chip out from her hair and brought it down to Fluttershy who started to dig through her bag.

"What does it do?" Fluttershy asked as she opened the Pokédex up.

"It registers me for the league!" Fluttershy's eyes widened at Rainbow's explanation. She dropped the Pokédex as her mouth went agape.

"What!?" Fluttershy snapped. "After what you just saw in there? How could you want to do this?" she was shaking from the confrontation, but she had to say something.

"I had to do it after seeing what these 'polka-men'—"

"Pokémon."

"Right. Anyway I had to sign up after seeing what those things could do. I've never seen anything create a crater in the ground after one punch. We need a way to defend ourselves, and those things are what we need."

"So you want to exploit them? I thought better of you Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow groaned, "No. Norman told me everything about the league, and since he isn't so confused with weird memories I trust he knows what he's talking about." Fluttershy sat down, somehow knowing it was going to be a long explanation. "Okay, so these Pokémon are born to fight. They're really easy to train so ponies can easily make them really strong really quickly."

"Okay," Fluttershy said, almost knowing that was the case. Her memories, she found, were becoming more and more useful. Surprisingly, Pinkie was quiet as Rainbow spoke.

"So because they're so easy to train and with the strange powers they have, they're basically animal weapons in the wrong hooves."

"Weapons? That's a little much." Pinkie interrupted.

"Whatever, just listen," Rainbow snapped in frustration. "So the league here was set up to train ponies to protect themselves using these Pokémon since we can't do any magic ourselves. They don't fight for sport, they fight for self-defense. Well at least that's what Norman told me."

Alerce leaped from Fluttershy's hooves and started to walk around. It had been night for longer than they had thought, the air was now cold with the moon now comfortably situated in the sky. The lights in the buildings had all but gone out with the street lights making the town feel lifeless. "So, what do we do about a place to sleep for the night?" Rainbow asked, trying to change the subject. "Norman told me that there's this thing called a 'Pokémon Center' that houses trainers for free for the night. We could try that."

"That sounds like a great idea!" Pinkie said, springing up to her hooves. "Is that center the only building over there with its lights on?" she pointed to a building that a light blue glow coming from the windows and a white Poké Ball symbol lit up on the roof.

"Well, what are we still doing here? Let's check it out," Rainbow flew off, leaving a rainbow streak behind her. Pinkie hopped along to follow as Fluttershy picked up her medical supplies. She picked up Alerce with her head hung low and made her way to the building to catch up to the other two.

'I still don't want to fight.'

The inside was filled to the brim with cots and mats for ponies to sleep on. There was a direct path to a pink mare with a white doctor's coat behind a counter. Rainbow and Pinkie were waiting by her, striking up a conversation. Fluttershy daintily made her way past the mob of ponies, looking at all the medical equipment behind the counter. "Welcome to the Pokémon Center! How can I help you tonight?" the mare asked, bowing her head slightly.

"Um, do you have any more room for the night? I mean with the amount of-"

"Of course, but we only have room left downstairs," the mare interrupted.

"Okay. We'll head down then I guess," Fluttershy stated as she started to fly off to the stairs.

“Wait, these two were telling me about an injured Pokémon you have?” the mare inquired, stopping Fluttershy in her tracks. “They said you were pretty devastated when it happened.”

Fluttershy’s face turned red as she flew back over, taking Alerce out from the cradle of her forelegs. She placed him on the counter; he was already sleeping. “Here he is. W-what are you going to do?” she was still slightly panicked.

“Don’t worry, Pokémon Centers are here to heal Pokémon when they’re injured in battles. He’ll be all better by the time you wake up in the morning,” the mare laughed a little. “It looks like you tried your hoof in healing him yourself. You have a good eye for patient care it seems.” Fluttershy wasn’t used to getting compliments about her veterinary skills. She liked it quite a bit. The mare took Alerce and placed him on a bed, letting a pink blob creature with stubby arms and a nurse hat wheel him off to the care center in back.

“Thank you,” Fluttershy said as she flew down the stairs. The basement was just as full of ponies as the main lobby, most of them already asleep. It was as lit up as the lobby had been, making Fluttershy wish that they would’ve slept under the stars like she did the night before. There was a small empty section on the floor, enough for the three to tightly fit in. Luckily only one pony was snoring.

“So, you have any sleeping gear in that bag?” Rainbow asked.

“Uh, I might. I haven’t really had a chance to go through this yet.” Fluttershy dumped out the contents of the bag to find anything the three could sleep on. All she could find was one small rolled up sleeping mat. She sighed and unrolled it. “I shouldn’t have fought Norman today.”

“Are you still going on about that? Alerce is fine, you didn’t do anything wrong,” Rainbow started.

“No, I mean a really shouldn’t have fought him. When he challenged me to that fight and I refused, I got some kind of memory vision,” she began cleaning up her supplies. “The girl just talked to him and left to show some kid how to catch Pokémon. Something weird is happening.”

“Huh, that’s strange,” Pinkie said. “Did anything else weird happen today?”

“I already told you about-” Fluttershy paused as she thought about the vision. “So the girl in the vision had a Treecko, the Pokémon I got from the professor back in that town I ended up in. Like I told you before, Alerce had turned into a Turtwig when I was asleep yesterday.”

“Oh, right! Did you see anything strange then, like a unicorn, or a wizard?” Pinkie asked as Rainbow groaned and slapped her hoof against her forehead.

“No, nothing like that. I remember my dream was just a normal dream, but something jolted me awake. That’s when I checked on Alerce and he had turned into a Turtwig,” Fluttershy paused and glanced at both her friends. “You said that you came early this morning, right?”

“Yeah,” Rainbow said, then quickly snapped back. “Wait, are you saying we did this?”

“I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on.” Fluttershy said, shrinking back.

Rainbow trotted to the small mattress and lied down, trying to make room for the other two. “Let’s just get some sleep,” she muttered as she closed her eyes and turned to her side. Fluttershy snuggled into the middle as Pinkie flopped down on the other side. She closed her eyes and saw nothing but red on her eye lids, making it hard to get to sleep, but it didn’t matter to her. She was just happy to have two of her friends help her in this strange world.

The sounds of many voices woke Fluttershy up. She stretched out and shook to get the tension out of her joints, but something felt off. She couldn’t feel Rainbow or Pinkie on either side of her. She opened her eyes and took a look, noticing they were both gone. Her bag looked rummaged through as well. Without thinking she rolled up the mat, grabbed her bag and flew up the stairs. When she reached the top, she saw bunch of ponies in line for something. That’s when it hit her: the smells of fresh baked

goods, specialty fruits, and spices filled the air and pierced her nostrils. She licked her lips; with all the turmoil and thoughts she hadn't paid attention to how hungry she was. The line was relatively small, most of the ponies had already gone through and taken their share. She flew over and waited, cocking her head to the side every once and a while to see what she could get.

"Hey Fluttershy!" Rainbow Dash called over, taking Fluttershy out of her hunger trance. Rainbow had a brown jacket with a white fluffy collar on covering a white shirt, with black pants covering her flank.

"Wait, did you go clothes shopping? Where did you get the money for it?" Fluttershy asked still trying to take in the sight of her friend with clothes on.

"Pinkie and I woke up before you so we could get some clothes. We kinda took some money out of your bag. We needed something."

Fluttershy sighed, moving ever closer to the massive amount of food waiting on the table. "Where's Pinkie? I thought you said she went with you."

"I'm right here!" Pinkie shouted, springing out from behind Rainbow Dash. She had a light blue shirt with jean overalls on. "I couldn't find anything that looked very fun, so I got something different. Looks good, huh?"

Fluttershy couldn't help but snicker. In all her time with her friends, she had never seen them look so ridiculous. She covered her mouth with her hoof, trying to disguise the laughter. "I-I'm sorry, it's just," tears formed in her eyes as her laughter grew. A few seconds later she sniffed and wiped the tears from her eyes. "They look fine."

"Well at least today's starting off better than yesterday," Rainbow said, glancing over at Pinkie. "We should probably find some Pokémon to catch. We can't be out here forever with just Alerce." Rainbow dug through the pockets of the jacket, taking out several miniature Poké Balls. "I picked up some of these as well. Thought we needed them."

“Alright,” Fluttershy said as she made her way to the start of the food filled table. She grabbed a plate took a small amount that filled her plate and sat down to eat. Pinkie and Rainbow came over and sat beside her.

“So, what’s the plan? Are we going to go off of your weird, messed up memories?” Rainbow asked.

“I can’t really think of anything else to do. Twilight hasn’t tried to talk to me lately so I don’t know how long it’ll take them to find that spell.” Fluttershy said, digging away at her food. “I’ll get Alerce after this, then we should probably head west since that’s the only other way out of town.” Pinkie and Rainbow nodded.

With her plate cleared, Fluttershy scooted around other sitting ponies and reached the front desk. It had been the first night in this world with no Alerce, and she was anxious to see him again. “E-Excuse me, my Turtwig was being taken care of last night. Could I get him back please? Also, what do I owe for breakfast and lodging?”

The mare turned to her, setting down her paper work. “The breakfast is complimentary,” the mare laughed. “What was your Turtwig’s name?”

“Alerce.”

“Let me go check,” with that the mare went off into the back. The three waited in silence, both Pinkie and Rainbow nipping at their new clothes. A moment later Fluttershy saw Alerce on the a cart the mare was pushing, fresh and new. She took him off and placed him on the counter, letting him climb onto Fluttershy’s bandanna. “There you go, good as new.”

“Thank you,” Fluttershy said, making her way out of the Pokémon Center with Rainbow and Pinkie following behind. “He really is resilient,” she remarked. The sun was already half-way up in the sky with a small haze of clouds making their way from the west. The humidity from the other day had returned, making the three squirm a little in their new clothes.

“Bleh, this is going to be disgusting later, isn’t it?” Rainbow asked, finally fitting her wing out from under her clothes. “I can already feel sweat soaking my pants.” With that Pinkie Pie suddenly burst out in laughter.

Looking towards the path out Fluttershy knew that's where they had to go next: against the sweltering western wind. "Alright, let's see what Pokémon we can find. There has to be some cool ones over there." Rainbow hoped as they trotted and flew towards the western forest.

Chapter 6

Outlanders

The plains stretched as far as Twilight could see. Semblances of small settlements were peppered in the distance, but nothing too remarkable in the barren openness. They had traveled for hours in tall grass with the sun beating down on them, refusing to let up. A small breeze blew through the array of grasses, creating a calm whistling sound that put the ponies at ease, at least just a little. Twilight took a swig of her water and placed it back in her bag as she licked her lips. Step by step, the journey became more arduous. Even the map they were given by the princess wasn't as much help as they had hoped: some of the ink markings were smudged, and the path towards Ventia was nowhere to be seen. She only hoped they were headed in the right direction.

"How long have we been walking? There hasn't been a sign or road at all; I'm wondering if we're even headed the right way," Rarity asked, slightly panting. She took one of the apples from her bag and bit into it.

"There has t' be a path around here somewhere. Delivery ponies head t' that there Ventia country, right?" Applejack stated, looking back at the two unicorns. "Luna must'a put us in that forest if it was close t' the path."

"I've talked with some of the mail ponies before. Most of them just do local stops. I haven't heard one talk about heading to another country before." Twilight explained.

"They're probably just being modest. As much as I would love for people to know about my boutique's success it's impolite to boast in casual conversation."

Twilight stopped, causing Rarity and Applejack to follow suit. "It's just strange, I've never heard of this country, or any other ones on this map. I haven't even read about them. It wasn't until the princess explained it until I knew of what was outside of Equestria, if there was anything at all." Twilight said. A bead of sweat passed between Twilight's eyes. She let it run down,

then plopped down in the grass. "I'm getting tired. If we can't find anything soon, what should we do? We've been following the sun's movement correctly, I don't understand why we haven't found a road yet."

Without a second thought, the other two sat down and started to rummage through their provisions. Rarity set up a small cloth on the ground for a makeshift picnic, trying to lighten the mood. Twilight took out two pieces of flat bread and some red apples and promptly placed them on the mat. Before Twilight could even blink, Rarity cut up the food with several quick slashes of a knife and split it amongst the three. Applejack dug in as soon as she could while Twilight wiped the sweat off her brow. The heat from the sun was much more apparent to her when she wasn't moving. Except for short expeditions Twilight never went on excursions, and it showed. She took a small bite of an apple slice and tried to savour it as much as she could. Without a proper destination, Twilight wanted to make sure they had enough rations to make an emergency trip back to Ponyville if need be.

KHUUUUUUUUU!

The three ponies sprang to their feet as the aftershock of an explosion rushed past them. A cloud of smoke rose in the distance, towering above the plains. This was their chance to finally see another living creature from outside Equestria. Through an unspoken plan they quickly gathered their belongings and broke out into a full gallop towards the towering fume. The grass whipped at Twilight's face, but she gritted her teeth and barreled through, still too tired to form a path with her magic. "Ah' think ah can see somethin'!" Applejack yelled back.

The grass ahead of them thinned out enough that they could see patches of shorter grass ahead. Applejack quickened her pace, plowing her way through the last thicket and made her way to the other side. Twilight turned her head as to prevent long grass from whipping against her face as she ran. After losing sight of the earth pony ahead of her, she bowed her head to make the final push. Just as she got up to speed, she felt no tall grass in her way, leaving only shorter grass ahead. She opened her eyes and skidded to a stop, seeing Applejack waiting. The area was a lower prairie with cut down grass covering a large expanse, showcasing an array of small towns and mountains in the distance. The sound of debris crashing

caught Twilight's attention. There was a small wagon engulfed in flames as two ponies lay on the ground, covered in burns and bruises.

Twilight bolted ahead with Applejack as Rarity made her way out from the grass patch. Adrenaline flowed through Twilight like she had never felt before: the rush of fear and anticipation was exciting, though worrisome. They were two earth ponies: stallions. One of them was trapped under a broken off piece of wood, while the other was thrown from the driver's seat lying on his side. Twilight stood over the stallion in the grass, inspecting his wounds and trying to calculate the force of impact. How an explosion could occur in a wooden cart was beyond her, but her interest was piqued. A few broken ribs, severe burns to the back and several scrapes were he skid across the ground. She bent down to hear for breathing; luckily he was, but it was shallow and empty. Twilight breathed a short sigh of relief and resumed her investigation. Nothing seemed too out of the ordinary, until she reached the pony's flank: he didn't have a mark.

"Twi', over here! Ah' found somethin' interesting!" Applejack yelled, motioning Twilight to head over. Still confused by her 'patient's' lack of cutie mark, she trotted over, wary of the still burning flames. Rarity had reached Applejack before Twilight and peered inside, Twilight noticing a strange look on both of their faces. She was just hoping it wasn't anything too tragic. "Take a look at this." Applejack pointed her hoof to a small hole which lead to the inside of the wagon.

"Did you make sure that pony was alright?" Twilight asked in a worried tone.

"Yeah ah' checked an' he's still breathin'. Ah' need your knowledge on what this thing is supposed t' be," Applejack responded.

Twilight took a look, making sure to not get too close to the flames. Inside was a pile of wood from the outside of the wagon, but there was something hidden underneath. A mass of twisted steel and cables lay with a black liquid burning on top of it. Twilight took a step back, trying to make sense of what she saw. It looked like a type of engine, but one more advanced than she had ever seen. Most things in Equestria were run with either magic or physical labor. Only large machinery, how little there was in Equestria, was run with steam. Even with the engine broken apart she could see remnants of pistons and gears with other varying scraps that must've made up the exterior.

“So, what do ya make of it, Twi’?” Applejack prodded.

“It looks like an engine, but much different than ones back in Equestria. There’s some weird liquid in that that seems to be combustible. It may be oil, I’m not sure. If I had to guess I would say that the engine must have overheated which set the liquid on fire and caused the explosion.” Twilight explained.

“Well ah’lright then. What should we do? We can’t just leave ‘em here,” Applejack stated.

“We have to get them some help, but we don’t have enough medical supplies.” Twilight hung her head, looking back and the bare flanked pony.

“Agreed, but if they could tell us where we could find some more we could gladly spare some of our own,” Rarity suggested. “Now if we could just wake one of them up we could get on our way.”

Twilight made her way back to the injured pony as Rarity helped Applejack lift the plank from the other victim. As Twilight approached she noticed the pony moving around, at least squirming. She rushed over and sat down beside him, waiting for a response. He opened his eyes and looked at Twilight as he began wincing in pain. “Whawhat happened?” he said weakly.

“You were caught in an explosion a few minutes ago. Could you tell me what happened?”

The stallion struggled to gain his footing, stumbling over himself on the way up. He clutched his chest as he stood. “Ugh, I remember drivin’ and hearin’ some clankin’ in the engine.” He labored as he set his hoof back down to stabilize himself. “Somethin’ must’ve got stuck there and caused the engine to blow.”

Twilight lent herself as a crutch and helped the pony towards the wreckage where the other pony was now out of the rubble and was being treated. “Do you know where a town with supplies to sell is? My friends and I are a little lost.”

The pony sighed in pain, "There's one not too far down the road to the north. It's small, but it might be what you're looking for."

"Thanks," Twilight responded as she stared at his body. "Where's your cutie mark? Did you not get one? I'm sorry for prying."

"Cutie mark? Never heard of it," the pony said, taking his forehoof off of Twilight and hobbled his way to his friend. "Thanks for your help. We can handle it from here." The stallion lifted his friend to get him up, talking to him in a low voice.

"Are you sure?" Twilight asked, trying her best to help.

"Yeah, we'll be fine," he said as he sat down near his friend. Applejack and Rarity stepped off and trotted over to Twilight, leaving the two battered ponies to their wreckage.

"Ah' really don't want ta' leave them here, but ah'm sure they'll be fine." Applejack stated morosely.

"Did he tell you where we could find a place to stay?" Rarity interrupted.

"Yeah, he said there was a small town down the road," Twilight said. Even with the wreckage she was happy to finally see a road that led somewhere. She thought maybe the old map that Luna gave them would finally become useful. As they left the burning wreckage behind, the whole world seemed to open up to them. There were more ponies with wagons with merchandise and supplies traveling along the main road, none of them giving the three Equestrians a nod or paid any attention to them. They simply went along quietly and Twilight didn't mind. Just the view of the rolling plains and mountains in the distance was enough to make her satisfied, at least for a little while.

As they walked, Twilight couldn't help but obsess over that one pony's lack of cutie mark knowledge. Maybe he came from a town that never had them, but he traveled. He had to have seen them, Twilight thought. She had to let the others know. Twilight spoke up, "So, did you see something off to you about those ponies we helped?"

“Not exactly. They seemed perfectly normal to me,” Rarity said.

“Why? Did we miss somethin’?” Applejack asked, looking over to Twilight.

“When I inspected that stallion’s wounds I noticed he didn’t have a cutie mark.” Twilight turned her head, watching her friends exchange sideways glances. “I brought this up to him and he said he had never heard of them. You would think if he travels he would’ve heard of them, right?”

“Come t’ think of it, ah’ don’t think that other pony had a cutie mark either,” Applejack thought aloud. “Maybe we shouldn’t pry too much int’a this. It’s only two ponies.”

“You’re right.” Twilight turned her head and continued to watch for any signs that pointed them to a town. The sun began its descent towards the horizon allowing the air to cool off, alleviating the three from the heat, at least somewhat. The view along the path was consistent throughout: rolling plains with short and long grasses, mountains in the distance, the faint silhouettes of what looked like settlements. Twilight opened the map and tried to chart out how far away they were. They had passed a sign maybe fifteen minutes before, and she wanted to see what was near them. She scanned it over, noticing a distinct lack of towns on the map. The one that they had been heading to, Wheatown, wasn’t listed. The town was either too small for the map to list, or the map was older than the town. Twilight sighed in exasperation as she put the map away.

After only an hour of trekking, a small town came into view with a wooden gate blocking the path in. It looked like it had a quaint feel to it, what with its straw thatched roofs and what looked like a small fountain in the center. Twilight hastened her steps, eager to find out what a town outside of Equestria would be like. She blazed past Applejack, who followed in tow with Rarity as they tried catch up to Twilight. After only a minute of running later, she banked left and slowed herself before she ran head first into the gate.

“Is this Wheatown?” Rarity asked as she trotted up to Twilight.

“Ah’ reckon it is. This is the first town we’ve seen.” Applejack stated.

“Well, here we go,” Twilight said as she opened the gate with her hoof. The town was very small, with only eight or so buildings lining the perimeter. Several earth ponies walked around with hoes and rakes, conversing about the day's events. Two fillies ran around the stone fountain, chasing each other and rolling around in the grass. As they entered they noticed the lack of fanciful architecture like they saw back in Equestria; every one of the buildings had an old world charm to them. They looked simple and drab. Twilight ignored it, though she had never visited a town with such simple tastes.

They approached a stallion who was carrying a hoe and rake on his back who was heading west into the field. Twilight assumed by the name of the town that he was off to harvest wheat, but she didn't want to assume anything. “Excuse me,” Twilight said, catching the pony's attention. “Do you know we could find a store here? We've never been in this part of the country before.” The stallion stopped and pointed his hoof towards a relatively larger building that had a wooden sign with the words ‘*General Store*’ written in red paint. Twilight looked over, then looked back, red with embarrassment. “Uh, thanks,” she said as the pony turned back to the field and began to walk again.

“Well he ain't much for talkin'” Applejack said, peering over to the shop. “Let's take a look at what they have then.” The three slowly trotted to the store and opened the wooden door. The shop had a wooden design to everything, with thatched patches and designs on the walls and floor. There was a dark brown earth pony behind the counter, taking a look at some of its inventory. The store was packed with food like grains and produce, small steel weapons, canisters of oil, books on local events and history, rolled up scroll maps, small trinkets, and beddings just to name a few. Twilight forged ahead, looking up over the counter to get a better view of the storekeeper.

“Excuse me sir, my friends and I would like to buy something. Do you have a minute?” The mare tilted her head up, trotted to the counter and placed her hooves on top. She looked over the three ponies, causing Twilight to become a little uneasy.

“What can ah' do ya for?” she asked, tapping her hooves on the counter.

Twilight's face flushed red from the gender mix-up, but the mare didn't seem to mind. "We're just looking for some food and blankets to buy. We're making our way to Ventia."

"Ah' see. Just enough fer the three a' you?" she asked, bowing her head into the display case to retrieve a few folded blankets.

"Yes ma'am." Twilight took a few gold bits from her bag and placed them on the counter. "I'm hoping this is enough to cover it. I don't see any prices anywhere."

The mare brought up a few blankets and placed them on the counter, then eyed the few bits Twilight had left. She squinted to get a better look, inspecting them carefully. Twilight thought maybe the mare took their money as fake. After a few seconds, the mare finally spoke up, "What's this?"

Twilight was dumbfounded. "Uh, those are bits. You know, money."

"Don't patronize me, ah' figured that much out," the mare snapped. "So, where'd you say you were from again?"

"We're from Equestria." At that moment, Twilight saw the mare's eyes widen as if she was about to be hit by an oncoming freight train. She stepped off the counter and walked to a small section of the counter that swung open upwards, allowing a pony to pass through.

"Over 'ere. If it's alright with ya' ah'd like t' talk t' you a bit. Ah' have some tea goin' at the moment." The mare made her way up a flight of stairs, leaving the shop completely empty except for Twilight, Rarity and Applejack. They each glanced at each other with contorted looks.

"What should we do? We need supplies, but I don't know if I like this." Twilight looked over to the opened pathway, rubbing her left foreleg with her right. The three sat in silence, neither of them wanting to make the decision. A high-pitched whistle of a teapot pierced Twilight's ears now perked ears. At least she's actually boiling water, Twilight thought. The whistling died down as the mare walked down the stairs and motioned them over. Twilight grimaced as she looked at her friends and cautiously

made her way past the open path and slowly ascended the stairs. She didn't check back for Applejack and Rarity, trying to make sure that everything ahead of her was innocuous.

At the top of the stairs was a bedroom the size of the lower floor. A small, one-pony bed lied on the north end of the room with a window on all four walls. It was decorated with multi-colored banners hanging on each side of the walls with golden stitched insignias of various animals and weaponry. There was a wooden rack filled with swords and maces in the corner, putting Twilight on edge. Next to it was a small stove with a tea pot with rising steam coming from the spout. She finished her ascent and approached the mare who was sitting at a table with four chairs set up, each with a set of teacups and saucers in front of them. "Come, sit."

Apprehensively, Twilight sat down as the mare poured some tea in their cups. Applejack and Rarity sat down and they all watched the mare closely, making sure she didn't do anything suspicious. She set the teapot down in the middle of the table and took a small sip. "So, you're from Equestria, huh? Ah've never met anypony from there before."

"You're store is empty downstairs. Aren't you afraid somepony's goin' t' take somethin'?" Applejack asked, taking a look outside.

"No one's stolen anythin' in this town in years. We don't lock doors at night like you city ponies do," the mare explained, irking Applejack. "The name's Zipporah. It's nice t' meet you folk."

"Twilight Sparkle," Twilight said, extending her hoof to shake.

"That's an odd name fer a pony. Are all Equestrians named weirdly like that?" Twilight took offense to this.

"Well, this is Rarity," she pointed at Rarity who slightly bowed, "and this is Applejack." Applejack graciously tipped her hat. "So, you've never seen an Equestrian before? It's only a few hours walk away."

"Not sure. No one I know's ever gone neither. Ponyfolk just tend to avoid it." Zipporah took another sip.

"Now why's that d' ya suppose?" Applejack asked.

"Sorry for my interruption, but do you not have a cutie mark as well?" Rarity prodded. Twilight hadn't noticed, but when she dipped her head to check Zipporah's flank, it was indeed blank. Applejack took a quick sip of her tea, her face scrunched as she did it and set it down. She looked around trying to be nonchalant as she pushed the cup away and slumped in her chair.

"Cutie mark? Is that some weird Equestrian thing?" The old mare crossed her front-legs and looked at them inquisitively. "Ah've never heard of them before."

"You're the second pony we've talked to that's never heard of them," Twilight said as she took a sip of tea. It had a strong earthy flavor, but it wasn't overbearing. Slightly bitter, but she could handle it. "That's so strange. Most ponies in Equestria have them by the time they're little fillies. Basically they're markings on your flank to signify your special talent. Mine is conjuring magic, so my mark is a six pointed star." She leaped off the chair and pointed to her mark. "It's always nice to have a reminder of what you live for."

"So, you two have one as well?" Zipporah asked. "What about that necklace?" she pointed to Rarity who promptly looked down at her element charm.

"Oh this? It's just decoration," Rarity passed off. "It's nothing, really. Though it does match my cutie mark which are three purple diamonds." She took a sip of her tea and patted her mouth with a nearby napkin. Applejack stayed quiet.

The room was quiet for a few minutes. A small rustling was heard outside as a group of stallions came out from the fields. The sun set lower in the sky, causing the sky to become a pale yellow and orange. Twilight tapped her hooves together nervously. The silence was overbearing, and she had to break the tension. "Is this where you live, Zipporah?"

"Yes, ah' never married," she stated as she grabbed her teacup with both hooves. "Ah' just tend to mah store every day." After taking a larger gulp of her tea, she looked over to Twilight. "So, where are you three

headed anyways? Ah' know you din't come all the way out here for our lil' town."

"Well one of our friends needs some help and the spell to we need isn't anywhere in Equestria. We're headed to Mistral City in Ventia." Twilight said.

"Mistral City? You Equestrians never stop surprisin' me," Zipporah laughed. "Mistral City is a wretched place last ah' heard. They don't much care for Equestrians neither. Whenever one of them ponies is over in this town ah' always here 'bout two unkillable demons that haunt Equestria. Everypony ah've met from there is quite obsessed."

"Two... demons?" Twilight asked, bewildered. "I don't know of any demons in Equestria. It sounds like made up rumors." She dug into her pack and took out the map, unfurling it onto the table. "Could you take a look at this while we're here? We don't have any recent maps of areas outside Equestria and this is pretty old. Is this map still accurate?"

"Ah' can look, sure." Zipporah turned the map towards her and looked at it closely. She nodded her head a few times as her eyes scanned every inch. She placed her hooves on it several times, pointing out locations to herself. After a few minutes she turned the map around and looked up at Twilight. "Everythin' looks fine. There's a few more towns than before, but everything else looks alright."

A muffled commotion was heard from outside. Twilight nodded to Zipporah, set the map back in her bag and took a look out the window. Two ponies passed by at a full gallop, one turned and headed towards the shop. She got up to look down at the pony. "What's wrong, sugar cube?" Applejack asked. Before Twilight answered she saw a brown blur fly passed the window; she looked to see if she could see what it was, but it was gone.

BAM BAM BAM There was a hurried knock at the door. "Griffins! We need help!" a stallion shouted and ran off. Zipporah quickly left her chair and galloped to the weapon rack, taking out three swords and a mace.

"Alright, ah've got weapons fer us. Take one and let's go."

The three looked at each other, neither of them wanting to move. "Uh, what are we doin' again?" Applejack prodded.

Zipporah stared at them blankly. "Are ya' joking? We don't have time fer that, jus' hurry an' get over here!" Twilight took a deep breath and trotted over, taking a sword and held it in the air with her magic. "You two as well, meet me downstairs!" Zipporah grabbed a mace with her mouth and galloped down the stairs, leaving the three alone in the room.

"What should we do? We can't go out and kill griffins our first day out, can we?" Twilight wondered, glancing at the sharp steel.

"We don't really have a choice, do we?" Rarity said, "We're on a mission to save Fluttershy, aren't we? If she knew we were killing animals to save her she would never forgive us."

Applejack took a sword and held it in her mouth, "Right. we have to be as non-lethal as possible." With sword in mouth she trotted to the base of the stairs and looked over to Twilight and Rarity. "Ah'm ready when you two are."

Rarity and Twilight looked at each other nervously. Rarity picked up the third sword, placed it on her back and held it there with magic. "Well let us go, shall we?"

"Alright." Twilight caught up to Applejack who proceeded down the stairs. Zipporah was outside the open door, mace ready. She turned her head, and as she saw the girls she motioned them over. They followed her direction, seeing six griffins swooping and striking ponies with terrible force.

"Do ya know what to do?" Zipporah asked, surveying the town.

"Uh, no. We don't really have this problem in Ponyville," Twilight said as she began to sweat.

"Really? Ugh." Zipporah groaned, "Alright, stay together. They hunt down the strays, now move!" She bolted out the door, bunching together with the other ponies. Twilight could see shutters on houses closing and doors slamming. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She looked

back at her friends, then raced out into the fray. A large dark brown griffin swooped down, clipping a white stallion in the back, causing him to topple over in the grass. A mare and stallion grouped together, grimacing and awaiting their chance to strike. Applejack burst through the door, easily vaulting over one of the low-flying griffins. As she was in the air, she kicked with her back legs, causing the griffin to slam into the earth. She landed and ran to join the ranks, creating a phalanx with the others. Rarity was the last to come out, holding the sword close to her face in a defense stance. She crept around, swinging her sword to ward off stray griffins.

“Why are they attacking!?” Twilight yelled over to Zipporah, who had just slammed her mace into a griffin’s skull. It lied there with small trickles of blood coming from the impact wound.

“They’re after us and our young, just attack!” Zipporah yelled, scrambling to make note of the griffins’ positions. Twilight wanted to argue, but a griffin with extended claws lunged at her, screeching at the top of its lungs. Twilight dodged, dropped her sword, and used her magic to create a large blinding light. She shot out a bright spark and it struck the griffin, and with the sound of thunder it crashed to the ground. It was alive, but unable to move. Rarity swung her sword wildly as she backed into the phalanx. She halted the sword and looked around, keeping her eyes peeled. Twilight galloped to the fountain, checking to see if any griffin was hiding around it. Nothing. She looked to the sky trying to track their location, when she heard a sickening screech. She whipped her head around and saw two griffins break apart the group, one of them held a mare in its talons, trying to take off with it. Rarity was on the ground, struggling to get up. Her sword was far behind her. Twilight charged up another light spell and quickly fired it at the fleeing griffin, causing the mare to drop to the earth.

Rarity hobbled on to her hooves, her knees shaking from the impact. She was dizzy and couldn’t see straight, putting her in a panic. She hurried towards the sword, but fell over as a griffin landed right near her. “*RARITY!*” Twilight called out as she went into a full gallop to her ailing friend. Before she could reach her the griffin swiped, but a blinding light came from Rarity, making Twilight stumble backwards. She saw the griffin topple back as well, Rarity still enveloped in light. All the commotion seemed to be gone as the light stopped, revealing Rarity with glowing white eyes, her necklace and cutie mark where glowing in a bright purple light. She took a wide stance and her horn glowed, causing twenty needles to come out from her

bag and form a shield around her. She lifted her head and reared back, sending the magically charged needles flying in precise paths across the town. Two griffins that were beating down on a few ponies were struck in the wings, forcing and pinning them down to the earth. They tried moving but yelped out in pain as the needles pierced muscle and bound them to the ground. A white griffin timidly stepped back, then took off trying to flee the magically charged unicorn. Rarity snapped her head towards it and tossed the rest of the sewing needles out, catching it in its wings and legs, letting it tumble from the sky and crash into the earth. All that remained was the griffin that confidently stood on Rarity's steel weapon. She slowly let her head down and stared at her oppressor, waiting for it to make a move. Just as the griffin jutted its claw out to begin racing towards her, Rarity took a long piece of fabric out from her bag. With the thin edge, she slashed the griffin's back, making it plant face first into the dirt right out of reach. With all the griffins down, the element stopped glowing as did her cutie mark. She fluttered her eyelids, bringing her eyes back to their azure color. She let out a long sigh, then toppled over herself into the dirt.

After the dust cleared, Twilight rushed over to Rarity, checking frantically for signs of life. She saw her chest rise and fall; she was breathing. Twilight took a sigh of relief. The air was cool but slightly charged as the battle came to a close, letting the ponies breathe easier. Twilight shook; the adrenaline was just starting to wear off as she grabbed Rarity, attempting to drag her into the shop. A brown stallion rushed over and easily hefted Rarity on to his back, catching Twilight off guard. "Uh, thanks," she said, trotting into the store. They went up the stairs and placed Rarity in Zipporah's bed. Twilight sat down next to it. The stallion took his leave as Applejack came into view. Looking over Rarity, she was visibly shaking and her breathing was shallow. Magically, Twilight stripped Rarity of her necklace and looked over it, turning and inspecting every inch.

"Twi', what happened? Ah' couldn't see anything over the pack of ponies near me," Applejack asked as she plopped down next to Twilight. "Poor Rarity, it must'a been too much for her."

"It had to do with this." Twilight floated the necklace in front of Applejack. "When she was in need this started to glow, enhancing her abilities I believe. I've never seen her do anything so quickly with that kind of accuracy and power."

“Luna did say somethin’ ‘bout that before we left, di’n’t she?”

“I think so. It must’ve taken out so much energy as a last resort that she just passed out. We won’t be able to move until tomorrow, if then.” Twilight let the necklace fall to the ground, its gold ornate plate slightly clanging on the wooden floor. “We should get our supplies while she’s asleep. I’ll stay here and tend to her.”

“Ah’lright, ah’m on it.” Applejack said. She got to her hooves and headed downstairs, leaving Twilight and Rarity alone in the room. Out from her bag she took a her element crown form her bag and looked at carefully.

Her curious eyes filled with trepidation as she stared at her reflection in the purple star. *‘I’m the Element of Magic. If generosity gave Rarity the ability to single-hoofedly take out a whole pack of griffins, what would magic do?’* Twilight shuddered as she set the crown next to Rarity’s necklace, waiting anxiously until her friend awoke. Zipoorah came up the stairs, weapons covered in dirt and traces of blood. She put them away in the rack and looked over Rarity.

“How are her wounds?” she asked, inspecting Rarity’s body..

“Well, she’ll live,” Twilight said, choking up. “This is all my fault. If I hadnt’ messed up that spell, she’d still be making clothes in her boutique. Why did they attack us?” She put her face in her hooves, trying hard to keep her composure. “If I found an easier spell, none of this would have happened.”

“Why does that matter? She has t’ normally defend against creatures, doesn’t she?” Zipporah assumed as she placed the tea kettle back on the burner.

“No, nothing like this happens in Ponyville, we said that before. The only dangers lie in the Everfree Forest, and those creatures never come into town.” She paused, thinking of her next course of action. “What is the trail like to Mistral City?”

“It’s nothing too bad,” Zipporah answered.

“Tell me!” Twilight snapped. Her breathing became labored as her guilt finally caught up to her. “What am I putting my friends through? How many attacks will there be?”

Zipporah sighed as she checked on the tea. “If ya’ must know, the path goes through the Drakiris mountain range. That’s where the feral griffins lie. After the mountains is Ventia, who’s winter is very long. It may snow for over half the year. Barely anypony makes the trip.”

Twilight stared in disbelief. “You weren’t going to tell me this!? Why?”

“Well, you hadn’t paid for my services yet.” After slapping her forehead, Twilight pointed down the stairs, hoping Zipporah would get the hint.

“Applejack is downstairs looking to buy things. Just... just take the bits; we need Rarity in bed more than the money.” Zipporah nodded her head and headed towards the stairs. She stopped, and turned to face Twilight.

“If you’re really going, I would wear some cloaks. You stick out too much.” She turned away and descended the stairs. Twilight looked down at the floor, trying to ease her guilt as Zipporah left. She glanced at the crown coldly, regretting opening the door for Fluttershy that day. The library in Ponyville felt so distant from her, and all she wanted to do was go back. She lay down on the hard wooden floor, still staring as she waited for Applejack to come up the stairs.

Chapter 7

Wildwoods

“...and that’s how you get kicked out of flight school with style,” Rainbow Dash touted as she spun around in the air. The forest was thick with trees, leaving Rainbow Dash’s trick obscured in the shadows. Fluttershy didn’t mind; she liked hearing her friends talk about themselves even without visual aid.

“Did you really pull that off?” Fluttershy asked.

