



By The Muffin Man

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Prologue

Lost in the Fire

"Simply the thing I am, shall make me live."

Thrumming rain and thrashing leaves overwhelmed the usual silence of the mid-afternoon air. The library was dark, much too dark for anypony to see properly. The tall, book-filled rooms were usually flooded with sunlight, which on most days would pour through the great tree house's numerous windows and spill onto the floor like an overturned barrel of Sweet Apple cider. Today, however, there was no sun to be spilt—at least none that could be seen by the unicorn filly that crept through the shelves of the library in search of a family treasure. Apparently, the building's resident dragon had not cared to light even a single candle.

The Pegasus ponies had set up a regular tempest, something that they had to do every so often when a scheduled drizzle was skipped. That seemed to happen quite frequently lately, though no pony was entirely sure why. Lightning arced across the sky, connecting with the magical lightning rod atop the tree. The living wood of the building uttered a gentle creak as it accepted nature's electric fury.

Most any filly would have been scared witless by the sheer power of the storm that was crashing its fists down upon Ponyville, but this filly was on a mission that no amount of scary thunder could deter. Her mother was out of town visiting the royal city of Canterlot on what she called "Official Business," and would be back later that same day. The filly couldn't care less *what* her mother called this errand of hers; all she was concerned with was the fact that her mother wasn't there. More specifically, that her mother wasn't there to tell her off for what she was about to do.

...That was, if she could even *find* what she was looking for.

She stumbled about in the dark, tripping over rugs and piled books that her mother had left strewn about the floor after yet another night of intense studying. Her blind gait eventually ran her right into a telescope tripod set up next to the window—the instrument wobbled precariously before

proceeding to fall directly on top of the little filly, who quickly covered her head with her hooves to protect herself. The tripod and its load fell over with a mighty crash that almost rivaled the thunder outside.

"Ouch!" she yelped, and then instantly froze. Spike had probably heard the commotion and would surely investigate: dragons had good hearing. At least, that's what she had read in one of the library's bestiaries. After about a minute and a half with no sign of an impending investigation, she sighed with relief. Spike was likely napping deeply, as he tended to do on rainy days.

Deciding that she needed some light after all, she gave her magic a try. Squeezing her eyes shut, she concentrated as intensely as she possibly could. Though she strained and clenched her teeth, nothing happened. After stopping for a few deep breaths, she began her trials anew and with increased vigor. Her horn fizzled and popped, showering a few amber sparks onto the floor. The magical residue danced and skittered around like living creatures before fading away. Finally, her horn sputtered to life and gave off a bright glow from its tip—the light illuminated the room as much as any candle, and it was more than enough for a pony so young to find what she wanted.

The room was as it had always been: shelves lined the walls, crammed full of manuscripts, books and scrolls on every subject imaginable. Along one wall sat the small bed where her mother slept, the covers patterned with the night sky. She winced as the light revealed the telescope she had knocked over, lying on the floor among shards of broken crystal and glass. Her thoughts quickly turned back to her goal.

It has to be here somewhere, she thought, But where?

A search of the bookshelves came up with nothing, as did a thorough examination of the jewelry cases and armoire. She finally sat down with a frustrated huff.

"I know it's here somewhere," she sighed as she lay down for a moment to rest. The moment her head hit the floor, however, she spied something under the bed: a simple wooden box. She snatched it up and held it close to her face, so that her glow spell could shed some light on the mysterious object. *This must be it!* She thought excitedly, blowing the dust off its lid.

The box was small, only about the size of a loaf of bread. Its faces were largely unadorned save for a perfect facsimile of Twilight Sparkle's cutie mark painted atop the polished mahogany lid, and a shimmering padlock decorated with a fiery magical symbol clunked noisily on one side. She set it down on the floor as she fumbled for something she had stashed in her mane; the object fell to the floor with a sharp metallic ping.

The object was, in fact, a tiny silver key that she had surreptitiously "borrowed" from Twilight's key ring before she left. Taking the key carefully between both hooves, she slid it down into the lock on the box. The instrument stuck momentarily, but with a light jimmy it slid smoothly into the keyhole. Once she was sure that the teeth of the key were perfectly seated within the pins of the lock, she rotated it forty-five degrees clockwise and was rewarded with a satisfying *click*. The lock abruptly fell off the box with a soft clunk. She lifted the lid delicately, marveling at how effortlessly it moved on its oiled hinges. Inside, she found surely the most beautiful piece of jewelry that had ever been created. Reverently, she picked it up to examine it.