“Yeah, who else has that kind of speed?” Rainbow said, flipping once again. She looked up at the canopy, slowed her flying, then landed next to Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie. “You know, I think I’m going to walk. The clearance is so low I can barely maneuver.”

Fluttershy and Pinkie laughed. “That’s why I landed when we got here. I flew in a forest here before and it was hard to get out without getting hit by tree branches.” This forest was much bigger than the one outside of Oldale Town. Thicker trees were flush with darker bark as a deep green moss made its home across the forest floor. Only small rays of light could penetrate the forest ceiling, making the woods look ominous. Both Rainbow and Pinkie looked around curiously at everything, with a mix of excited and annoyed looks.

“I’m getting a bad Everfree Forest vibe from this place,” Rainbow Dash stated. “I mean I’m not worried about it or anything, it just reminds me of it,” she backpedaled.

“Well since there are strange animals in here I can see why. I wonder what kind of Pokémon will be in here. Bugs maybe?” Fluttershy wondered, checking for any signs of movement or animal sounds.

“That sounds cool I guess,” Rainbow stated. “I was just hoping for something, you know, cooler. By the way Pinkie, did I give you those Poké Balls yet?”

Pinkie looked up in thought, “No, I’m not even registered for the league. Should I even have a Pokémon, I mean I wouldn’t want to take any of yours-”

“We need all the help we can get if that Norman guy is right,” Rainbow Dash interrupted as she stuck her hoof in the pink pony’s mouth to silence her. She took her hoof out and rummaged through her new bag, pulling out three Poké Balls.

“That’s great! I could look for an alligator, it’ll be just like Gummy!” she jumped up and gasped. “Oh no I forgot about Gummy! I hope he’s alright.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine, Fluttershy assured her. “Mr. and Mrs. Cake probably know how to take care of him. The animals back at my cottage however-”

“But he needs so much attention! I can’t imagine what Mr. and Mrs. Cake are going through,” Pinkie Pie said as she sat down to ponder. The three had a good laugh and pressed onwards. Red spiked worms crawled on the leaves, along with hanging white and purple cocoons. Only the sound of rustling leaves and the crunching of fallen sticks filled the forest, giving Fluttershy some time to relax. The events of the other day still haunted her: the memory backlash, Alerce’s strange transformation, and the fight with Norman still caused her to shake. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself and focus. This was a new day, filled with new outfits for her friends, a sea side view off the shallow cliffs, and a forest with new animals to explore. Everything was serene, just as Fluttershy liked things.

Fluttershy’s ears perked. She could hear a small chirp in the distance, something that didn’t come from a worm or cocoon. She thought maybe it was one of those birds that flew with her above Oldale Town as she stopped to get a better sense of the noise. Rainbow and Pinkie stopped and looked back, confused. “Hey, are you alright? Is it another one of those weird flashes?”

“Shhh,” Fluttershy shushed them. “Do you hear that? It sounds like a tiny bird in the distance. The sound is coming from the ground, and it hasn’t moved. That’s so strange.”

Rainbow looked around, trying to see past the large thicket. "I don't hear or see anything except us. Are you sure?"

"Positive." Fluttershy crept closer, keeping her ears perked and listened for any sudden movements. Several chirps made their way through the forest, each one louder than the last one. She increased her speed, weaving her way through the mass of trees until she came upon a large opening. Except for a few twigs and rocks, the area was completely empty. Only a small figure at the other end showed itself from beneath the forest shadows. It was hard to see, but as Fluttershy got closer, she began noticing an orange tint to the figure. Its silhouette became clear to her, causing Fluttershy to stop in her tracks.

"What's wrong?" Rainbow asked, stopping next to Fluttershy.

"Over there, that's-" she inched closer, trying her best not to startle it. A few more chips came, as she approached. They sounded like sobs. "That's Brendan's Torchic." She spread her wings and flew, landing next to the abandoned bird. It looked up at her, staring straight into her eyes. "What are you doing all the way out here? Where's Brendan?" she quietly asked, trying to comfort the distraught Torchic.

"Wait, Brendan? As in the crazy fighter Brendan you were talking about?" Pinkie asked as she trotted to the Torchic.

"Yeah, but I don't understand. This was the Pokémon his father gave him." The Torchic got up and ran around the group, its small bout of depression seeming to gone. "He was so proud of it when he challenged me. Why would he leave it here?" Fluttershy looked around, trying to find any signs of Brendan. The forest floor was so dense with leaves and moss that if he had left any hoof prints, they would be impossible to find.

"Maybe it ran away? You did say he was kinda mean, I mean I would have." Pinkie chimed in.

"Considering how Brendan acted, I don't think it would've done that. It's scared of something." Fluttershy watched the Torchic make its way towards Rainbow Dash. It jumped up and down with glee, causing Rainbow to look down at it. A faint smile ran across her face as she patted it. It looked up at her and smiled back. Laughing, Rainbow reached down and

picked up the Torchic, holding it up in the air. It began to laugh with her, making random hiccup noises as well.

“So, I don’t understand. If this is Brendan’s, then why is it hovering around me?” Rainbow asked, placing the bird on her back.

“Maybe it just likes you,’ Fluttershy assumed, walking to the Torchic to examine it.

“Oh! Catch it! It can be your first Pokémon, Rainbow Dash! We could celebrate afterwards, I’m sure there’s a place to make a cake or something like for FI-” Rainbow shushed Pinkie, and ran her hoof across her mouth like a zipper. Pinkie nodded and sat down, making the same hoof motion.

“So, what do you know about catching these things?” Rainbow dug into her bag and took out a small Poké Ball. She tapped the button, causing it to enlarge to its normal size. Her head jumped back a little, but she quickly went back to pondering.

“Well, I don’t think you can catch a Pokémon that another pony owns. It just... doesn’t sound right.” Fluttershy explained. “I... I think.”

“Only one way to find out.” Rainbow exclaimed, “We should try it out!” She took the Poké Ball and tossed it in her hoof, ready to catch the bird. “Uh... what do I do? Just toss it?”

“Umm, maybe we should try it with Alerce first. I’m sure he won’t mind a small toss on the shell.” Fluttershy looked down at Alerce who nodded at her suggestion. She stepped away from Alerce, waiting for Rainbow to make her move. With a quick toss, the Poké Ball bounced off of Alerce’s shell, causing it to bounce in the air and open up. He became enveloped in white light and turned into a wisp of energy. It went inside the Poké Ball and it closed shut. Only a moment later, it burst open in a green light, bringing Alerce out and back to his original form. She shivered and shook off the lingering transition sense. “Well, I guess that didn’t work.”

“What should we do then? We can’t just leave it here.” Fluttershy started to pace, looking up at the forest canopy.

“Wait, where is it?” Pinkie asked as she frantically searched. The other two turned their heads, and looked in disbelief. It was gone.

Fluttershy bolted out to the perimeter of the tree-less opening and poked her head between the trees to look. Rainbow took off, hovering just below the canopy. The three yelled out to the Torchic, trying to catch its attention. Pass after pass yielded no results. Distraught, Fluttershy approached the two Poké Balls that lay in the clearing.

“Did you find anything?” Fluttershy asked with her head hung low.

“No, all that’s here are these Poké Balls. Oh, maybe you can use your memory thing to find it.” Pinkie suggested.

“But, it only shows up when something weird happens. Also I’ve never tried actually conjuring it before.”

“You’ve got to try! Maybe we’ll be able to find him faster!” Fluttershy slowly nodded and swallowed nervously. Her breathing became stuttered from the tension, but she closed her eyes and concentrated. She could only hear the ambient sounds of the forest, and saw nothing but black. The only memories that appeared were ones of her own. She bit her lower lip, straining to get a memory to appear.

After a few moments, a wave of wooziness fell over her. She stumbled to the left, almost falling over, then heard faint cries for help. They became louder and louder each time, and it began to hurt Fluttershy’s ears. Suddenly, a flash of the image of a man appeared. He held a manila envelope and was on his back, scurrying away from a man in pirate’s clothing as he yelled for help. The assailant had a knife and a wolf, waiting to attack. The vision became clearer as she felt herself running towards the man to save him. “*Leave him alone!*” It was May’s voice. Right as she reached the man, her vision went white. She opened her eyes and looked around. She was lying on the ground, surrounded by Rainbow, Pinkie and Alerce. She got up and shook her head, trying to keep the memory at the forefront of her mind.

“Did you see anything? You kinda just fell over.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t about the Torchic. There was some thing being attacked, and the girl in the memory was trying to save him.”

Rainbow cocked her head, "Some '*thing*'? What do you talking about? You're usually better at explaining animals to us than that."

"I-It's, well," Fluttershy lowered her head. "It's hard to explain. I've never seen a creature anywhere close to this, and they have the intelligence and language as us."

"What did it look like?" Pinkie Pie jumped around with excitement.

"Well, their face was like that of a monkey's, but he had no hair on its face and it was more defined. The only hair it had was on the top of its head, and it was quite short. Also it stood on two legs and had hands, similar to a monkey's as well." She looked up at the two. "I'm sorry, I'm not great at explaining things."

"Whatever. We still need to find that bird." Rainbow Dash trotted to the two Poké Balls that still lay in the grass. "That's... strange. I only took out one. Pinkie, did you drop one?"

"Nope! Mine are still in my pocket." Pinkie tapped on her pocket, causing the capsules to rustle and clank. Fluttershy and Pinkie began to slightly panic, glaring at all the trees to make sure there was nothing hiding in their midst. Rainbow picked up one of the capsules and opened it. It was empty. She sighed and closed it. After placing it in her jacket pocket, she picked up the other one. It felt slightly heavier to her. She pressed the button, causing a bright white light to burst out from it. Rainbow backed away and dropped the Poké Ball, wings spread in defense. The light formed into a familiar figure and faded, leaving a smiling Torchic. It shivered, then looked up at Rainbow.

"Did it just... did it just catch itself?" Rainbow wondered as she inspected the Torchic. "Why would you do that?" she said as she ruffled the Torchic's feathers.

"Maybe it did run away from Brendan and went to you. It was probably feeling lonely after it fled and clinged to you."

"Ooo, you should give him a name! Is it a guy?" Pinkie rushed to Rainbow's side and placed her hoof on her friend's back.

"Hmm..." Rainbow began thinking. "How about Igni? That sounds cool." The Torchic began jumping up and down with joy. It seemed to like it.

"He was a lot less fussy than Alerce was when I named him," Fluttershy stated, patting Alerce on the head. She donned a frown and looked to the north. All she could think of was the memory vision she conjured. "We... we should go find that creature. He could still be in trouble."

"How do you know that he would even be here? Maybe that's supposed to happen later, or it already happened." Rainbow took Igni and placed him on her back.

"Well, every time I've had a flash, it's been at the time it should be happening. I think." Fluttershy started pacing. "We have to go see."

"Fine," Rainbow said as she headed to the edge of the clearing. "Let's get going then." The three headed through the forest's thicket, keeping their eyes peeled for the troubled creature. Fluttershy kept her ears perked for any sounds, but all she heard was the sound of rustling leaves. None of them made a sound as they peered behind and between the trees. Neither Pinkie or Rainbow had a clear idea of what they were searching for, but Fluttershy did. She was hoping that the memory was false, or that they weren't too late. The rays of sunlight began to dissipate as an overcast of clouds loomed over them. The once vibrant colors of the forest became muted and dull, and everything started to blend together. She kept her head east, hoping her friends were checking the other directions. The only visuals she remembered were the two figures. The layout of the tress were obscured, but she noticed sunlight dappled their clothes and skin. It was still sunny then.

"Where could he be? It feels like we've been searching forever, and that fog isn't helping us one bit," Pinkie stated, causing Fluttershy to turn her head.

'Fog? What is she talking about, there's no fog, it's ju-' Fluttershy's train of thought stopped as a saw a thick wave of fog was headed towards them from the west. "This is all wrong. They where covered in sunlight, like it was... a few..." she stopped and frantically jumped around to find the figure. "No, no," she whimpered. "We need to find him, now."

“Calm down, we don’t even know if he’s out there.” Rainbow grabbed a hold of the frantic pegasus. “I know you haven’t done things like this before, but you can’t lose your head.” Rainbow stated in a calm tone. “We don’t even know if your memories are correct, they could be completely fake.” Fluttershy’s breathing began to stabilize as Rainbow backed away. It had been a while since Fluttershy had heard Rainbow use that tone of voice. She figured it was the unfamiliar land they were in that caused her to act as she does with her weather team. She let out a small sigh and ventured into the fog, trying to avoid the silhouetted trees. Rainbow and Pinkie followed close behind.

After a half-hour of searching, they found nothing. Fluttershy leaned up against a tree, taking a break from the search. Pinkie was still hopping around, quickly peeking behind each tree while Rainbow sat along side Fluttershy. Alerce jumped off her trainer’s back and played around with Igni, each of them laughing as they rolled around. Rainbow Dash watched them with fascination. “So, we have to fight with them.”

“That’s what Norman said,” Fluttershy said.

“Before I got Igni, I was all for it. I never really owned a pet, so I never knew what it was like,” Rainbow explained as she watched her Torchic run around. She paused. Igni began jumping on Alerce’s back, happily chirping. He lost his balance and fell to the ground, but quickly sprang back up. “This might be harder than I thought.”

Fluttershy’s right ear twitched, catching the faintest bizarre sound from the thicket. She turned her head and stood up, just staring into the fog. “I heard something,” she stated. She crept her head closer to the north, waiting for the sound to come back. Pinkie jumped over, crunching sticks and leaves as she went.

“Pinkie! She’s trying to listen for something,” Rainbow yelled in a whispered tone.

“Sorry, I’ll try to be quieter.” Pinkie halted, now tip-hoofing closer to the pegasi. Fluttershy slowly made her way through, keeping her ears pointed to the north. With each step, she became more nervous. The noise was sickening, making her uneasy. A moment later it cried out again and it

was loud enough to pierce Pinkie and Rainbow's ears. "What was that? It sounded like someone having a stomach ache."

"No, it sounds like..." Fluttershy knew that sound. She increased her speed, hoping she could get there quick enough. Weaving her way through trees, she leaped over fallen branches and charged her way through the thicket. She shook from the knowledge of what was ahead, but she couldn't stop. Both of her friends kept pace, seemingly unaware of what Fluttershy knew.

A hazy figure came into view. It was lying on the ground, making it hard to see exactly what it was. Fluttershy slowed her gallop into a trot, trying to casually approach the creature. It had not made a sound for since she started her gallop, making her nervous. After a few methodical steps, the creature became fully visible. It was a grey stallion in a white coat and black pants, with a massive bite wound on his left shoulder. He was moaning and shaking, trying to stave off the pain. Fluttershy rushed over and started to inspect the wound. "Are you alright? C-can you hear me?"

He groaned again, then forced his head over to the yellow pegasus. "I've been better..." he trailed off into an episode of shaking and yelps of pain.

"What happened? This wound doesn't look good at all." Rainbow and Pinkie caught up to her and stopped. They looked over him and stayed back to let Fluttershy work. Fluttershy began digging through her back, taking out a bottle of antiseptic and bandages.

"I was attacked. A pony came at me with a knife and a Poochyena. Just like that one over there." He lifted his right hoof and pointed at a wolf who stood behind Rainbow Dash. Fluttershy looked over, jumping back from shock. She didn't hear anything following her, but it just stood there staring at her. Turning back to the stallion, she began covering the wound with antiseptic.

"This is going to sting, I'm sorry." The stallion bit his lower lip, trying not to make a noise. He panted and let his head fall back to the ground. "Who attacked you? Do you know why?" Rainbow got closer and inspected the area around them.

"It was somepony from Team Aqua. He was wearing a blue bandanna, and had a black and whi-

"-white striped shirt and blue pants," Fluttershy finished. Both Rainbow and Pinkie looked straight at Fluttershy, then looked at each other. The stallion stopped mid-sentence, and looked at her dumbfounded. Fluttershy quickly recoiled, "Oh, I'm sorry."

"You've seen Team Aqua before?" he asked, then winced.

"Um, no. It was a lucky guess," Fluttershy fibbed. She quickly went to change the subject. "So, what was he after?"

The stallion sighed. "He took a package from me. I was making my way to the Devon Corporation, and he stopped me. He sicked his dog on me and stole an important document I was delivering."

"So, he used his Pokémon as a weapon..." Fluttershy looked over at Rainbow as she paced and messed with her coat. She took the roll of bandages and wrapped them around the wound, pulling hard to make sure it stayed on correctly. "Where did he go?"

"He went north, probably passed right through Rustboro City. Please don't go after him though, it's Devon Corporation business. I don't want you fillies to involved in this."

"Is there anything we can do though?" Pinkie asked.

"You're doing enough as it is, but if you really want to help I do have something you can do." The stallion planted his hoofs into the grass and tried to stand. He wobbled and fell back down, grunting in pain. "If you can, could you tell my boss about what happened? I'm being expected to arrive with it, and they need to know now."

"What about your job? Won't you lose it if we say it was stolen?" Fluttershy interjected.

"Don't worry about it." The stallion rubbed his wound, trying to soothe it. "As long as they know about it it's fine."

“So how do we go about getting in? They aren’t going to let three random ponies talk to their president, will they?” Rainbow asked as she looked over at the Poochyena. “Also, what should we do about this guy?” She approached it and it began to snarl. Quickly she stepped back, making it stop. “Well, that’s new.”

“Tell them you need to talk to the president about ‘Project 746’. The receptionist will know what you’re talking about.” He tried standing again, bracing himself better this time. “Could you help me get out of these woods? There’s a house in the next route that I can rest at.”

Fluttershy took his injured foreleg and put it around her neck, trying to lift him to carry. “Could someone take the other side? I can’t do this myself.” Pinkie Pie hopped over, and took his right side. With Pinkie out of the way, the Poochyena approached Fluttershy, nuzzling her torso. Her body shifted, trying to still hold onto the pony as the wolf tried to play. “Not now, maybe later.” The wolf looked into her eyes and backed off, keeping itself at a good distance.

“Why does it come up to you, but when I get near it it growls at me?” Rainbow asked, then looked ahead. “Whatever, I’ll lead the way.”

“Thank you so much for this,” the stallion said, walking in sync with Fluttershy and Pinkie. The fog was lighter than before, giving way for details to show themselves. It made it much easier for the four to navigate the rest of the woods. The striped Poochyena walked along side them and glanced in all directions, seemingly watching for sudden movements. “The path to Rustboro should be just up ahead. It should take too much longer.” They pressed on, sidestepping around trees and bushes before seeing a clearing in the distance. Rainbow spread her wings, flew ahead and checked their distance. She turned and nodded her head towards the clearing, signaling them through.

As they passed through the forest, a large city sprawled in front of their eyes. Giant towers threatened the sky, and towered over the trees and houses along the path to the city. They appeared as sentinels, silently standing in the fog’s midst. Fluttershy took her eyes off the sight and noticed a small house west, right near the beginning of the path. “Is that it?” she asked, pointing to the house with her head.

"Yeah, that's it." He grunted and fell to knees, bringing both Fluttershy and Pinkie with him. Struggling, they brought him back up and trekked to the building. It was small but cozy, nestling itself amongst the trees. Rainbow dashed ahead and looked inside, inspecting the building thoroughly. They crossed over a small wooden bridge and made their way to the front door. There was a sign that read '*Rustboro Rest House*' hanging on the door. Rainbow knocked and waited for an answer. A light flickered in the window, as they could hear something approach.

"Hello, welcome t-" A dark brown unicorn stated as he opened the door. He stopped midsentence, glaring at the injured Devon employee. "W-what happened here?"

"It's a long story. Can we come in? I heard you house trainers needing some rest." Fluttershy asked, trying to look around the unicorn to see the inside.

"Well, I can't refuse an injured traveler. Please, come in." He stepped aside, revealing an inside filled with beds and an area to cook. There were several other ponies inside, each with their Pokémon out. The variety of them intrigued Fluttershy, but she had other pressing matters to attend to. She and Pinkie brought the stallion to a bed and laid him down, making sure he stayed on his left side as to not ruin his shoulder more. With that taken care of, Fluttershy turned to the Poochyena who sat on the floor, wagging its tail.

"Why did it follow us all the way over here? Shouldn't it still be in the forest?" Fluttershy wondered as she began inspecting the wolf.

"I don't know. I didn't even hear it behind us when we were finding this guy." Pinkie said.

"D-do you want to be my friend, wolf?" Fluttershy asked, rubbing its fur. It closed its eyes and began wagging its tail. "I'll take that as a 'yes'." It happily barked as she dug into her bag and pulled out a Poké Ball. She brought it close to the wolf, far enough away for it to make its own decision. Without hesitation, the Poochyena tapped the button on the Poké Ball. It opened and enveloped the Poochyena in a white light then trapped it inside. She let go of it, letting it fall on the floor. It wobbled back and forth a

few times before it was completely dormant. She picked it up and looked at it, smiling. "I'll have to name you later."

"Ugh, thanks," the stallion spoke up. "I would give you something to reward you, but that thug took my wallet as well. I'm sure that Mr. Stone will be able to reward you kindly." He took the blanket and draped it over him.

"Will you be fine by yourself? I-I mean you're still badly injured," Fluttershy asked.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure if anything happens the pony who runs it can help. When you reach the city, it's on Celestial Road. It's about four blocks north and to your left, and it's the tallest building on the road. You can't miss it." He motioned Fluttershy over, bringing her head close to his. "Remember, it's 'Project 746'," he whispered.

"Why do you trust us so much with this?" she said under her breath. "Isn't it really important?"

He chuckled. "No matter what, they'll find out eventually. The project name isn't important, I'm just trying to get the news there faster. It doesn't hurt anyone that three filly trainers knows that Devon is working on a project."

Fluttershy lifted her head and backed away from the stallion. After placing her new Pokémon in her bag, she turned towards the door. "Well... let's go." She didn't want to leave the stallion, but she had no choice. They smiled to the unicorn as they left off to Rustboro City. "So, what should we do? I really don't want to get involved in something like this. Well, more than we've already been."

"Maybe it'll lead to an adventure!" Pinkie gasped, "I'm always wanted to go on an adventure. I mean the Nightmare Moon and dragon trips were fun, but this has intrigue and suspense." Pinkie began hopping as they turned north.

"Yeah, adventure sounds good," Rainbow said. "I mean as long as we're here, we might as well do something cool, right?"

"I guess..."

“Great! Let’s do it right away so we have a better story to tell when we get back. We can get supplies and stuff later, adventure calls!” Pinkie let her expectations get the best of her.

“We don’t even know if this will lead to anything though.”

“Well, you can always use that weird memory thing again, can’t you? It worked for that pony, we were just a little late,” Rainbow said.

“Let’s just deliver the news and be on our way. We should probably talk about this when we know more about it, shouldn’t we?” Fluttershy asked as they approached the beginning of the city’s main road.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Rainbow said, looking over at Pinkie.

Beep *beep* *beep* The Pokédex began beeping, startling Fluttershy. She closed her eyes and groaned, then took the Pokédex out and flipped it open. The screen flickered and the automated voice ran through its routine. “Rustboro gym at 3:30,” Fluttershy repeated to her friends. She took a look at the clock. It was 12:15 p.m. “Well, we have enough time at least.”

“Um, shouldn’t we train a little bit before your fight? I mean Alerce didn’t do so hot against Norman.” Rainbow asked in a worried tone.

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt,” Fluttershy said painfully. She swallowed nervously and looked over at Igni who was sleeping on Rainbow’s back. “If we finish this early enough, maybe we can... spar?”

“I never thought you’d ask!” Rainbow said with excitement. “I can’t wait to see what Igni can do,” she sighed, and looked at Fluttershy. “I know what I said back in the forest about Igni, but if there really are ponies out there using these creatures as weapons we have to be ready for anything.” They both looked on ahead and stared at the city that laid in front of them. The streets were crowded with ponies without their Pokémon in view, all of them dwarfed by the massive buildings. It looked like Canterlot to them, except the buildings were more rectangular and dull colored, and the layout was much more structured and rigid. Ponies trotted with suits and formal dress, while others in more adventures attire. A battle took place on

the side of the road between two ponies, each one of them looked as if they were only sparing.

“I’m so hungry. Shouldn’t we stop somewhere to eat?” Pinkie asked, rubbing her stomach.

“After the we visit that ‘Devon’ company. That is what you wanted, Pinkie.” Rainbow said.

“Okie dokie!” Pinkie exclaimed as they traveled another block. Fluttershy couldn’t help but stare upward at the towers. They eclipsed anything she had ever seen built by ponies, and it amazed her. Glass surrounded the perimeter of each of the buildings, and fanciful decorations garnered the front of each, attracting the view of everypony. She turned her head towards where they walking, looking up at the sign they were approaching.

“Alright let’s see, that was one, two, three blocks?” Pinkie asked.

“Yeah, we’re coming up to it now I think.” Rainbow said, turning her head to the left. Pinkie and Fluttershy followed suit. Like every other street, it was lined to the brim with compact buildings, though one did stick out. The tallest building on the street had an insignia of a swooping pegasus wing, with a sharp expanding line running opposite bolted to the front. Small statues of ponies lined the front, standing as guardians of the building. “Uh, I think that’s the building.”

“The one with the statues?” Fluttershy asked.

“Well, he did say it stuck out. It wouldn’t hurt to check it out.” Rainbow spread her wings and flew towards the building, Fluttershy following. Pinkie bounced around the constant stream of ponies until they reached the front doors. There was ‘Devon Corporation’ plastered on the doors, but something stuck out to Fluttershy: there were no door handles. She crept closer, scanning the doors for a way in, but as she got close they slid open. Puzzled, she moved in closer to make sure it wouldn’t close on her. She waved her hoof between the doors. They remained motionless.

“Well, I guess it’s fine.” Pinkie and Rainbow passed her into the building’s lush interior. The carpet was a deep crimson, making a striking

contrast to the pale yellow of the walls. A mare with reading glasses sat behind a counter, watching as the three gaze around with stupefying fascination.

“Can I help you?” the pony asked as she removed her glasses.

“Oh yes, we need to talk to, uh, the president.” Fluttershy responded.

“Uh huh,” the mare said sarcastically. “So, what do you need to see Mr. Stone for?”

Rainbow jumped ahead of Fluttershy, “It’s about, what was that,” Rainbow rubbed her chin in thought. “Oh yeah, ‘Project 746’.”

The mare sighed and pressed a button on a strange device and began speaking into it, “Mr. Stone, there are three fillies here about ‘Project 746’.” She waited for a response.

“Anypony else sick of being called fillies?” Rainbow asked, sneering at the receptionist.

“Follow me,” the mare said as she left the desk, and began walking down a hallway. Fluttershy hesitated, then followed at a distance. After a few steps, she pressed a button on the wall that was on the side of two metal doors. A light on the top flashed the number ‘3’, and progressively went down until it reached the letter ‘G’. Suddenly the doors slid open as the front doors did. “It’s the top floor. Please don’t be too long, Mr. Stone is a busy stallion.” The three moved through the doors into a small box-like room. There wasn’t much inside except a panel of buttons to the right of the door and that same informative light on top. The three adjacent walls were of polished metal, allowed the three to see themselves.

So... top floor,” Rainbow said to herself as she press the highest number button. “How is this supposed to-” the room began to shake and they could feel themselves being pulled to the floor. “What’s going on!?”

“I-I don’t know,” Fluttershy said, trying to make sure Alerce was still safe on her back. Just as the shaking began, it stopped. The doors slid open, revealing a small hallway and a door at the end. Couches that lined the walls for them to sit on. They each exited the room, and the doors closed behind them. Right as the exited, the door at the hallway opened,

and a stallion in a black suit and sunglasses motioned the three in. Fluttershy took a deep breath and followed the pony's invitation.

The room was as large as the base floor, but more open and grand. Windows lined the walls, leaving no sense of walls. A large Devon symbol was sprawled across the floor in front of a large wooden desk where a stallion sat in a plush chair. "So, you must be the three here about 'Project 746', am I correct?" he asked in a pleasant tone. It was a blue unicorn with a dark blue swooping mane. He wore a dark brown suit with a mark stitched on the lapel. It was a yellow crescent moon with a smaller white crescent inside.

"Uh, yes we are." Fluttershy couldn't help but look around the room more as she spoke. "I found an employee of yours injured in the forest to the south. He told me that somepony from a 'Team Aqua' stole some documents that pertained to it."

"Is that so?" he said, placing his hooves on the desk. "I'm not surprised."

"D-does that mean you're not going to fire him?" Fluttershy responded.

"Hmm, why do you care so much about one pony's employment status?" He stood up and approached the three.

"I... uh... well..." Fluttershy shuffled her forehooves and lowered her head.

"I haven't seen such caring young mares in quite a long time. You remind me of my daughter." Fluttershy's head perked back up. "I thank you for bringing this to my attention. I will make sure you are rewarded in kind. Could I see your PokéNavs?"

"A Poké-what?" Rainbow asked.

The stallion chuckled. "I thought every trainer had one." He trotted back to his desk and opened a drawer. He pulled out three devices with open straps coming out from the bottom. "These are PokéNavs, they're quite essential for every trainer. They're of Devon Corp. design." He carried them over and handed them to each of them. "They come with a map,

clock, touch screen, feeding timer, everything you need pre-installed. There's also an experimental phone application installed into those three.

"Why would you give us these for free? It seems like a little much." Fluttershy asked.

"I'm letting you keep them under one condition." He trotted back to his desk and sat down. "My daughter, Stephanie, is doing some research in the caves of Dewford Town, and I can't contact her at the moment. I need a letter delivered to her right away. You seem trustworthy enough."

"But, I-"

"Don't worry, whatever is inside will mean nothing if you peek I can assure you." One of the two black-suited ponies handed Fluttershy an envelope. "Dewford has a gym, and since you're trainers you should be going there anyway. Also I've heard there are quite a lot of rare Pokémon as well." One of the ponies began escorting the three out of the room. "Good luck!" he yelled out as they approached the door. Fluttershy was the last to go through, and she overheard the two at the other end of the room talking quietly to each other.

"Did you see those two ponies that were with the yellow pegasus?"

"Yeah, what about them?"

"Well, don't they look fami-" She was pushed out the door and strained to hear the rest of the conversation. The door closed, leaving the three alone in the hallway.

"This is so exciting! I can't wait to see what this 'Stephanie' looks like!" Pinkie yelled out as she hopped towards the metal doors.

"Wait, they were just talking about you two!" Fluttershy yelled out, desperate to grab their attention.

"Oh well, they can talk about us all they want. I'm sure its because they think we'll be expert trainers." Rainbow said with confidence. Fluttershy sighed and walked to the doors. She took one last sideways glance at Mr. Stone's office. After a short sigh, she walked through to the

metallic room and watched the stallion's office disappear behind the polished steel doors.

Chapter 8

Analogue

Alerce stood at the ready, staring down his feathered rival. It was his first real fight, and Fluttershy tried to keep her nerves under control. They stood in the middle of the crowded city, ponies with business suits passed by without question. She still wasn't used to the frantic nature of the place, but while she was here she had to get used to it. "Uh, use Tackle," Fluttershy said, making Alerce run at a full sprint. Igni swiftly dodged and slapped Alerce with his wing. The Turtwig struck the ground but then popped back to his feet.

"Alright, try scratching him," Rainbow commanded, still trying to get her bearings. Igni jumped onto Alerce and scratched at his head. Alerce withdrew into his shell and spun, launching Igni back towards Rainbow Dash. Igni started coughing and hacking; Rainbow bent down to check on him. "Are you alright, guy?" After a few more coughs, small embers flew from his mouth, catching Rainbow in the snout. She frantically rubbed her nose, trying to alleviate herself from the singeing embers. "Ow, what was that?" Igni slunk back and continued coughing.

"Uh, let me check." Fluttershy dug through her bag and whipped out her Pokédex. She had never used it to check information without desperation, so now was good a time as any. It lit up automatically, showing a screen with several options. She clicked the button next to "Move List". It beeped at her, saying to point it at a Pokémon. She tilted it down and lined it up with Igni; it flashed white and showed a text file of available league recognized moves. "It looks like that's 'Ember'. Igni is apparently a fire type, so he creates fire in his body I'm sure."

"That sounds... awesome!" Rainbow said, pushing Igni back into the fray. "Now, use that Ember attack on Alerce, not me." Igni smiled and nodded, then turned and stared her opponent down. With a quick lunge forward, she fired a spray of small embers at Alerce. Some caught him on the face and legs, making him run and yelp in pain. With a worried glance, Fluttershy took the Pokédex and scanned over Alerce, revealing him to be a grass type. A type that's weak to fire.

“Uh... uh,” Fluttershy stammered. She tried coming up with a strategy, but the type and power disadvantage between the two was overwhelming. In desperation she scanned the tablet again, looking ahead on Alerce’s move set. The only attack ahead in the list was Absorb, but it was still a ways off. “Tackle him!” she finally commanded. After shaking off the embers, Alerce charged and buried his head into Igni’s chest. The both flew towards Pinkie Pie, rolling and stumbling in the grass.

As the fight went on, Fluttershy felt excited. She didn’t want to think it was May’s personality resurfacing, but it reminded her of the time she fought Brendan. No memories surfaced, which put her on edge. The endorphins that ran through her body was something she hadn’t felt since she saw Rainbow Dash pull off the fabled Sonic Rainboom. The gym fight couldn’t come fast enough; she shook with giddy anticipation.

A few minutes later, her Pokédex’s alarm went off. “Alright, that’s enough,” she said, alerting Rainbow. Alerce bolted back to Fluttershy, rubbing the burn marks on his head and legs. “It’s 2:30. I need Alerce at full strength to fight this gym leader.”

“So, are we just going to wait in front of the gym like last time?” Rainbow asked as she scooped Igni off of the grass.

“Yeah. We might as well.” Fluttershy placed Alerce on her back and began making her way to the east side of the city. The map on her new PokéNav was quite handy after all. Pinkie leaped from the grass and bounced along side Rainbow Dash.

The gym stood next to two towering buildings, making it feel small and cramped. It was designed like any other building that wasn’t a glass behemoth: It was small and rectangular with a brown brick outside. A few windows were etched in the front just to the side of the sliding glass doors. A line of ponies extended from the entrance. Fluttershy couldn’t understand why there was a line if the fights were scheduled, but she took her place in the back to not stand out.

“So why didn’t I get a call for a gym fight? I’m registered,” Rainbow complained as she approached the line.

“Maybe it just hasn’t finished registering yet,” Fluttershy responded as the line shortened.

“I wonder what this gym leader looks like! I bet they look like all those other ponies in suits,” Pinkie exclaimed. “Maybe one of these ponies in line know something!” She hopped out of line and began talking to a young stallion. Fluttershy couldn’t make out what he said, but his face became bright red as he talked, making Pinkie giggle. His eyes darted as he talked, then he looked down at the pavement. Giggling, Pinkie hopped back and stared at Fluttershy.

“So, what did you find out? He seemed a little embarrassed,” Rainbow said.

“Oh, he was going on about how pretty she was, and how refined and cultured too. He was so red when he started talking! Apparently she has a really good fashion sense as well. I think Rarity might like her.” Pinkie snorted as she continued her giggling fit.

“What about her Pokémon? Did you find anything out about that?” Fluttershy asked.

“Nope! All he did was stammer about the gym leader. It’ll be more fun if we find out when we get in; that way it’ll be a surprise!”

As the clock ticked towards Fluttershy’s fight, her patience began to wear thin. Even after her existential crisis a day ago, she couldn’t help but be excited. She didn’t want to think that May’s personality was rubbing off on her, but she couldn’t come up with any other explanation. Rainbow and Pinkie broke that part of her, didn’t they? Her body shook as the line dwindled down to one pony. She checked the time, trying her hardest to keep her cool. It was 3:15, only fifteen minutes away from her second gym fight. She hoped that because there was such a long line that this was the first gym. Either that, or these were ponies who wanted to court her. All her trails of thought dissipated as the final pony entered the gym.

“This is it...” Fluttershy said, trailing off. ‘*Self-defense, it’s just self-defense,*’ she repeated to herself.

"You'll do fine. Norman was the fifth leader, maybe she's the first," Rainbow assured her, placing her hoof on Fluttershy's back.

"I hope so." She felt a knot in her stomach form as she waited, her head pained and her vision blurred slightly. Her anxiety got the better of her, but she ignored it as she stared at her PokéNav. 3:29. The last pony to enter finally left with a disappointed face. He trotted past them slowly as the three made their way through the glass doors.

The inside was much different than that of Norman's; much more refined and cultured. Beautiful banners hung and sparkled with the mid-day sun. Elegant tapestry lined the gym floor, leaving a polished wood arena in the center. There were no bleachers and no seats for spectators as well. It was only the three and the gym leader alone in the building. At the other end of the gym stood the silhouette of a young mare unicorn with her head held up high. After the lights dimmed, the mare gracefully trotted her way to the center of the gym, allowing her purple and red dress to shine with the sun's light that poured in from the ceiling. She was a white unicorn with a swirled purple mane with eyes of azure. On her shawl were three small purple diamonds. Fluttershy gasped as she stared.

"R....R...Rarity?" she clamoured, her mouth hung agape.

"What's Rarity doing here? I thought she was back in Ponyville!" Rainbow muttered. Fluttershy didn't understand. Her best friend stood right in front of her, but the air around her had changed. Why would another of her friends follow her here?

"Welcome to the Rustboro Gym. My name is Roxanne," the mare stated as she approached the three. She sounded exactly like Rarity, but she acted as if nothing was wrong. Fluttershy couldn't even look at her friends when she was conditioned without having pains of resurfacing memories. Maybe Rarity went with her friends without their knowledge and landed elsewhere. Maybe she had fully succumbed to those incessant voices. "Which one of you is my 3:30 appointment, hmm?"

"I am," Fluttershy said with a huff of confidence. "C-could I ask you something, miss?"

The unicorn formed her mouth to a pout and placed her hoof under her chin. "I don't see why not."

"Do you remember anything about yourself before two days ago?"

Roxanne recoiled and stared blankly at Fluttershy. "W-what do you mean? Of course I do. What kind of silly question is that?" She turned away and strode to her side of the arena. "It's been a pleasure, unknown pony, but I can assure you that this will be the only gym you will ever attend."