The subject of her search was a tiara, crafted from the finest gold and with nine small sapphires set into its front. Intricate patterns carved into the gold wove about and around the gems, but it was the apex of the tiara that truly caught her eye. A gem cut into a six-pointed, faceted star lay set into the marvelous golden lattice, catching the glow from her horn and sending sparkles of purple flying to all walls of the room. In the dim light, it shone like a veritable beacon.

She knew exactly what it was that she held in her hooves. Her mother had told her about her adventures when she was younger: about how she, auntie Applejack, and their friends had saved Equestria from the eternal night of Nightmare Moon many years ago. This was *THE* Element of Magic. The jewel atop the pinnacle, Twilight had said, acted as an amplifier for a unicorn's innate magical ability. It allowed one to cast spells beyond the power of imagination, and could even allow a *non-unicorn* to cast magic. There were few who could activate this power, however; only the gem's harmonizing spirit—currently Twilight Sparkle—and Celestia herself had ever been able to access its true potential.

But, perhaps, could *she* activate its power? After all, she *was* descended

from the Spirit of Magic—perhaps it might work for her as well? Intense, burning curiosity overcame her and she moved ever so warily to place the tiara upon her own head. What spell would she cast? How would she even activate it in the first place? Her many questions, though, were cut short before she even had a chance to place the artifact upon her tiny head by the sound of the front door to the library open and almost immediately slam closed again due to the gale outside. Her little heart raced.

"Daylight!" Twilight called happily from downstairs. "I'm home, Day, and I've brought you a treat!"

A cold bead of sweat dripped from Daylight's brow as she hurriedly put the element back into its case. In a panic upon hearing the sound of hoof-steps upon the stairs, she slid the box and lock back under the bed and snatched up the key. She'd put it back on the key ring later and Twilight would never know that it had gone missing, but for now it was nestled safely in her hair. Lights came on all around the library as Twilight ignited the candle flames with her magic. A single strand of grey shone dully in the purple unicorn's mane.

"Oh! There you are, Daylight." She smiled at the filly as she finished illuminating the bedroom, but then frowned once she noticed the mess. "What are you doing here in the dark? And what the hay happened to my telescope?"

"I was... I was, uhh... hiding from the thunder," Daylight lied nervously. "I kinda sorta knocked over the telescope in the dark..."

To her surprise, Twilight chuckled and gave her a loving look. "It's alright, Day, especially seeing as Spike couldn't be troubled to turn on any lights. I have just the spell that will fix that telescope right up. And I also have just the thing to cheer *you* up after such a dark and gloomy afternoon."

Dayspring perked up immediately as she was handed a pink bag from Sugarcube Corner, opening it with gusto. "A Double Chocolate Super-Sprinkled Frosted Donut! Thanks Mommy!" She smiled, excitedly biting into the sugary treat.

"You're welcome sweetie," Twilight replied, giving her daughter a playful nuzzle.

The storm cleared out later that evening, leaving the sky open for the stars to shine. Each one winked into existence as the moon climbed into the sky, dragged there by the ancient magic of its caretaker. A lone wisp of cloud snaked its way through the otherwise pristine expanse, blotting out a few of the fainter stars, and a cricket chirped in the wet grass as it was dully illuminated by the warm light from the windows of the library. Inside Twilight sat with her Number-One Assistant after finally getting Daylight her dinner and tucking her into bed.

Spike had grown a great deal in the years that Twilight had known him. She still remembered the day when she hatched his egg—the same day that she gained her Cutie Mark and became the protégé of Princess Celestia. She smiled at the memory. Spike was now slightly larger than herself, and he sported a pair of lovely reptilian wings that had just recently finished growing in. He wasn't too terribly used to them yet, however. Rainbow Dash had given him numerous flying lessons, but he still flew like a clumsy, one-winged owl.

"So, ah, what exactly did the Princess want, Twi?" Spike asked. He had inquired earlier, but she had told him to wait until Daylight had gone to bed. "And why couldn't you have talked by scroll? Why did you have to go all the way to Canterlot? Seems like an awful lot of trouble just to talk..."

"Whoa, slow down there Spike, one question at a time," Twilight said. "The Princess didn't want any written acknowledgement of what's going on is all, so we had to talk face to face."

"But about what?" Spike insisted.

"About something that's going on. I'll assume I can trust you not to breathe a word of this to anypony?" Twilight asked.

"Absolutely! I *am* still your Number One, after all. You can trust me!" Spike puffed his chest out rather proudly.

"Good. Well, there's a group of ponies that have been gathering near Ponyville. They call themselves 'The New State.' We're still not entirely sure

what they're about, but the Princess has reason to believe that they may be radicals who have designs on gaining political power—possibly even overthrow the diarchy. She said that they are fairly widespread, and have even shown up in Manehattan and Cloudsdale over the past few weeks in addition to their other haunts. The Princess wants me to be on the lookout for them, as Intelligence reports that they may have something big planned. We just don't know what or when."