"But, I've already been in another one," Fluttershy retorted.

"Yeah, the fifth one in fact. She's not afraid of you," Rainbow yelled out.

"Norman's? Hmm..." she scratched under her chin again. "It doesn't matter. I won't get into how that's impossible, so I'll simply get started." Roxanne's horn glowed, causing the perimeter lines of the arena to harshly glow. "I am Roxanne, the first gym leader of Hoenn's Pokémon League. I will show you the true nature of Pokémon." With her horn, she gracefully tossed a Poké Ball out onto the field, revealing a large rock with arms. It was polished, leaving Fluttershy unsurprised, but she hadn't a clue on what to make of it. She whipped out her Pokédex and scanned the creature for information.

"Weak to grass, huh?" Fluttershy muttered under her breath. Alerce didn't have a grass attack yet, but maybe after taking a few attacks he can-

She stopped and stared down at Alerce who growled at the rock. After shutting her eyes, she placed one of her hooves on her forehead. This was the same Pokémon whom she cried over after the last fight, and yet at the moment she wanted to throw him back into the ring. Was she changing her ways, or was something forcing her. It had only been a day since they arrived, and she got thrills from violence. She didn't know herself anymore.

"Fluttershy?" Rainbow approached her, hearing small sobs from the yellow pegasus. "Fluttershy, what's wrong? You haven't even sent out Alerce."

"I... I don't know." Fluttershy looked up at her friend. "Just a minute ago I knew why I had to fight, but I... was getting excited for this, and... I..."

Rainbow grabbed the pegasus's head and made her stare straight into her eyes. "You're the Element of Kindness, I know that. A pony was just mauled by a wolf sent by a trainer, and he's part of a team. There are probably many more ponies with even more powerful Pokémon that could come for us. You aren't fighting for sport, you're doing it to survive." She let go of Fluttershy's head and looked over at the Rarity look alike. "Alerce is ready for this, and he knows this world better than you. Trust him."

Fluttershy gulped. Her friend was right. The whole world it seemed was based around fighting, and she knew it for days. For all she saw, she wasn't ready to accept it alone. If the girl really was influencing her, maybe she could let it fight for her as she contemplated her stance. She concentrated on May's personality and mannerisms, letting take her take over as she mentally went blank. *'It wouldn't hurt to try, would it?'*

Rainbow could only watch as Fluttershy opened her eyes, with a new found fire and intensity. Her timid demeanor seemed to melt away as she stood with her head held high. "Alerce, go out there and withdraw until you can use Absorb. Take as many hits as you can; I have potions ready." Alerce nodded his head and calmly entered the field.

"Oh, are we starting? Very well, you know what to do Geodude." The rock lunged forward, hitting Alerce in the shell. Its fist bounced off as a blue light enveloped his shell. "Keep at it!" Roxanne yelled, prompting Geodude to unleash a series of volleys at the Turtwig. Fluttershy only stood, a small teeth-filled grin formed on her face, putting Rainbow on edge. Just a second ago she cried about even letting Alerce onto the field, then suddenly she smiled as he was pummeled into the earth.

"What are you doing? You can't win with pure defense," Roxanne stated as she flipped her mane. "You'll have to lower your defense at some point." Fluttershy's mischievous smile grew as he held up her Pokédex.

"Alerce. Use Absorb, now!" She said in an authoritative tone. The Turtwig glowed in a green aura that enveloped him and the Geodude. Suddenly a crack appeared on the rock, and green tendrils of energy coiled

around Alerce. It absorbed into his skin, making all his bruises and cuts disappear. The Geodude rocked back and lay on the ground, unmoving.

“What was that?” Rainbow demanded. Fluttershy cocked her head towards the pewter blue pegasus and grinned. With her wings unfolded, Rainbow took a step back. “Y-you’re starting to creep me out.”

“That was Absorb, a grass attack that steals a Pokémon’s energy. Simple stuff, really.”

“L... like a v-vampire!?” Pinkie jumped.

“What’s going on with you!? One second you’re acting like the Element of Kindness, then you steal some animal’s energy like it’s some plaything? What happened to you!?”

Fluttershy huffed. “I only did what you told me to do. You wanted me to fight, so I made the necessary steps to do it.” Her voice changed between every sentence, delving deeper and deeper into something unrecognizable to Rainbow. She turned back to Alerce who sat waiting patiently for Roxanne’s next Pokémon.

“You’re smiling!” Rainbow snapped. “We aren’t doing this for fun!”

“Maybe *you* aren’t,” Fluttershy stated coldly.

Roxanne held her Poké Ball in the air and a red beam of light enveloped Geodude, turning it into a wisp of energy as it entered the sphere. “You know the type advantage, that’s good. You’re already better than 95 percent of trainers I have to face. Fillies these days never put in the research.” She took another Poké Ball from her dress and threw it to the field, revealing another Geodude. “I hope your Turtwig isn’t too exhausted.”

“Alerce, finish it.” Fluttershy commanded, leaving Alerce to his work. His body glowed green as he released more energy absorbing coils. They struck the Geodude with terrible force, creating a gut-wrenching crack as energy flew through the air back to Alerce. Just as the Geodude came to battle, it fell where it stood. “I didn’t know gym leaders were going to be so easy,” she smiled.

Rainbow could feel a knot forming in her throat. Her friend was gone, replaced by some pink-haired monster. "Hey! What have you done with Fluttershy?!" Rainbow screamed, catching Fluttershy's attention. "No matter how much we need to defend ourselves, the Fluttershy I know would never take joy in this!"

"While we're here, why not have some fun?" Fluttershy approached Rainbow whose wings stood erect. Fluttershy's pupils were half the size, giving her a violent look. "I couldn't do it alone, so I let May take over as I thought over things."

"You... you let this happen!? You're hiding behind this monster as you think about *things*?" Rainbow grabbed Fluttershy and stared into her eyes with fury.

"Of course. It only seemed logical. Alerce was a strong, quick and loyal Pokémon. I guess the world knew better and changed him into something more fitting. A cowardly Pokémon for a cowardly pegasus. Maybe if I keep this up he'll change back."

Rainbow couldn't believe what she was hearing. Why Fluttershy would ever let this personality take over baffled her, but she had to take action. "Bring. Fluttershy. *Back*." Rainbow commanded as she took her right hoof off her friend and reared it back.

Fluttershy stared back at her, giving Rainbow horrible chills. As much as she tried, she couldn't look away from her icy gaze. Fluttershy's pupils disappeared, leaving only her teal irises. Rainbow's hooves were stuck in place as a wave of panic washed over her face. "If you would kindly step out of the way so I can finish this, that would be helpful. You always told me to be more assertive and confident." Rainbow shook from rage as Fluttershy's stare became more intense. She snapped her eyes shut and quickly mulled over her options. After one last shake, she gritted her teeth and smacked Fluttershy across the face. She let out a small scream and fell over as her body went limp; her head bounced as it struck the ground.

Both Roxanne and Pinkie gasped as Rainbow lurched over with tears in her eyes and her mouth hung open. She panted. She never wanted to hurt her friend, but Fluttershy left her no choice. "Dashie? Are you alright?"

Pinkie asked, grabbing hold of the shaking pegasus. "Why did you do that?"

"I had to. I pushed her too far..." Rainbow watched as Fluttershy grimaced, attempting to get up from the assault. She wiped the tears from her eyes and lent a hoof to the struggling pony. Fluttershy's eyes jolted open, her eyes as large as normal.

"W-what happened? Did I fall over?" Fluttershy asked, rubbing her cheek.

"I'll explain later. Are you doing alright, Fluttershy?" Rainbow pulled her friend off of the ground, letting her stand on her own hooves.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. A-are you... crying?"

Rainbow wiped her eyes. "No, of course not." She looked over to Roxanne who sent back her other Geodude. "Just finish this and let's get out of here."

"You know, I've never had guests like this before," Roxanne yelled over. "As much as I'd love for you to stay, I do have more appointments for today and I would hate to be late." She tossed her final Poké Ball out onto the field, revealing a strange rock creature with a giant red nose. It stood with closed eyes and no emotion, shimmering in the sun light. "Alright Nosepass, be a dear and use Rock Tomb. That Turtwig rubs me the wrong way."

Fluttershy snapped to attention. As rocks floated in the air around Nosepass, she looked down at Alerce who appeared untouched. She shook her head, trying to alleviate herself from her dizziness. Her head was ringing and her cheek and the side of her head burned, but she had to focus. Everything between when the Geodude appeared and now was a giant blur, but she had to make a decision before Alerce was pummeled. "Use Withdraw. Hold it off." Alerce nodded and waited out the barrage of rocks that struck his shell. She turned to Rainbow and Pinkie, "What happened? I don't remember defeating that rock. All I remember is that it was weak to grass, and Alerce didn't have a skill yet for that."

“He has Absorb now. You used it twice.” Rainbow stated.

“He does? Well alright.” After the flurry of rocks ceased, Alerce popped his head out from his shell and awaited an order. “Try Absorb. That should work.” Without hesitation Alerce performed the skill, cracking through the Nosepass’ body. Fluttershy recoiled in horror. “W-wha?” The energy absorbed into Alerce’s shell, healing it to a polished shine. The Nosepass stumbled, trying to keep its footing.

“Go for it again!” Roxanne yelled. Without Fluttershy’s command, Alerce used Absorb again, letting his opponent fall face first into the floor. As Fluttershy panted from the drop off of adrenaline, she heard Roxanne clapping on the floor.

“That was marvelous! It’s been a while since anyone has been able to defeat me so thoroughly. Also that performance in the middle was simply divine and masterfully crafted.” She walked to her Nosepass and placed it back inside its capsule. “I wish more of my opponents were as much of a firebrand and entertainer as you were.” Fluttershy wanted to ask about the state of Roxanne’s Pokémon, but thought better of it. She repeated her mantra in her head as she made her way to the middle of the arena. *‘Self-defense, it’s just self-defense.’*

Roxanne scratched her chin, her eyes scanned over the pegasus. “You’re from Littleroot, aren’t you? The clothes look like their style.”

“Yes,” she stated, as she wondered what Roxanne tried to imply.

“You’re the second trainer from there to defeat me within the past two days.” She glanced down at Alerce. “You’re also the second to abandon your Hoenn starter for another region’s.”

“I didn’t abandon my starter. One morning I woke up and he turned into this. He was a Treecko before!” She stopped. “Wait, Brendan’s already gone through here?”

“Yes he did. Quite feisty I might add. About your Turtwig, frankly with all I’ve seen today, I’d believe anything.” Roxanne’s horn glowed, lifting a

small golden thin badge from her dress. Two arrows pointed outwards away from each other, slightly off kilter from being lined up. Both were connected by gold bars that ran across the middle. "This is the Stone Badge. It proves you are worthy of starting your journey." She placed the badge in Fluttershy's hoof. "The next gym is in Dewford Town. Just south of the Petalburg Woods, there's a ship that brings trainers to Dewford. If it's full, there's always Mr. Briney. He's a salty old pony, but he'll help if you know what to say."

"Thank you." Fluttershy took the badge and placed it in her bag. "So, you don't recognize me at all... and you remember things from your past?" she shuffled her forehoof. "I'm sorry for prying, but you look and sound exactly like one of my friends."

"Hmm, I'm sorry. I'm pretty sure I remember everything from my past quite vividly. You are such an odd bunch of ponies." She turned around gracefully as her dress swayed back and forth. She walked back to her side of the arena and glanced back at the three "Thank you for a wonderful battle. Good luck miss. You might want to get your head checked though, that impact looked like it hurt."

Fluttershy turned away and exited the gym, weaving her way through the new line of ponies that congregated outside. A cool breeze whisked through the buildings, clanging the wind chimes that hung on the buildings down the street. The light, somber tone calmed Fluttershy as she watched her friends keep their distance. Pinkie's eyes simply wandered, trying desperately to avoid eye-contact as she walked. Walking and a straight face was never a good sign with Pinkie. Rainbow simply stared ahead as she followed Fluttershy south. She rubbed her face; her skin was still quite raw, so much so it was as if she didn't simply fall over. After the pep talk from Rainbow Dash, she had no recollection of what happened until she woke up on the gym floor.

"What happened to me in the gym?" she asked as she turned to her friends. "Why did I wake up on the floor with a bruise on my face?" A small twinge coursed through her cheek. She rubbed it as she waited for their response.

“That was my fault,’ Rainbow Dash spoke up. “You were acting so... mental. You said something about letting May take over. Did you really do that?”

“I don’t remember doing that, but I must’ve forgotten. Why, what did I, or she, do?”

“You were smiling! Not like a good smile, but like an evil, evil smile,” Pinkie blurted. “Then you used your stare against Rainbow Dash and she smacked you in the face and got teary-eyed.”

Fluttershy’s pupils shrank. “I... I couldn’t have used the stare. I would never use it on my friends.” She looked down at the pavement, ashamed. She didn’t want to believe them, but they were her friends. Why would they lie to her? “I thought that she was only excited for fighting. I didn’t know she was so ruthless. I’m so sorry.”

“You know what, let’s forget about it.” Rainbow said as she hovered above the ground. “Since Absorb took care of all of Alerce’s injuries, we should be good to go through the forest again. It’s good that you’re back, Fluttershy.”

“Great idea! I would love to see what the boats look like here. Everything is so new and shiny here, so it must be amazing!” Pinkie hollered as she bounced around the group.

Fluttershy nodded and continued down the road. “Do we have enough supplies for the trip? We haven’t really stopped to get anything lately.”

“We just ate, so we should be fine. Once I do my flight training today I might run through all our food though,” Rainbow said, doing a somersault over the two. “By the way Pinkie, you still need a Pokémon. We can’t have you running around without one of your own.”

“Maybe I’ll find something on that boat! We haven’t seen any cool water ones yet, so maybe I’ll...” Fluttershy’s concentration moved elsewhere as she caught a glance of a pony out the corner of her eye. It stood near a park bench with an orange lizard with a flame on its tail. All she heard from her friends were mumbles as the pony caught her peeking.

He motioned to his lizard and they both came straight at her. Fluttershy stopped and grabbed Alerce, setting him down on the pavement. She squinted, trying to get a better view of the pony. The silhouette of a flowing jacket and strange hat gave way to color and detail as he came closer. *'Brendan?'*

"Hey!" the pony yelled, stopping in front of the three. "It's been a while, girl."

"Who's that, Fluttershy?" Rainbow asked, staring at the strange pony.

"The name's Brendan." He gritted his teeth and locked eyes with Fluttershy. "So, what have you been up to? Laugh at anymore ponies lately?"

"W-what?" Fluttershy asked. She didn't remember laughing at anypony. "I just got finished with a gym fight."

"Oh, so you'll fight gym leaders, but not me. It's a good thing I get rid of that Torchic, he couldn't even beat Norman, let alone get any respect from you."

"Uh, about that." Rainbow chimed in, grabbing Igni off from her back. "Is this yours?"

"Y-yeah," he stammered irritably. "Whatever, I'm challenging you here filly." He looked down at Alerce, who growled at the fire lizard. "What happened to my father's Treecko?"

"Oh, well... he just..."

"So you won't even fight me with my father's Pokémon, I see how it is." Brendan cut Fluttershy off. "It doesn't matter, my Charmander will burn that stupid turtle to crisp."

"I'll fight you!" Rainbow flew in Brendan's face, staring him down. "I'll take your old Torchic and take you out with him!" With that she moved away, giving Igni space to move. Igni jumped up and down with glee as he fluttered his wings. Brendan stepped back as the moving crowd formed a perimeter around the two fighters. Fluttershy stepped back near the crowd,

hoping May's personality didn't rear its head. Thinking of May, Rarity came to her mind. Maybe Twilight knew if Rarity followed the two in. She wasn't a unicorn, so she had no access to magic. Even though, she had to try.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on Twilight. Her conversation with her last time was still clearly etched into her head. Fluttershy cried and pleaded for help the last time they talked; maybe Twilight didn't want to talk to her. With her lower lip clenched in her teeth, she focused on Twilight, hoping that somehow they could talk.

A few seconds later, she heard a small echo reverberating through her head. With all her mental anguish, she couldn't tell if it was Twilight or just May's memories trying to resurface. "H-hello? Twilight?" she said, as she fell into deep concentration

"Hey Fluttershy! What are you doing in my head?" Pinkie's voice echoed through Fluttershy's mind.

"Pinkie? How are you... I mean how are we doing this? Neither of us are unicorns."

"Pinkie? Fluttershy? Is that you?" Twilight asked with a somber tone.

"Oh Twilight, I'm so glad to finally hear from you. I'm sorry about last time, things were a little out of my control."

"Oh, it's alright. Is Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie with you? I never got the chance to talk to you, and things are pretty hectic where I am." Twilight asked, her voice lightening up.

"Yeah! We found Fluttershy only a few hours after we landed. Things are crazy here! There are animal fights, and tall glass buildings, and crazy ponies, and-"

Wait, animal fighting?" Twilight interrupted Pinkie. "Like cockfighting? Everywhere seems to be completely different than Equestria."

"Everywhere? Like more than one place?" Fluttershy wondered.

“Yes. The counter-spell that could bring you three back was stolen from the royal archives in Canterlot. Apparently the only other known location of the spell is in the country of Ventia. So far in the day we’ve been out, we’ve already been attacked by a pack of griffins.”

“Packs of feral griffins? Is it really that dangerous out there? They *eat* ponies.” Fluttershy shuddered, remembering the assault from Rainbow’s old griffin friend, Gilda.

“We are able to fend them off, but Rarity was injured. We have the chokers we got at Luna’s old castle, and it gives us more power in times of crisis it seems. Rarity’s already set off once, and she’s lying in bed at the moment, recovering. I’m just watching her as Applejack gets supplies.”

Fluttershy opened her eyes and saw Rainbow flying in the air, throwing gusts just above Igni’s head. The gale slammed into the Charmander and Brendan, forcing them to turn and shield their eyes. “Stop that! You’re cheating!”

“Who me? I’m just relaxing up here.” Rainbow closed her eyes and put her forehooves behind her head as her wings continued their assault.

Fluttershy jumped back into the conversation, “Wait, Rarity is over with you? She didn’t come with Rainbow or Pinkie? We just saw a pony who looked and sounded exactly like her!”

“She’s right here next to me. Only Rainbow and Pinkie went through.”

“How can we all talk to each other like this? I mean, we aren’t unicorns. This is just strange!” Pinkie asked.

“Maybe the spell wasn’t just a way to talk. We may all be linked subconsciously. This is great, now if anything happens you can talk to me at anytime.” She paused for a second. “Hold on, I hear somepony coming up the stairs. I’ll talk to you two later. I’m so relieved to hear from you two.”

“Please be careful, Twilight,” Fluttershy said as her mind became clear. She opened her eyes and saw the Charmander lying on the road unconscious. Rainbow flew down to the ground, swooped up and planted her hooves. She picked up Igni, whose only damage was some ruffled feathers.

Brendan only scowled as he sent back his Charmander. Without a word, he bolted past Rainbow and Fluttershy, rushing back into the city. "That was easy," Rainbow remarked.

"We contacted Twilight; Rarity is still with her," Fluttershy said as the crowd closed in on the three.

"You did? How? You aren't unicorns."

"Apparently Pinkie, Twilight and I are linked somehow. I can't really explain it, but we can talk to her any time now."

"That's great!" Rainbow said as she folded her wings. "That pony was weird; why was he all in your face like that?"

"I ran away from him last time I met him. He must've been really hurt by it." Fluttershy said, looking north into the city.

Rainbow lowered her head in thought, then looked up at Pinkie. "So, Rarity is still with Twilight, and wasn't accidentally sent here?"

"Yeah, that's what I just said," Fluttershy explained. She thought for a moment, "You know, this isn't the first time I've seen a pony I recognized. It was a brown pony with spiked back brown mane and an hourglass cutie mark. I thought maybe it was my imagination."

"I know that pony!" Rainbow exclaimed. "He normally works with Applejack during Winter Wrap Up, right?" She paused and looked up in thought. "So, if there's a pony running around that looks like Rarity, and another that looks like a citizen of Ponyville," Rainbow pondered, looking back at the forest. "What about ponies that look and act like us?"

Chapter 9

Fallout

With a flash, a white, slender alicorn appeared in front of the royal archive's doors. She looked at the walls with disdain; the unpainted and unlit stone crumbled in disrepair. They showed their age quite visibly. The floor was still the dull grey stone she remembered from a thousand years ago.

"I can't believe she hasn't finished this yet," she muttered to herself. She channeled energy through her horn, and swung open the two doors with ease. The inside was nearly black with only a light glow emanating from the center of the room. With a yawn, she entered the room and lit every torch simultaneously, illuminating every inch of the library.

She spread her wings and flew above the expansive maze of bookshelves. After scanning the room, she spotted a figure in the center, slumped over in slumber. "I knew she'd be here." With a flutter, the alicorn landed in front of the desk, looking straight at the drooling princess. "Luna," she called, springing the princess out of her sleep.

"-wha? Who?" Luna stammered as her mind adjusted to the waking world. She looked up at the smaller alicorn as she shuffled all the books off the desk, "Oh, hey Celess."

"Down here again, huh?" Celestia started, glancing at the dusty rows of texts, "I thought you were going to start sitting on the throne and listening to your subjects. Not everypony is asleep during the night you know."

Luna huffed. "Did you come down here just to scold me?"

"Of course not, I'm just looking out what's best for you. It's already been a year since you've come back, and you act as if nothing has changed." Celestia put her hoof on her sister's shoulder. "There are those who need your guidance at night."

“...just give me some time, alright? I still have a millennia of history to catch up on.”

“I understand that. Now, I did come down here for a reason. My pupil gave me a letter three days ago requesting access to the archives. The walk from Ponyville to Canterlot is less than a day, and I haven’t heard from her since,” she took her hoof off and stood back on all fours. “Do you know if she came by?”

Luna shuffled in her seat and slid her gaze from her interrogator. “Uh, yeah. She came down the day before looking for some book. Didn’t stay for long.”

Celestia glared at her. Luna had never been good at playing large matters off, and it seemed that her banishment hadn’t helped that. “What did she get? Why was I not informed of this?”

Luna looked down at her pile of books. Her sister watched as the young alicorn struggled to hide her guilt. Celestia’s curiosity was peaked, but a cloud of anxiety hung in the air. “She was trying to find a spell from Arcan... but there was a problem.”

“A problem?” Celestia paced back and forth, glancing at Luna’s scattered texts.

“Yes,” Luna took a deep breath. “Do you remember the book we received from him after the old castle was built?”

“Of course. Why, what happened to it?”

“Well, the preface and counter-spells were torn out of the book.” Her teal eyes burned through Celestia as she spoke.

“Maybe the pages fell out. That is an old book after all.” Celestia suggested, staring back at her sister.

“You’re smarter than that, sis,” Luna argued. “There are tear marks and remnants of the pages still in the spine. Even if the epoxy did fail, they would have been in the book. This happened while *you* were in charge; you didn’t touch this place while I was imprisoned, did you?”

“Do *not* talk to your big sister like that,” Celestia scolded. “I just want to know what happened. Where is Twilight Sparkle?”

“She...” Luna’s eyes darted to the side. “She’s on her way to Mistral City.”

Celestia froze. “Why is she going there? Where did she get that idea?” She started pacing as the solar wind in her hair subsided.

“Twilight told me that she performed a deviation that sent one of her friends to another realm of space-time. The only book we have that had the counter-spell had the pages ripped out, and I know that one complete version lies in Mistral.”

Celestia closed her eyes and sharply inhaled. “You told her to go? Luna, you of all ponies should know what Mistral City is like. Now the Element of Magic is missing from Equestria, and my student is running head first into the dragons’ den.” Her pacing hastened. The clapping of her hooves echoed through the library, making the room feel hollow and lifeless. “She’s only a young mare! She’s completely unprepared for this kind of excursion!” A small pool of tears rested in the goddess’ eyes as her mind buzzed with fear. “Things could kill her out there! Why didn’t she come talk to me first!?”

“I didn’t know what else to tell her! She was pulling her mane out because of this. I brought her and her friends their element necklaces, so they should be fine.” Her body shook as she spoke. “If they could defeat me when I was Nightmare Moon, then they should be able to wipe the floor with any of the low-life scum there.”

“You misundersta-” she stopped and looked inquisitively at her sister. “Her friends? You mean more than one element left Equestria without my knowledge?” She buried her face into her hoof. “Why was I not told this?”

“You’ve been busy over the past few days, and I didn’t want to disturb you,” Luna said, her face flushing with shame. “That’s probably why Twilight didn’t talk to you the day they left.”

“When did they leave?” Celestia placed her hooves on the desk and stared at her sister. She never liked pressing answers out of ponies, but Luna was stalling. “Twilight is more important to me than any business I could possibly have. When did she leave?”

“T-two mornings ago.” Luna squeaked. “I’m so sorry, Celess. I haven’t had much practice dealing with other ponies in the last millennia... so... I must have misjudged the weight of this.”

Celestia turned away from Luna and headed into the maze of bookshelves. “I have to raise the sun in less than an hour. When I do, you are to join me in the conference hall.” She turned to the distraught alicorn. “I need you to write a letter to Twilight’s assistant in Ponyville. If anyone knows the whole story, it will be him.” Celestia’s horn glowed with a brilliant white light. “If anything happens to Twilight or any of her friends, I will not hesitate to raise the banners.” With that, she left in a burst of light, leaving Luna alone in the dusty archive.

“Eww, what was I doing in somepony else’s bed!?” Rarity yelled, the noise knocking Twilight from her trance. The white unicorn jumped from the bed and backed away with panic in her face. She then lowered her head in embarrassment as Applejack turned over and grumbled in her sleep. “Oh, sorry about that. I didn’t know where I was for a moment.”

“It’s alright, I’m just glad you’re awake,” Twilight yawned as she got to her hooves. Night had long since fallen as she kept an eye on Rarity. Applejack and Zipporah had gone to sleep hours ago as Twilight kept watch. She was exhausted, but she was too excited about Rarity’s waking to care.

“Twilight, I’m so sorry about what happened today. I wish I was better at defending myself, but I just made things worse by passing out at such a pivotal moment.” Rarity checked her body for injuries and tried managing her ruffled coat.

“You don’t remember what happened in the battle?” Twilight asked as she wiped her bloodshot eyes, forcing herself to keep them open.

“Of course I do, I just told you. Really Twilight, you must listen more,” Rarity scoffed.

“Tell me everything you remember,” Twilight said as she approached Rarity. She glanced at her friend’s body, circling her to check on her wounds.

“Fine, if I must. I swung my weapon around gracefully as I left the store and backed into the phalanx of ponies. I thought I was fine, but after fending a few off one flew right into the group and struck me in the side, tossing me on the ground. My sword lay right in front of me, just out of reach, and a brutish griffin landed on top of it. Before I could react, I passed out, then woke up just a minute ago.” Rarity looked out the window at the coming dawn. “I wish I could have been a better help.”

After making her round, Twilight looked up at Rarity’s eyes. “I know you don’t remember this, but you were the one who took down all the griffins.”

Rarity looked dumbfounded, then began snickering. “Twilight, you don’t have to try making me feel better. I think I would remember such a powerful display if it happened.”

Twilight lifted Rarity’s necklace from the floor and showed it to her. “When you were about to be struck by a griffin, your necklace activated. You took needles from your bag, thrust them into the base of their wings and immobilized them.” Rarity stared at Twilight with her mouth hung open. “Maybe you forgot because of stress.”

Rarity paced, her legs hobbling lightly as she walked. “I really did that?” She stumbled into Twilight, wrapping her hooves around the purple unicorn. “I’m sorry, I was so frightened.”

Twilight lay in Rarity’s embrace, baffled. She lightly pushed her away and held onto her shoulders. “It’s alright, you’re fine now.” She took her hooves off her friend and watched as Rarity folded the sheets on the bed with her magic.

“I know. I’m sorry for that outburst,” Rarity said as she let go of Twilight. “I’m just not thinking straight at the moment.” A quiet lull filled the

air as Rarity's horn ceased to glow. The two unicorns glanced around, trying to come up with words after Rarity's scene. Twilight's eye-lids grew heavy again as the bed beckoned her. As she slowly approached the warm, soft, feather filled mattress, she heard murmurs from outside. Wanting to ignore them, she inched closer to the inviting bed, but the whispers only grew louder, prompting Twilight to turn her head towards the window.

The sun still had not yet risen as she looked down at the ground in front of the store. Amidst the blue-grey haze, ponies stood in a crowd. Forty, no, fifty of them at minimum were huddled together. "Twilight? What are you looking at?"

Twilight turned to Rarity with her eyes half-closed as Rarity placed the choker around her neck. "There are some ponies gathered outside. I'm going down to see what they want." She broke eye-contact with Rarity and trotted silently down the stairs, hoping not to wake Zipporah who lay behind the store counter.

With a flick of unicorn magic, she slowly opened the doors. Noise of the rabble filled the room as Twilight poked her head out the door; her eyes meeting with several ponies. "Um, hello? Could I help you with something?" The group fell dead silent as the last stragglers looked over at Twilight. She gulped and opened the door fully. "What are all of you doing in front of the store? Does Zipporah really open this early?"

"Zipporah?" A grey-blue pegasus asked. "Never heard of her."

"Then why are you standing in front of her shop? Are you new in town?" For as small a town as Wheatown was, she never guessed that it garnered this much attention. She didn't like what she saw. As she waited, several ponies hollered to her and continued their rambling.

"No ma'am, we just heard a rumor that there are Equestrians here," a dull yellow colored earth pony explained. Twilight huffed out a nervous laugh and stared at the crowd. They grew louder and more distracted as Twilight laughed, making them unaware of her creeping back inside the store. Once the door closed, she rushed up the spiral staircase. When she reached the top, she stomped on the floor, causing Rarity to glance over at full attention.

Out of breath, Twilight began, "We have a problem. A *huge* problem."

"What is it, Twilight?" Rarity asked.

"There's a large group of ponies outside saying they heard rumors of Equestrians here! How did they find out about us so quickly?"

Rarity stopped pacing. "So a couple ponies know about us, what's the problem? Did you even ask them how they heard of us."

"Well... no, but don't you remember what Zipporah said? She talked about two 'unkillable demons' and how ponies from Mistral City talk badly about Equestria. Ventia isn't far from here, they might find us before we even reach the city." Twilight explained as she grabbed and unfurled her map.

"How many could there be? We're in a small town in the middle of nowhere."

"Forty, or fifty; I lost count." Rarity stepped back, then looked out the window at the mass of ponies.

"Well, that is more of a problem than I thought," Rarity exclaimed. She rushed over to Applejack, shaking her to get her up, "Applejack, get up. We have a situation, and we need to leave." With a grunt and several thrown expletives, Applejack got off from her blanket and rubbed her eyes.

"What's goin' on?" She looked out the window with a puzzled look. "It's only the crack of dawn, what's the rush?"

"What are we going to do? We can't just *waltz* out the front door with our cutie marks showing." Rarity asked as she looked out the window to the north. "Is there a back door?"

"Will somepony please explain what's happenin'?" Applejack demanded as she packed up her blanket.

“There’s a huge crowd of ponies outside talking about rumors of Equestrians. We need to leave before they cause any problems,” Twilight explained before turning to Rarity. “We’ll have to ask Zipporah about the door. Applejack, did you pick up those supplies I asked for?”

“Yep! I got some food, and blankets, and cloaks like you asked for. I figured anything else like fire starters would be better set up with magic. Lightens the load a bit.” She patted her saddle bags which bulged from the massive amount of supplies.

“Good, take out the cloaks. I thought we could save them for the mountains, but we need them to stay hidden.” Twilight said as she grabbed her saddlebags.

“Wait, mountains? Who told you about mountains?” Rarity asked.

“The Drakiris Mountains. They appear on the map on the border of the Outlands and Ventia. Those griffins we fought live there according to Zipporah, so we have to be careful.”

“Anything else you want to tell us before we rush out there?” Applejack quipped.

“I think she mentioned something about extended seasons as well. It’s been locked in winter for ages apparently.” Twilight placed her bags on her back and took a cloak that Applejack tossed on the floor. “It might have something to do with how time and space works there, but I’m not sure.” She paused and motioned to the stairs “We should probably get going before the crowd gets any bigger.”

As the first rays of the sun cast through the windows, the crowd became louder and rambunctious. The three donned their russet, woven cloaks and swiftly made their way down the stairs. Along the back wall were crates covered in blankets and flasks of unknown liquids. Rarity and Applejack shuffled around the mess, reaching the back wall. “You two search for an exit, I’ll talk to Zipporah.” Twilight commanded, leaving the two ponies to their work as Twilight strode over to the still sleeping shopkeeper.

“Zipporah, wake up. We need a way out of here through the back.” Twilight asked, pushing against Zipporah, attempting to wake her. The earth pony stirred in her sleep, then violently sat up with her eyes wide open.

“What is it?” she asked, looking at Twilight, then over to the source of aggravating noises that pierced the shop walls.

“There are ponies outside looking for us. Somehow they found out there were Equestrians here. We need a way out without being seen.” Twilight explained, looking over to her friends who continued their assault on the back wall.

“Is that what that noise is? You ponies are nothin’ but trouble,” Zipporah complained as she hauled several crates away, clearing a path between two red, gold stitched banners. There was a black, iron door knob sticking out from the wall. “There’s a back door, but it’s been years since it’s been used. May need a bit of work get through.” When she reached the wall, she slammed her shoulder into the wall, causing a part to bow out. She held onto the doorknob and shook it, trying to force the door open. “Open you infernal door!” Zipporah cursed as she shook the door harder.

“How could we have missed that?” Rarity quipped as Zipporah began slamming her shoulder into the door. With one final hit, the door cracked and swung open. Twilight looked outside, seeing only empty grassland.

“The back of the store is clear, we have to go.” She stepped aside, allowing Rarity and Applejack through as she turned to Zipporah. “How did those ponies find out about us? Did you tell anyone?”

“I didn’t say a word, but perhaps your ‘cutie marks’ gave you away. All you can do now is stay hidden and avoid Ventian eyes at all costs.” She shoved Twilight out the door and grabbed the knob. “Go, there’s nothing left here for you.”

“Thank you for everything!” Twilight yelled as the door closed swiftly behind her. Her heart raced as she entered the grasslands, escaping the feverish horde. Rarity and Applejack lay ahead, waiting for her to catch up. While she ran, Twilight could still hear the distant cries of the crowd as she turned towards the Drakiris.

The path ahead was shrouded in a deep fog, making it hard to see the main road. Twilight lowered the hood of her cloak, letting the open air muss her hair about. The rising sun dully lit the trail as they made their way through the dense fog. They walked alongside the trail, trying to keep away from prying eyes so close to town. Rarity retrieved a few apples from her bag and handed them to Twilight and Applejack. "Here, eat up. I have a feeling we won't be going into towns any time soon," Rarity said before biting into an apple herself. Twilight took a bite, trying to calm herself. She relished the apple's sweet taste after her long night.

As the three made their way through the tall grass, Twilight's fatigue began creeping back up on her. Her eye-lids drooped, and her trot wobbled as she forced her attention ahead. Her body ached as she moved; the lack of sleep and energy made it hard for her to think straight. She looked over to Applejack who looked as if she was talking, but no words came from her mouth. Quickly, she glanced to Rarity who nodded and responded to Applejack in kind with silence. She couldn't tell what was happening, but made a mental note of the loud buzzing sound that danced between her ears. After only a few more steps, she fell face first into the grass, digging up a chunk with her mouth. Applejack bent down to pick Twilight up, but her body resisted. The ground felt like a puffy cloud that called for her to lie on. Applejack hoisted Twilight up and looked at her with a concerned look. "Are ya' alright?" Applejack asked. Twilight was happy that the earth pony's voice was able to pierce the constant noise, and she had to answer in earnest.

"Well, I didn't get any sleep last night. I was up watching Rarity's condition." She blinked furiously, trying desperately to keep her eyes open. "I think I need some rest. The stress must be getting to me."

"If you don't mind sleeping in the grass, we could always stop off the road." Rarity swept her hoof, showcasing the lack of ponies and visible path. "It's not ideal, but you need your rest. You look just awful right now."

"Thanks, I know." Twilight responded as her two friends lifted her by her forelegs and carried her to a small patch of tall grass. The thicket was just tall enough for them to not be seen as Twilight dozed. They let her down easy and stood beside her.

“We’ll stay here and watch for anypony, or anything coming. We won’t let anyone know we’re here,” Rarity said as she set down her saddlebags and took out a small blanket. “You might need this. This fog will make the air chilly if we stay here too long.”

“Thanks...” Twilight yawned as the warm, fleece blanket draped over her. The grass was still wet with dew, but was soft and comfortable; perfect enough for her. With a tired smile, Twilight closed her eyes and let the smell of the dewy grass lull her to sleep.

A warm breeze gently brushed passed Twilight as she lay upon the observatory. She surrounded herself with books for the evening, everything from *The Egghead’s Guide to Astronomy* to *The Advanced, Illuminating Guide to Theoretical Space-Time Anomalies*. After a long day of spending the day at Rarity’s, she was ready to snuggle into her blanket and absorb herself in books for the rest of the day. As words flew by, she heard some banter from below the balcony. She shook her head and continued her assault, but it grew louder and more grating. Although the sounds came from happy, exuberant ponies, Twilight preferred the sound of silence as she read. With one last yell boring through her ears, she slammed her book closed and leaned over the balcony. All five of her friends were standing below surrounding Rainbow Dash. They stopped talking and looked up at her.

“Hey Twilight, come down here for a minute! I have something I want to show you girls,” Rainbow called out.

“I’ll be right down,” Twilight yelled back. She stepped away from the balcony ledge and teleported down to the base of the tree. Rainbow stood there with her head held high, making Pinkie giggle. “So, what do you want to show us?”

“I’d like to know as well. I was just in the middle of doing measurements for a client when you ripped me away from my work.” Rarity complained.