Spike looked puzzled. "Why would anypony want to overthrow the Princesses? Things are great the way they are! Aren't they happy?"

"Who knows?" Twilight sighed. "Some ponies are never happy. They rebel just for the sake of rebellion. They take up a grand cause even when they don't truly understand the implications of what they are doing."

"But what could possibly be *wrong* with the diarchy? Celestia and Luna are both some of the most caring ponies in Equestria! They do nothing but good for us!" Spike wondered, disturbed by the situation.

"It's hard to say. You or I may not see anything wrong with the diarchy, but not all ponies think the same. Perhaps they see something that we can't. And this is still just idle speculation; we don't know for sure what they're trying to do. They *could* be entirely harmless," Twilight said, somewhat hopefully.

"Well, I still don't—" Spike yawned, "—still don't..." and promptly fell down right where he stood, snoring loudly.

Twilight shook her head; Asleep all day, and quick to fall asleep at night. That was a dragon for you. She turned from the room and climbed up the stairs to check on Daylight. The filly lay in her bed, fast asleep. She was neither small nor weak like Twilight had been when she was her age, but rather was well-built, and her father's deep green eyes looked at Twilight every day. However, an unexpected trait had turned up when she was born that surprised her parents: Day's fur turned out to be bright sun-like yellow, inspiring her name. In hindsight, though, it wasn't entirely surprising. Her father's side of the family had a fair amount of yellow genetics, but Twilight had never seen a pony of that color before. It even almost seemed to glow when the light struck her just right.

Twilight smiled sadly, then continued up the stairs to the very top of the tree. Ponyville lay stretched out before her through a small porthole window. A few lights flickered in the distance in houses and stores alike, and Rarity's Carousel Boutique was brightly illuminated as always. A great dark shape loomed at the edge of the horizon: the mountains, she thought to herself, and perched atop one of them a small speckle of light that marked the city of Canterlot.

Putting a hoof to her forehead, Twilight felt the thin golden ring at the base of her horn. She looked off in the distance, in the direction of what once had been Sweet Apple Acres. No light had shone there for many seasons.

"Oh Macintosh," she whispered, a single tear forming in the corner of her eye. "Why did you leave me?"

"HEY TWILIGHT!" A high-pitched voice echoed in Twilight's ear, rattling the treetop windowpane she had apparently fallen asleep leaning against.

"Wha—Pinkie?" Twilight awoke with a start to see the familiar face of her old friend staring at her through the window.

The fourth-floor window.

"Aha! You're awake! Open up, silly filly!" Pinkie said merrily.

Twilight rubbed the sleep from her eyes. What time was it? The sun was rather high in the sky, so perhaps she had overslept. Her joints gave a few pops as she stretched, lifting herself to all four hooves. She unlocked the latch of the window and swung it open, sticking her head out to see how this early-morning greeting was even possible. Pinkie was standing on what had to be the four tallest stilts Twilight had ever seen a pony wear. It almost seemed impossible, but she knew better. This was Pinkie Pie, after all.

"So, to what do I owe this unexpected visit?" Twilight yawned.

Pinkie Pie beamed a huge smile and took a deep breath—

"So I was trotting off to the mill to get some more flour for Sugar Cube Corner because we're out of flour and you can't make cupcakes without flour so anyway I was trotting along when I noticed some new ponies that were all dressed the same way and that I hadn't seen before so that must mean that they were new to town and if they're new to town then I thought that I should throw a welcoming party so I jumped over to greet them and tell them that I was going to throw a super-duper-mega-extra-fun party for them and that they could make all kinds of new friends here in Ponyville and they told me that that's exactly what they were here to do and that I didn't need to throw them a party because they were going to throw us a party although they didn't really call it a party but what else could it be oh I bet it's a surprise party so that they can get to know us all and they *also* said that I should spread word to everypony that I could so as to make sure that everypony is there so they can enjoy the party oh and the party is going to be at eight o' clock sharp at the fairgrounds tonight!" Pinkie finished, gasping for breath but still smiling.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. New ponies, all dressed alike? This sounded suspiciously like what Celestia had been talking about. She needed to know a bit more about them, though, as she didn't want to bother the Princess with a false alarm.

"Pinkie, I need to ask you a few questions about these ponies," Twilight stated.

"Well okee-dokey Twi! What do you want to know?" Pinkie asked, grinning.

"First off, how were they dressed?"

"Huh, well, I wasn't paying too much attention to that because the party sounded so exciting," Pinkie confessed, abashed.

Twilight frowned. "Well, I need you to tell me what you did notice about them. It could be important, Pinkie."

Pinkie thought for a moment. "Well. Like I said, they were all dressed the same, wearing white coats, and there were six of them and they all had this emblem of a creepy eye or something embroidered on their sleeves." She paused, and then seemed to remember something more. "Oh! And they were all unicorns."

Twilight nodded, going to retrieve parchment and a quill from a small desk to take some notes. "Okay, did you get any names, perchance?"

"Nope, sorry Twilight, they didn't really say, but I did ask. Though they did call their creepy eyeball club something..."

"Yes? What was it?" Twilight pressed urgently.

"Um... it was something like 'The Blue Date'... I dunno, I didn't really hear that well. What's all this matter, anyway, there's going to be a party! And guess what? They said I could join their club! I bet it's fun! Yay!" Pinkie shouted in pure elation.

Twilight stared hard at the notes, not really paying too much attention to Pinkie.

"You okay, Twilight?" Pinkie asked, concerned.

The unicorn looked up, distracted. "Yes, I'm fine," she said and then, in an effort to get Pinkie to leave, "I've got some things I need to check up on; why don't you go tell the others about it?"

"Okee-dokey-lokey!" the pink earth pony replied happily as she teetered off towards Fluttershy's cottage on her wonky stilts.

Twilight hurried downstairs, where she found Spike and Daylight sitting at the table for breakfast. The purple dragon was heating up two bowls of oatmeal with his fiery breath. They both looked up as Twilight entered.

"Well there you are, Twilight. I was wondering where you were, it's nine o' clock after all. You're late," Spike stated, with a certain degree of smugness.

"No time to talk now, Spike. I need you to send a letter." Twilight said hurriedly.

"A letter? Now? But I haven't even had a single bite of my oatmeal yet! Can't it wait?"

"No. I mean *now*, Spike!" Twilight said hotly.

"Okay, sheesh, I'm coming." Spike resignedly followed Twilight into the upstairs study.

"Get this down: *'Dear Princess Celestia, I have reason to believe that The New State ponies have come into the open in Ponyville, just as you warned they might during our last meeting. They are planning some sort of gathering for 8:00 pm and are trying to get as many ponies to attend as possible. I know of six of these ponies so far, all unicorns, and bearing the emblem of an open eye. It is possible that more could be either present already or on their way. Their motives are as of yet unclear. Please advise on how I should proceed. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle.'*"

Spike rolled up the scroll and burned it with his searing green dragon fire, sending the magical ashes through the air to Canterlot. He looked towards Twilight, an expression of fear on his face.

"You think they're *here*? *Now*?" He asked.

Twilight looked him in the eye. "I don't think that they're here, I know that they're here," she said. "I want you to keep a close eye on Daylight. Don't leave her side. I'd feel a lot better knowing that a big strong dragon was here to protect her while I'm out."

"Of course!" Spike replied, basking under the compliment he had been given. His face screwed up momentarily as he let out a loud sputtering cough, followed by a belch, and spewed green flame and ash into the air in front of him. The ash swirled around before coalescing into a slightly crumpled and hastily rolled piece of parchment—not at all what Twilight was expecting, given the pristine condition in which Celestia's letters usually arrived.

Spike unrolled the parchment and began to read. "Ahem. *'No time to talk—busy. Problems. Investigate NS meeting. Report back. —Celestia.'*" Spike turned over the paper to see if there was any more on the back. "That's weird, I've never seen a letter like this from the Princess. The writing is barely even legible!"

Twilight stared off into space, deep in thought. "All the more reason to be

worried," she said in a hushed voice.

Twilight locked every door and window in the library that evening, giving all of her keys to Spike for safekeeping. Parchment, ink, a spyglass, and a quill were all thrown into a saddlebag, which was hastily slung over her shoulders.

She turned to Spike, giving him instructions. "Don't let anypony you don't know in tonight. In fact, don't even open the door unless it's me. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Spike saluted diligently.

Daylight stood impatiently to his side. "But Mooooooom, can't I come with you? I promise I won't be any trouble!" She mewled piteously.

Twilight looked fondly at her only daughter. "No, Sweetie, I'm sorry. Where I'm going is no fun anyway, and it probably isn't safe."

"But I heard Pinkie say that it was a party and that everypony was going! I wanna go too!" Daylight whined.

"No buts, Daylight. Stay here with Spike, be good, and maybe I'll bring you home another donut. Would you like that?"

"I guess so," Daylight said, resigned.