“Now, there’s a good reason. I’ve just mastered an insanely tricky maneuver that I’m going to use for the *Equestrian Flying Nationals* in two

weeks. I need to get you girls excited for when I perform.” Rainbow boasted as she lifted herself off from the ground.

“Let’s see it! If it’s as spectacular as the Sonic Rainboom, you’re sure to win the competition! Ooo, ooo, I want to see it.” Pinkie exclaimed.

Rainbow nodded. “Alright, here I go!” With that, Rainbow launched into the air with blinding speed. Twilight watched as Rainbow banked around a large, puffy cloud, ripping through the outside, turning it to a veil of mist. As she made another turn, she flew through the droplets of water that in turn followed the pewter blue pegasus through the open sky. Twilight was in awe of her friend’s flying ability, but something in the corner of her eye caught her attention. A brown mass tore through the sky, headed in Rainbow’s direction. She looked down at her friends, but none of them seemed to be reacting. With a pained look, she glanced back up just in time to see the brown object to strike Rainbow with terrible force, sending the pegasus plummeting. Twilight brought her hoof to her mouth in horror, “Rainbow Dash!” Twilight yelled. Rainbow fell to the earth as Twilight heard horrible screeching coming from the east.

Twilight gasped as the creature swooped down in pursuit of the fallen pegasus. Reluctantly, she tore her eyes from the scene to see a mass of griffins flying through Ponyville. Fluttershy screamed and flew away while Applejack and Pinkie stood their ground. A griffin whizzed past Twilight and grabbed Fluttershy, attempting to lift her from the ground as she kicked and screamed. Without hesitation, she ran at a full gallop, charging a spell to save her friend, but she heard a terrible scream behind her. She froze, and turned around, seeing both Applejack and Pinkie on the ground with two griffins standing on their bodies. Shaking, she brought her hoof to her mouth, shrieking audible sobs as the griffins tore into their bodies. Before she could run, she caught the sight Rainbow crashing into the earth as a tawny griffin swooped in, dragging the pegasus away. She tore her eyes away as Rainbow’s lifeless body was left hanging in the griffin’s talons.

Twilight slowly backed away, unsure of what to do. Rarity was gone, and as she turned back to Fluttershy who was nowhere to be found. Her lower lip quivered and her sobbing grew louder as she looked for a place to hide. Her mind went blank in blinding fear as she looked. Her ears drooped as she turned back, the sight of crimson blood pooling around her earth pony friends burned into her weeping eyes.

She forced her eyes shut and ran, tears streaming down her face. She had to run. Keep herself safe. She opened her eyes and saw an open wooden shed. Frantically, she stormed through Ponyville, but before she could reach the shed, a loud screech pursued her. She turned her head in panic, and encompassing her vision was a pair terrible ink black wings and the piercing, ice-blue eyes of a large griffin. It screamed straight for her with its sharp claws about to seize her neck.

Twilight screamed as she woke. Her breathing was heavy, labored and stuttered as her mind adjusted to consciousness. Her body flopped down from a short jump as she felt her body sway back and forth. She was arched belly down on something small and round. Her gaze drifted to the ground, and she noticed rocks and debris moving to her left as she swayed; she was moving. She quickly looked around, noticing the brown, stitched cloaks of her friends and a unicorn with long, purple locks of hair looking at her. "R-Rarity? Why are we moving?"

"Twilight, you're awake!" Applejack exclaimed as she turned off the road. "What was the scream all about? Had a bad dream?"

"You could say that," Twilight confirmed as she rolled off of Applejack's back and stretched. "So, why did you start moving?"

"Well, you were taking so long with your nap that Applejack just lifted you up and carried you on her back. I don't know how you slept for so long with all that dreadful rocking," Rarity said as she brushed off Twilight's cloak.

"How long would that be?" Twilight looked at the sun's position, trying to figure it out before one of them had the chance to respond. The sun was still quite low in the sky, just reaching a low-lying line of clouds.

"A day," Applejack stated as Twilight's steps stuttered in shock. "You must've been exhausted to have slept so soundly for that long. I didn't see you move around at all. I just decided to carry you so we could get to Ventia quicker. We don't have time to muck around."

"I see," Twilight said as she fluffed her cloak. "Anything notice us while I was asleep?"

"Well, somepony did ask us about our cloaks. I simply told them we were merely travelers," Rarity said. "I want to keep our stories consistent for when we get into Mistral City. Other than that, nothing bothered us. I'm not sure how with these cloaks on and you on Applejack's back, but we seem to be traveling at a good pace." She lifted a few apples out from her bag and handed them to Twilight. "There are mountains just up ahead. We think it may be the Drakiris."

"Looks like it." Twilight turned and looked over to the horizon, taking notice of the dagger shaped mountains shrouded in a blue veil. Snow smothered over half the mountains, almost confirming Zipporah's claim of an extended winter. The Outlands were baked in the heat of the summer sun while the mountains were chilled with a snap of cold winds. "I think we could reach the base before nightfall if we move quick enough." Twilight yawned again, and motioned her friends forward. "Let's get moving."

Twilight watched several motorized carts drive by. The three stayed silent as they went down the road, minding their words as they walked. Twilight's thoughts drifted towards her short, but visceral nightmare. Everything in the dream felt real; normally her dreams felt abstract and fake. She went over it several times, trying to piece together every scene and detail. As she mulled it over, she let her eyes wander. The silence between the three was overbearing, and the sound of wind rustling grass acted simply as white noise. With no notice, the conversation she had with Pinkie and Fluttershy flashed through her mind. She never did tell Applejack nor Rarity about how their missing friends were. "Listen, I forgot to mention that I was contacted by Pinkie and Fluttershy the night before," she said with glee.

"Oh? Well, what did they say?" Rarity asked. "It would've been nice to know about this conversation sooner."

"I know, but it slipped my mind as things got hectic," Twilight explained. "Pinkie said that she found Fluttershy within the day that they landed. Apparently they weren't too far off from each other."

“Well that’s good. They aren’t in any danger, right?” Applejack asked.

“I don’t believe so, but Pinkie mentioned something akin to animal fighting being a large event there. Fluttershy didn’t seem too worried about it, and that worries me.”

“It’s not anythin’ too dangerous it sounds like,” Applejack said before she took a bite of an apple that she got out from her bag.

“Yeah, I thought Fluttershy would be a little bit mor-” Twilight stopped speaking as she looked up at the sky near the mountains’ peak. There, peaking out from the back of a grey cloud, was the moon in broad daylight, something never seen on Equestrian soil. She glanced over at the still rising sun and judged the angle of the sunlight, making sure what she was seeing wasn’t an illusion.

“Uh, Twi? What’re you lookin’ at?” Applejack prodded, knocking Twilight’s train of thought off-track.

“Look up at the mountains. Does anything look off to you?” Twilight pointed at the low hanging moon. Only the bottom half fully showed as the top obscured and faded into the morning sky.

“Well, the peaks are a little uneven. They could use a little maintenance as well, maybe get rid of some of that snow,” Rarity suggested.

“I don’t see anythin’ out of the ordinary, Twi. What should I be looking for?”

“No, don’t look at the mountains, look above them. Look to the west; there’s something very wrong going on here.”

Almost instantly, both Rarity and Applejack saw the issue. They looked at each other, then Applejack scratched her head. “What’s the moon still doin’ up at this time a day?”

“I don’t know. Luna should’ve lowered it by now, but the sun is over taking it by itself. If Celestia can do that, how was Luna able to stop the sun from rising a thousand years ago?” Twilight lowered her head in thought.

“Maybe it doesn’t work like that out here. We certainly don’t have griffins attacking us back home.”

“This land is so confusing! Why was I able to find nothing about outside of Equestria in any of my books? You would think that there is something on the subject!” Twilight ranted as she whipped out the map. “Maybe if there’s a town large enough they may have a library. I want to do some research about the world; there’s so much I need to know.” Twilight scanned the map, noticing a cluster of small towns near the base of the Drakiris. She lowered the map and saw faint silhouettes of buildings in the distance. “We should stop at this section of towns over here.” The map flew in front of Rarity and Applejack, allowing Twilight to point out the towns. “If we get there by nightfall, we can spend the night and head into the mountains in the morning.”

“Sounds good to me,” Applejack stated. Twilight rolled the map back up and put it away, continuing their hike. The further they traveled north, the more dense the road had become. Ponies in traveling gear, supply wagons, and possession-less wanderers roamed the new busy road. Twilight huddled closer to Applejack and Rarity, making sure she didn’t get separated from the group. As time went on, grasslands turned into fields, deciduous tree filled forests made way for a plethora of evergreens, the looming Drakiris reared itself higher into the heavens, and the amount of ponies thinned as they approached.

Details of the mountains began to appear as they approached. The sun now pushed towards the horizon as the road ahead split four ways: three headed to towns on the outskirts of the road, one continued its path north. The largest city lay to the north; with buildings taller than three stories and a large gate showcasing the entrance.

“So, which town should we head into?” Applejack asked as they approached the crossroad.

“I’m thinking the one closest to the mountain base. Maybe we can get a feel for the weather in Ventia since it’s so close,” Twilight said. She

looked around at the other towns, and saw no one outside. None. No pegasi in the sky, no earth ponies or unicorns in the field or streets. Nothing. "Why isn't anypony outside? It's still light out."

"We can only see a small part, don't worry about it," Rarity explained. "Besides, if there is no one out, there's less of a chance for us to get caught."

"And that works how?" Applejack argued.

As Rarity and Applejack argued about stealth tactics, Twilight saw a glimpse of ponies in the distance. A group ran across the road, yelling and hollering. Their silhouettes were faint, but they looked as if they ran with purpose, but scrambled. They were afraid. Twilight slowed her pace, stopping her friends in their tracks.

"Hold on," Twilight said and pointed at the stream of ponies. "What's going on over there?" More ponies spilled in from the west, rushing through the arched gates. "Why are they running?"

"It's no use standing here, let's find out," Applejack stated, bolting towards the swarm.

"Wait for us!" Twilight yelled, running beside Rarity. The air near the town stayed as warm as before with no hint of chill off the mountains. Beyond the gate was a city of iron; buildings of beige brick and iron towered above the roads, eclipsing the three as they approached. One pegasus looked over to them and banked away from the crowd, touching down in front of them.

"What are you doing out here, are you mad? They're going to find you, now hurry!" He grabbed Applejack and tried bringing her towards the crowd.

Without hesitation, Applejack stripped off the pegasus's hoof and stomped the ground. "Now hold on, what's goin' on here. Who are you?"

"There's no time, just hurry." He looked over Applejack and the two unicorns as they approached. "You definitely don't look Ventian." He paced

further, examining the Equestrians' cloaks. "Travelers, huh? Come now before they find you."

"Wait, hold on. Who are 'they'?" Twilight demanded.

"Ventian search parties are headed through the Drakiris as we speak. There are rumors of Equestrians in the Outlands, and they're trying to snuff them out." Twilight's eyes widened at the prospect.

"I heard that rumor two days ago, how could they already know?" she asked.

"News travels fast around here. Last I heard the parties are already almost through the mountains." He turned and faced the frightened herd. "I don't have time to explain things, grab your friends and let's go!" He commanded, trying to shove them into the crowd.

Twilight stumbled into the herd and was hit from behind, moving her with the frightened ponies through the city gates. She pushed her way through to Applejack and Rarity, huddling close as they funneled into the streets.

The high-rise buildings were magnificent but life-less. No lights shone through the windows, and only the setting sun's light illuminated the empty, paved roads. The group flowed into several buildings and stowed away. Twilight looked over to the mountains and saw small flickers of flames traveling down the pass. Without further hesitation, she ran down the road with the split crowd and ran into a building, letting Applejack and Rarity pass through before the pegasus closed and locked the door.

A multitude of ponies sat on the floor, whispering and shaking: families huddled together, lone ponies and drifters, sharply dressed business ponies, and even ones dressed as guards. "You'll be safe here as long as they don't bother us," the stallion stated as he trotted to and sat on the stairs. The three found a small place on the floor and sat there, wondering what to do next.

"Why are they all hiding? Why aren't the guards outside protecting the city" Twilight asked as she took another look around the room.

"Maybe the Ventians are too strong for them. Ventia sure is a lot bigger on that map than the Outlands, more potential troops," Applejack suggested. "It wouldn't hurt to ask."

Before Twilight could stand up, a small filly ran up to the three and looked at them inquisitively. She was a white filly with light blue hair, staring at them with her mouth hung open. "What are the capes for? They look so cool," she asked with enthusiasm.

"Well, we're adventurers, dear." Rarity started, shooing Twilight off to gather information. "We travel all over the world, hunting for vast treasures and riches..."

Twilight stood up and weaved her way around the huddled ponies, approaching a stallion in makeshift armor. He simply stared the floor, with a defeated gaze. "Excuse me, why aren't there any ponies outside defending this town? I-I'm new here, and I'm just curious," Twilight asked, waiting for the stallion to respond.

"We don't have a protective force. Anypony that tries to protect us gets taken by the griffins during patrols. We haven't had any real protection in years," the stallion stated, his head and body unmoving. "All we can do is let things happen they way they happen. No pony is willing to fight anymore."

"But you're wearing the armor of a guard! Why aren't you fighting?" Twilight pleaded.

"I'm wearing this for my own protection. I was in the guard before they disbanded it, but..." the stallion stood and unbuckled his chest plate, revealing a twisted blackened scar across his side. "I was attacked by a griffin and barely survived. I'm of no use now." He sat back down in defeat, closing the chest piece.

"I-I'm so sorry," was all Twilight could muster at the stallion's explanation. She trotted back to the group, noticing that Rarity was still speaking with the filly.

“...then she kicked the dragon right in the snout, and it flew off, breathing flumes of smoke and fire all around us!” Rarity continued her tale. Before she could finish, the filly stood up and ran back to her mother, jumping up and down with glee. The mother closed the filly's mouth and shushed her. The clapping of hooves made themselves heard beyond the walls, choking Twilight with tension. No pony spoke a word as they marched. Twilight pressed her face against the window to see the coming battalion. Near the gate, a double file line of armored ponies in cloaks began their march down the street, opening doors and smashing windows to get inside the buildings.

“Search everywhere, those Equestrians are to be found!” A pewter stallion in silver armor yelled. “I want them found, now!” Twilight sunk back from the window and hid herself. Applejack and Rarity crept close to her and huddled together.

“What do we do? I haven't even been able to find any information about this place. No pony is even willing to defend the town.” Twilight shook as the sound of broken glass came closer.

“We can't do much. If they find us with the townsfolk, we risk their safety. They might get tried for harborin' us,” Applejack stated, grabbing Twilight's shoulder to stop her shaking.

“Can't we do anything? They have no way to fight for themselves, but we do,” Twilight said, rearing her head back to look out the window again. Several ponies screamed and ran out the doors of several buildings, prompting the Ventians to seize them and throw them to the pavement, screaming. With another window smashed, Twilight turned back to Applejack who stared straight at her.

“I'm going to be honest with you Twilight, there's nothin' we can do. We can't risk being caught for Fluttershy's sake. This is the Outlanders' war, not ours. If we don't leave now, it'll only get worse.”

“So, what's the plan?” Rarity asked, peaking her head between the two. “I'm sure we can't use another back door.”

Twilight tried to swallow the lump that formed in her throat. “I'm going to teleport us out of here. I've only transported two before, but I'm sure I

can move three.” Twilight said as her horn began to shine with a purple light. Several ponies murmured as she charged the spell. One colt approached, but after a few moments, the three disappeared from the room in a flash of white light.

They landed right near the city gates, just behind the battalion. Twilight shook her head and peered up, noticing the gaze of several Ventian ponies. She took a step back, preparing herself to gallop away. “*RUN!*” she yelled as several guards with bladed weapons in their mouths charged at the three.

“Take them out! Don’t let them escape!” the commander yelled as the three exited through the gates. Twilight was still exhausted from the long hike and oversleeping, but she had to move quickly. Four of the armored ponies gave chase. One bolted into the sky and flew over head, landing in front of the three. Rarity whipped out five needles and hurled them at the pegasus, who swiftly dodged two, but took three in his side. He fell and clutched his side as Twilight leaped over his body. As they ran down the road, the soldiers closed their distance, yelling at them to stop. Twilight turned around, her horn flaring with energy as a sudden wall of flame erupted before the hoard, cutting off their pursuit. They stopped and moved to avoid the fire while Twilight, Rarity and Applejack disappeared into the forest of evergreens that nestled at the bottom of the Drakiris.

Twilight slowed her pace and leaned against a tree, panting and shaking. A large shock wave shook the ground, knocking snow off the trees. Twilight wiped the snow off her face and looked back, watching as a plume of smoke rose above the skyline and heard ponies screaming in anguish. Rarity and Applejack scoured the area for soldiers, laying low to avoid being seen. “D-Did we lose them?” Rarity asked.

“We should keep moving. If we stay here, we’re sitting ducks,” Twilight suggested as she took her body weight off of the tree. She planted her hooves and began heading through the forest, trying to drown out the Outlanders’ pleas for help. The three weaved their way through the thicket as the sun set on the ruined city.

Crystalline snow gently floated down on the mountains' peak, settling on a large pair of obsidian wings. With a ruffle of his wings, a creature watched as armored ponies with the blue, Ventian flag marched through Kirsiks Pass. A sneer formed on his face as he stood silently above the marching sellswords. He looked up and turned away, peering over at the pack of griffins that made their home on the mountain's surface. He stepped down from the rock and landed with his claws sinking into the snow.

"Sigil! Sigil Blackwing!" a griffin yelled out as she approached. She was a ivory griffin with a scar running down from her ear. After bowing, she began, "I'm sorry to disturb you, but the Wheatown team returned from their hunt."

"Great. Inform the team from Northern Pass, make sure they're aware," Blackwing stated as he walked past the young griffin. "I'll make sure there is food left for your service."

"I'm sorry Sigil, but they didn't come back with any food," she said worried. "They were attacked."

He snapped his head towards the girl. "They fled? It was a meager hunt of villein ponies, it should have been easy. I didn't train cowards!" His face twisted in fury.

"They were gravely injured by several ponies, but were released. They came back here for medical supplies."

Blackwing looked at her puzzled. "They were shown mercy? By Outlander ponies? They would have beaten them to death!" He paced for a few steps, letting the falling snow cool his temper. "Where are they now?"

"They are resting at the Apex, sir. The medical teams are patching them up as we speak."

"Thank you, Arya," he said as he unfolded his wings. "Head back to the medical wing and await instruction. I don't like what ensued." With that he flew up and over the steep cliff face, arriving at the Apex. It was a large, flattened section of the mountain, surrounded by iron crossed gates and

frozen thicket beds. Flames scattered through the Apex, warming the chilled griffins through the eternal winter.

A group of griffins surrounded the injured team, mending their wings and extracting the needles from their tendons. Two of them winced, and one yelled as trickles of blood poured from their wounds. "What happened? I heard a rumor about mercy from ponies," Blackwing asked as he landed beside the team.

"Everything was transpiring as normal, Sigil, but there were three strange ponies who fought with them." The griffin cringed as the last needle was pulled. "We almost took out one of them, but as I went in for the kill, she glowed with an intense light and took the five of us down with a shield of needles-"

"Five of you'?" Blackwing interrupted. He looked over the rank, soon realizing the who missing hunter was. "What happened to Tawn?"

"She was killed by a mace to the head, Sigil. One of the locals killed her before she had the chance to strike."

Blackwing lowered his head. "She had much potential." After a moment of silence, he lifted his head back up. "What else happened?"

He pointed to his back. "After she pierced the team's wings, she used some strange cloth or something to slash my back open."

"Tell me what you know about the others." He paced back and forth, watching the silent pack.

The griffin sighed and stretched his wings. "All I can remember is that there were three of them. An orange mare with yellow hair and a strange hat, a purple mare with a dark blue mane, and the white and purple pony. They looked like Outlanders, but they had strange marks on their flanks-"

"Wait, marks? On both sides of their body?" Blackwing interrupted.

"Yes, Sigil. The white one had a gold choker with her mark design as well," he continued. "When we were being freed, I overheard that they were heading north. Maybe that's why the Ventians hired the mercenaries?"

Blackwing looked at the group, spread his wings and smiled. "Listen well, griffins of Drakiris. Those three ponies that Sarin described are of Equestrian blood. The mark they carry is the 'demons' brand', and their appearance is a detriment to Ventia and Mistral City. I want patrol teams set up and scouring the mountains for any sign of these three. Any news of their appearance is to be reported straight to me." The surrounding griffins roared with purpose, readying themselves for the hunt. "They are *not* to be killed, only captured. We'll use them to take back our territory from Ventia's grip!" He clenched his right claw tightly. "Now go!" The griffins roared and flew off as a group before splitting into smaller patrols. Blackwing watched as they flew off in all directions in search for the illusive herd.

A young, tan griffin with medical supplies approached the sigil and looked at him with concern. "Are you sure we should be messing with the demons? You don't know what they're capable of."

Blackwing stared at the young medic with his icy blue eyes. "All we need to do is show them to that bastard in Mistral and we'll have a bargaining chip into reclaiming our territory. After we get what we want, then we can have our fun with them."

"As you wish, Sigil Blackwing," the griffin bowed as he stepped away to tend to the injured team. Blackwing turned his head away and looked over the mountains to the south, exhilarated by the news. He closed his eyes and smiled, voraciously licking his beak.

"I've always wanted to taste Equestrian flesh," he said to himself as he opened his eyes toward the horizon.

Chapter 10

Mare

The evening sun cast the trail in long, slender shadows as an open field and sea revealed themselves. As Fluttershy, Pinkie and Rainbow left Petalburg Woods, Fluttershy's nose was assaulted by the sea's briny air, but she was calmed by the sound of waves as they crashed on the beach and docks.

"I am *not* being a picky Pinkie," Pinkie protested, glaring at Rainbow.

"Yes you are! We went through the entire forest twice already and you haven't captured a single Pokémon yet." Rainbow hovered in front of Pinkie, flying backwards as they walked. "There were plenty of worms you could've caught."

"If I get a worm, Igny might gobble him up! Birds eat worms, you know."

"No he wouldn't. Really Pinkie, we all need to have at least one if we're going to be here long," she stated, then landed and resumed walking along side Pinkie.

As they turned down the path, Rainbow stopped walking and pointed south with a smile on her face. "Look, the cruiser is still docked. We made it in time!" In front of them, at the end of a long wooden dock, stood a large passenger ship with groups of ponies lined up at the entrance ramp. Stripes of white and blue streaked along the stories of glass windows above the matte, charcoal hull. Just off of the docks was a small wooden booth, a line of ponies waiting to purchase a ticket extending from it. "It's a lot bigger than I imagined."

"Do you think that's where Mr. Briney is? The one Raril mean Roxanne talked about?" Fluttershy asked.

"I think he lives in there." Rainbow pointed to a small wooden shack with a rust colored roof. Several small groups of ponies sat around its

entrance, conversing with one another while others sparred with their Pokémon. Another dock extended just past the gathered ponies, leading to a much smaller, more cramped looking boat. It was a quarter the size of the cruise liner and the hull was cased in iron. Remnants of red paint desperately clung to the sides, existing only as a testament to the ship exterior's age and wear, the ship seeming to be in otherwise fine condition. "We should probably get some tickets before we end up stuck on that trashy boat."

The line that extended from the booth was short, but to Fluttershy it was still another line; the third in just a day's time. She could feel herself falling into the routine she felt funneled through on her first day, the idea of it chewing at her psyche as she shifted in agitation.. Even with Rainbow and Pinkie at her side, the voice of the girl made its way to the forefront of her thoughts, telling her she was to go south, and only south. As she stood in the line, she could only think of heading in the opposite direction, hiding somewhere until Twilight brought them all back home. With a listless stare, she looked up at the ticket vendor, hoping that by the time she bought the tickets the passengers will have been let on the ship.

"Three tickets to Dewford, please," Fluttershy said, looking along the back of the stall.

"That'll be 1,500 bits," he responded, looking over the three mares.

"E-excuse me?" Fluttershy asked, refusing to believe the stallion's words.

"It's 500 per ticket. Three tickets, 1,500 bits. Take it or leave it, we're about to close and there are still a lot of ponies waiting to get tickets," he stated, his hoof pushing into his cheek as he leaned on the counter.

"Uh, yes, well, let me check my bag." Fluttershy took Alerce off her back, stripped her bag off and dug through it. She pulled her satchel out and counted the gold bits that accumulated inside. After a few moments, she opened her mouth, but she couldn't come up with anything to say. She sheepishly looked up at the vendor, then lowered her head and walked away from the line without a word.

“Fluttershy, what happened?” Rainbow asked as she hovered in front of her friend. “Why’d you leave like that?”

“We don’t have enough,” Fluttershy sighed, eyeing the old, rickety boat. “I have enough bits for one ticket. Seven-hundred and forty-eight bits, that’s all.”

“Maybe you and I can fly there and Pinkie can go on the boat. It can’t be that far away, right?” Rainbow suggested before flying over to a laminated poster that hung on one of the booth’s posts. After a quick scan, she flew back as Fluttershy tied up the satchel and slipped it back in her bag. “To Dewford is a little over a four hour trip. Ninety miles,” Rainbow stated, looking south across the sea. “If I go fast enough I can fly there in about thirty minutes, but...” she yawned, covering her mouth as her face scrunched up. “You know what, never mind. Let’s just visit that ‘Briney’ pony. I’m too tired for that kind of stunt today.”

Solemn-faced, Fluttershy began her march to the shack’s door, wading through the sea of ponies laying about in the grass. Before she could reach the front door, she heard Pinkie and Rainbow strike up a conversation with a pair of ponies. She sighed then turned around, trotting back to her friends.

“...bribing him. I heard that works if you have the bits,” a filly unicorn said, petting what looked like a small blue mudskipper. “We gave him 300 bits on top of the ticket price. A lot of these ponies think they can just muscle their way through. It’s hilarious.”

“So, bribe him with enough bits, huh?” Rainbow asked. “Sounds good to me, but what’s the downside?”

“The boat is slower. A lot slower... and only a few groups can get on. He’s very selective.”

“Thanks, we’ll keep it in mind,” Rainbow said, taking off for the front of the cottage. As the two ponies returned to their conversation, Fluttershy and Pinkie ran to catch up to Rainbow who stood near the front door.

“Well, they seemed nice. I hope they get on,” Pinkie said.

“Yeah, but only after us,” Rainbow said, pressing a hoof to the shack door.

With a creak, the door swung open to reveal an old, tan-furred, white-maned stallion chasing a frantic seagull around the room. The walls were paneled with wooden planks, and only a small bed, table and stove stood inside. As Fluttershy took another look around the room, she found herself only able to stare at the seagull, seeing the injured hummingbird she had bargained her and her friends’ safety to help. Her eyes darted as the ephemeral, emerald bird flapped around the room, dipping often due to its damaged wing. As the three entered, Fluttershy’s breathing stuttered as she tried desperately to keep her composure.

“Are you Mr. Briney?” Rainbow asked, causing the grizzled stallion to cease his pursuit. He dusted himself off and watched as the bird ran across the room, eating stray bread crumbs off the floor.

“Haven’t you kids learned to knock before barging into an old sea pony’s home?” His gaze pierced Rainbow Dash, but she remained calm and stoic. “What do ya’ want? You can’t be here to give me those ship parts I ordered, that’s for sure.”

“We heard that you give rides to trainers over to Dewford,” Rainbow said.

“I see, so you’re just like the rest of those freeloaders outside. Let me see your credentials, Missy. Why should I let you on my vessel?” He walked up to her and leaned in, staring her right in the eyes.

“I, uh, what do you want to see?” Rainbow stammered, trying to keep her cool.

“Your badge. Rustboro City’s Stone Badge; let me see it.”

“I don’t have it.” She pointed to Fluttershy. “My friend, uh... May does.”

“Then what am I talkin’ to you for?” He broke his stare and trotted to Fluttershy, pacing back and forth in front of the pegasus, his eyes now locked onto hers. “So you’re the trainer that needs the vessel, eh?”

“Y-yes,” Fluttershy answered, hoping the stallion would keep his distance. She took the badge from her bag and held it in her hoof, letting the sun’s light from the window reflect off its surface.

“That’s the one. So, what’s your excuse? Did you spend all your winnings on that ridiculous garb?” He glanced at Fluttershy’s outfit and laughed. “That cruiser hasn’t left yet, so I know you didn’t miss it.”

“‘Winnings?’ As in... money? I never got any from the gym.” Fluttershy explained, baffled by the captain’s words.

“Roxanne never forgets to give money to winning trainers, she’s far too generous for that.” the captain stated, wheeling on the flustered pegasus. “Are you calling my friend a cheapskate?” he asked before he resumed pacing back and forth, quickening his steps.

Fluttershy looked over to Rainbow, who mockingly twirled her hoof near her head and crossed her eyes, making her and Pinkie laugh. The staunch captain huffed and stopped, overlooking the three.

“Now tell me, why should I let you on instead of all those ponies outside?”

“Um, I...” Fluttershy started before glancing at Rainbow who motioned her and Pinkie over. The three quickly huddled, occasionally looking back at the old curmudgeon. “What are we going to do? He seems a lot worse than what Roxanne told us.”

“Maybe pull some of that ‘gym leader’s daughter’ clout. That could work.” Rainbow suggested.

“I don’t know. Don’t gym leaders make enough money that affording a ticket wouldn’t be a problem?”

“You aren’t a gym leader though.” Rainbow rubbed her chin. “Well, we’re right by Petalburg, we could always ask that Norman guy for some cash.”

"I... I'd rather not. Especially after the scene I made in the gym, he would never give us anything." Fluttershy lowered her head. "What makes you so sure that he'd help?"

"He gave me that chip to put in your Pokédex, so he can't be too stingy."

"Well, this isn't helping. By the time we get over to Petalburg, the ship will have already left!" Pinkie blurted, trying to keep the two pegasi on task. "Hmm... what about that letter we got from that Devon Corp. guy? That seemed pretty important."

"That's perfect! If you pull out that and your tie to Norman, we're sure to get on that boat," Rainbow exclaimed as Briney tapped his hoof impatiently on the wooden floor. Fluttershy broke away from the huddle and stared at the tan stallion, her chest out and head high. She knew she had to perform this act perfectly.

"So, what is it? I'm choosing in a half-hour, so you'd better hurry."

With a deep breath, Fluttershy began, "I am May Stannis, daughter of Norman of the Hoenn Pokémon League. I have been requested by Mr. Stone of the Devon Corporation to deliver a letter to the his daughter in Dewford, and I humbly request passage on your ship." Silence fell as Fluttershy finished her speech. Mr. Briney stood wide-eyed, then closed his eyes and laughed, making her lower her head with a flushed face.

"Hah-ha, you're a gym leader's daughter with no money, AND you're a mail carrier? What, did you spend all daddy's money on a designer saddle?" He laughed derisively. "I heard stories from him about his daughter, but I never expected her to be as pathetic as this!"

"Hey! Leave my friend alone!" Rainbow yelled, pushing her face into his.

"Dash, I can take care of myself," Fluttershy stated, causing Rainbow to back off reluctantly. Fluttershy's breathing grew heavy and her heart raced as she spoke. "I'm sorry that I can't live up to your expectations, but can you please tell us what we need to know?"

“Aha-ha, what are your names so I can call you if I let you on?” Briney asked, his laughter subsiding.

“I’m Rainbow Dash, and she’s Pinkie Pie,” Rainbow explained, pointing at Pinkie who had put on a smile.

“Do you have the 200 bits per ticket at least?” He asked before writing their names down on a scraggly piece of paper. “Fuel and food ain’t free, you know.”

“Um, yes,” Fluttershy answered, moving to retrieve her bits.

“Don’t take it out now, I haven’t picked you yet. You kids are so hasty.” He walked to the door and opened it, motioning them outside. “Wait out there with the others, I’ll have made my decision soon enough.” They quickly left the cottage, the door slamming behind them.

As time passed, the cruiser raised its anchor and smoke rose from its funnels. It chugged off from the docks, leaving the poorer ponies behind to await Briney’s decision. Fluttershy kept quiet, watching Alerce and Igny play in the field while her Poochyena, Wovler, stood watch. The ponies that had gathered outside had become more and more impatient; their conversations growing louder and testier. Each minute felt like an hour as the sun descended past the horizon, making way for the soft glow of twilight. With a contented sigh, Fluttershy watched the purples and reds of the sunset dissipate into a blackened sea of stars.

“Listen up, you freeloaders. I’ve made my decision!” Mr. Briney yelled, snapping Fluttershy out of her stargazing. Everypony ceased talking at once, chomping at the bit to hear the old sea pony’s decision. “It was a hard choice, but there are some who need this more than others. Let’s get to it then.” Alerce stopped playing and ran back to his owner, nestling in her lap. “The first group is Ethan and Lyra.” A pegasus with a gold and black jacket with his suspender-clad friend jumped up in joy, hastily grabbing their supplies and running to the dock. “The second group is May, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie.” Fluttershy’s mouth hung agape.

Had her speech worked? Was it how, dare she say, pathetic she looked to him? The mix up at Rustboro Gym? She couldn’t figure out the reason, but before she knew it she had recalled Wolver and Alerce, and

was on her hooves, rushing towards the dock. Rainbow and Pinkie jumped around with joy, Igny happily flapped his wings and chirped between them.

After the last group was called, the rest of the crowd dispersed back to Petalburg Town. The final passenger was a lone mare who rushed to the end of the line with Mr. Briney close behind. As he passed, the line fell silent, patiently awaiting their instructions. With a quick tug, he pulled on a hanging string, pulling down a ramp that clung to the edge of the boat.

“Now, before you all board, place the 200 bits for the ticket in this pan here and be on your way. I’ll give you more instructions after you’re aboard,” Mr. Briney explained, setting a collection pan on the ground and watching as the line of ponies made their way up the ramp. Fluttershy counted out 600 bits and placed them in the pan before motioning for her friends to follow her up to the deck.

When the final passenger was aboard, Mr. Briney grabbed and pulled the ramp up before standing tall in front of the passengers. “Welcome to my vessel. Down on the lower deck are two rooms with some cots and a bunk-bed. That’s where you’ll be sleeping if you choose to. There are some rations in the small kitchen at the end of the hallway, but there aren’t many. The trip should only take about six hours depending on the choppiness of the sea. If you need me, I’ll be at the helm.” With that, the sea pony reeled up the anchor from the sea, letting it dangle off the side of the hull before disappearing into the cabin.

As the ship's engine roared to life and the ship began moving, Fluttershy, Rainbow and Pinkie made their way to the lower deck, followed by the last, white coated passenger. They went to scope out their temporary living conditions, the sway of the boat causing Fluttershy to stumble into the narrow walls of the deck as they went down. The room was a lot smaller than she had imagined: two cots were laid on the floor and one bunk bed stood in the corner. The walls were painted in a cream white, but was chipping off as badly as the paint was outside. It wasn’t ideal, but it was somewhere to sleep. Rainbow seemed to be content with roughing it, and without hesitation stripped off her jacket and shirt, leaving only her shorts. She flopped into the top bunk, mumbling incoherently as she drifted to sleep.

“So, are you going to sleep too? I was thinking of going up to the deck for a bit. I’ve never been on a boat before. This is so exciting!” Pinkie stated, bounding back down the hall towards the stairwell. “Are you coming?”

“I guess I could. You know, I’ve never been on a boat before either,” Fluttershy responded, flying up the stairwell and into the cool, maritime air. The darkness of night draped itself over the sea, with only a few stars and the moon shining down on the pegasus. She trotted to where Pinkie Pie stood and leaned against the railing. They watched as the silhouettes of distant islands and lands floated by. As the winds tugged at her mane, she smiled and shut her eyes. One moment of peace was all she needed, and the soothing rocking and cooling breeze provided just that.

“You think we’ll ever get to visit those islands?” Pinkie asked, gazing out into the distance. “There’s so much out there, but we might not get the chance to see it all. Wouldn’t it be exciting?”

“I think it would. Maybe after we get some more answers about what’s happening, we could afford to get a little sidetracked.” Fluttershy looked over to Pinkie. “How long do you think we’ll be here?”

“I think he said six hours or something, but I could be way off-”

“No, I mean here in Hoenn,” she interrupted. “As interesting as these new creatures are, I really miss home. My cottage, Ponyville, our friends, everything.”

“I’m sure Twilight will find the spell and we’ll be back home in no time. Besides, I’ve always wanted to go on an adventure, so I don’t mind how long it takes,” Pinkie said with a smile. “I’m having fun so far.”

With a yawn, Fluttershy took her hooves off the rail and trotted back to the stairwell. “I’m going to get to bed. It’s been a long day.”

“Good idea! I’ll come too,” Pinkie said, trotting along side Fluttershy as they made their way back into the barracks. Only the white mare had since joined Rainbow and was now sleeping on one of the grounded cots. Before Fluttershy could move, Pinkie had hopped into the lower bunk with a giggle, draping herself with a single sheet before laying down to sleep. With

a long sigh, Fluttershy gently lowered herself onto the remaining cot and closed her eyes, quickly falling to sleep.

Fluttershy awoke with a scream, her breathing heavy and quick as sweat dripped from her brow. Her hooves shook as she clutched her neck, bloodshot eyes glancing about for any movement, but the room was still. With relief, she looked down at the floor and her blanket, letting the engine's sound drown out her recollection of the nightmare. It was the second nightmare she'd had in this world, but the first had never been so visceral. She couldn't even recall what the other dream was, but this dream... this nightmare hurt. It physically hurt. As she calmed down, she sat in the pitch black room, trying to stay awake until the ship docked in Dewford.

As her breathing slowed, she heard the door creak open, sending her back to full alert. She looked up, noticing a blurry wisp of a pony slipping out of the room into the hallway. Fluttershy stripped off her covers and crept over to the steel door, peeking her head through the small opening. The shadowed pony stood at the end of the hall, just out of reach of the upper dock's halogen light. Fluttershy gulped and opened the door further, allowing her to slip through the doorway. She knew that whoever was out there was simply a pony that was aboard the ship, but her frightened state clouded her judgment, her mind composing monsters from the shadows. Apprehensively, she crept out from the room and trotted down the hall. With a bound, the shadowed pony leapt up the stairs, leaving Fluttershy alone in the hallway. She quickened her pace and charged up the stairs, frantically pursuing the wisp.