"Good," Twilight said, and gave Daylight a kiss on the cheek. "I'm going now. Lock the door behind me."

As she stepped out into the cool evening air, Twilight heard the door close and the latch shut behind her. She waited a second, until she heard the sound of a sliding bolt to indicate that the door was, in fact, completely locked.

Reassured, she began down the dirt path that led around the outskirts of Ponyville. The path would take her around to the south, where the Fairgrounds were located. Every autumn a traveling carnival would set up

there, its towering Ferris wheel the center attraction. The carnival was Daylight's favorite event of the year, more so than the Winter Wrap-Up or the Summer Sun Celebration, even though she'd only been to the fair once.

Twilight spotted a bunch of other ponies heading in the same direction—almost enough to qualify as a crowd. She scanned their faces, finding that she knew most of them personally: Lyra with Bon-Bon close by her side, Derpy with Dinky in tow, Cheerilee, Lightning Bolt, Colgate... and a lot more that Twilight didn't know quite as well. It seemed that whatever these New State ponies were planning, it would be big.

Perhaps it would be better for her investigations if she wasn't seen; that way, she couldn't influence the proceedings. Stepping off the path, she concentrated on casting a concealment spell. Her horn glowed momentarily, and she immediately knew that the spell had worked. It didn't make her invisible, *per se*, but it did make it so that any casual observer would overlook her... provided that she remained silent.

Twilight chose to stay off the path, keen on avoiding any direct attention. The fairgrounds opened up in front of her, a large field of grass trimmed and kept nice by a year-round groundskeeper. She took up a position in the woods to the west, giving her a prime view of the proceedings.

An elevated platform sat in the middle of the field, surrounded by tables set up with all kinds of food and drink. All were brightly illuminated by an unseen magical source. The moment it seemed that the last pony had arrived, one giant white banner was unfurled behind the platform. It bore the visage of an enormous, lidless eye. Some sort of enchantment made it seem as though the eye was gazing directly at you, no matter where you were. Twilight shuddered.

Nearly the entire population of Ponyville, just shy of two hundred ponies all told, was present and partaking in the refreshments while they waited for something. After eating from the table, each pony turned and lined up in front of the stage. What were they waiting for? Extending her spyglass, Twilight peered more closely at the ponies. Most of them were sitting, all facing the banner as if entranced. Pinkie Pie was seated in the front center, perfectly still. Upon seeing her, Twilight knew instantly that something was very wrong. Pinkie was *never* motionless or perfectly concentrated.

Just then a silvery-blue unicorn in a pristine white coat and tie took position at the front of the platform, flanked by five cohorts dressed in identical suits. Opaque silver glasses completely covered his eyes.

He began to speak, magically projecting his voice. "My friends," he began slowly, in an oily voice that seemed to slither into one's ears, "You are about to witness the most important event of your generation—nay, the most important event in the history of Equestria!"

What was this unicorn talking about? Twilight listened further, writing down his words as he spoke them.

"Tonight, you shall be part of a revolution. Tonight, my friends, we shall throw off the shackles of royalty. We will cast the chains of the diarchy aside and erase it from history. And in its place we shall be erect a new establishment, a brand new state, governed by you and I. We will erect a grand empire that shall last a thousand years and beyond!"

Twilight didn't like what she was hearing—Celestia's fears were right, and she must be told as soon as possible! The Royal Guard would take care of these usurpers!

The speaker continued. "All who stand opposed will be crushed by our iron hooves! My friends, look now, gaze into the abyss of the Eye. The Eye can show you everything and anything. The Eye will show you happiness and love, like nothing you have ever known before." The speaker paused, making sure that every pony present was looking into the banner. "Trust, kindness, honesty... these are all burdens that weigh us down. No doubt it was these very things that brought you here today. They give you a heavy heart, and in the end they bring unhappiness. Cast them into the abyss! Give them to the Eye, so that you may be free of them! Join with me, and we shall have our way at last! Tonight, we come out of hiding and seize control!"

The speaker stood silent for a few moments as the congregation gave themselves completely to the Eye. A wisp of black smoke coiled down from the sky, reforming into a bleach-white scroll that unfurled in front of the nameless speaker. He read it over, and the scroll theatrically burst into flame and vanished.

"As we speak, the six artifacts that have held you for more than a thousand years of tyranny come into our possession. We have taken them back from those who acted to hold you in bondage. They have been sent to the storm front, where they shall be used by five of our finest magi and myself to spearhead the assault and finally *free us all!*"

The congregation burst into cheers as Twilight sat numbly in the bushes. This couldn't be happening. Nothing like this had happened in a thousand years. Why *now*?

"My friends—" the speaker began anew.

Sudden realization hit Twilight like a sledgehammer. These artifacts that he talked of—there was only one thing that they could be: the magical focuses for the Elements of Harmony! If they had stolen all of them, then that would mean that they had gotten hers. She kept it under the bed, in a magically locked container. How could they have gotten to it? A sick feeling crawled into her stomach. If they had taken it, then they would have been in the library.

The very library where her daughter and best friend were hiding.

"Oh, no..." the words left her lips before she could stop them. Despite being barely over a whisper, it was enough to break her concealment.

"I see now, the Eye shows me our troops are marching through the gates of Cant—" the speaker stopped. His ears twitched, and he turned as if seeking out a sound.

Twilight held her breath.

"Ah, my friends, it seems we have a spy in our midst. Find her."

Immediately as the command was uttered all of the ponies, previously entranced by the Eye, sprang up and dispersed, looking for the interloper. It was only a few seconds before Twilight was found.

"Over there! Look! In the bushes!" A voice that could only belong to Pinkie Pie shouted, causing all of the ponies to immediately surge toward Twilight in a colossal mob.

Panic rushed over Twilight, and she instinctively knew what to do. Just as the ponies were almost atop her, a thunder-crack rent the still night air. In a flash Twilight had vanished, leaving the ponies grasping at nothing.

Twilight materialized in front of what was left of the library door. It lay there on the ground in front of her, ripped from its hinges and cast down from its frame. Dread weighed down upon her hooves as she took a few wary steps inside.

"Day? Spike?" she called out into the darkness. There was no response.

She illuminated the room with her horn and found it largely untouched. The books still sat in their places on the shelves and dirty oatmeal bowls sat on the table from that morning, still unwashed. Whoever came here must have known exactly where to look—perhaps they could even sense the energy of the crystal.

Her hypothesis was confirmed when she climbed the stairs to her bedroom and found the wooden box on the floor, unlocked and open. Its magical protective seal had been removed with its key—*her* key. It was the only way possible to penetrate the enchantments that she had meticulously placed upon the box to protect its contents. It must have been left opened, and she knew who must have been responsible.

"Oh Daylight, you can't even know what you've done," Twilight said slowly, her head bowed in frustration. Her crystal was gone; the one thing that could possibly focus the power of the Elements of Harmony was now in the hooves of the New State thugs. Only a being such as Celestia could conjure that much raw power. She sincerely hoped that Celestia would be able to hold off the New State—who could tell how powerful they were now that they had the Element of Magic? And what if they had taken the other crystals as well? She didn't even dare to think of that. The Princess had warned her, the day that Nightmare Moon had been defeated, of what could happen if the crystals fell into the wrong hooves.

Somepony was in the room behind her, she could sense it. She spun around and shot a beam of magical energy at the intruder, knocking it off-

balance and pinning it against the wall by its neck.

"Twi! No! It's me! Spike!" it gasped through the magical stranglehold.

Twilight let Spike fall to the ground in horror. She could have killed him! "Oh, Spike! I didn't hurt you, did I?" she asked worriedly.

Spike gasped for breath. "No, not really," he croaked, rubbing at his neck.

"Where's Daylight? Is she safe?" Twilight asked frantically.

"Yeah, she's safe. We both hid in the basement when some uniformed ponies broke in. They didn't even go down there. Twi, they stole it," he said.

"Yes, Spike... I know. Where is Daylight now?"

"Oh, she's still in the basement. Want me to go get her?" Spike asked.

"No... not yet. I need you to send a note to Canterlot as fast as possible. I cannot describe the urgency, so write quickly," Twilight replied.

"Okay!" Spike said, quill quickly ready in his claws.

"Dear Princess Celestia, I have observed the meeting of the New State ponies. They hypnotized the town, but I'm not sure how. Maybe a drug was placed in the food they consumed beforehand, or perhaps it had something to do with what they called 'The Eye.' Regardless, the focus crystal for the Element of Magic has been stolen from me by thieves working with the New State.

"I fear that you and Princess Luna may be in grave danger. I do not know if the other five focus crystals have been stolen as well, but it is a safe bet that they have. Whoever is behind this knew exactly what they needed. They mean to dethrone you, most likely through violent means! Please respond poste-haste, your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle" Twilight finished. "Send it now," she said flatly.

Spike rolled the parchment and wrapped a red ribbon around it before breathing a burst of dragon fire. The note vanished in a puff of green smoke. They had to wait only about a minute before a response came.

Spike doubled over, and retched out a cloud of ashes that became a note. This one was odd; it was a completely different kind of paper. It was thin and pasty white, not like the thick ivory parchment that Celestia favored, and had been neatly folded rather than rolled.