Outside, the air was frigid, leaving her bristling from the cold. She took a deep breath and sidled towards the bow, scanning the deck for any signs of life. With each step, the wooden deck creaked, leaving Fluttershy even more timid than before. When she reached the edge of the cabin, she poked her head around the corner.

There, leaning on the railing, was Pinkie Pie, her tail violently twitching. With a sigh of relief, Fluttershy trotted to the side of the pink pony, watching as Pinkie stared into the distance.

"Pinkie? What are you doing awake?" she asked, drawing the pink pony's gaze. Pinkie's eyes were bloodshot and she had dark circles under her eyes, but she smiled as she saw Fluttershy.

"Oh, I heard you scream just a few minutes ago. I just hopped out of the room to get some fresh air," Pinkie explained.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," Fluttershy apologized as she turned to face the open water. "It just felt so real. I remember it quite well unfortunately."

"Do you want to tell me about it? I had a bad dream too so that's why I woke up. I think I screamed right when you did... maybe it'll help both of us," Pinkie stated.

Fluttershy turned her head up, perplexed. "You had a nightmare too? That's strange, but alright."

"Well, I was sitting in a meadow and it was bright, and sunny. I was surrounded by a flock of butterflies, and several bunnies and squirrels were playing in the grass. There wasn't any fighting, just playing. It was so nice to just close my eyes and soak up all the sounds... to just let the wind run through my mane.

"Before I knew it though, I opened my eyes and all the animals were gone. Dark clouds gathered over me, blocking out the sun. I stood up and frantically searched for my animal friends, but I couldn't find them. I ran trying to find them, and the grass crumbled under my hooves. It had all died; the entire field was dead and brown. Even the trees were withered and bare. I stood there, scared to even move, and behind me there was this horrible, ear piercing screech. I turned around and saw a huge black griffin coming after me with large melting wings and extended talons. It was its eyes though; its cold, gelid blue eyes. They felt as if they were cutting straight through me." She shuddered, sinking down and curling around herself from the thought. "I turned and tried to out run it... but moments later I felt its claws wrap around my neck, pulling me back towards it. I woke up screaming. I... I think I'm going to stay out here for the rest of the night."

"Hmm..." Pinkie muttered, rubbing her chin. "That monster sounds exactly like the one in my dream. The blue eyes and everything!" she

exclaimed, prompting Fluttershy to jump back up to her hooves. "I was flying in my dream, then a huge, gigantic storm whooshed in and almost knocked me straight down into the ground. There were huge bolts of lightning, downpours and everything! Just when I straightened myself out, I heard a loud roar behind me. It was the same creature, and I woke up screaming as well! I don't think I've ever had a dream like that before."

Fluttershy's mind exploded with a million questions, but she kept her mouth shut. Nothing added up to her, but she was too tired to put much thought into it, chalking it up to pure coincidence. "So, do you want to just wait up here until we get to Dewford? I'm not too keen on going back down-

She was interrupted by a hoof to the mouth, Pinkie shushing her as she peered over the pegasus' shoulder. "Do you hear that?" Pinkie perked and wiggled her ears. "It's coming from the back of the ship. It sounds like claws scratching."

With her ears perked and Pinkie's hoof now extracted from her muzzle, Fluttershy listened closely, tuning out the sound of the motor and flowing water. Just at the edge of her hearing, she heard a slight tapping at the other end of the boat. Her heart raced once again as she slowly made her way over, following Pinkie's lead. As they moved, Fluttershy hugged up against the wall, trying her best to be not caught off guard.

On the deck lay a small blue alligator, smaller than Fluttershy had ever seen. It walked in its hind legs, searching the boat with crimson eyes. After a while, it yawned, showcasing its sharp teeth, and plopped down onto the deck. Fluttershy approached in a side step, halting Pinkie from getting any closer. Alligators were nothing new to her, having taken care of Pinkie's pet, Gummy. Like Gummy, this was a baby and was alone, but it could either be friendly, or extremely volatile. She begged that it was the former. As she drew within a few steps away, the alligator swiveled its head and stared at her.

Fluttershy reached for her bag to see what it was, but her hoof met nothing but air. With her backpack back downstairs, she had to fall back on her own animal knowledge. She had become so used to the machine's guidance, that it felt awkward, but refreshing to rely on her old skills. "Hey

there, little guy. Are you lost?" Fluttershy cooed, extending a hoof towards the gator. Before she reached it, however, the alligator stood, staring past her for a moment before taking off, shooting through the yellow pegasus' legs over towards Pinkie. It hovered around the pink pony, looking at her with curiosity and sniffing at her legs.

"Hehe, stop it! That tickles!" Pinkie giggled as the alligator's snout brushed up against her leg.

As Fluttershy looked away, a faded strip of orange rose above the horizon, signifying the coming dawn. She glanced back down at Pinkie, who had laid down and was now playing with the gator as if it were her own from back home. It hopped up, mirroring Pinkie did as the pair chased one another around the bow. She caught up to it, hugged it mid-jump, and rolled around on the deck, each of them laughing.

"Pinkie," Fluttershy called out, hoping she wouldn't ruin their fun.

Pinkie was flat on her back, holding the squirming alligator in her hooves. "What is it?"

"Maybe you should try catching it. Rainbow has been bugging you about it so much lately," Fluttershy stated, watching as the ribbons of light grew higher and brighter.

"That sounds like a good idea!" Pinkie exclaimed as she dug through her suspenders' pockets. She whipped out a Poké Ball and enlarged it, holding it in her hoof in front of the alligator. "Boop~!" Pinkie said playfully, bumping the button on the gator's snout. The alligator was enveloped in a white light before disappearing into the Poké Ball. It dropped to the floor and wiggled, leaving Pinkie in heated anticipation. With one final shake, it ceased moving, leaving Pinkie with her very first Pokémon. She loudly gasped, then scooped up the ball. With a smile, she placed it in her pocket just as the first rays of sunlight pierced the horizon. "Ooo, should we wake up Rainbow Dash? She'll be so excited to hear the news!"

"Maybe when we get to the island," Fluttershy stated, looking over the railing at the approaching dock.

Dewford resided on an island at the end of a small island chain, its being the largest. On the west side of the island was a large cave, with the

eastern path leading to the small town. As the ships made its final approach, the bell on the ship's tower loudly tolled and echoed off the nearby cliff faces. Both Pinkie and Fluttershy trotted to the stairwell entrance, waiting for Rainbow Dash to make her way up. "What are you going to name it!?" Fluttershy yelled, trying to make her voice heard over the ringing bell.

"I think I might name her Lady Gummy II!" Pinkie yelled back.

"Her? How do you know that its female!?"

"I don't know!"

The bell ceased its ringing as the boat slowed down to dock. Up the stairs came yawning ponies, followed closely by Rainbow Dash with Fluttershy's bag and Igny on her back. She let out a large yawn and stretched out her wings as she reached the upper deck. "Hey, Pinkie Pie. Hey Fluttershy. What's up?" Rainbow asked as she fluffed her jacket. "Oh yeah, you forgot this in the room," Rainbow said, tossing the bag to Fluttershy.

"Hey, Dashie! I caught a Pokémon, and we're almost to shore!" Pinkie exclaimed, whipping out Lady Gummy II's Poké Ball.

"You did? Finally." Rainbow breathed a sigh of relief. "So, what were you two doing up so early?"

"Nothing. Just watching to see when we would get to Dewford," Fluttershy lied, hoping Dash wouldn't pry any further.

"Oh, alright. Man, that bunk really beat that thin bedroll from the other night. Slept just like a foal."

The boat slipped along side the wooden dock, and with a small sputter from the engine, it stopped and simply bobbed in the water. The clanking of chains filled the air as the anchor sank into the water and made its home on the sea floor. When the sound stopped, Mr. Briney stepped out from the cabin looking as if he hadn't needed a wink of sleep. The conversing ponies ceased talking and looked over at the captain who stood and surveyed his passengers.

“Listen up, we’ll be docked here for two days. That should be long enough for the trainers among you to get your badge. After that we head to Staleport, and that’s where we’ll part. I’ll be around town if ya need me, so I leave you to your duties.” The passengers sprinted eagerly off the boat as the captain finished his instructions, leaving Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie to casually make their way down the ramp.

As Fluttershy’s hooves hit dry land, she waited for the familiar ring of her Pokédex. She assumed as she hit land, she would be notified of her gym fight. When it failed to ring, she took it out and flipped it open, staring at the illuminated display. Nothing. With a sigh, she put it away. Perhaps it might be broken. She brought Wolver and Alerce out of their Poké Balls and turned west down the path, headed for the opening of the cave. Its mouth was lined with stalagmites, each hung like pointed daggers. Its maw was wide and ragged, swallowing the eastward cliff face. Rainbow and Pinkie trotted to the edge, each surveying the inside of the cavern.

“See anything?” Fluttershy asked. The sun filled the entrance of the cave with a brilliant orange light, reaching far into the cavern’s depths. She only hoped that they wouldn’t have to venture far to find Mr. Stone’s daughter.

“Nope, just a bunch of rocks!” Rainbow called out, allowing Igny back up onto her back. “It looks very homey though, maybe a bear lives in it.” She giggled, prompting Fluttershy to follow suit. Pinkie stared at them in dismay, knowing she was the butt of their joke.

“Hey!” Pinkie yelled, huffing as she let Lady out from her Poké Ball. “Don’t think I forgot about that.”

“We *did* throw you a birthday party that day. Relax a little, it’ll make going through the caves a little easier,” Rainbow stated, making Pinkie grumble.

With the two ponies’ tiff over, Fluttershy made her way through the mouth of the cavern, peering at the smooth cave walls. The inside was even larger than she had anticipated, considering what she had seen as they sailed into port. It extended far past the sun’s reach, the path disappearing into a void of blackness just beyond. She gulped, wondering

how far the path may take her and her friends. Rainbow and Pinkie looked around the cave as Fluttershy dug through her bag, searching for anything useful. A small plastic tube with a tiny bulb and power box lay between her medical supplies and Pokédex. She took it out and placed it around her neck, the plastic harness easily sitting in the groove of her vertebrae. Fluttershy clicked a tiny button making the bulb flare to life, lighting the cavern walls.

“There we go,” she said, beginning her trek down the path.

“Where’d you get that?” Rainbow asked, peering at the small flashlight, “I didn’t see you buy anything in Rustboro.”

“Oh, it was just in my bag from the beginning. I guess May’s mother thought I needed it.”

The sound of dripping water and scratching filled the cave as they delved deeper, putting Fluttershy on edge. Rainbow hovered; To avoid stepping on a rogue stalagmite or falling down an unlit hole, Fluttershy guessed. The yellow light filled only a portion of the trail, leaving a clear path only big enough for two ponies. Pinkie smiled as they went deeper, playfully bouncing over elevated rocks and small cracks, Lady clamped down on Pinkie’s fluff of a tail.

The sound of scratching grew louder as their trek continued. Fluttershy averted her gaze from the path and shined the light on the walls, revealing creatures covered in steel clinging to the smooth surface. She wanted to check what they were, but she was afraid that the Pokédex’s loud beeping would stir them. She estimated that thirty or forty clung on the walls in view. They rested, unmoving. Fluttershy only hoped they stayed that way in case they were dangerous. Rainbow gazed along with her, their eyes darting back and forth between the creatures as Pinkie hopped along, ignorant to their situation.

“Is that a light ahead?” Rainbow asked, pointing to a small sparkle of azure deep within. “Maybe it’s another way out.” Without another word, she blazed ahead, leaving Fluttershy and Pinkie to catch up.

“We’re in the middle of the sea, that can’t be an exit,” Fluttershy hesitantly called out. With no other options, Fluttershy sent her Pokémon

back into their Poké Balls and galloped after Rainbow Dash. Her eyes darted between the ground and the path ahead, trying to keep tabs on everything. Her legs grew sore as she ran; the lack of sleep made it hard for her to maintain her gallop, but she continued unabated. Fluttershy saw that Rainbow had landed just up ahead, waiting for them to catch up. With one final push, Fluttershy caught up to the speedier pegasus, halting to investigate the source of the light.

Fluttershy tilted her head up and looked at the large expanse that lay before her. The cave ceiling rose to twice its normal height with a small stream of rushing water hugging the outer wall. No Pokémon could be seen in the ghostly blue light that filled the cavern. As Fluttershy looked about she found the source to be a lantern that sat alongside what looked to be a purple-furred pony. She looked to be a unicorn, surrounded by a wall of thick books and research materials. Fluttershy could hear a simple tune coming from the purple mare, the unicorn humming softly as she flipped through the pages of a book.

“E-excuse me?” Fluttershy called out, hearing her voice echo softly off the cavern walls. “Are you Stephanie?” she asked as she began her approach.

The mare shut her book and stood, looking over the shoulder at the three as they entered the clearing. “I am, yes.” Her voice sounded so familiar, but Fluttershy couldn’t quite place it. “I’m assuming you have a letter for me?”

Fluttershy stopped in her tracks. “H-how did you know? Your father said he had no way to contact you!” As the bookish mare approached, details began to reveal themselves. She was a unicorn in a black dress with silver cuff links on her forelegs. Her hair was silver with magenta and purple stripes coursing down her mane and she stared with piercing purple eyes. “T-Twilight?” Fluttershy murmured. Stephanie looked so close to her friend, yet just a little off.

Stephanie chuckled. “I’m not sure how I knew. I was expecting you to come... just not like,” the unicorn paused a moment, gesturing at the three with a hoof, “this...”

“What do you mean you were ‘expecting’ us?” Rainbow cried out.

"I don't know. It's the strangest thing; just the other day, I started getting visions, and one of them involved a trainer such as yourself coming, yellow one... Except I was only expecting one. Every other trainer came alone."

"I'm sorry we aren't what you were expecting." Fluttershy stated, trying to avoid asking the strange unicorn any more questions. She sounded just like Twilight, but her mannerisms seemed just a bit different. She was less confident about her information, making their conversation frustrating. Fluttershy dug through her bag and retrieved the letter, letting Stephanie take it from her hoof.

"Thank you," Stephanie said as she magically tore the letter in two. All three were taken aback as the letter gently landed in pieces on the cavern floor. "I won't be needing it, though. I already know what it says."

"Uh... er... wha-" Fluttershy stammered.

"We came all the way down here just so you could rip up that letter? What's wrong with you?" Rainbow yelled, stomping her hoof down in anger.

Stephanie closed her eyes and wore a cocky grin. "As I said, I already know what the letter says. The blueprints for 'Project 746' were stolen from an employee and you were able to retrieve it. It was then stolen again, and you took it back in Rusturf Tunnel and delivered it to my father."

Fluttershy looked nervously at Rainbow and Pinkie as the yellow pegasus shuffled her forehoof.

"Uh, we never did any of that. We found a stallion lying on the ground with a bite wound in his shoulder in Petalburg Woods, but that's it," Rainbow explained. "What are you even talking about?"

"What do you mean you didn't-" Stephanie snapped her jaw shut, staring at the three wide-eyed. "T-that's impossible. If you didn't stop Team Aqua from getting those blueprints, then-" She quickly raised the letter from the ground and a purple light ran up the tear, mending it back together. After scanning it, the unicorn lowered the paper, her mouth hung agape.

“This is just a financial document for Devon Corp. I’ve read this letter a thousand times, how can it be different!?”

The tension in the air built as the unicorn paced around the room. Nothing she was saying made any sense to Fluttershy, but somehow Stephanie knew about the attack in Petalburg Woods. She had to know what she was talking about.

“You said something about us not being what you expected. What were you expecting?”

Stephanie halted and turned to Fluttershy. “Well, from what I recall, the one who normally wears those clothes is a unicorn, at least if it’s a pony. And, well... you’re a pegasus.” She resumed her pacing, glancing at Rainbow and Pinkie. “Also, they were always alone, and you’re traveling with two others.”

“Why a unicorn?” Fluttershy asked. A split-second later, the reality of what Stephanie said smacked her in the face. “Wait, the one who normally wears these clothes? What do you mean?”

Stephanie sat down, looking over to the mouth of the expanse. “Two days ago I started having a weird sense of déjà vu about everything I did. When I looked to the front of the cave, I saw the faces of a thousand different beings: ponies, griffins, dragons, humans, almost any creature you could imagine. Each of them held the same letter and wore the same clothes. Each a ‘May, or a ‘Brendan’.” She stopped and scratched the back of her head. “What’s your name?”

“It’s... uh... May Stan-”

“No no, not the name this world gave you. Your real name! The one your parents gave you in Cloudsdale.”

“Howwhat?” Fluttershy stammered. She couldn’t wrap her head around the unicorn’s words. “How did you know where I was born? What are you even saying?”

"I don't know how I knew, it just sounded right to me. Please, just give me your name, I need to know."

"It's Fluttershy," she answered, hoping the mare would start making sense with this new information.

"Fluttershy... that name somehow sounds familiar. No one that I can recall has ever remembered their real name...I think. The details are still foggy on my end." She looked over at Pinkie and Rainbow. "What are your names?"

"I'm Rainbow Dash, and she's Pinkie Pie," Rainbow answered with her head held high.

"I see. You two look and sound very familiar as well." She took a book from her pile and flipped through it. "Now where was.... Aha!" Stephanie exclaimed, planting her hoof into the book. "That's what I was looking for. Analogue; a facsimile, or other worldly counterpart. You two fit the bill quite nicely," she explained, pointing at Rainbow and Pinkie. "You look so familiar, but not quite what I remember."

"You mean like Roxanne, and you?" Fluttershy asked.

"Wait, me?" She ran over to the flowing water and looked into it, inspecting her features. "So that's why I'm a female now..." she droned. "I was wondering why my blazer had turned into a dress." She turned her head back. "What's the name of your world's counterpart for me?"

"Um... our world? We live in the same world you know, just... far away," Fluttershy explained, trotting over to the unicorn mare.

"Uh, Fluttershy? Twilight said something about 'transporting through space time' as the deviation for that spell. I don't think we're in the same world as we used to be," Rainbow said, taking the butter pegasus aback.

Her body shook, sick from nerves as she made every attempt to keep herself calm. "Her name is Twilight Sparkle. She's the pony that sent me here."

“Sent you here, huh? Well that’s a first. Also, Twilight was it? You know I like that better than my silly gender bent name... but that would be so confusing for you.”

“Why... how do you know all this? Why are these ‘analogues’ popping up? Just... who are you?”

“I’m sorry, let me first introduce myself better. My name is, well, was Steven Stone, former champion of Hoenn’s Pokémon League. I seem to recall being human originally, or at least that’s what my memory seems to be telling me. With so many sessions, it’s been hard to keep track.”

“Um, human? What’s a ‘human’?” Fluttershy asked. “You said it before, but... what is it?”

Stephanie chuckled. “I guess you don’t have any in your world, huh? Well, they look similar to hairless apes, with exposed flesh and hair mostly on the top of their skulls. They are bipedal as well, having hands instead of hooves. Pretty basic *homo sapien*,” she explained.

Fluttershy remembered seeing them before, appearing in her short memory flashes. The sensation of moving fingers when she woke from her earlier nightmare coming back to her. She had the memory of a human girl. “Let me get this all straight,” Fluttershy started, closing her eyes in thought. “You’re an ‘analogue’, a human, there are these... ‘sessions’, you’re originally a male, and I should be a unicorn. Am I missing anything?”

“You know, now that you say back to me, it does sound a little ridiculous,” Stephanie laughed. “I can’t think about that right now. My mind has been running non-stop for two days, and speaking to you three isn’t helping. How about this-” From near her research supplies floated a computer chip. With magic, she stripped open Fluttershy’s Pokétch and placed it inside. “This is a telephone modification for your Pokétch. If you need to contact anyone, this is the application for it. I only have one since I only expected one of you, but that should be fine. My number is already programmed in, so if you find out anything, just call me. It would really be quite handy.” She looked up in thought. “...or is would it be ‘hoofy’? I never know with your culture’s inane equine euphemisms.”

“Um... thanks,” Fluttershy said, switching between her watch’s applications. The only name on the list read ‘Steven’. “I’ll call you if I find anything.”

“Great! I’ll be heading back to Rustboro to order some research materials.” She jumped up and down with glee. “I can’t believe this! I never expected you to be such an outlier, and you aren’t even insane!”

“Wait, what?” Fluttershy asked bewildered.

“Um... we should probably head out. Gym battle and all,” Rainbow said, rolling her eyes to the cavern entrance.

“Oh right, you’re trainers. How about this, I’ll teleport you out of here so you can go about your business. This cave is way too dark to be traveling in.” Stephanie planted her legs and her horn began to glow in a purple light.

“You’re powerful enough to do that?” Pinkie asked.

“Of course I can, I’m the most powerful psychic in my family’s lineage. Why do you think I was the champion?” As the unicorn finished, Fluttershy felt her body relax as a white light engulfed her. Before she knew it she floated in the air just as she had when she came to Hoenn. She wanted to scream, but she stopped herself in an attempt to steel her bravery. Her breathing quickened as she closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. Before she knew it, the light dissipated, leaving the three in front of the cave entrance. She hit the ground with a light thump, then ran to the hillside, panting as she leaned on it.

“Never... again...” Fluttershy panted as she stared at the ground, continuing to shake.

“It wasn’t so bad. At least we got to stay conscious this time.” Rainbow said reassuringly. She shook out her legs and wings before checking her pockets for her supplies.

“Woo! That was fun,” Pinkie hollered. “Think we’ll get to do it again?”

“If I have my way, we won’t.” Rainbow turned to Fluttershy, waiting for her to remove herself from the hillside. “Come on, we need to get scheduled for the gym fight,” Rainbow said. Fluttershy nodded and made her way to her friends. With a cloud of tension in the air, they trotted towards Dewford.

The town of Dewford was smaller than Rustboro City. Much smaller.

A Pokémon Center and market hugged the coast while the gym stood in the center of town. Besides the three main structures, there were just five other buildings, the number of docks on the island easily dwarfing that number. It was quiet, with only a few voices that could be heard over the sound of the waves striking the docks in the distance. Fluttershy walked down the road towards the gym as her friends discussed Pinkie’s new Pokémon. Amidst the relative silence, Fluttershy’s Pokédex joined it, failing to tell her of her coming gym challenge. She stripped the Pokédex out from her bag and opened it, seeing only the same flickering lights as when they stepped off the boat.

‘Why aren’t you working?’ she thought, banging the sides of it in an attempt to make it work. Despite her assault, the Pokédex remained silent. She sighed before looking up at the gym, instantly realizing why she never got the call.

“Uhh, Rainbow Dash? Pinkie?” she called out, grabbing the two ponies’ attention. “You might want to see this.”

Rainbow and Pinkie galloped over, confused. “What did you want us to...” Rainbow stopped and looked at the gym. It was completely boarded up on each side, the windows appeared smashed and shattered behind the boards. Upon closer inspection, Fluttershy found a hanging white sign that read: ‘Building Condemned: By the authority of Casein Sea Building Inspection’ in bold, red letters.

“This is the gym? I thought trainers came here for the second badge!” Rainbow yelled.

“Calm down. I’m sure there’s a reason for this,” Fluttershy said, looking around for any pony outside.

“I... ugh....” Rainbow groaned in frustration. “First that weird Twilight... Steven pony, now the gym is shut down. What’s with this place?”

“Maybe Stephanie had a point. She might be right if you think about it,” Pinkie stated. “She knew about Cloudslade, and that we found that Devon Crop employee. Maybe things *aren’t* happening the way they’re supposed to.”

“You can’t just say something crazy like that. I just...” Rainbow sighed, trailing off into a dejected silence.

The conversation with Stephanie had taken its toll on all three, but Fluttershy feared more so for Pinkie and herself than the cyan pegasus. The nightmare they had shared and lack of sleep, along with the unicorn’s insane ramblings, were doing neither pony any favors. With all that had happened, she had failed to pay attention to her now dry throat and rumbling belly. It’d been almost a day since they had eaten.

“We’re stuck here for two days before the ship sails again, right?” Fluttershy asked, breaking Rainbow out of her slump.

“Yeah, why?” Rainbow wondered.

“I think we should get some food and just relax. We don’t have a gym to worry about, and we haven’t eaten in almost a day. Maybe we can get all of this sorted out in the mean time.”

Pinkie smiled and trotted past Fluttershy. “Oooo, I’ll go see if I can find us some place to eat. Maybe they have kelp or seaweed; I’ve always wanted to try that.” She giggled and hopped down the road. Fluttershy trusted her with food arrangements, so she let her hop off with no qualms.

“So, why were you and Pinkie up early last night?” Rainbow asked. Fluttershy turned to see Rainbow staring at her. “You look like you haven’t slept at all. Everything alright?”

"I'm... fine." Fluttershy tried her hardest to stand tall in front of her friend. Her heart raced as Rainbow kept up her stare. "I just woke up early, that's all."

"I know things have been rough today, but I just want to know. Don't you trust me?"

As those words hit home, Fluttershy slumped to the ground and looked up at her friend. "It's just, what happened was so strange. Pinkie and I had the same nightmare. Well, not exactly the same, but they were very similar. We both woke up screaming at the same time, and it hurt. It really hurt." She looked away, feeling a knot form in her stomach as she spoke. "My neck and chest felt as if they were being stabbed and crushed, and I'm sure Pinkie felt the same way and... I just didn't want to worry you."

"Oh..." Rainbow said in a somber tone. She dropped her stare and looked for Pinkie who was still hopping around town. "I shouldn't be complaining. You came here alone and scared with your memories messed with, you thought your Pokémon died, you've been getting taken over by some girl named May, you're getting nightmares," she lowered her head with a sigh of contrition. "...and I'm just here for the ride." She lifted the sitting pegasus to her hooves and embraced her. "I'm sorry." She rested her head on Fluttershy's shoulder for only a moment, then let go and stood back up.

"It's alright." Fluttershy said before walking up over to examine the boards. "So, what do you think happened? Do you think that maybe we never had to come here in the first place?" She paused for a moment, running a hoof across the boards. "These look new."

"If we ask somepony about it, we should do it tomorrow. I'm sick of answers today," Rainbow responded as she circled around the building. "You're right, though, these don't look weathered at all."

"Hey, girls! I found us a restaurant!" Pinkie yelled out as she trotted back to the gym. "It's really cheap too, and from the ponies I talked to it sounds delicious!"

"Great, I'm starving," Rainbow said as she and Fluttershy followed Pinkie to the restaurant. "I really should've gotten something on the ship."

The restaurant looked more like a stand to Fluttershy; there were no tables on the outside, only ponies sitting on the sand covered ground. A menu scrawled into wooden planks hung above the counter behind which a lone mare stood. After ordering, they sat next to two of the ponies that sailed with them.

“Hey! Do you know what happened to the gym?” Pinkie asked, looking over the two’s plates of food.

“Not sure. There was nothing on the news about it, so it must’ve happened pretty recently. I thought my Pokédex broke when I came into town!” the gold hatted pony laughed.

“Same...” Fluttershy yawned, rubbing her eyes. Her eye-lids drooped as they sat, and she squirmed uncomfortably. She tried paying attention to what the ponies were talking about, but she only stared at the booth, waiting for her food to come. She licked her lips and shifted as she waited, trying to make herself comfortable.

“Fluttershy?” Rainbow asked. “Hey, are you alright?”

“Oh,” Fluttershy mumbled, looking over to Rainbow. She couldn’t stay awake anymore, her body screaming at her for some rest. “I’m just really tired. I think I’ll go lay down after this.”

“Okay. How about this: leave Alerce and Wolver with us, then we’ll get some training in while you get some sleep,” Rainbow suggested, extending her hoof. Fluttershy took out her Pokémon and handed their Poké Balls to Rainbow who then pocketed them in her jacket. “I’ll put them right back in your bag when we’re done.”

“That’s sounds nice,” Fluttershy said, yawning again.

Before she knew it, her plate of food was in front of her on a small mat. It was a simple daffodil sandwich which she dug into right away, wolfing it down before she had the chance to even taste it. With a swig of her water, she finished her meal just as the other four were taking their first bites. As she set her cup down, she looked up at the Pokémon Center, hoping it was still open. “I’m going to sleep. I’ll see you all when I wake up,” she yawned, standing up.

"Alright, sleep well," Rainbow stated, watching as Fluttershy slowly trotted into the Pokémon Center, hobbling from side to side.

The inside of the building was laid out the exact same way as the one in Petalburg, making it easy for her to find her way around. It was empty except for a nurse who stood behind the counter. She looked around, trying to find a comfortable spot to lay down. There, in the corner of the room, she spotted a small cushioned bench. It called sweetly to her, the cushions looking like soft, fluffy clouds beckoning her to lay on them. As she approached, she looked over to the nurse, who was busy with paperwork. "I-is it alright if I get some sleep here?" Fluttershy asked, her voice just squeaking out.

"That's fine. Have a good rest." The nurse closed her eyes and smiled.

"Thank you," Fluttershy said before dragging herself over and plopping onto the bench. She took out her blanket and draped it over herself, shifted into a comfortable position, and let herself drift off.

"Fluttershy! Pinkie! Wake up!" Rainbow yelled, shaking Fluttershy awake. She sat up, looking around the room with her eyes still half closed. It was night, leaving the Pokémon Center shrouded in darkness.

"What... what is it?" Fluttershy mumbled, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Come outside, you have to see this," Rainbow exclaimed as she bolted out the door with Pinkie close behind. As Fluttershy shook her grogginess off, she made her way to the door and stepped outside.

"Rainbow, where are you-" she stopped after she turned to the east. A sickening orange and red glow cast itself over the horizon as a thick billow of smoke rose into the air. "What is that?"

"It looks like something is... burning. I was getting ready to go to sleep after some flight practice, and I saw a flash of light came from over there.

Isn't that where we're supposed to go next? Staleport, I think?" Rainbow said, hovering above the Pokémon Center in an attempt to get a better view.

"I hope not, not if it's burning at least," Pinkie stated.

The way the orange and red light pulsated disturbed Fluttershy. She had seen fires before, but never as large nor as bright as this, nor with as red of hue. As the smoke gathered in the air, it reflected the flames' light, making the sky appear to be burning. "What do we do?"

"We find out what's going on," Rainbow said as she stared out at the inferno. "It can't be any worse than anything that's happened today. Hey, maybe it'll even be exciting." With a quick swoop, she landed, looking back towards the docked passenger boat. "We should wake up Mr. Briney."

Chapter 11

Crimson Sky

The air was still as the night had long settled on the small town. Dewford was all but asleep, except for three young mares who galloped and flew quietly through the back streets. Every building lay silent and dark, leaving the three illuminated only by moonlight and the faint red glow of the sky as an inferno raged to the east. Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie followed Rainbow Dash towards the docks, hoping to find Mr. Briney still aboard his ship.

“Mr. Briney! Mr. Briney!” Rainbow yelled as they galloped up to the weather-beaten boat. It bobbed up and down gently, floating silently over the cresting waves. A yellow light flickered on in the boat’s wheelhouse before a silhouette inside moved around. “I knew he’d be here.”

“Didn’t he say he was staying in town?” Fluttershy asked as she watched the cabin door swing open. “Why is he back over here?”

“There wasn’t any place to stay for the night except for the Pokémon Center. He wasn’t there the last time I checked.”

“What do ya’ want?” the old sea pony asked, leaning onto the railing as he looked down on the three. His seagull was asleep, laying on his back as Mr. Briney grimaced. “The sun set a while ago, why aren’t you fillies in bed yet?”

“Look east, there’s something on fire!” Fluttershy yelled, pointing to the burning sky. Its intensity had faded, yet it still gave her a sickening pain in her stomach. The smoke extended over the sea, engulfing the horizon in burning cinders.

“Huh, so it is,” Mr. Briney stated, rubbing his gray stubble. “So, what do you want me to do about it?”

Rainbow flew up to the deck and hovered in front of the sea pony. “We want to go check it out, and we were hoping you would sail us over

there. We have to go to Slateport anyway, right?" She flew over the railing and landed on the deck.

"Yes, in two days," he explained, glaring at Rainbow. "Also, you three want to go *towards* a wildfire? You're supposed to run away, you stupid fillies." He began pacing back and forth, switching his gaze between Rainbow and the other two. "Tell me, why should I risk my vessel to bring three greenhorns to a set of burning land? Fuel is expensive and I'm too old for fillies' games."

Fluttershy looked down in thought. Mr. Briney had been harsh before, making the three have to beg to board his ship the first time. The fire in the east gave her chills unlike any other fire she had seen before. It was the same feeling she'd had when she had fought with Norman; it felt as if the fire wasn't supposed to happen. She didn't realize why she had begun banging on her Pokédex for not responding until she saw the blaze in front of her; something felt terribly wrong, and it seemed that deviations were becoming worse.

"I know you don't like us, and you think I'm... pathetic, but we have to go. Ponies could be injured," Fluttershy argued. "We have to do something about it."

"There are firefighters and police who can take care of things like this, what makes you think you're needed over there?" Mr. Briney removed himself off from the railing and walked to the raised ramp. "One good reason, what is it?" He asked, eyeing Fluttershy.

Fluttershy locked eyes with him, watching his movements closely. *'He said there was a reason he let us on the first time... but why?'* she thought. If she couldn't come up with why Mr. Briney let them on his boat in the first place, she didn't know how to convince him to bring them back to the mainland. She looked back at the blaze, feeling the knot tighten in her stomach, then looked back up at the sea pony. "I... well..."

"Hmm? What was that?" Mr. Briney asked condescendingly.

"Please? I know you don't trust us, and it's an odd request, but we have to go. Seeing it there..." Fluttershy shuddered as she looked back. "I... just..." she murmured, clutching at her chest. "Please!"

Mr. Briney looked down at her and Pinkie Pie and laughed. "May, the daughter of Norman, is reduced to begging in front of an old captain." He looked away from the ponies and up to the horizon, taking out a small, brass telescope and looking through it.

Rainbow flew down from the deck and landed in front of her friends. "Ugh, well that was pointless," she groaned, then yawned as she trotted down the dock. "I'm going back to the Pokémon Center to get some shut-eye."

Fluttershy yawned and nodded her head, following Rainbow back onto the island. "I don't know why we thought that would work. We barely got onto the-" Fluttershy jumped at the sound of a loud clang behind her. She quickly turned around, noticing the ramp onto the ship was lowered onto the end of the dock. After a few quick, silent glances between them, the mares approached the ramp and looked up at Briney who stood just off to the side of the ramp.

"So, are you fillies coming aboard or not?" Mr. Briney yelled out, placing a white, black-billed hat on his head. He had donned a blue blazer with brass buttons running down its front with white trim.

Fluttershy stood confused, watching as the grizzled pony tapped his forehoof impatiently on the ramp. "I thought you weren't going to-"

"Don't question your captain, sailor!" Briney interrupted her, stepping off the ramp. "You want to get to Slateport so badly, you're going to work for it. I'm your captain now, and you take orders from me. Now come aboard before I ship off without you sorry lot!"

Without another word, Fluttershy trotted up the ramp, followed by Rainbow and Pinkie, keeping her eye on the now authoritative stallion. He drew a line with his eyes towards the backside of the cabin, forcing the three to line up with their haunches to the stairwell wall. The rocking of the boat was much rougher than she remembered as she saw Pinkie stumble into the wall from her tired movements. After Rainbow brought Pinkie back to her hooves and with the three firmly lined up, Mr. Briney casually made his way to the middle before scanning the three of them. Fluttershy gulped, anxiously awaiting the sea pony's next action.

“So you want to be adventurers, huh?” He began to pace in front of them, casually glancing towards the east every few seconds. “If you’re going to use my ship, you’re going to be my crew, is that understood?” Fluttershy nodded as Rainbow and Pinkie looked at each other, making short gestures with their hooves. “I can’t hear you, greenhorns!” He yelled, snapping the three to attention.

“Uh...yes,” Fluttershy said softly. Rainbow and Pinkie followed suit, slightly mumbling their responses.

“That’s ‘Yes, *Captain.*’ to you lot!” He snapped, grimacing at his lowly crew. “You want to be on my ship and act as my crew, then *act* like it! Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Captain!” The three yelled in unison, putting a smile on the seasoned captain’s face.

“Good, now let’s put you to work. Rainbow was it? Sound the bell above the wheelhouse as we depart. When we get close enough to the flames, fly ahead to see what’s happening. Pinkie, I need you to man the spotlight on top of the cabin; make sure we don’t run into anything in the open water.”

“Okie-dokie, Captain!” Pinkie said with a salute.

“May, before I give you your instructions, I need to speak with you in the cabin. There’s something I need to clear up with you,” Mr. Briney said to Fluttershy before turning his back to the other two mares. “Sound the bell! We’re shoving off!”

Rainbow flew to the bell and yanked on its string, causing the bell to toll and echo off the cliff face. Mr. Briney entered the wheelhouse, sitting on his wooden chair, pulling several levers and turning the ignition key. With the clang of chains, the anchor slowly rose from the water as the engines roared to life. With a sudden jerk, the boat began moving back from the dock, bowing out to face the blaze. Fluttershy and Pinkie grasped the railing as the boat turned, trying not to bowl each other over. As the boat crawled to a stop, it sailed forward with incredible speed.

“Pinkie! Man the second light, there’s no lighthouse where we’re headed!” the captain yelled out, spurring the pink pony into action. She quickly bounded around the outside of the cabin, galloping up a ramp to the top. She clicked on a switch, giving life to the bulb and swiveled it to shine its light on the dark water below. Pinkie giggled as she turned the light on and off, blurring the light across the sea and obscuring the wheelhouse light. “Slow it down, lass. I can’t see a thing!” the captain yelled.

“Oops, sorry,” Pinkie laughed in embarrassment before concentrating the light on a single point on the waves.