"That's weird..." Spike said as he opened the note. It was not written; rather, it had been typed by one of those fast new typing machines.

"What is it, Spike?" Twilight asked, looking over Spike's shoulder.

"This isn't from the Princess. Here, listen—'Mrs. Sparkle, I regret to inform you that this warning of yours came too late. Only moments ago, rebels stormed the city and overran the castle defenders. They were led by six unicorns, each wielding one of the stolen focus crystals. Their magic was amplified by the crystals to the point that the Royal Sorcerers were powerless to stop them."

"We don't yet know exactly what went on in the throne room, but we have confirmed that Princess Celestia is missing, and Princess Luna has suffered a mortal puncture wound to the neck."

"The New State has forced a retreat of the remaining Royal Guards and myself to a safe location. Casualties cannot be estimated at this time. Major damage to the city includes the destruction of the Royal Records Office and the burning of the Royal Library. Princess Luna is with us now, but our medical staff does not believe that she will make it through the night. The magical failsafe for the Sun and Moon has been tripped, which will keep the celestial cycles in motion for the time being in the Princess's absence."

"Our covert agents, who have been monitoring the dragon fire networks, have informed me that the New State believes you to be a major threat, most likely due to your connection to Princess Celestia. You must remove yourself from Ponyville immediately to ensure your safety."

"Our scrying devices also show movement of New State rebels in your area and estimate that they shall be upon you within ten minutes. Signed, Maj. General Stouthoof, Commander of the Royal Military Forces of Equestria," Spike said, his voice wavering.

Twilight could not find any words; spoken language momentarily eluded

her. Her fear suddenly became a grim resolve when she realized what she had to do. She galloped downstairs and seized a book from the shelf nearest the shattered door. Rushing back upstairs and snatching the quill from Spike, she hastily wrote a short letter before folding it and placing it in an envelope.

Twilight touched her forehead, feeling the cool trace of gold at the base of her horn. *Forgive me, Macintosh, for what I'm about to do.* With loving care, she slipped her wedding band off of her horn and placed it in the envelope with the letter. Twilight sealed it with wax and wrapped it with the book in brown paper. The little bundle was then thrown into her saddlebag, which she handed to Spike. She then wrote a second note with as much speed as she could muster.

"Go and get Daylight for me, I need to talk to her," Twilight commanded with deep sadness in her voice.

"Sure thing, Twi," Spike said disconcertedly and ran off to do what she asked.

Spike rushed back with Daylight in tow. The little filly was disheveled and almost in tears. "Mommy!" she shouted happily at the sight of Twilight. "I was so scared! Who were they, Mommy? Why did they break the door?" the filly asked as she affectionately rubbed up against her mother.

Twilight looked down fondly at her daughter. "That's not important. I need you to listen to me carefully, Daylight, and do what I'm about to tell you to. Can you do that for me, Daylight?" she asked.

"What is it, Mommy?" Daylight asked nervously.

"Can you do that for me, Daylight?" Twilight repeated.

"I s'pose..." Daylight responded, after a pause.

"Okay, I'm sending you to visit with Aunt Applejack for a while; I want you to do everything she tells you to. Give her this note when you get to Appleoosa." Twilight handed her the second note.

"You... you will be coming, right?" Daylight asked.

"I have to stay here for a little while sweetie, there is some unfinished business that I have to deal with before I can come. Spike will fly you there safely," Twilight said in a soft tone.

"I want to stay with you, Mommy! I don't wanna leave!" Daylight said in a fuss, tears beginning to well up in her eyes.

Twilight leaned down, giving her daughter a firm hug. "I'll be with you every step of the way, sweetie. Don't you worry."

Daylight sniffed. "Promise?"

"Promise. Now, you must go," Twilight said, placing her daughter carefully on Spike's back. She leaned in to whisper in his ear, "See her to safety, Spike. I'm counting on you."

Spike gave a weak smile. "Anything for you, Twi."

Twilight gave Daylight one last embrace. "One more thing," she told her.

"Yes Mommy?"

"Don't look back," Twilight said. Before Daylight could reply, Spike was out the door and surging forth clumsily into the dark summer night.

If she was so important to these rebels, then they would follow her. She was far too exhausted to teleport them all to safety. Even if she could have, they would have come at her again. If these ponies had already done this much damage and they wanted her dead, then they would never stop chasing her. At least this way, her daughter would be safe.

They'd be here any second now; she could feel the massive vibrations of many hoof beats on the dirt road. Daylight and Spike had gotten out just in time, it seemed. The hoof beats stopped abruptly. Twilight stood as tall as she could when the speaker from the fairgrounds trotted through the open door and took a place in front of her, his cohorts standing close behind. None of the brainwashed ponies followed. That was good.