With the boat now at cruising speed, Fluttershy closed her eyes and took a nervous deep breath. She couldn’t figure out why Mr. Briney wanted to speak to her, and she was hoping it wasn’t just a private berating. Step by step she slowly approached the cabin doors, her breath quickening as she came closer. Apprehensively, she pushed the door open, causing the stern earth pony to look back at her. Without a word she closed the door behind her and kept her distance.

“Y...you wanted to see me, Captain?” she squeaked out, watching the seagull hop down off of the control panel as she avoided the captain’s gaze.

“Yes I did,” he said in a soft tone. She had never heard him with such a lack of bite to his words. With another deep breath, she trotted to his side and looked out at the open sea. “Do you know why I called you in here?”

“N-no, Captain,” Fluttershy answered, watching small islands whizz by.

“You don’t need to call me that, I was just having a bit of fun with you three,” he laughed. “This is about the other day and just before you boarded tonight. Do you have any idea why I called you pathetic in my cabin when you first came?”

Fluttershy lowered her head, peeking up at the captain. “Um... to make fun of me?”

“Of course not, that would be cruel. I just wanted to get a rise out of you,” he explained, confusing Fluttershy. “Your father told me all about you

when he first came to Petalburg. Oh the stories he would tell. The girl with fire in her eyes he would say; she'd never back down from a fight and send her opponents packing." With a sudden movement, he spun the wheel, banking around a stray, empty wooden boat. "That was close... that Pinkie is a good spotter when she isn't playing around, ain't she?" Fluttershy responded in silence. "Anyway, I was excited to see this firebrand of a Pokémon trainer for the first time. When you came into my cabin I thought nothing of you, but when you told me your name I was shocked, let me tell you.

"You were nothing like the stories, so I tried to force it out of you. I thought you were playing games with me, so I let you on my boat to see if I was right. When I saw you come up to see your friend, I expected to see that side of you come out, but I heard you talk about your nightmare." Fluttershy looked up at him in surprise.

"You heard that?" Her face fell, flush with embarrassment.

"Yes, but it's nothing to be ashamed of I can assure you," he said, patting Fluttershy on the back. "At that point I needed more confirmation of this 'change' you went through. I kept watching and saw you with that stowaway Totodile. Any other trainer would've fought it, but you approached it like it was a small foal. I can't say I wasn't surprised when I saw that. I tried one last time right before I let you on to rile you up, but you stayed as calm as you are now. I didn't know your father exaggerated so much."

"Y-yeah, he does that a lot," Fluttershy lied, trying to keep up with his story.

"Your friends, did they come with you to Hoenn? Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie?" he asked, tapping on one of the gauges with a hoof as he steered with the other.

"Yes. They're my best friends," she explained.

"Hmm... that's what I thought." He paused for a moment, rubbing his stubble with his hoof. "May isn't your real name, is it?"

Fluttershy took a step back, her eyes darting back and forth in thought. *'How could he know my name? I've only told it to one other pony,'* she thought, her mind scrambling to come up with an answer.

"No, no it's not," Fluttershy answered.

"I knew it! Call it an ol' sailor's intuition. May seems more of a Hoenn name than a Johto name. I was wondering why your name was so conservative compared to your friends." Fluttershy breathed a sigh of relief. "So, what's your real name?"

"It's Fluttershy," she answered with a calm breath.

"That sounds better. I think it suits you better too," he said before turning his attention to the sky.

"What do you think it is? ...the fire, I mean," Fluttershy asked.

"Well, it can't be a wildfire. The humidity is too high and we get consistent rainfall throughout Hoenn. A place like Blackthorn where you come from, sure, but not here; especially not a port town." He grabbed a radio receiver from the dashboard. "Rainbow, can you hear me?"

They waited for a moment before they heard a muffled, "Yeah... I mean yes, Captain," from outside the wheelhouse.

"We're getting close to the docks on this strait. I need you to fly ahead and make sure I'm not headed towards a burning dock. See if you can make out what's going on as well, I don't like the look of this," Briney commanded, watching the cyan pegasus salute then bolt through the air, blazing off from the boat. Fluttershy watched as Rainbow disappeared through the smoke, leaving a small rainbow trail behind her.

Fluttershy crept out of the wheelhouse and leaned on the boat's railing, watching for any sign of Rainbow's return. She could see the shadow of a dock coming into view over the horizon, absent of the crimson light that consumed the land north of it. A trickle of smoke seeped its way down her windpipe, making her close her eyes and cough violently. Leaving her eyes half way open, she continued monitoring the flames. She

stripped off her bandanna and dipped it in her water, covering her mouth trying her hardest to keep from breathing the smoke .

In no time, Rainbow emerged from the smoke, landing gracefully on the ship's deck. Fluttershy took herself off from the railing and rushed to her friend, awaiting her scouting report. A hum made its way through the speakers as the captain slowed the boat to half its speed.

"What'd you find?" he asked before Fluttershy could speak.

Rainbow fluffed her jacket and desperately tried to wipe the soot off from her jacket. "The dock isn't on fire, I can say that much."

"What's happening over there?" Fluttershy asked with concern. The red glow of the blaze made its way onto the boat as they inched ever closer, enveloping them in its light.

"The entire town is on fire," the rainbow-maned pegasus cried. "I couldn't get a good look at it, but I couldn't see anypony left in town." She began to pace. "I don't know what we're going to do. I would just grab a rain cloud and make it rain, but I can't seem to touch them. Alerce is probably useless since he's weak to fire. Wolver is still pretty weak. Pinkie's alligator is nowhere near powerful enough to put out the fire. Lorica is weak to fire-

"Lorica?" Fluttershy asked in confusion.

"You remember those creatures in the cave? The ones with the metal backs and all? I caught one of those while you were asleep." Rainbow explained, releasing the creature onto the boat. It yawned, then looked up at Fluttershy. The crimson from the blaze glinted off its armor, flickering and pulsating in contrast to its bright, azure eyes. "He didn't stand much of a chance against Igni, so I figure he's not strong against it."

"Pinkie, kill the lights!" Mr. Briney yelled over the speakers, prompting Pinkie to switch off the lantern. The boat was on its final approach to the dock, slowing its speed to a mere crawl. With a choke, the engines severely slowed and the lights on the boat flickered off. "Prepare to dock!" He called out through the wheelhouse glass. Rainbow called back Lorica and stuffed his Poké Ball back in her jacket before Pinkie hopped down

from the cabin. The grizzled sea pony turned the wheel a final time and dropped anchor perpendicular to the dock, stopping the boat completely.

As the ship rocked on the waves, Mr. Briney came out from the wheelhouse and lowered the ramp onto the dock, letting the three mares onto dry land. "Do you three know what you're doing? Will you be alright?" he asked, watching the three descend the ramp. Fluttershy could hear the concern in his tone, like a father looking after his daughters. She looked back at him, meeting him with a smile.

"We're just seeing what we can do. I'm sure there are ponies that need our help," the pink maned pegasus explained.

"I'll be here if you need anything. If you need to head back to Dewford, let me know. I'll be heading back in the morning to get ready for the group still over there," their captain said before making his way back into the wheelhouse. Fluttershy sighed and turned around, her view now encompassed by the blaze.

The dock was connected to a large sprawling beach filled with umbrellas and fold-up chairs. Several beach balls lay scattered on the sand, while others bobbed in the tide. The three mares trotted down the dock, Pinkie galloping out ahead of them. As their hooves hit sand, Fluttershy felt the sands' warmth flowing through her legs. It was... tepid, but unusually so. As she drew closer, the heat of the flames rushed to Fluttershy's face. Fluttershy coughed more as they trudged along the beach and onto the stone roads of the burning town.

Slateport was in ruins; the nautical museum had fallen apart and was left in shambles, a building that held a large boat and submarine was ablaze, the steel inside glowed bright orange as the iron-cast beams emitted the crimson light they saw from Dewford. Not a single building stood unscathed in wake of the fire, each of them crumbled onto themselves in ruin. Fluttershy raised a hoof to shield her eyes, coughing from the lingering smoke and fumes. The sign welcoming them into Slateport lay on the ground, covered in embers and burning with a harsh, orange glow.

“Let’s start looking, there have to be some survivors,” Rainbow said before breaking off from the group and beginning to search through some of the wreckage, heaving off several heavy chunks of roofing and timber.

Fluttershy flew off in the other direction, trying to fan off some of the embers with gusts from her wings. After a few moments, all that remained of the flames on the wreckage in front of her were smoldering ashes, so she got to digging her way through. Each piece felt heavier for the pegasus as she continued coughing. She covered her mouth again with her rag, trying to filter the air between each removed piece. After straining to roll an iron girder off from the collapsed building, she felt the hair on the back of her neck stick up. She felt as if... somepony or something was watching her. Slowly, she turned around and squinted, trying to focus on a small, standing figure in the distance.

The figure was mostly in shadow, with the light of the flames licking at its body. It reflected the light, as though it were covered in a shined metal. Turning her body fully to face the figure, she studied it as it remained still, not moving as the flames inched closer to it. It was bulky and still, and she felt sick looking at it, feeling as if it stared straight through her. Her breathing stuttered as she trotted towards Rainbow Dash, making sure she never broke eye contact with the figure. Before she made it to her friend, it twitched its head to the right, then back up again almost instantaneously. She let out a tiny scream and rushed over to Rainbow who was still chipping away at the wreckage.

“R...Rainb...bow?” Fluttershy stuttered, tapping the cyan pegasus on the shoulder.

“What is it Fluttershy? Did you find something?” Rainbow asked, turning towards her friend.

“L..look over there...” Fluttershy pointed to the figure as it continued its stare unabated. As Rainbow came closer, a flash of light came from behind it, completely silhouetting the pony. Coiling up from behind him was a monstrous serpent, its body segmented with spheres and was covered in multiple fins with a great, gaping maw hanging open. It towered over the figure, its body reaching high above the flames as Fluttershy saw saliva drip from its mouth, sizzling as it hit the ground. She shuddered, quickly

ducking behind her friend. Rainbow called out quietly to Pinkie, letting the pink pony hop over to her side as Fluttershy shook behind them.

"It's probably nothing, Fluttershy," Rainbow assured her, making her way towards the shadowed figure. Pinkie quickly followed suit.

"Rainbow... I.. no!" Fluttershy squeaked before running behind the wrecked buildings. She snuck her way through the back streets, avoiding eye contact with the shadowed pony. To her right was a hollowed out building with the front still intact. It wasn't on fire, so she made her way inside, peeking out from a broken glass window to watch her two friends approach the pony. The light of the fire made its body visible, revealing a horn on the pony, its body clad in azure armor. A scabbard with a straight-sword hung on its side, clanging against its side plate as it moved closer to her friends. The beast remained behind it, floating above the ground. She ducked her head, and closed her eyes, hoping her friends didn't engage it.

"Hey, you!" Rainbow yelled, catching the armor-clad pony's attention. "Could you help us find survivors? There's a lot of rubble to sift through."

Fluttershy poked her head back up, seeing the unicorn only a few feet away from Pinkie and Rainbow. The monster had set down behind it, its head laying against the unicorn's side. "There are still ponies here?" It asked in a grizzled voice.

"I think so, there might be some trapped under the rubble," Rainbow said before turning around, frantically looking for Fluttershy.

"Why should I help them? They were given the chance to leave," the stallion said, his tone sending a shiver down Fluttershy's spine.

Rainbow quickly turned back, getting into the stallions face. "What do you mean 'a chance to leave?' Did you do this?!" she demanded, pushing her face into the stallion's tempered steel helmet. Fluttershy held her hooves to her mouth, trying to shake off her nerves. She wanted to grab her friends and run, but she was paralyzed in place.

"You two... you look so familiar..." he droned, tilting his head to glance at Pinkie. "It's almost as if..." he trailed off as Rainbow backed away, motioning Pinkie to her side. He tilted his head up and stepped closer to

them. "Your clothes... your colors... your naivety... you two must be the spark!"

"The what?" Pinkie asked, huddling closer to the pegasus.

He laughed. "All thanks to you I can remember everything," he explained before his head twitched again. "If you're the spark, then... Your friend... she turned me into *this*! This... horse!" He exclaimed, stomping on the ground making Rainbow and Pinkie step back.

"I have no idea what you're talking about!" Rainbow yelled, Fluttershy hearing a small crack in her voice. "Did you do this, yes or no?!"

"I knew the Blueprint would come when it saw this..." he said, gesturing to the smoldering ruins as Rainbow spread her wings in defense. "The last time a Spark came to Hoenn, the blueprint was with them." He took a step forward, followed by his serpent. Rainbow's face showcased her fury as he shoved his face into hers. "Where is the blueprint?"

"Blueprint? I don't know what you're talking about, but if you don't step off," Rainbow growled, butting her head against his. She gritted her teeth as she stared him down. "I'll take you down right here!"

"With what, your weak Pokémon?" He laughed, pushing Rainbow back.

"No, with this!" Rainbow yelled, as she turned and bucked the armored stallion in the helmet. He crashed to the ground, tumbling back until he was stopped by the serpent's bulky coils.

"Tell me!" He yelled, getting back onto his hooves. Scuff marks now defaced the once pristine armor as she could hear the muffled, heavy breathing of the unicorn. "Where... is... Fluttershy?!"

Fluttershy quickly ducked her head down, body trembled. The fact that stallion knew her name scared her. Steven knowing of Cloudsdale seemed innocent enough in hindsight, but even he hadn't know her name. She sat down with her back to the wall, staring at her shaking hooves. After taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and searched through May's memories for an answer to who the stallion was, but the armor was

complicating her search. His voice was her only clue, but it wasn't predominant in the girl's memory. She was afraid to look back at the scene going on behind her so she delved into the only memory she could find,

"I came to see what was taking so long to snatch some parts, and you simps are held up by a mere child?"

Fluttershy's eyes sprang open. The girl's memories had only surfaced in reference to Fluttershy's present... meaning the girl had met this stallion here. With the town destroyed and the stallion obscured, she couldn't find a vivid memory. He didn't sound like anyone she knew, but the voice seemed resonated with the girl. At the sound of a loud clang, Fluttershy jumped in shock and peered out the window. The stallion was flat on his back with Rainbow being restrained by Pinkie.

"I said we won't let you touch her! This is your last warning!" Rainbow yelled, struggling to free herself of the pink pony's grasp. "Let go, Pinkie!" she screamed.

A blood-curdling roar bellowed from the serpent, making Fluttershy cover her ears. It rose from the ground and flew, circling around Pinkie and Rainbow. With one last shove, Rainbow escaped from Pinkie and bolted straight into the air. With pin-point accuracy, she hit the creature under the jaw, sending it back through the air. It landed, swiftly turning itself to strike. With frightening speed, it flew through the air and rushed towards the cyan pony.

Pinkie ran to a pile of rubble as the unicorn got back on his hooves and shook himself off. "Kill her," he commanded, watching Rainbow blaze up into the lingering sea of smoke. The serpent followed suit, trying desperately to keep up. As Rainbow emerged from the top of the plume, she dived back down at frightening speed, striking and slamming the creature into one of the smoldering buildings. Her breathing was labored as she hovered directly below the ceiling of smoke, noticing the serpent trapped under the rubble..

Pinkie looked over a ruined home, taking notice of the small chunks of metal and charred wood available to her. She smiled as she began hoarding them into a pile. With one quick look over her shoulder, she

started dragging her pile back towards the unicorn with a sly smile on her face.

With a flash, a large, column of fire shot out from the rubble, lighting the sky as it flew towards Rainbow Dash. She quickly noticed the blast and flew down towards the ground, narrowly escaping the encroaching flame. Just as she flew towards the serpent, it broke through the rubble and struck its tail into the pegasus' back, slamming her into the ground before disappearing. She rolled a few feet before struggling back to her hooves. With a flap of her wings, she carried herself back into the air. She searched the area, awaiting the serpent's next attack, but it was nowhere to be found. As she looked, she felt something drip on her forehead.

Rain.

A downpour rained down from the sky, soaking the entire down in a torrent of water. Fluttershy shivered as she placed her bag over her head, trying to keep herself dry. The ground hissed as the flames were doused and the crimson sky returned back to its original, dark blue hue.

Rainbow put her hoof over the face as she flew around, looking for the serpent. With the serpent seemingly gone, she dived and dashed towards the now unprotected stallion who stood silently in the rain. Just before she could strike the unicorn, a thunderous roar filled the sky. Rainbow turned her head up, seeing the creature coiled inside a cloud as a giant flash of white cracked through it. With a thunderous clap, a bolt of lightning arced straight Rainbow's body, making her scream in pain before crashing and tumbling into the ground. She lay there, scorched and unmoving as the monster landed beside her. Tears flowed down Fluttershy's cheeks as she recoiled back from the window and held her shaking forehooves to her mouth.

"Rainbow!" Fluttershy yelled before claspings her mouth shut with her hooves. Just as she screamed, the unicorn cocked his head towards her.

"She's over there; grab her!" the unicorn yelled, motioning for the monster ensnare her. Fluttershy tried forcing her wings open as the growls of the serpent came closer. She broke out into a gallop, frantically looking back to see how much time she had left but the serpent broke through the wall and circled around the frightened pegasus. She closed her eyes and

shuddered, sobbing as she clenched her teeth and waited. Against her better judgment, she opened her eyes and watched the serpent circle one last time before closing in on her. For a fraction of a second, she felt its wet scales brush up against her fur before she felt a small shock where it touched.

With a massive roar, the serpent recoiled back, electricity surging through its body. It writhed on the ground, squirming in agony as the pain coursed through it. Fluttershy scrambled against a standing piece of rubble, her eyes darting as they followed the flopping monster. After a few seconds, it stopped and lay motionless.

“Take that!” Pinkie yelled as she hurled rubble at the unicorn. Each piece hit and bounced off, knocking the unicorn back before his horn glowed through the armor. A blue light enveloped the debris pile and it was tossed across the town, leaving Pinkie with no ammunition.

“You useless beast, you can’t even handle a puny unicorn?!” he hollered, bringing the creature to attention. “Bind the earth pony, she’s of no use to us. I will take care of the unicorn myself.” With that, the serpent flew through the air once more and descended upon Pinkie. She scrambled down the road, trying to escape, but the tail of the serpent found its way under her belly and scooped her off the ground. It fully ensnared Pinkie and brought her to the ground, forcing her into submission. She squirmed, but the serpent tightened its grip, causing her to yelp out in pain.

Fluttershy’s pupils shrunk as she watched her two friends struggling to survive. She felt a tightness in her chest, causing her to grasp it and slump to the ash-covered ground. She peered to her left, watching the unicorn advance towards her. In desperation, she tried again to force her wings open to fly away, to save her friends and run. A crackling roar threw off her concentration as three walls of fire surrounded her, seeming unaffected by the continuing downpour. Fluttershy turned back to the unicorn who stood only a few feet away.

“There you are, unicor-” he stopped, peering around Fluttershy. “You-you’re a pegasus?! But... you’re wearing the hat and everything! Don’t tell me *you’re* Fluttershy!” he yelled, stamping his hooves in frustration.

“W-what do you want...?” Fluttershy gulped, her breathing quickening as she tried to steel her courage.

“You must to be the blueprint; you have the green bandanna and orange vest.” He came closer, backing Fluttershy towards the walls of flame. “What is a pegasus doing as the blueprint? It doesn’t make any sense.”

With the unicorn in a calmer state, Fluttershy looked with worry over to her injured friends, her anger rising towards the armored pony, her fear turning into focus. As her breathing quickened, she rose and flew into the stallion’s face, staring furiously through the eye slits of his helmet. Her pupils disappeared, leaving only her irises and whites of her eyes. ‘How *dare* you hurt my friends!’ She screamed, pushing her face into his as it contorted in anger. “I don’t care what you want from me, but I won’t let you have it!”

She heard a small chuckle from the stallion as he casually broke away from Fluttershy’s piercing stare. “So you are Fluttershy... hollow-boned, cowardly Fluttershy,” he said condescendingly before slipping his sword from its scabbard, holding the point threateningly before the pegasus’ face. She fell back and scrambled away, her eyes returning to normal as the stallion regained his composure. “Help me, and everyone will be saved,” he stated.

“Why couldn’t you just ask?! Why did you have to do this?” Fluttershy cried, her eyes darting between the stallion and the sword. “What about my friends?!”

“Even if I did ask, you’d never help me. Why would you? You’re the Blueprint. Everything in this world is crafted to fit your standards. Every person in Hoenn was turned into one of you horse-beasts, giving you everything you could ever want. I’ve seen it happen thousands of times. Your friends did help me a little at least,” he chuckled lightly. “The spark allowed me to remember every session, how they began and how they ended. How your starter became a coward to suit your pathetic nature.” Fluttershy’s mouth hung agape. She couldn’t formulate a single thought as the stallion continued. “I know what has to be done, and what my job is as the callen.”

“W...what is it?” Fluttershy squeaked, piling up ash behind her to toss.

“I am to break the time loop... and all I need is you,” he said before approaching Fluttershy, twitching once more. She scrambled back as far as she could without touching the flames, scraping up and keeping a pile of ash close to her.

“I-I won’t go with you!” she yelled, throwing the ash at the stallion before trying to slip by him. After a quick wave of his hoof across his helmet, the unicorn stomped on the ground, causing Fluttershy to retreat back. In the distance, she could hear the faint wailing of sirens above the crackle of the flames.

“I’m not asking you to,” he stated, inching closer, “I’m forcing you to.”

With a swift movement, the stallion grabbed at Fluttershy with one of his hooves. As he touched her, she felt the same small shock as before, watching as the unicorn jumped back. The armor on his foreleg shredded into pieces as shrapnel, scattering across the ash. With part of his armor destroyed, he lunged in to grab her again with both of his hooves. A large jolt of electricity shot through him as he seized her, throwing him to the ground and making him to scream in pain. The flames dissipated around Fluttershy as the unicorn writhed on the ground, violently squirming and crying, his body arching back from shock.

Quickly, Fluttershy grabbed one of the scraps of armor and shoved it in her bag. With the unicorn incapacitated, she ran through the alleyway to get back to Rainbow Dash before he could get back up. She glanced back, watching as the unicorn attempted to climb back onto his hooves, only to fall back down.

“Gyarados! Get over here!” he screamed, the serpent releasing the pink pony and at its master’s call and slithering towards the unicorn. She couldn’t hear him anymore, but watched as the Gyarados hoisted the unicorn onto its back and flew off to the east over the sea.

Fluttershy closed her eyes and let the rain wash away her anxiety. Her breathing slowed and her adrenaline began to fade, allowing her to focus. With the sirens growing louder, the pegasus flew immediately to the still motionless Rainbow Dash. Fluttershy shook her, trying to wake the

rainbow-maned pegasus. She bent down to listen to Rainbow's vital signs, noticing a tear in the cyan pegasus' shorts, revealing her cuite mark. She rolled Rainbow onto her back, watching as the cyan pegasus' chest slowly rose and fell. Fluttershy breathed a sigh of relief before Rainbow coughed and hacked, hastily opening her eyes.

"Rainbow, I'm so glad you're awake," Fluttershy said as the cyan pegasus looked around frantically.

"W-Where's the monster... and that unicorn?!" Rainbow yelled as she rose to her hooves, spreading her wings instinctively before arching back in pain.

"What's wrong?" Fluttershy asked, carefully examining Rainbow's wings.

"It's a small crick, don't worry about it. It should be fine in a few days," Rainbow assured her, slowly and carefully folding her wings back to her side. "What happened to those jerks?"

"I-I'm not really sure... that creature--I think he called it a Gyarados--tried to grab me... but a bolt of lighting knocked it away... the same thing happened to the unicorn when he tried to grab me," Fluttershy explained. With Rainbow awake and on her hooves, she galloped over to Pinkie as she struggled to her hooves.

"So you chased them off? I knew you had it in you Fluttershy," Rainbow laughed, trotting up to her friend.

"Are you alright, Pinkie?" Fluttershy asked, helping the pink pony up to her hooves.

"Yep, I'm fine," Pinkie stated. "Feel a little like a jelly doughnut without its filling, but I'm alright." She brushed herself off, trying to shake some of the rain from her coat. The blaring sirens grew louder as red and blue lights flashed to the north, coming closer to the ruined city. Above them, the rain quieted, slowing to a sprinkle, then disappearing completely. The large billows of smoke from before had vanished, leaving the city in a lifeless lull save the three mares.

“So, what do we do now? Do we keep looking for survivors?” Rainbow asked, stretching her wing. “By the way, where did that stallion go anyway?”

“The monster took him east. I don’t think we have to worry about him for a while,” Fluttershy explained, noticing several vehicles emerging on the northern road.

“Why was he after you anyway? Did you do something to him?” Pinkie asked, sitting down on the soaked earth.

“He said something about me being the ‘blueprint’ or something. He’s trying to break some kind of time loop... and he needs me to do it.” Fluttershy stripped off her hat and wrung it out. “He knew about Alerce too. Something about you guys turning him into a coward. I’m not really sure.”

“Alerce, a coward? He went up against that terrible monkey in Norman’s gym, no problem,” Pinkie said.

“He was probably just trying to get under your skin. Though... you did say something similar when that girl took you over,” Rainbow said, piquing Fluttershy’s curiosity.

“What did she say?”

“I think it was something about the world changing Alerce into something cowardly... I don’t know. She was talking nonsense,” Rainbow said. Several large vehicles charged down the road, not being carried by ponies. Several large white trucks with red crosses, small vehicles with flashing red and blue lights and massive red vehicle with a ladder on its roof charged down the road and stopped near the three mares. “I wouldn’t worry about it, they were just trying to rile you up.”

“I guess...” Fluttershy responded glumly. She had no idea why the consciousness of a girl would taunt her for her docile nature. Maybe she knew something Fluttershy didn’t. She shook her head in rejection and watched several uniformed ponies step out from the vehicles and rush over to them.

“Hey! Are you three alright?” a stallion in a navy blue uniform yelled, galloping alongside several paramedics. Two of them branched off and went to examine Rainbow and Pinkie, carefully inspecting their injuries.

“Y-yeah. We’re fine, just a little shaken,” Fluttershy said, watching Rainbow fidget as the paramedic taped up her wing.

“That’s good,” the officer sighed. “There were several obstructions blocked the road here... made it nearly impossible. Glad none of you were hurt. What was with the light show? For a second there, it looked like... like there were a lot of white flashes.”

“Oh, well...” Fluttershy started. She had no idea how to explain a stallion wearing armor with a flying serpent without sounding insane, so she decided to do the next best thing. “I don’t know, we only just got here.”

“That’s alright then. You missed a stallion in armor with a massive Gyarados, at least according to the townsfolk when we were coming over,” he explained, causing Fluttershy to look down at the ground to avoid eye contact. From the ambulance, several white coated ponies brought out a large white tent with a bold red cross and set it up just off the road. With Rainbow and Pinkie bandaged up, the paramedics escorted them to the tent, Fluttershy presuming to let them rest. She looked back up to the officer who was speaking over his radio to a fellow officer.

“So, the townsfolk escaped?” Fluttershy asked, prompting the stallion to put away his radio.

“Oh yeah, droves of ponies going straight up to Mauville. I’d suggest you do the same.” He looked around the city, taking note of the utter destruction. “There’s really nothing here for you now.”

“Thanks. Could I go see my friends?” she asked, not knowing the procedure of breaking off conversations with law enforcement here. That last thing she wanted was to be arrested after that whole experience.

“Of course. You know, your friends look pretty familiar. Are they from around here?”

“Rainbow and Pinkie? No, they came with me from... Johto,” she responded, taking a couple steps towards the tent.

“What are their last names if you don’t mind me asking?” he asked with an inquisitive look.

“Um, they’re Dash and Pie,” Fluttershy stated, questioning the police stallion’s intent.

“Oh, I didn’t know the gym leaders had any relatives out in Johto. I was wondering why they looked so familiar. That news must’ve been devastating to hear when you’re a whole country away,” he said, shaking his head. “Happened so close to each other too, I was surprised.”

“Wait, what are you talking about?” she asked, halting her departure. “What news?”

“Just tell them that I’m sorry for their losses,” he said before picking his radio back up and resumed his conversation. With a glum look, Fluttershy turned back to the tent and made her way over.

Just as she arrived, the two paramedics exited the tent, talking to each other and letting Fluttershy pass through. With a small push, the tent flap opened, revealing her newly bandaged friends. They were lying on small white cots surrounded by discarded bandage wrappings and gauze trimmings. Rainbow scratched at her bandages, trying to alleviate some kind of itch.

“Hey, Fluttershy! Why do you look so bummed?” Pinkie asked, back to her exuberant self.

“Just something that police stallion just told me. It doesn’t make too much sense.” Fluttershy took a deep breath. “He says, ‘Sorry for your losses.’”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Rainbow asked, wincing at the tightness of the bandages. “Nothing in this place has made any sense so far. You know what, let’s forget about that. What do we do now?”

“Well...” Fluttershy dug through her bag and brought out a shard of the light blue armor. The edges were shredded and not clean cut, the electric shock viscerally tore the armor apart. “The police stallion said that the ponies that left went north to Mauville. Maybe if we’re fast enough, we can catch up to them and see if anypony can give us any information.”

“Sounds great, let’s go!” Pinkie yelled, hopping up before Rainbow pushed her back to the cot.

“Are you sure you want to do this now? Are you alright?” Rainbow asked, giving Fluttershy a concerned look.

“Oh, I’m fine,” Fluttershy lied, trying to pass off any worry until she had some hold of the situation. “I’d rather find out information now while the unicorn is injured than stay here and do nothing while he recuperates. I had enough sleep from the day before, so I’m ready to go if you two are.”

Rainbow rose to her hooves, stretching her limbs as Pinkie followed. “I guess that settles it. Let’s go to Mauville,” she said, walking out from the tent. Just as Pinkie and Fluttershy left, they came muzzle to muzzle with a very stern-faced Rainbow Dash. “You realize what this all means, don’t you Fluttershy?”

“What are you mean, Rainbow?” Fluttershy asked, watching the sky turn to a lighter shade of blue as dawn approached.

“You’re going to have to fight, and fight hard, Fluttershy.” Rainbow stated. “You can’t think of these creatures as animals anymore. They have to be our protectors and monsters to our enemies if we want to survive. Pinkie and I can’t do all the fighting, you have to push yourself. Understand?”

Fluttershy gulped. She’d known she had to fight before, but the armored stallion made it all the more obvious. “I... I know. I told you before, I’m not afraid to fight.”

“Good... let’s get going then,” Rainbow said before turning up the road and leading them towards Mauville. Fluttershy lowered her head as she walked, her mind now focused enough to go over everything the unicorn said to her. She let her mind slowly process the information as she

marched steadily up the road. Without thinking, Fluttershy let Alerce out from his Poké Ball and let him lay on her head, comforting her as the three made their way north.

Chapter 12

Eternal Frost

It had been two days since Twilight left for Canterlot, as Spike arched over and leaned onto his knees, tired but proud. Along with the three young fillies, the Cutie Mark Crusaders, and mountains of animal care books from Fluttershy's collection, the dragon had finally created order out of chaos inside of Fluttershy's cottage. All but a few of the animals were nestled in their beds asleep while the girls were outside, chasing down the final runaway chicken. With a long sigh, he fell back on his behind and smiled as he sat to relax for the first time since the pegasus' disappearance.

The entirety of Ponyville was calmer since the incident. With Twilight Sparkle leading the charge to find their fellow villager, life returned to near normalcy. Only a few ponies showed any sign of worry as they went along in their daily business. Both Rarity's and Applejack's sisters showed their concern as they worked with Spike, but seemed as happy and energetic as ever as they helped set the animals in line. All that remained for the dragon was to await Twilight's return.

"Spike! Spike!" a yellow, red licorice maned filly yelled as she burst through the front door.

"Be quiet, Apple Bloom. We don't want to wake the animals up again and do another two days of work," Spike shushed her, looking around cautiously to make sure the animals continued sleeping.

"Oops. Sorry, Spike," Apple Bloom said, lowering her voice to a near whisper. "I just wanted to say that we caught the last chicken! We're all done." She jumped up in joy as her two friends joined her in the doorway.

"Great. Now, I need to get back over to the library and clean up a bit. I still haven't gotten all those books cleaned up from when I went looking for animal care books the other day," he said, weaving through the fillies to make his way to the library.

“We’ll join you!” the orange filly stated. “It’ll just get boring over here if the animals are asleep.”

“Yeah, and we won’t get our cutie marks staying here either,” the white, pink swirl maned filly argued. “I already checked to see if I got my ‘house-cleaning’ cutie mark, but I got nothing.” The girls pouted as they looked at their still bare flanks. All three had been trying for months to force their special talents to come to light, but failed at every venture. Spike was just glad he never had to worry about that.

With a nod of his head, he walked out of the cottage. “C’mon, I want to get over and back before anything bad happens.” Spike stated, letting the girls out before closing the cottage door.

Ponyville bustled with activity as the sun lingered high in the azure sky, leaving the town balmy. The fillies behind him yammered on about their cutie mark crusades, wondering if whether having a house cleaning mark would be worth it or not. As they made their way through town, a gray pegasus in a blue mail-cap flew down to the front of the library, leaving a scroll in the mailbox. Noticing this, Spike sprinted to the mailbox, getting there just before the mare had left.

“Excuse me, do you live here? You can’t go around stealing others’ mail you know,” the mare asked, looking at him with her golden eyes. They were obscured by a frame of thick, black rimmed glasses.

“Oh yes, I live here with Twilight Sparkle,” Spike exclaimed, pulling the scroll from the box. “Wait, are those new glasses?” He asked, looking inquisitively at the mare’s spectacles. The mail-pony was a well known public servant around Ponyville, and her appearance was well known. Why she had it changed, he had no idea.

“Oh, these?” She removed the glasses, showing them off to Spike and the girls. “Yeah, I just got these this morning. They’re supposed to keep my eyes from going wall-eyed. Apparently they’ve been enchanted to eventually fix that,” the mare explained as one of her eyes began to drift upwards. She quickly set them back on her face, letting her eyes return to normal, then giving the four a salute. “Well, the mail has been delivered; I’m off,” she blurted before taking off to the next house.

"Maybe ponies will call her Bright Eyes again instead of Derpy all the time," the orange filly wondered.

"Scootaloo!" Apple Bloom interrupted. "It ain't nice to say that name!"

"That's what every other pony calls her! I thought it was her nickname!" Scootaloo argued, prompting the white filly to join in the argument.

With the fillies now in a heated argument about naming conventions, Spike decided to crack the seal on the letter. He dug his claw into the binding and ripped it off, letting the letter unfurl in his claw. Before he read the first word, he felt a lump form in his throat, trying to force its way out. He had experienced this many times before, and knew precisely what this was. He let it go freely, expelling the energy out from his mouth. The energy swirled in the air and materialized into a letter with a dark blue band binding it closed. He took a look at the insignia, noticing a white crescent moon garnering where there was normally a bright, orange sun.

"Is this from Princess Luna?" Spike wondered aloud, catching the fighting fillies' attention. With a swift slash, he tore about the paper band and opened the letter, taking note of the regal, curved letters of ink compared to her sister's more casual penmanship. As his curiosity peaked, he began reading aloud as if Twilight were around to hear, "*Dear Twilight Sparkle's dragon assistant*, Wait, she didn't even try to guess my name!" he clamoured, making the girls roll their eyes.

"Thou hast been summoned to Canterlot by thy Princesses in regard to the Element of Magic's excursion outside of Equestria's borders. We have sent thee a chariot to transport thou to our castle to report on what thou knows of the events of the disappearance of the Element of Kindness, and are required to escort the remaining elements to discuss these matters in the Royal Hall.

"Thy chariot shall arrive in two hours, which thou must take by royal decree. We await thy arrival with astute patience.

"The Princess of the Night; Princess Luna of Castle Canterlot, Equestria"

“Wait, Twilight left Equestria!?” Spike exclaimed in a panic. “Why does the princess want to talk to me about this? Maybe that’s what this letter is?” Spike picked up the first letter, letting it hang from his claw.

“Well, you are Twilight’s assistant,” the white filly stated.

“You’re right Sweetie Belle. I mean, why wouldn’t she want to talk to me,” he said, puffing out his chest and putting his claws on his hips. “So, what do they mean I need to ‘bring the elements’? Luna calls Twilight an Element, but then tells me to bring them to the castle. All of the ponies who beat Nightmare Moon are gone, how can we bring them there?”

“What about those necklace things they wore when they came back from beating Nightmare Moon? I saw Rainbow Dash parade it around for a few weeks after that... maybe she meant those,” Scootaloo hypothesized. “We’ll can help you find them, and then come with you! I’ve always wanted to see Canterlot.”

“Me too!” Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom exclaimed at once.

“Alright, it wouldn’t hurt I guess. I’ll try to get Mrs. Cake to look after the cottage again, I’m sure she’ll be okay with it.”

“I’m going to Dash’s house first!” Scootaloo exclaimed, galloping off towards the east side of town.

“How are you gonna get up there, you can’t even fly!” Apple Bloom yelled, catching up to the enthusiastic filly.

“We’ll meet you back here when we find them, Spike!” Sweetie yelled as she left towards Rarity’s boutique to find her sister’s element.

With a nervous chuckle, Spike barged through the front door of the library, tearing it apart for Twilight’s ornate crown. He first scoured the main room, skimming through each book to see if she had hollowed out space for it there. With every crown sized book searched through, he bolted up the stairs, tearing apart the unicorn’s room and study. He spared no shelf nor small space in his pursuit, but wound up with nothing; the crown was gone. Frantically, he searched out on the observatory deck, then rushed back down the stairs and out of the library. With time of the essence, she

decided to get things squared away with Mrs. Cake and search for Pinkie's Element. Kill two birds with one stone.

Sugar Cube Corner was the bakery in town where Mr and Mrs. Cake graciously rented out a room for Pinkie when she came to town from the rock farms of Stone Valley. He entered the cake themed building and saw Mrs. Cake, a bulkier, blue mare standing behind the counter, surrounded by various treats and confections.

"Mrs. Cake, could you do me a huge favor? It has to do with Fluttershy's cottage again," Spike panted, running up to the counter.

"Oh sure, what is it this time?" the mare asked with a curious smile.

"I was summoned by Princess Luna to go to Canterlot, and I need to bring the Elements of Harmony, including Pinkie's. I can't leave Fluttershy's unattended, so could you go and look after it for a little while while I'm gone?"

Mrs. Cake pulled out a sheet of paper from under the counter and looked it over, nodding and talking softly to herself. "Well, it looks like I'll have some time open, so I can do it. If it's royal business, I'm sure it must be important."

"Great!" Spike exclaimed. "So... could I go up to Pinkie's to look for her necklace?"

"Sure, just don't make it messier than it already is," Mrs. Cake smiled, watching as Spike hurried up the stairs.

On the top floor, lay two doors: one was closed, and the other was open with the smell of saccharine air. With a keen knowledge of Pinkie's love of sweets, he ran through the open door and found the beige colored room covered in baking supplies, costumes and pranking devices. He waded through the mess, overturning every item to check for the elusive necklace. It took longer for him to check every part of the floor than he anticipated, then hurriedly looked under her bed, noticing something with a glint of light lying on the dusty carpet. He reached in and grabbed hold, feeling the metal in his claw before pulling it out to examine it. It was a gold

necklace with a turquoise balloon in the center, reflecting the sun's rays throughout the room.

He had one.

With the Element of Laughter in tow, he rushed down the stairs and out the door, noticing the three fillies waiting at the library with two Elements laid down on the grass. He ran as fast as his small legs would take him and joined the three, placing Pinkie's Element on the grass along with Rainbow Dash's and Fluttershy's.

"This is it? That's only half!" Spike exclaimed, worried.

"Well, I couldn't find my sister's, but Sweetie found Fluttershy's in one of her drawers upstairs," Apple Bloom stated, picking up the butterfly laden necklace.

"I couldn't find Rarity's, and she's normally so organized," Sweetie said, then looked over to Scootaloo. "Hey Scootaloo, how did you get up to Rainbow Dash's house? You can't fly."

"It's a long story, and involves a large wooden catapult," the filly laughed, looking long-fully at the red, lightning bolt shaped ruby in Rainbow's necklace. "Rainbow's house is *awesome*! There are so many Wonderbolt posters and headbands there," she explained before donning a white, cloth headband.

Spike lamented over their small haul, but tried to stay optimistic. Surely the princess doesn't need *all* the Elements he thought as the sound of stallions cutting through the afternoon air diverted his attention. In the sky, speeding down to Ponyville was Luna's royal guards, donned in black and navy armor pulling a low, aerodynamic chariot behind them. Spike quickly picked up the three necklaces and watched as the chariot landed only a few feet from them.

"Are you Spike?" one of the guards asked in a gravelly voice.

"Yes, sir," Spike said nervously, the spikes on the armor giving him the chills. The three fillies quickly hopped onto the speeder along with Spike and braced themselves for the chariot ride. "We're ready to leave,"

he said, prompting the pegasi to spread their wings and bolt towards Canterlot's castle.

Spike swallowed anxiously as they sped through the air, watching as the castle came closer as well as his meeting with the royal sisters. Ponyville and its townsfolk looked like specks as they climbed higher and higher up the mountain, leaving both Spike and Sweetie Belle frightened from the immense height. The majestic waterfalls came into clear view as they weaved through them then arched over the cliff face, landing in the royal courtyard.

The young dragon had never been so nervous in his short life. Not only had he been summoned to the castle, he had no idea what happened to Twilight Sparkle. He tentatively stepped off the chariot and faced down the large, crimson castle doors.

The frigid winds of the Drakris cut through Twilight's coat and manteau, chilling her to the bone and causing her to shudder. Snow and ice covered most of the path and cliffs as flurries pelted the mares from the sea of dark gray clouds above. It was hard for Twilight to see ahead of her, having to put her hoof up to keep the snow out from her eyes, but she knew she had to keep moving; those soldiers could still be following them. With the snow and nightfall making the visibility all but null, they followed the fresh hoof tracks of the Ventian soldiers to make their way through the mountain pass.

"Are they following us?" Applejack asked, looking over her shoulder and back down the mountain pass.

Twilight turned and peered down the path, seeing only the faint red glow of the town near the horizon. "It doesn't look like it. We should keep moving though; I don't want to take any chances."

"Applejack, please tell me you bought boots from Zipporah. I'm getting muck all over my hooves, and they're freezing," Rarity complained, shaking her hooves dejectedly each time she stepped.

"I'm mighty sorry, Rarity. We only had room for food, the cloaks and other essentials. I didn't think about boots at all," Applejack apologized, peering down at her own hooves, taking notice of the clumped crystals that encased them. "Mine ain't lookin' too good either."

As they trotted, Twilight tried to keep her hopes high but the thought of the burning town made her shudder. She kept envisioning the looks of the scared townsfolk, each recoiling as another glass broke or fire erupted. Mothers holding tightly to their children, grizzled veterans hanging their heads in shame and cowardice, and her own fears as the soldiers marched. "We should've helped them," Twilight said, perking the ears of her two companions. "Those ponies chased after *us*; those townsfolk didn't have to be involved."

"You ran just as fast as we did, Twilight," Rarity stated as she looked to Twilight. "Yes, they after us, but what were we to do? It was three ponies against an entire army, not a bunch of straggling griffins. Besides, the only reason we survived in Wheatown was because of an accident with my Element."

Twilight sighed, trying desperately to alleviate the burden of the town's fate. She hadn't slept since she woke up on Applejack's back, and her exhaustion wore her to the point where it pained her to walk. "I mean, I just...." she trailed off, hanging her head as she looked down at the hoof marks ahead.

Rarity opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. In a flash, she realized her error and quickly backpedaled. "I'm sorry. I didn't think we would have to do that either," the white unicorn finally said, leaving the three to trudge along in silence.

The trail winded around the mountain side and grew rockier and slicker as they traveled, making them trot tentatively as the jagged mountains of the Drakiris loomed overhead. The snowfall softened into a flurry as time wore on, but the tracks ahead began to disappear into the fresh accumulation. They had been traveling for several hours, the sky clearing as the mountains revealed themselves. Even with the cloaks, Twilight's body shivered relentlessly and her fur bristled as her breath formed increasingly dense wisps. With Equestria and the Outlands baking in the summer sun, neither of the ponies were prepared for the cold, let

alone the mountain's blizzards. The Drakiris extended along the Ventian border, creating virtually a naturally walled country that gave them no alternative ways of entering the country. Jagged rises and cliffs towered over the ponies, and far ahead the trail widened and dipped into a small basin before reaching a large expanse surrounded by evergreen forests.

"What do y'all think Mistral City is like?" Applejack asked, breaking the hallowing silence.

"From the sound of it it does not seem clean at least," Rarity answered. "Do you remember what the princess called it? The 'city of the damned'? I, for one, would never enter such a dreadfully sounding place on my own accord."

"I don't know, Rarity. Luna said that Mistral is where 'space and time converge', meaning there could be an infinite amount of cultures and societies that have traveled from far beyond Equestria merging into one city!" Twilight clamoured, picturing Mistral's visage. A massive city, filled to the brim with ponies, griffins, dragons, and other various creatures sharing ideas and knowledge from lands long passed and far in the future. It warped her mind when she attempted to think of how it would be possible, but she continued with a giddy smile. The streets were lined with shops and homes, each decorated with its county's own fixtures. It was a truly a sight the scholar wished to see, but as reality quickly sunk in, the smile on Twilight's face was wiped clean. Knowledge of the "demons" and the burned town seeped its way to the forefront of her thoughts. "I... I'm sure it's lovely."

"If you say so," Applejack exclaimed, shoving her hat into her bag to keep it from flying away in the wind.

"Hey! You said there was no room for boots in the bags!" Rarity protested, huffing as she checked the contents of her saddlebags.

"I needed room for my hat, and boots wouldn't have fit in here anyhow. Also, I didn't feel like wearing them throughout the plains back there," Applejack explained, watching Rarity roll her eyes at the farmer.

"What good that did, my legs are still freezing. What part of 'eternal winter' did you miss when Twilight explained it?" Rarity huffed.

“Wait, what’s over there?” Applejack asked, pointing at a jutting chunk of metal in the distance. It was buried halfway in snow, allowing only a curved, reflective segment to be seen.

“Hey, you can’t just-”

“Is that... armor?” Twilight wondered, cutting off Rarity. She rushed ahead, curious as to the nature of the metal. It was a curved, shined armor piece, dented and splashed with splotches of blood that slowly oozed down as Twilight held it upright. Looking around, other stained armor pieces surrounded it, leaving the purple unicorn sick with unease. They bore the same red and gold color scheme as the Ventian troops, giving Twilight the feeling that these wounds were fresh. “This is bad... What happened here?” she asked, looking at her friends with a worried gaze.

“What is it, Twilight?” Rarity asked, slowly approaching the grizzly scene.

“Look at this.” Twilight lifted the largest piece out from the drift and hovered it in front of her friends, showcasing the golden tint of the shoulder guard. “The colors are the same as those soldiers we fought, and this blood is fresh.”

Rarity and Applejack both recoiled back from the sight, their faces contorting in disgust as a drop of blood dripped into the white snow. “What could’ve done this?” Applejack asked, peeking around and taking notice of the shredded pieces that still lay on the road.

“I don’t know, and I don’t like it. Maybe it was-” Twilight stopped herself, pondering the ridiculousness of her statement. “No, there’s no way a griffin could do something like that to a fully armored soldier... could they?”

“What are we going to do? We’re completely out in the open here,” Applejack stated, looking around at the wide open sky and straight, but uneven path.

Twilight looked around, trying desperately to find anyway progress without drawing any attention. She had yet to see another sign of life

except her and her friends, but the bloody armor made her start to worry. The cliffs were bare and straight, leaving no crevices for them to hide behind. Up ahead lay nothing but flat, open land. Snow drifts and howling winds made it hard for anything to see, which put her mind a little at ease.

"They have to be somewhere, find them!" Twilight heard faintly coming from behind her, snapping her to attention. Panicked, she turned to see an orange glow wrapping around the jagged pass walls. Applejack and Rarity turned and watched as the light grew larger and brighter as it came closer.

"Run!" Twilight yelled as the three bolted down the path, bounding over jagged rocks and pools of ice. From the sky, several pegasus ponies dove and swooped past the three, causing them to stagger and slow their frantic pace. A small orange glow bounced off the snow below the three, shadows crawling out in front of them as the army approached.

With the glow of Twilight's horn, the air around the mountain swirled and sheared the snow off the cliffs, whipping it at the poised guard. Applejack ran ahead and intercepted a diving pegasus guard, knocking it down with a single hoof. It rolled in down the path, hitting the cliff side and passing out. Rarity quickly joined her, releasing sewing needles into the air and striking their wings with deadly accuracy. After escaping the wind tunnel, two guards rushed down and slashed their swords at Twilight, making her jump back and forced them away with white pulses of energy.

As more pegasi descended, the three mares huddled together poised to strike. Out from the ranks, a lone, heavily armored stallion appeared, raising his hoof. The soldiers stopped their approach, backing away from the three as he came closer. He stood covered head to hoof in plate armor with red and gold sashes hanging off his side. A gold, dragon insignia lay plastered on his chest, surrounded by red flames.

"You're cornered; you have nowhere to run," he said in a cold voice. Slowly, he made his way down the path, drawing a blade from its scabbard with his mouth and glared.

"What do you want? We haven't done anything to you!" Twilight yelled, darting her eyes between the soldiers to watch their movements.

“Lord Rhaegar has sent us to take care of the Equestrian threat, meaning you three. You can either come quietly and alive, or attack us and we shall kill you and bring the lord your corpses instead. Your choice.”

“How do you know we’re Equestrians?” Applejack yelled, nostrils flaring. “We’re just passin’ through.”

The stallion chuckled, raising his hoof once more. “I don’t need to know, we’re only looking for three mares. Whether or not you’re the Equestrians doesn’t concern us as long as we get paid. You’re coming with us either way.” The surrounding soldiers grabbed their weapons and bolted towards the three. Twilight backed into her friends, her horn glowing brightly as Rarity stripped the needles from the pegasi’s wings and pointed them at the opposing force. Their leader charged ahead, quickly closing the gap between them with sword in mouth. With a spell in mind, Twilight charged her attack before hearing a faint screech above her.

Before she could look up, a tawny griffin dove and slammed into the stallion, dragging it through the snow and rocks and tearing through him with its claws. As the soldiers ceased their approach, more griffins fell from the sky and mercilessly struck them, causing wails of pain to echo throughout the pass. Without hesitation, Twilight pushed her two friends up the path, running as the soldiers tried fighting off the assault. Two pegasi fought a single griffin above them, whizzing past it and striking with incredible speed. After several attacks, the griffin grabbed one of the ponies and threw it to the ground, directly in front of the frantic mares. The pegasus’ wings and several legs were shattered, leaving it to cry out as Twilight and her friends barreled passed it.

The open field and pinewood forest lay out in front of the mares as they continued down the pass. Sound of the griffins’ attacks fell quieter, leaving Twilight relieved. She looked back, watching the griffins continue their assault on the soldiers, half-way thanking them for getting them out of the Ventians’ cross hairs. The three slowed to a trot as they entered the entrance to the basin, panting and nervously laughing from their narrow escape. Twilight slipped her canteen out from her bag and took a drink, smiling as the water sloshed around in her mouth. She passed it to the others, giving them time to rest before they made their way through the forest.

“Where did they come from!?” Rarity asked, watching the griffins in the distance.

“Don’t you remember, those griffins we fought over in Wheatown come from here. I’m just shocked they didn’t attack us-” Twilight suddenly stopped from the sight of something fast approaching in the distance. Several other silhouettes joined it, making Twilight step back and point at the figures. “Wh- what are those?”

“I don’t know, but run!” Applejack yelled, throwing the canteen into her bag as they sprinted into the field, rushing for the forest’s edge. A loud, harrowing screech came up behind Twilight, causing her to turn her head. Her eyes widened as a griffin soared towards her, staring her down with its ice blue eyes. It flew over Applejack and Rarity, extending its claw and grasping her neck, slamming her into the frozen tundra. She winced and screamed as her side scraped across the ground, and gasped for air as the griffin’s claw pushed at her neck. Weakly, she turned her head up, watching the griffin’s large, pewter wings fold back onto its body. She struggled and flailed her body, trying to break free, causing the griffin to force her neck further into the snow, nearly causing her to black out. Several griffins landed beside Applejack and Rarity, restraining them and forcing them into the ground.

The blue eyed griffin opened its beak, expelling various incomprehensible chirps and grunts, staring at the purple unicorn’s eyes. As Twilight struggled further, the griffin coughed, twitched its ear, then looked over to her two friends. “I’m sorry about that, I forget I have use the Equine tongue when speaking to horses.”

“Y-you can talk?” Twilight asked, her curiosity overriding her survival instinct for a split second.

“Of course I can. Just because my tribe and I live in the mountains doesn’t mean we’re degenerates. Learn some respect,” it said in a gruff voice before pushing harder into Twilight’s throat.

“W-What do you want from us?” Twilight squeaked

“We are after the same thing those sellswords were after, three Equestrian mares who are headed for Mistral City,”

“Sellswords? They were only mercenaries...” Twilight pondered, wincing from the claw’s pressure. “Why do you think we’re Equestrians? We’re just explorers making our way to Mistral City.”

“Oh, really?” the griffin asked, lifting the manteau off Twilight’s flank, revealing her cutie mark. “What do you call that then?”

“Hey, leave her alone!” Applejack yelled, prompting the griffins to tighten their grip.

“You can’t expose my flank like that!” Twilight screamed. “Stop it!”

“Silence!” the pewter-winged griffin snapped. “You are in no position to make such demands.” He turned his head back down to Twilight, looking over her body. “So, you are Equestrian... and that’s the demon’s brand... Those scouts from Wheatown were right.”

“Scouts... those griffins that attacked us!?” Twilight snapped, glaring at her attacker. “They were scouts for you? We *saved* those griffins when those Wheatown locals were about to kill them. You should be thanking us!”

“Oh yes, I heard about this. I honestly never believed that the demons’ heirs would be so naive.”

“What was that?” Applejack yelled.

“If you would’ve killed my scouts like ponies should then I never would have found you. They told me everything: your demon’s brands, colors, voices, what bags you possessed. It’s natural selection; ponies kill and fight off griffins, and griffins eat ponies.”

“Let go!” Rarity called out, trashing with her horn glowing a light blue hue. Before she could cast a spell, the griffin she held pushed the side of her face into the snow, causing her to yelp out in pain.

“Don’t try any magic, unicorns. We know how it works; trying to bluff us with your hooves unable to move was pointless and moronic.” He

hoisted up Twilight by the neck, letting her body flail just off the ground. "We're leaving."

"Where are you taking us!? What do you want!?" Twilight yelled, tears streaming down her face.

"It's simple. We're taking you to the bastard Rhaegar to bargain for a piece of our homeland back. We will then take you three and handsomely reward you for your assistance," the griffin spoke, letting another griffin tie up Twilight's front and back hooves together before placing her on the griffin's back. She knew whatever "reward" those griffins had planned wasn't good, and didn't want to know what that may be. Rarity was treated much the same, violently thrashing as they bound her. Applejack was simply lifted and pushed, staggering into the middle of the two pony-carrying griffins, but given the opportunity to walk. She dusted herself off and slunk quietly in the middle, looking over her two friends as the griffins began marching into the field.

"What are we going to do?" Twilight whispered, looking over to make sure the griffin didn't react. "I-I'm scared."

"Try talkin' to him. Rarity and I'll think of somethin' while you distract 'em," Applejack suggested, then turned her attention to Rarity. Twilight had never spoke to a griffin on her own terms before, and wished that it wasn't in this kind of environment. Nervously, she swallowed the lump in her throat and slowly turned to the massive griffin.

"Uh, hey. I'm just curious... uh, what's your name?" She asked, plastering a fake smile across her face.

"Why?" the stern griffin asked, turning his to Twilight and staring her in the eyes. The way he looked at her made her petrified, as if she were reliving the nightmare from the other night.

"If you're going to exploit me and my friends, at least have the decency to give us your name," Twilight stated, trying to match his authoritative tone.

"It's Blackwing. Sigil Astrias Blackwing. I'm guessing the next thing you're going to ask is about my griffins, is it not?"

“Uh... no. Why us? We don't pose any threat to anypony... or anything. We're just trying to bring our friend home, that's all.”

“While your efforts may be valiant, I will not let a horse's ambition trump my own. I have not braved this winter all throughout my life for a pony to-”

“Hey, you. My rope is too tight, I'm getting rope burn on my delicate pony-peddy!” Rarity complained, kicking the griffin on the side. “Is this any way to treat a lady? Not where I come from you don't- My bag fell off and is lying in the snow and you don't even have the decency to pick it up for me? How dare you!” Twilight watched this spectacle as several other griffins come to the courier's aide, trying to calm the crazed Rarity. With the griffins focus on Rarity, Twilight rushed to think of an escape plan, silently thanking Rarity for the diversion.

“Stop trashing! You're making this worse!” a brown griffin yelled, hitting Rarity square on the cheek.

“If you complain one more time, we'll rip your throat out and bring the Ventians your corpse instead!” another griffin screamed, being wary of Rarity's thrashing horn.

As Blackwing moved to join the to settle things himself, Twilight noticed that the griffins' attentions lay fully on the wailing unicorn. *I hope this works*, Twilight thought, channeling magic to her horn. Wind from the west swept through the field, magically picking up intensity. The griffins began to shiver and look towards the fierce gusts, being pushed back as Applejack dropped down into the snow. Twilight slipped off the griffins back and onto the snow, face first. She lifted her head and spat out some snow

“What's going on?” Blackwing hollered, unaware that Twilight had slid off his back. “Why is there a draft coming off the mountain this far down?”

Twilight focused all she could into the windstorm, lifting packed snow from the ground and whipping it at the bewildered pack. Amidst the confusion, Rarity was bucked off the griffin's back, landing face first into the snow. With a final surge, the wind blasted and batted away the tall-standing griffins, leaving Twilight able to see Applejack and Rarity without

obstruction. The fierce glow of Twilight's horn stopped, her mind switching to another spell and beginning to charge.

Blackwing shielded his eyes with his talon, watching as Twilight's horn began to glow white. Ducking his head, he pushed against the barreling winds, folding his ears down to reduce the drag. "Stop!" he yelled, watching as the three Equestrians disappeared in a blinding white flash, leaving the dying wind to take their places.

Twilight hit the ground with a thud, her mouth filled with snow and frozen dirt. She spat it out, running her hoof on her tongue to get the residue off as she squirmed to free herself of her bindings. Out in the distance, she heard the faint cry of squawking griffins as the sound drowned by the wind rustling through the forest. She looked around, seeing Rarity and Applejack still shaking off their dizziness. The trees that surrounded the mares were massive, with lush green pine needles obscuring their view through the trees. It looked as though they were far in, completely blocked in by the mass of trees. Twilight felt safer around a mass of trees than in the open for the griffins to follow.

"Ow, my head," Rarity said, rubbing her head with her still bound hooves. "Where are we?"

"I don't know, but as long as we're away from those monsters, I'm fine," Twilight stated, panting and watching her breath evaporate into the air. Applejack firmly planted her hooves and checked to see if her saddlebags were still intact. "Applejack, hurry and untie us. I don't know how far away we are from the griffins, but I'm too tired to do magic right now."

"You got it!" Applejack said before tearing through Rarity's bindings with her teeth, ripping them off with relative ease. The long day and night seemed to not faze the farmer as she quickly went to Twilight's aid, tearing through the leg bindings. Twilight shook her hooves, trying to ignore the rope burn on her hooves as she stood. A large bruise aggravated her side, as she still felt the pressure of Blackwing's talon pushing on her neck.

"I'm so glad you picked up on that diversion, Twilight. Rarity and I were hopin' you'd come up with somethin'," Applejack complimented, helping Rarity up to her hooves.

"Y-yeah, it was nothing..." Twilight said, trailing off as she looked at Rarity's condition. Her face was badly bruised as well as her side was completely red. Applejack looked completely fine, let alone a small amount of snow and dirt on her belly. With a step, Twilight forced herself to move and stumbled over herself, landing face first again into the snow. Applejack ran over and lifted her up to her hooves before reassuringly patting her on the back.

"You alright?" Applejack asked, watching Twilight hobble and wince as her buises flared. "We can stop here for a while if we have to."

"No, we have to keep moving... Get.. away..." the purple unicorn mumbled before falling again, her body refusing to move from exhaustion. She lay there, watching the snow fall down from the evergreens as it began to lull her to sleep.

"Twilight?" Applejack asked, leaning down to look Twilight in her tired eyes. "You don't look good at all. Come on, we need to find somewhere warm to rest."

"I... can't, I just..." Tears welled up in the unicorn's eyes once more as her voice cracked. "I never should've brought you two along."

"What are you talking about?" Rarity asked. "I thought you were over this when we helped you defeat Nightmare Moon!"

"It's just... Fluttershy's disappearance is my fault, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie are gone as well. We were nearly killed by griffins and some lord is after us now... I shouldn't have made you risk your lives to help fix my mistakes..." Twilight trailed off, looking dejectedly at the ground.

"Fluttershy is our friend as well. We'll do anythin' to help get her back home, Sugar Cube. Who knows what would've happened to you if you came out here on your own," Applejack protested, hoisting Twilight back up to her hooves. "Those griffins could be anywhere by now, we gotta keep movin' like you said."

“Right,” Twilight agreed, wiping her eyes and forcing herself to move to keep pace with her friends.

As they walked through the dull, snow covered evergreens, Twilight looked around, noticing a lack of a direction marker; the brush was so dense that she nor her friends could see outside of the forest. Each way she looked appeared exactly the same: trees blanketed by snow surrounded by a carpet of white. Wary, she caught up to friends, stopping them from advancing. “Do you know what direction we’re going in? Are you sure this is north?”

“I reckon it is, but I’m not too sure,” Applejack said, scratching her head.

“Right now, as long as we stay out of sight of those griffins I’ll be fine. We’ll just poke our heads through the trees to make sure they aren’t there when we find a way out,” Rarity suggested, continuing to hobble around the trees.

“Fine, as long as we find somewhere warm to stay,” the purple unicorn yawned, once again following behind and wrapping her scarf around her neck. “If we stay out here much longer, we could catch hypothermia. I need sleep, so let’s find somewhere quickly.”

As the three mares walked, the sky above began to clear, revealing the rising sun. The light burrowed through the forest, illuminating their path ahead and drowned out Twilight’s anxiety. The days prior had been a roller coaster of events, many tragic and highly disturbing, but the scholar felt a strange sense of calm. She didn’t know what it was, but even when she was pinned to the ground by Blackwing, she and her friends remained highly calm and collective. She didn’t know if her drive to bring back Fluttershy pushed back her distress, but she took anything she could get. With a small, curious smile on her face, she took a sip of her canteen before Rarity stopped her in her tracks.

“Girls, look up ahead.” Rarity pointed through the trees, noticing a small clearing ahead with small objects that were obscured by the dense brush. “What do you think it is; a town or a camp?”

"I don't know, but we're going. As long as there isn't something that wants to eat us or exploit us for personal gain, I'm all for it," Twilight said, continuing slowly and wary as the clearing grew closer. The trees ahead thinned out until the three made their way into the expansive grounds. "It's... it's..."

"Ruined," Applejack interrupted, taking notice of the snow covered ruins. Half-broken down wooden structures littered the clearing, most of their materials either caved into itself or broke off and scattered around its base. Remnants of wooden carts and what looked to be old merchants' booths were buried by snow and pine needles. Twilight walked in further, sighing in disappointment. "Ah, horse apples. I thought this could'a been somethin'."

"Hold on," Twilight said before walking up to a ruined shack. She climbed over one of the breaks in the wall, digging through the snow and debris. After throwing out half the pile into the field, lying on the pile was a leather-bound book. With a twinkle in her eye, she hastily threw the remainder of the lumber off the book and lifted it in the air, showing her friends her find. Eager to open the text, she climbed out of the house and opened the book, allowing Applejack and Rarity to take a look.

"What's that?" Applejack asked, trotting out the back to see the book's cover.

"It's a book of some kind, I've never seen one like it before," Twilight said before flipping through the parchment pages. The ink and parchment were both dry as a bone, somewhat confirming Zipporah's claim of an eternal winter... at least one that never goes above freezing temperatures. The writing was readable, but the grammar, structure and dialect made it hard for her to understand. It appeared to Twilight to be some kind of novel

.

"What does it say?" Rarity asked, struggling to read the archaic text.

"It's a story... about something. I'm not sure," Twilight explained before shutting the book closed. "The diction is weird; I can't make any sense of this. Maybe if we were somewhere warmer I could concentrate."

“That’d be great once we get outta here,” Applejack yelled from the middle of the town, motioning them over to her. Twilight shoved the book into her bag and ran over, watching Applejack put her hat back on her head. “How long until we set up camp? We can’t keep goin’ like this.”

“Later, when we find someplace warm,” Twilight explained, scanning the ruins again. The town looked the same all around with not a single building still standing. “What happened to this place? It’s fairly old from the looks of it.” She jumped inside another building, taking notice of standing wooden shelves filled with filled flasks. Taking a flask, she popped the cork and took a whiff, immediately pulling herself away. It was strong and pungent, burning Twilight’s nose. With her eyes tightly shut from the pain, she motioned Applejack over and gave her the flask. “Do you have any idea what this is?”

With a sniff, Applejack swished the flask around before taking a sip, her face contorting from the taste. She swallowed the foul liquid before violently shaking. “Yep, that’s whiskey alright. Old stuff too, never tasted whiskey so strong before.”

“Liquor? That’s it?” Twilight sighed, taking her leave from the building. “Let’s go, there’s nothing here.”

“Hey, over here!” Rarity yelled from through the trees, peeking her head out from the brush. “There’s a way out of the forest over here, and we were going north the whole time!” Twilight and Applejack sprinted towards Rarity, watching her run through the trees ahead of them. Ahead, Twilight could see the faint blue sky near the horizon as the trees thinned into a large expanse; the large, empty expanse.

“Where are all the towns?” Twilight wondered, quickly turning her head to search. The mountains in the north were now too far away to be seen, leaving only the emptiness of the snow’s white blanket. Up to the horizon, nothing but trees rose above the ground. No town lay in sight, nor even a simple settlement. She sighed and turned her head right, seeing a large spindle jutting up into some of the remaining clouds. With her eyes transfixed, she bolted towards the tower, barreling through the heavier snow as Rarity and Applejack followed.

The path ahead turned into a steep incline, but Twilight wasn't fazed. A chance that somewhere habitable was just ahead made her ignore her exhaustion. As she trudged, the hill became steeper before suddenly dropping off like a cliff. At the apex, Twilight stopped and gazed over the horizon, her eyes widening from the sight. "I sent us farther than I thought."

A large ocean brushed up against the peninsula, expanding past the horizon. On land, lay an enormous walled city, hazed in smoke and its entrance blocked by massive iron gates. An uncountable amount of buildings covered the inside the walls, surrounding the sky-high tower the made its home in the center of the city. Above the buildings in its center lay a spread of raised land with a mass of buildings standing over sections of the city. One small, hair-size path snaked its way to the gates as the crumbling ruins of other towns lay beside it, rejected and dwarfed simply by the outer walls.

"As that it?" Rarity asked, looking over at Twilight.

"The most northern city in the country," Twilight said, re-telling Luna's directions. "Mistral City."

"Damn it!" Blackwing shouted as he slammed his claw into the snow. The winds from the Equestrian's spell died down, leaving the griffins alone in the wasteland. "I can't believe that horse distracted me. We had them!"

"We have prepared the scouting teams to find them, Sigil," The pewter griffin said, politely bowing his head. "We are sorry for our folly, we'll make sure it never happens again."

"Wait," Blackwing commanded, putting his claw to his beak in thought. "Maybe we can play this to our advantage still."

"How so, sir?"

"Take the scouting team back to the pass and carry the mercenary corpses back up to the Apex and make sure the sick and fledgling make use of them as we prepare to leave. I want the pass completely clear to get rid of any evidence of our involvement. If we leave in a small group to

Mistral in a day, I can play this off like we never encountered the demons, pushing all the blame to Rhaegar.”

“Yes, Sigil!” the scouting leader said, taking the rest of the griffins south to the pass and leaving Blackwing to stew amidst his thoughts.

How did she perform magic without a drawing a rune first? If she can perform powerful magic like that on a whim, that purple mare could be useful still. Blackwing thought, standing up and spreading his wings. *Rhaegar’s men have no chance against that sort of magic. Getting him to side with me will be only a matter of time.* He took off and headed back to the Drakiris as a cloud of snow rose from the still earth. *Mistral City will implode with the Equestrians present.* A small smile crept its way across the sigil’s beak as the Apex came into view, littered by griffins gathering supplies for their hunt. *This should be fun to watch.*

Chapter 13

Variance

The midday sun shone upon the three mares as they made their way up the quiet pathway. The trail wound around a quiet sea as a large path lay above them, supported by large concrete beams in the water. Only a few birds flew overhead, leaving the trail feeling desolate. Fluttershy tried her best to keep the armored stallion out of her thoughts, but the silence between her and her friends made it difficult. She looked down to the ground in nervous ticks, wondering what to do. Rainbow trotted ahead with her head confidently forward while Pinkie trudged alongside Fluttershy.

“What makes that officer so sure that those ponies will want to talk to us about this?” Rainbow Dash asked, breaking Fluttershy out of her nervous fit. “Their whole city was just burned down, and even we haven’t talked for the past few hours.”

“Maybe they won’t,” Fluttershy spoke up. A siren blared ahead of them as another vehicle barreled past them on the road above towards the once standing Slateport City. “We should probably focus on staying away from that stallion until Twilight brings us home.”

“I guess,” Rainbow said dejectedly as the three trotted around the final bend.

The sight of buildings rose over the horizon as the trail straightened, giving Fluttershy a straight line of sight to Mauville City. Not another pony nor Pokémon was on the road, worrying her that the refugees had already arrived and dispersed throughout the city. Fluttershy dug through her bag, searching for any food she had left, but ended up empty hoofed. She sighed, placing the bag away before continuing up the road.

Before they could clearly see the city, Fluttershy’s Pokédex began to beep, alerting the three and wiping the bored expressions off their faces.

“Quick, open it!” Pinkie hollered. “I wonder what the next gym leader will be like...”

“Didn’t we skip the second gym?” Fluttershy asked, confused as she pulled out the metallic noise maker. “I know that the gym in that town was boarded up, but I thought we needed the second gym badge to advance.”

“You were called into the fifth gym right away, remember? I don’t think this thing is following any real pattern here,” Rainbow stated.

Without further interruptions, Fluttershy opened the Pokédex and listened to the pre-recorded message that blared from the device. Once again, the message glitched when saying her name, but continued as normal. With a beep, the message ended and the turquoise screen faded to black. “9:00 pm tomorrow.”

“Great, that gives us time to train and rest up,” Rainbow said, increasing her speed down the path.

“Do you think maybe we should talk to Stephanie before we do anything? That stallion is probably still looking for me and I don’t want to make a scene without knowing how to approach this,” Fluttershy asked in a cautious tone.

“I don’t see why not,” Pinkie stated. “Ooo, maybe he... er, she knows about the next gym. Also where to find someplace to eat, I’m starving.”

“Hopefully, I won’t interrupt anything.”

“Just call him so we can focus on the gym fight sooner,” Rainbow said, annoyed.

Fluttershy stopped and lifted her forehoof, cycling through several screens before finding the phone application. She clicked a button on the device’s side as Stephanie’s name showed on screen. The screen went dark, then brought up a strange rotating circle as a long tone ran through the speakers. Before long, Stephanie’s face appeared on the screen. It looked like she was in a library with tall shelves of books lining the walls.

“Hello, who is this?” Stephanie asked before looking at Fluttershy. “Oh, it’s you, Fluttershy. How are you doing- Wait, what happened to you? You don’t look too well.”

“Uh, I’m fine,” Fluttershy responded, puzzled as to how she could see the Twilight analogue through the PokéNav. “About... this,” she waved her hoof around her face, showcasing her drooping eye-lids, “I need to talk you you about it.”

“Shoot. I’m sure I can help with what’s going on, I mean I have been a female for the past 28 years or so so I know how that kind of stuff works.”

Flush, Fluttershy stammered then spoke up, “No, not about... that... but about what happened to me and my friends.”

“Ah, that makes more sense. Was the gym that rough over in Dewford? I didn’t think Brawly had it in him. Oh, did you hear the news this morning? There was a fire over in Slateport. You might want to be careful when you head over there.” Stephanie began taking books off the shelves and flipping through them as she spoke.

“We... already went to Slateport. That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“You did? What happened?” She asked, looking up to the screen again.

“It’s a long story, but there was a stallion in weird blue armor that burnt the city down. He was looking for me, and said he knew everything about the session. I don’t know what to do...”

“Hmm...” Stephanie picked up a blue bound book and opened it, scanning her hoof over the words as she read. She reminded Fluttershy of Twilight so much; it was hard for her to separate the two as long as she didn’t pay attention to how she spoke. “That’s strange; there are a bunch of scribbles in this book, and they look like my handwriting... er, hoofwriting. Yeah, I think that’s a good replacement.”

“What does it say?” Fluttershy asked curiously.

“Well, it says something about a spark, a blueprint, a callen and sessions. It doesn’t seem to go farther than their definitions though.”

“That’s what he talked to me about! He said I was the blueprint, he was the callen, and my friends were sparks. I have no idea what he was talking about though.”

“Maybe this will help. It says that the blueprint is the one who first enters here while the sparks occur when another from their point of origin enters the same session. It must be a glitch in the system, so maybe that’s why everything is acting so weirdly.”

“What’s the callen?”

“Well, it doesn’t really say. I’m not sure how accurate these definitions are since there are no places to cross-reference them. Judging by what I know about languages, ‘callen’ seems to be an old version of the word ‘called’, so maybe a chosen person or pony is what he was talking about. These definitions had to have been written during other sessions when sparks occurred, but I still need more information. I’ll have to put in more research and get back to you on it.”

“Do you by any chance know about the stallion?”

“Who, the one in the armor?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any description of him other than ‘he was a stallion’?”

“Oh, I do.” Fluttershy dug through her bag and pulled out the shrapnel that broke off the stallion’s armor then held it in front of the camera. In the sunlight the armor shone with a brilliant azure hue. “This broke off his armor when he tried to touch me.”

There was a slight pause as the scholar thought with one eyebrow raised. “It came off when he touched you? Interesting. To be honest, I really don’t know much about armor, but I do know someone at Mauville University who should know about this piece. His name is Dr. Maxwell; he’s a professor in archaeology and ancient cultures. You should go talk to him about it.”

“Thank you,” Fluttershy said with a slight smile. “I’ll call you again if anything happens.”

“I’ll talk to you then.” The screen went black as Stephanie hung up the phone.

Fluttershy placed her hoof on the ground and looked over to her two friends. Pinkie began to hop down the road, leaving Fluttershy and Rainbow to catch up with the bouncing pony.

“Why didn’t you ask him about the gym? Or what to do about the stallion?” Rainbow demanded, causing Fluttershy to lower her head in shame.

“I... I don’t know. I don’t want to call him again so soon... it would probably be rude.”

“That’s fine, I’m sure we can figure out what to do ourselves!” Pinkie chimed in, “It can’t be that hard to keep a low profile in a city of thousands of ponies.”

“How do you know there are thousands?”

“Look at the buildings, silly. No city with this many tall buildings has a small amount of ponies in it.”

“I guess,” Fluttershy stated as Mauville City came into full view. Buildings and ponies were strewn across the city as far as the eye could see and buildings towered over any that Fluttershy had ever seen. Various assortments of Pokémon followed traveling ponies as they went down the sidewalks, some stopping at various stands and buildings. The three made left the path and kept going straight, losing themselves in the sea of concrete and ponies that littered the walkways. Fluttershy lightly coughed as particles of dust and smog entered her windpipe.

“This place is huge!” Rainbow said excitedly. “Wait, how are we going to find those ponies from Slateport?”

“Let’s ask around,” Pinkie suggested, hopping over to a group of suited ponies. Fluttershy couldn’t help feeling that something was wrong

with the city. She couldn't place her hoof as to why, maybe May's memories were permeating her thoughts and the city was somehow different than what the memory suggested, but trying to focus on that when it felt like everypony was staring at her made her drop that particular train of thought.

As Pinkie continued to pester the business ponies, they looked at her and their noses scrunched as a grimaced look washed over their faces. "Hey, have you seen anypony from Slateport around here?"

"Have you bathed lately? I can smell you from here!" one of the ponies stated, then proceeded to escape their rancid question up until they turned at an intersection just up ahead.

"Huh, well that's not very nice," Pinkie said, putting her hoof up to her chin in thought.

"To be fair, we haven't exactly taken care of ourselves since we got here," Rainbow said, smelling her clothes and forcing her head away as she took a sniff. "Yeah, my jacket smells fishy."

"Tonight we should clean our stuff at the Pokémon Center. Maybe they have soap or something to put on this," Fluttershy suggested, taking Alerce and her bandanna off her head. The bandanna was still wet from the Gyarados' conjured storm, making Fluttershy question the state of the rest of her attire. She had never had to wash any clothing since Rarity always cleaned her dresses after parties. "We should keep looking."

With one unsuccessful questioning, the mares kept up their pace, making sure to keep their distance as they asked other ponies. As the three searched, they merged into a sea of bodies, each going every which way. No pony wished to speak to them they went further into Mauville City.

"Excuse me, please..." Fluttershy pleaded to the passerbys. "It will only take a second of your time." No pony paid the yellow pegasus any attention.

"This isn't getting us anywhere,' Rainbow exclaimed. "We should just focus on the gym fight and improving our Pokémon so we can smash that stallion's armored face in the next time he shows up."

"I still want to find out what happened. We really should try to find out more about what we're dealing with."

"Fine," Rainbow protested, continuing her search. At the corner of an intersection Rainbow spotted a young mare, standing with bags under her eyes. Her eyes darted back and forth before she bolted down the road, toppling over several ponies in the process. "Let's ask her."

"Okie dokie, Dashie!" Pinkie said as she burst from the sidewalk out and ran across the street with the mare in sight.

"A-are you sure?" Fluttershy asked, noticing both Rainbow and Pinkie were already gone. "Wait for me!" Fluttershy yelled as she followed behind Pinkie, watching as the frazzled mare sped down the road. The frantic mare looked back for a split second before turning down an alleyway. Fluttershy watched as her friends turned down the alley, following close behind as they kept their eyes out for their target.

The alley was dark, covered with grime and discarded trash. Fluttershy tentatively trotted down the alley, hearing a soft wail in the distance. As they went further down, they spotted the mare blocked by a concrete wall. She shrunk down and shook as they approached, whimpering as the three halted. Fluttershy didn't want to get closer, seeing as the pony looked stressed enough without her and her friends bearing down on her.

"S-stay back, please," the mare pleaded, shielding her eyes with her hoof as her voice cracked.

"We aren't here to hurt you, we were just curious about what you were doing," Pinkie explained with a warm smile.

"Why? Why me?"

"We're looking for somepony, anypony from Slateport that could help us," Fluttershy said, slowly resuming her approach.

"I-I'm from Slateport. What do you want?"

“I’m sorry for bringing this up, but do you know anything about that armored stallion?” Fluttershy inched closer, trying to break the cold tension surrounding them.

“Not really... why do you want to know?” The mare’s eyes dried up as she spoke, her voice ceasing to crack as well.

“I... can’t really say. Please, I’d just like to know.”

“All I remember is my husband running into the house and saying we need to leave. I grabbed all the supplies I could and my foals and ran out of the house. All I remember after that is watching a Gyarados start torching everything in sight.” She began sobbing, making Fluttershy take a step back. “My husband said he told them that he’ll kill anypony that stayed in Slateport. Did he say ‘anypony’? I think he said ‘anyone’... I guess I’m still recovering from it.” She lightly chuckled. “I must’ve embarrassed myself by running like that, huh?” The mare sniffed as she looked up at the Equestrians.

“You don’t know anything either...” Fluttershy said disappointed. “Well, do you know anything about the gym here?”

“Are you Pokémon Trainers?” The mare’s demeanor seemed to change as she wiped the tears from her eyes. She looked more positive than before. “When’s your match?”

“Uh, 9:00 tomorrow,” Fluttershy said, relieved that the conversation had lost its awkward air.

“Wow, so you’re in a prime time slot! Lucky. I’ll make sure to watch it when it comes on.”

Fluttershy looked at the white mare puzzled. “Watch? Are there stands like in Petalburg’s gym?”

“You don’t know about this? The matches are televised for ponies to watch at home. 7:00 and 9:00 at night are the prime time slots which bring in larger crowds. I can’t afford a ticket in anyway.”

"T-t-televised?" Fluttershy stuttered, her body shaking with nervousness. "W-what kind of Pokémon do they use?"

"I think it's electric type. She might have changed it lately though, she doesn't keep with one team for long."

"Thanks," Fluttershy said as the mare stood up and brushed herself off as she wiped the stream of tears from her eyes. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Sorry for worrying you, I need to go. My husband is waiting for me," the mare said, squeezing past the three Equestrians and trotted down the alleyway as if nothing happened. Fluttershy stood perplexed, wondering if any other interaction with one from Slateport would have been so odd.

"Now that we have that, let's go get some training in," Rainbow suggested, now hovering slightly off the ground. "You have a gym fight to win, and you can't look weak in front of all those ponies."

"Right..." Fluttershy groaned, still shivering as they left the alley and joined the remainder of the moving crowd. They were sandwiched between a stallion in a business suit, walking with a large grass snake slithering beside him and a kid in a baseball cap with a rat placed firmly on his head much like Alerce. The sight of the serpent made the yellow pegasus wary, causing her to dart her eyes to the other side of the street to avoid it all together. As much as she was thrilled about meeting new animals, the reality of the night before was too fresh in her mind. "Don't you think we should check the university for that professor first? I mean I know that I have a gym fight coming up, but I would really feel more comfortable if we knew about that stallion first."

"Fluttershy, we're disgusting at the moment," Rainbow stated bluntly. "We should train now while our clothes and fur reek, then wash up in the Pokémon Center tonight and speak with him tomorrow." Pinkie and Fluttershy nodded in agreement, turning onto the street that led them back to the route they entered the city from.

The trail that led back to Slateport City remained desolate, giving the three mares plenty of room to spar. A cool breeze blew through the trees,

rustling the leaves and making Fluttershy feel at ease. The three trotted a ways down the road, making sure they were far enough away from the city to not cause a ruckus before setting up for a fight, not that fighting in the city would raise any suspicions. Alerce lept off from Fluttershy's head and landed on the pavement, shaking its legs as if it felt some pain from impact. Fluttershy dug through her bag and tossed Wolver's Poké Ball, letting him breathe some fresh air before bringing the two together in a huddle.

Rainbow threw her two Poké Balls out from her jacket pocket, breaking out Igni and Lorica onto the trail. With a cocky smile, she brought the two Pokémon together and huddled like Fluttershy, discussing strategies and tactics to use against her friend's type disadvantaged creatures.

Pinkie had released Lady Gummy II from her Poké Ball long before they reached the trail, and had let her clamp onto her tail with its infantile teeth as they approached their destination. With an excited laugh, Pinkie stripped Lady off her tail and set her down, waiting for her two friends to cease strategizing.

"Are you two ready?" Pinkie asked impatiently. "Lady and I have been ready for minutes now, and you two are just talking!"

"Hold on Pinkie, I'm almost ready," Fluttershy said, bringing her attention back to her two Pokémon. "How strong are you two now?" the yellow pegasus whispered to the combatants. "I know that Rainbow trained you two while I was asleep, but how far did she push you?" Fluttershy put her hooves up to her mouth in thought, wondering if Rainbow's training was enough to take down a gym leader on live television. She shuddered at the thought as she looked up, taking notice of a hoof tapping Rainbow Dash.

"I'm ready, Fluttershy. We don't have all day," Rainbow called out, pushing Lorica to the forefront of the ranks.

"Alright, I'm ready," Fluttershy announced, letting Wolver take the helm. The two Pokémon were around the same size, yet Lorica's large steel head-plate made it appear much larger compared to the tiny wolf. Both Pokémon began to pace around between the two trainers, the Aron making sure to keep its shield facing Wolver at all times. They paced for several rotations, each not wanting to make the first move.

Fluttershy looked up at Rainbow who hovered in the air with a confident, almost cocky smile plastered on her face. She tilted her head down, looking at Fluttershy with a fierce gaze as to make the first move. The yellow pegasus wanted to reach for her Pokédex to find out how to fight the creature, but decided against it. She didn't want to rely on a piece of technology when it came to an animal when her talent with them worked just as well.

Steel plating would make it hard for me to attack directly, especially with that shield present, she thought, trying to come out with a competent strategy.

"Lorica, bash it!" Rainbow commanded, prompting the Aron to charge straight at Wolver, giving the wolf ample time to dodge the sluggish cave dweller. With a slight sidestep, the Poochyena dodged Lorica's charge, and opened its mouth, watching its teeth give off a wispy black glow. It looked up at Fluttershy, waiting for a command as it took notice of Lorica's heel-face turn. Quickly, Fluttershy ignored her previous conviction and took out her Pokédex, pointing it at the wolf's teeth. The device beeped, showing Wolver's teeth on the screen with the caption "Bite" at the bottom.

"Again, with more weight behind it!" Rainbow called out, making Lorica sprint head down at Wolver at a slightly faster pace. To the side of the image, the Pokédex listed the attack's specifics, including its type.

"A Dark-type move?" Fluttershy thought aloud, watching Lorica's continued feeble attempts at chasing down the fleet-footed lupine. *I don't want to do this but...*, "Wolver, use Bite!"

At his master's command, Wolver leapt over the sluggish Lorica and opened its mouth, once again revealing the Dark-type Bite. He chomped down on the Aron, causing it to yelp out in pain as Wolver snarled and scratched at its steel exterior.

"H-how did you do that? You can't bite through steel!" Rainbow protested, much to the delight of Pinkie who seemed to take joy in the cyan pegasus' annoyance. "Lorica, shake it off!"

The Aron tried its hardest to throw Wolver off of him, flailing and running about. The Poochyena refused to let go, keeping his teeth sunk into Lorica as the steel-clad Pokémon tired itself out. With a thud, Lorica slumped to the ground, giving up the fight against its quicker adversary.

“Really, you’re going down like that?” Rainbow complained, watching Wolver open its jaw, taking the Aron out of its clutches. With a wag of its tail, Wolver dashed over to Fluttershy, sitting down and letting its tongue hang out. Fluttershy reached down and pet him, drawing a content smile out from the beast.

With a sigh, Rainbow returned Lorica back to its Poké Ball, looking down and putting a hoof on her stomach. “Hey, Fluttershy? Why don’t we have the main event fight, then grab something to eat? I need a win.”

Fluttershy rubbed her stomach as the mention of food brought up the fact that she hadn’t eaten all day. With no money, it was easier for the pegasus to keep her attention on important matters, anything that didn’t include food. Unfortunately, she still needed a meal.

“I’m fine with that,” Fluttershy confirmed, showing Alerce into the center to spar.

Igni quickly hopped into the ring, ruffling its feathers in anticipation. Unlike the previous two combatants, the Pokémon stood still and stared each other down, each growling in an intimidating manner. Rainbow seemed to join in, staring down Fluttershy with a sharp, dagger-like gaze. How committed Rainbow was to Pokémon fighting frightened the timid pegasus.

“Scorch him!” Rainbow called out, prompting Igni to expel flames from its mouth. Alerce sidestepped as quickly as he could, but was pelted by the burning embers. As a plume of smoke rose from the turtle, he shook himself off and began to charge at the orange fowl.

“Use Tackle!” Fluttershy commanded, watching intently as the two faced off.

The nerves Fluttershy usually felt from battle seemed to have disappeared. Her only thoughts were that of the armored stallion’s

presence, making her care less about her old ways and made her embrace the new to survive. It was something she felt she would never have done back in Ponyville. A small weight still formed in the pit of her stomach as she thought about it, but she found it easier to ignore.

Igni skidded across the ground on his back, quickly hopping back to its talons and shacking off the heavy blow. Flames once again flew through the ring, scattering across the ground and into Alerce's face. The Turtwig staggered back, trying desperately to shake off the burning cinders that clung to his body.

"Use your shell to block it!" Fluttershy yelled, but before Alerce could react another wave of embers clung to the turtle, making him stand with his head hanging low. He began to breathe heavily, forcing his eyes shut in pain. "Try tackling him again," the nervous pegasus suggested, watching Alerce burst from the ground, slamming Igni in the gut. The Torchic flew across the ring, bouncing off the ground while struggling to get up.

With a confident smile, the Turtwig turned to Fluttershy. She smiled back, but her expression turned to worry as he turned his head down and coughed up a pool of saliva on the ground. His breathing turned to labored wheezes as he collapsed on the ground, shaking and crying out in pain. Quickly, Fluttershy flew to the distressed Alerce, trying to diagnose whatever was happening to the Pokémon.

"A-Alerce? What's wrong?" Fluttershy asked, getting no response from the pained Turtwig. She looked up to Rainbow who looked at her with a worried gaze, same with Pinkie. As Fluttershy turned to Alerce again, a bright white light burst from the turtle, knocking Fluttershy back in shock. A small, white wisp surrounded Alerce, making Fluttershy extremely worried, yet curious as to what was happening. With a fierce cry, Alerce arched back in pain and his body began to violently shiver. Without warning, the scales that covered his body began to shed off, leaving exposed green skin. His body then began to grow in size, easily doubling or tripling his original size. With a disgusting squelching sound, new green scales pierced out from his body, releasing a sickly green-ooze that dripped down the fresh scales and caused Fluttershy to put her hoof to her mouth in disgust.

As Alerce ceased his unannounced growth spurt, a fissure line split lengthwise down his shell, cracking it in two. It fell to the earth, making way

for a new shell to emerge from the turtle's back. It ran across the entire length of his body, covering everything from his head to the tip of his tail. The shell severed the small sprout of Alerce's head as two yellow scaled spikes jutted from the side of his jaw. Before the metamorphosis was complete, two torso length bushes cracked through the shell near its center, arranging itself comfortably on the turtle's back. With one final gasp and head held up, Alerce slumped to the ground as the white glow surrounding his body faded away.

The three Equestrians stood with their mouths agape, staring at Alerce blankly with no words to speak of. Fluttershy gazed at the now giant turtle in a confused stupor, unable to draw any conclusion as to what exactly happened. As she snapped herself out of her trance, she hastily took her Pokédex out and pointed at the transformed Alerce. The screen showed Alerce's familiar information, but its species stuck out to her. Where it had normally shown "Turtwig", it now showed the word "Grotle". Fluttershy thought she should be more shocked by this transformation, but Alerce's change from gecko to turtle seemed much more unlikely. Curious, she pressed the button next to the species name, bringing her to a screen which showcased the species as a whole. As she read, it stated that Grotle was an evolved form of Turtwig, confusing her further.

H-how can a turtle 'evolve'? They don't go through that kind of metamorphosis...

"W...what just happened?" Rainbow asked, finally breaking from her stupor. "I mean, that was cool, but what happened exactly?"

"It says here that he 'evolved', but turtles don't normally change like this,"

"Yeah, and geckos don't turn into turtles either," Rainbow quipped. "Does your Pokédex say anything about it?"

"Hold on, let me check," Fluttershy said as she scrambled to find the explanation. After going through several screens, she came upon a massive list of words and their definitions. She scrolled down then clicked when "Evolution" was highlighted, bringing up its definition. "Here we go." Fluttershy began reading, "Evolution what occurs when a Pokémon reaches a certain stage of maturity and strength. As it reaches this point, a

Pokémon will change in shape, substantially increasing its natural power as well as possibly changing its type. An evolved Pokémon may learn more powerful moves, but will learn moves slower than its less evolved forms. While some creatures may evolve more than once, some may not evolve at all. Evolution is always a harrowing and exciting experience for any new trainer.”

“Does that mean... Igni and Lorica could evolve into something amazing and powerful?” Rainbow asked with an excited tone.

“That... was.. AMAZING!” Pinkie finally blurted out, rushing over to the passed out Alerce. “I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“Fluttershy just said what it was,” Rainbow explained, watching as Alerce’s eyes opened. With a large yawn, the Grotle got to his feet and tested out his new body. “I know, let’s try out his new power!”

“Wait, what?” Fluttershy asked, turning to the cyan pegasus. “Don’t you think he should rest first?”

“Look at him, he’s fine.” Alerce plopped back to the ground, closing his eyes and snoring loudly.

“Dash, I don’t think-”

“Igni, use Ember!” Rainbow commanded, causing Igni to spew flames from his mouth again, hitting Alerce square on his massive body. He slowly opened his eyes, looking casually at the burning cinders. With one quick swipe, he brushed off the cinders and got to his feet. Rainbow’s face grew pale as Alerce bucked his head upwards, smashing Igni into the air, over Rainbow’s head and into the brush far off the path. With a sharp exhale, the lumbering giant fell back to sleep, paying no attention to the scrambling Rainbow Dash as she rummaged through the bushes on the side of the trail.

“That was incredible...” Fluttershy squeaked, slowly approaching the slumbering Alerce. She patted her hooves on his shell, hearing him let out a contented rumble. At this point, she was just happy that Alerce still acted the same as he did before.

"We need to evolve *all* of our Pokémon," Rainbow stated bluntly, emerging out from the brush with a very dazed Igni on her back. "If these things can evolve more than once, could you imagine how powerful they could be. Do you think that's why that Gyarados was so powerful?"

"That would explain a lot," Pinkie said, picking up Lady and holding the crocodile out in front of her. "I wonder what she would turn into? Whatever it is, it's probably something massive."

"How about we get them food and clean up for tomorrow?" Fluttershy suggested, calling Alerce back to her Poké Ball. A small part of her wondered how she would feel without Alerce outside with her, but her empty stomach stopped the train of thought short.

"Yeah, this is probably a good place to stop. Besides, we should get to the Pokémon Center early and see if we can catch a gym fight." Rainbow said, letting Igni on her back. Pinkie hoisted Lady up to her head, letting the Totodile sit on her head as Fluttershy trotted silently alongside Wolver. Fluttershy's nerves calmed a bit as they traveled back into the city, Alerce's new found strength reassuring her as her scheduled fight drew nearer.

The moon rose on Mauville as the three mares finished eating. A mass of yellow, halogen lights littered the streets as brightly colored billboards and illuminated storefronts drew their attentions as the sky grew pitch black. Unlike Petalburg and Dewford after dark, ponies continued to flood the streets, hollering and growing more rambunctious as the night went on. Fluttershy gazed in awe, noticing lights strung from the top of large skyscrapers and a large white haze in the distance.

"The plan is to win to get some kind of money, right?" Pinkie asked, curious about the aforementioned plan. "That free food was nice, but I don't think we'll be that lucky again."

"Well, that's part of it, but Fluttershy's new evolved Alerce should wipe the floor with whatever Pokémon that gym leader's got," Rainbow presumed, weaving her way through the mass of ponies. As they trotted, Fluttershy caught the sight of several street performers putting on a show. Only a handful of ponies stopped to watch them juggle or play drums with

plastic buckets. The lack of a crowd gave Fluttershy a small sense of relief about the next gym fight, but she still held onto her doubts.

“Hold on,” Fluttershy said. “What’s the plan? The matches are televised, and that stallion could be watching.”

“We’re stuck here until Twilight gets us out, right? We need to find out everything we can about this place and how these animals fight so we can survive long enough for her to bring us home,” Rainbow stated as they crossed the street and the orange roof of the Pokémon Center came into view. “We go in, give that gym leader a swift defeat, and by the time that jerk gets here we’ll already be gone. If we keep moving, we’ll hit him when he least expects it.”

“But, he said he knew-”

“By the way, what time is it? Aren’t the prime time matches about to begin?”

“Well... um...” Fluttershy looked down at her PokéNav. “It’s 7:14.”

“We’re already missing it?” Rainbow realized, quickening her pace. “We have to hurry; I need to see what, or who the gym leader looks like.”

“It might not even be an analogue,” Fluttershy stated, weaving through the bustling crowd and apologizing at every turn.

“Whoever it is, it’s probably exciting for it to be on television!” Pinkie said, quickly running along the curb and avoiding the crowd all together. “It’s just over there!”

With the Pokémon Center drawing closer, Fluttershy began running through the possibilities of analogues in her head. She was innately curious to see what Pinkie and Rainbow’s analogues would be like, or if she had one of her own. Applejack’s was still up in the air, or it could even be a pony she could have never thought of. They crossed two more roads and found themselves at the sliding glass doors of the Pokémon Center, waiting for them to open as the white light inside invited them inside.

The doors opened, allowing the three to trot in as they saw a massive crowd of ponies staring at something in the corner. As they settled in, the crowd roared and several ponies gave each other high-hooves then turned back to the corner. Curious, Fluttershy trotted over and attempted to catch a glimpse of whatever was happening. The sound of cheering and laughter drowned out the sound as she could only make out small sections of the screen in between the excited crowd.

“What’s going on? Is this the gym match?” Fluttershy asked, causing a few ponies to turn and face her.

“Yeah, and the challenger is kicking her butt!” a yellow earth pony exclaimed, quickly glancing back to catch more of the match.

“I-Is there any room so I can see? I can’t make out anything,” Fluttershy asked.

“You should’ve gotten here sooner,” A grey unicorn stated.

“Maybe some ponies will make room after the 7:00 match,” Fluttershy said, hoping to just catch one look at Mauville’s star gym leader.

“It’s worth a shot,” Rainbow said before tapping the grey unicorn on the shoulder. “Hey, any chance of squeezing in here once this match is over?”

The stallion laughed. “You’re joking, right? You have to get here at least an hour before it begins to see anything.” He scanned them over. “You’re Pokémon trainers, right? Why don’t you just buy a ticket and watch it live?”

“What makes you think we’re trainers?” Rainbow asked.

“You smell like sweat and seawater,” he said, turning his back to the mares.

Rainbow scoffed at the stallion, but thought he was as good of a pony as any to ask. “Can you at least tell us the gym leader’s name?”

“It’s Wat-”

“Watson,” Fluttershy interrupted, prompting the two conversing ponies to stare at the dumbfounded mare. “I-I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt anypony.”

“Whatever, just leave me alone.” The stallion turned away again, just before jumping in celebration as the rest of the crowd roared in excitement. Fluttershy held her head in her hoof in embarrassment, wondering if she could somehow stop May’s memories from surfacing at such inopportune times.

“Hey, can anyone tell us who the gym leader is?” Rainbow’s question became lost in sea of excited ponies, causing Rainbow to turn towards the downward-leading stairs. “Come on, let’s get cleaned up for tomorrow.”

“Sounds good to me,” Pinkie said, following the cyan pegasus downstairs.

“Wait, shouldn’t we...” Fluttershy trailed off before reaching the front desk, asking the nurse if the Pokémon Center had accommodations for them that night. After a quick nod from the nurse, Fluttershy headed downstairs, noticing the building’s larger basement in comparison to Petalburg’s as she made her way down. A dozen ponies were sprawled across the floor, some sleeping and some talking or playing with their Pokémon. To the left some sinks and faucets were protruding from the wall, along with some cots and blankets pushed off to the side. Next to the sinks were several white, box-like machines with porthole windows on the doors. Curious, Fluttershy walked over and saw one of them with clothes tumbling inside. A small bell rung, prompting an orange pegasus to trot over and take the clothing out. With a look of annoyance, the pony fit her clothing into a basket and sat back down near her partner.

“E-excuse me?” Fluttershy called out, catching the pegasus’ attention. “Is this where you wash clothes? I’ve never done it before.”

With a look of utter confusion, the mare trotted over to Fluttershy. “You look like you’re my age, how come you’ve never washed clothes before?”

“Well, where I come from we don’t normally wear clothes, they’re more for special...” Fluttershy caught the mare’s eyes, noticing her shifting uncomfortably. “...occasions. Could you help me?”

“As long as you don’t stand there naked in front of me, I can,” the orange pegasus said.

“I only have one pair of clothes... and...”

“Here.” The annoyed pegasus took a pair of greyish blue leggings and a red with collared shirt with thin vertical stripes out from her basket and threw it onto Fluttershy’s head. “Put those on, then come back here with those rags you have on.” She lightly sniffed the air, recoiling as the stench pierced her nostrils. “What is that, fish?”

“I-I’ll be right back,” Fluttershy said, blushing in embarrassment. She went to the other side of the stairs where no pony was looking and stripped her clothes off, using them to dab any filth or perspiration from her yellow coat before dirtying the clean attire. Feeling moderately cleaner, she donned her new clothes and carried her traveling attire to the waiting mare.

“Alright, first off, we...” The mare proceeded to show Fluttershy the ins and outs of using a washing machine and dryer as both Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie listened in and watched. As the machines worked their cycles, the three Equestrians and the generous pegasus and her partner sat down to chat. They introduced themselves to each other as the roar of the excited crowd above them threatened to drown out their conversation.

“So, who’s the gym leader in this city?” Rainbow asked, tapping her hoof impatiently.

“You don’t know who she is? I thought everypony has seen her battle at least once,” the orange pegasus’ orchid-coated stallion friend asked.

“We’re new around here, and Fluttershy has a match tomorrow with her at 9:00,” Rainbow explained.

“That’s great! You can see what she looks like in person,” the orange pegasus exclaimed. “I wouldn’t want to spoil something so magical. I’m sure you’ll love her; she has an amazing stage presence.”

“What’s her name?” Fluttershy asked, hoping to at least get that much out of them. Considering that Watson sounded like a male name to her and Steven had been changed into Stephanie when she became Twilight’s analogue, having the name of another gender-bent gym leader would likely explain a lot.

“Trust me, you’ll know when you get there,” the orange pegasus said as the timer on the washer had expired. With no success, Fluttershy stood and trotted to the dryer, taking her clothes out and bringing them to where Pinkie and Rainbow had set up the cots. As the Pokémon matches continued, Fluttershy slumped into her cot, tired and worried, and forced herself to sleep through the incessant chattering of voices just on the other side of the room.

Night had long turned into the afternoon as the three mares studied a map of Mauville City. Cleaned up and filled with food, they had found an information booth alongside the sidewalk, a massive amount of graffiti littering its sides. Mauville was several times larger than any city Fluttershy had ever been in, making it hard for her comprehend how many ponies could live in a city this large.

“Have either of you found Mauville University yet? I can’t see it anywhere?” Pinkie asked, nudging her muzzle against the map.

“No, not ye- Here it is,” Fluttershy responded, pointing to the Chimecho district on the western side of the map. “So if that’s there, then the stadium is...” She scanned the map again, instantly finding the stadium. “There. Er...”

“It’s on the opposite side of the city!” Rainbow exclaimed, putting her head in her hooves in frustration. “Where are we now?”

“Right here?” Fluttershy pointed at the southern section of the city. “If we want to get to all three, we’ll have to head to every part of town.”

“Well, what time is it now?”

"It's 2:34," Fluttershy explained.

"We have less than five hours to get to the stadium. We have no money for the bus, and..." Rainbow stretched out her bandaged wing. "I can't fly with this right now." Rainbow folded her wing as she attempted to chart out the route to the stadium. "There has to be a Pokémon Center close to the stadium, right? I think we should finish the gym fight, sleep, give that professor a visit tomorrow, then leave before that lunatic can track us here."

"Shouldn't we talk to Maxwell first? Figuring out who that stallion is more important than a gym fight, right?"

"Don't you remember what your Pokédex keeps saying? If we don't show up on time, you'll be banned from the league and there'll be no way to get the training we need to fight the stallion in the first place," Rainbow stated bluntly.

"I guess," Fluttershy said, disappointed by their lack of available time. "We should get moving then if we want to get there on time."

"Sorry about taking so long this morning," Pinkie apologized, looking down at her still warm clothes. "I'm sure we can make it there on time."

With half of their lunches in Fluttershy's bag, they began their trek to Mauville's stadium, paying close attention to their only map. As the hours passed and the stadium drew closer, Fluttershy's own nervousness began to rise. Feeling unprepared and wary of making a scene at the gym fight, she kept her head low as they traveled. Along the sidewalks were shops filled with various odds and ends that could be seen through their windows, windows that Pinkie couldn't help pressing her muzzle against to peak inside. It never took long for the pink earth pony to catch up as her excitement for the gym battle rose. Fluttershy looked over to Rainbow to gauge her feelings, noticing her eyes staring straight ahead, unwavering. She was obviously confident in her plan which gave Fluttershy a small sense of relief.

Along the streets, there were vertical banners hanging from every street light. They were light yellow with the silhouette of a pony with swirled hair hanging down its front and were advertising the city's gym. Fluttershy

couldn't tell what kind of pony the mare was, nor did she look familiar to her, causing her to believe that she wasn't an analogue.

"Hey, do either of you recognize that pony on those banners?" Fluttershy asked, prompting Pinkie and Rainbow to give them another look.

"I've never seen a pony like that before," Pinkie explained. "What do you think, Dashie?"

Rainbow Dash intensely focused on the banners, her face showing her deep in thought. "I don't know... She looks familiar, but I can't put my hoof on it. Whatever, we'll find out soon enough."

"Oh, okay," Fluttershy said, perplexed by Rainbow's slight familiarity with the mare. Fluttershy was now even more curious about her opponent as they continued down the sidewalk.

Hours passed as the sun began shining in the orange hue of dusk. The stadium loomed in the distance, rising as tall as many of the larger buildings. Ponies swarmed the outside and accompanying areas; all of them were either headed to the stadium or were there already. Fluttershy's throat dried as she noticed the volume of onlookers, making her shiver. Two large beams of light shot from the stadium into the sky and a large screen lay near the entrance of the rectangular stadium, flashing many different images and videos of Pokémon fighting inside.

"There are a lot more ponies than I expected," Rainbow Dash spoke up, quickening her pace to reach the snake-like line that formed from its entrance. Pinkie and Fluttershy soon followed as the butter pegasus tried to keep herself from hyperventilating. The roads near the stadium were blocked off by orange and white striped wooden blockades with ponies in black riot gear that had the word "POLICE" written on their chests in white.

"Why is there all this security?" Fluttershy asked as they trotted past the blockade. "They can't do this every night, could they?"

"Did you see how popular these gym fights were with those ponies back in the Pokémon Center? I'm not surprised they have to increase security with *us* being the opponent!" Rainbow exclaimed, sounding proud of her boasting.

“No pony knows who we are though, do they, Dashie?” Pinkie added, looking for the end of the line.

“May is a gym leader’s daughter, isn’t she? They obviously hyped that up and got ponies to buy up tickets.”

“I really hope this is just the normal attendance...” Fluttershy muttered, watching ponies as they sat under open tents, drinking and grilling vegetables in an open concrete field. Several of the ponies began hollering and celebrating, downing drinks as they did so. There was a smell of barley and hops in the air, a strong air wafting over the stadium’s outside. Fluttershy turned her head away from the hooligans, noticing that they were now at the end of the line. Rainbow had already started a conversation with the pony in front of them as Pinkie played with Lady.

“Are there normally this many ponies here? It seems like a lot,” Rainbow asked, yelling over the excited crowd.

“Oh no, tonight is special,” the tan unicorn started. “They were showing ads about this, uh, mystery trainer during the 9:00 match. It’s sounds awesome!”

Fluttershy turned her head to the unicorn in full alert, trying to piece together why her match was special. She peeked her head to the side, catching a glimpse of the screen. A shadowed pony appeared on screen with a red question mark over it, followed by text about the final match of the night. The pegasus gulped, realizing that both gym leaders she faced before hadn’t known her either. With her nerves racking her she brought her attention back to the conversation to try to calm herself..

“Hey, what time is it?” Pinkie asked as she got up from letting Lady crawl on her stomach. “You think the line is gonna move soon?”

“6:43,” the stallion said, watching the line in front begin to move into the stadium. Fluttershy turned to the tailgaters, seeing them pack up their supplies and head to the back of the line as it moved at a relatively quick pace. The cheering grew louder as they approached, watching the line shrink until they arrived at four booths with ponies inside, taking tickets from the spectators’ hooves.

Fluttershy was next. She cautiously trotted up to the tired looking mare in the window, wondering what to do.

“Do you have a ticket, or are you here to purchase one. We only have a few hundred left,” the mare explained.

“I’m, uh, the challenger for the nine o’clock match,” Fluttershy explained, watching the mare give her a curious look.

“You are, huh? Let me see your Pokédex; I need to see if your trainer ID matches.” Fluttershy reached into her bag and pulled out her Pokédex, slipping it through the opening in the glass pane. The mare in the booth quickly opened the device, flipping through the menus until she reached Fluttershy’s ID. “Hmm, 78342. The paper says that as well...” The attendant closed the Pokédex and gave it back to Fluttershy, unlocking the turnstile to let the pegasus through.

“Oh, could you let my friends in as well? They’re right behind me,” Fluttershy asked as Rainbow and Pinkie waved their hooves.

“I don’t see why not.” Rainbow and Pinkie promptly thanked the mare as they caught up to Fluttershy. “When you go in, go down the first hallway you come across to the left; a security guard will see you to your waiting area.”

“Thank you,” Fluttershy said as she entered through the stadium’s massive gates.

Inside the stadium under the seats were dark with only a sparse number of fluorescent lights illuminating the area. Beyond the hallway lay a set of stairs leading up to the bleachers and a large set of doors at the ground level. Most of the crowd piled up the stairs as several went up to booths, buying drinks and snacks. The walls of the entrance soon passed, leaving the three in the presence of a massive corridor to their sides, wrapping around the field.

Fluttershy looked to her left, noticing a lone pony in a black suit wearing sunglasses waiting in the middle of the hallway. Curious, she and her friends trotted over to the stallion, distancing themselves from the

ecstatic crowd. The noise of the crowd grew dimmer as they approached, giving the timid pegasus a little piece of mind.

“Are you trainer number 78342?” the stallion asked, lifting his sunglasses to get a better look at the mares.

“Yes, I am,” Fluttershy responded, handing her Pokédex to the stallion as she watched another similarly dressed stallion approach. “You must be the security guard that attendant was telling me about.”

After the stallion went through the Pokédex he gave it back to Fluttershy and placed his sunglasses back on his face. “Right this way; let me show you to your box seat as you wait for your match.” The guard turned and nodded to the other stallion, causing him to turn up a distant flight of stairs.

“Box seat? What’s that?” Pinkie asked excitedly.

“I’m more curious about who this gym leader is. No pony has said a word to us about it,” Rainbow complained, glaring at Fluttershy. “Maybe *somepony* shouldn’t have interrupted that stallion in the Pokémon Center.”

“W-Well, ponies have said that its a ‘she’, and Watson is normally a male name,” Fluttershy stated, averting Rainbow’s gaze. “She has to be an analogue like Steven, but this stadium and city don’t feel right.”

“What do you mean? Nothing looked out of the ordinary to me,” Pinkie said as they began to ascend the plush, crimson carpeted stairs.

“I... I don’t know. It’s probably something with May’s memories. It doesn’t seem to important at least.”

The staircase climbed to mid-point of the stadium, leading to a narrow hallway with wooden doors on their right. It was much brighter than the area below, leading Fluttershy to believe that this was a much classier area. The stallion ahead trotted to the door just around the bend, opening it and waiting for the three to enter. Excited, Rainbow and Pinkie barged through the doorway, leaving Fluttershy to enter the plush, nicely furnished room.

As she entered, the first thing she noticed was the room-sized window that gave a clear view of the entire arena. Ignoring the other furnishings, Fluttershy trotted up to the window, noticing the massive amount of ponies in the stands. Not a single seat appeared empty as even more attendants swarmed the stadium. Fluttershy gulped and shivered, averting her eyes from the crowd and down to the field where a stallion stood with a green, pink-bellied raptor-like Pokémon with leaves jutting from its arms and a long one that flowed down from its head. On the other side was a stage with wires strewn across its empty floorboards.

“Fillies and gentlecolts!” the speakers blared, causing the crowd to fall silent for a moment. “Welcome to Mauville Stadium for tonight’s entertainment! Each opponent tonight is fighting for the illustrious Dynamo Badge, which will bring them closer to Hoenn’s Pokémon League and becoming Hoenn’s new champion!” The crowd erupted in hoof stomps and cheering. Fluttershy could feel the sound permeating the glass, shaking her as the stallion below stood tall.

“Ooo, this is so exciting!” Pinkie said, pressing her front hooves and muzzle to the glass.

“Our first opponent is a technical engineering student from Mauville University, showing up with his Pokémon, Grovyle.” The stallion pumped his hoof into the air as she heard part of the crowd begin chanting ‘M U! M U!’ as the announcer continued.

“Wow, some of those ponies painted themselves red and white!” Rainbow said, looking at the crowd.

Fluttershy turned to Rainbow who was transfixed on the stage that lay below. “We should go talk to that pony after the match. You know, save us from traveling all that way.”

“Yeah, sure,” Rainbow said, sounding as if she was ignoring the timid pegasus. Fluttershy again turned her attention back down to the stage.

“Will this science major be victorious this day? Only one mare stands in his way. Introducing the gym leader that needs no introduction, but wants one regardless. A mare whose electric power can be seen in the legendary Mauville storms!”

The lights inside the stadium suddenly shut off, leaving only one spotlighting the stage as smoke began to pour from the floor boards. As the spectacle occurred, the crowd's enthusiastic roars grew to their highest point, giving Fluttershy the feeling that the stadium would shake apart. Fluttershy caught a glimpse of a light blue mare as she made her way out of the smoke, her light blond hair swirling at both ends as she posed for the ecstatic crowd.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, introducing Mauville's own gym leader, the Electrifying and Powerful Wattsie!"