"Twilight Sparkle, I presume?" the slimy voice said, "I am Maleve. I don't

think we've had the pleasure of a proper introduction."

Twilight looked at him hard, and though she could not see his eyes, she stared directly into them. She said nothing.

"Oh, come now," Maleve said, as if taken aback. "Have you nothing to say to a pony of such eminence?"

Twilight ignored the unicorn's words. She simply stared at his invisible eyes, beaming hot sulfurous hatred into his soul.

"Well, I do admit, I had hoped for a philosophical conversation, having heard many things about your intelligence from a certain elderly tyrant. What was her name again? Oh, I remember now. She called herself Celestia. That was of course before I killed her, personally I might add. It was a pity that I couldn't have finished the blue one off, but I think she will not recover. That wound of hers was pretty nasty, after all. It's a shame, really—she would have made a powerful ally if she had taken me up on my offer."

Twilight met him with silence.

"You're wondering, no doubt, how I did it," he continued, "Wasn't I at the rally and not in Canterlot? Oh, that is quite true, I was in Ponyville, but I was also in Canterlot. Come to think of it, I led the revolt in Manehattan as well, and took down the bastion of Cloudsdale with my own two hooves and horn. Yes indeed, I was in many places at once. I can split myself, you see, with the magic that the Eye has given me. The Eye gives me the ability to do many things. But now, I am all here." His voice dripped with morbid sincerity. "I have come to extinguish the spark."

Twilight blinked.

"That is, unless you would take me up on my offer," he said pensively. "The same offer that foolish Luna did not accept. I am in a position to offer you a powerful place in the new order. A position that would grant you many things, indeed. Oh, don't try to hide it—you want power. You crave power. This is your chance to have it. So now I ask you, and I will ask you only once: will you join the New State?"

"No," Twilight stated boldly. "I could never be party to such horror. No, I will not join you." She looked at Maleve coolly. "You have extinguished nothing today. All you have done is ignited a flame in the heart of Equestria that I know will *never* be put out. It will burn forevermore, only growing in strength and intensity as time goes by. It is something that can never be tamed by you, or by any pony."

She gazed about the library one last time, remembering everything about it, drinking in the moment. She relived in a fraction of a second all the long nights of studying, the surprise party that Pinkie Pie threw here on her first day in Ponyville, her first sleepover with Rarity and Applejack, the many sleepless nights of weeping until she fell asleep, thinking of her husband Macintosh and how he'd never come back. She took her memories of life and stored them away, somewhere deep inside herself. Somewhere she knew that they couldn't ever be forgotten, no matter what happened.

As Twilight finished her sentence Maleve made as if to move against her, but hesitated ever so slightly as if unsure about her. It was all the time she needed. Her magic welled up within her, growing into a flame and quickly matching the ferocity she felt within. Every door and window snapped shut and magically sealed, the smashed front door suddenly repaired and bolted. Maleve turned to see it with a start, realizing that there would be no escape.

Twilight's eyes began to glow with a piercing light. The wreaths of flame that she had felt envelop her heart began to snake out into reality, blossoming like flowers in the morning sun. Curling tongues of fire spread from her mane and lapped at the books around her, igniting their weathered pages—each one the summation of a lifetime of knowledge and each one vanishing in a cloud of smoke and ash faster than one could blink. Greedily, hungrily, the flame spread outward faster and faster. It consumed everything it touched, changing soft fabric to black dust, charring and burning fur and skin alike until it was wholly unrecognizable. The inferno melted glass from the windows that began to drip down like a hellish, terrible rain.

A hurricane wind whipped itself into being and stirred the roaring conflagration. The wind fanned and blew the flame in a mighty firestorm that spread throughout the entire tree. She saw the ponies surrounding her succumb one by one to the flame. Maleve was the last to fall, his own

magic having protected him thus far. But not even magic of his ability could stand forever against this raw, primal outburst of fury.

The light inside the tree was blinding... almost like standing on the surface of Celestia's magnificent sun. Twilight shut her eyes as her own magical fire turned against her. As she felt the sting of the heat and the weight of the world collapsing in upon her, the light faded from her eyes.

I'm sorry Daylight, that I couldn't keep my promise.

I'm sorry Macintosh, for everything.

I'm so sorry.

She looked back.

Daylight had promised that she wouldn't look back. But she did anyway.

As Spike climbed higher into the night air, she saw the flash of light within the library as it seemed to shrink. She saw the flames climbing higher within what used to be her home. The ponies of the town raced about aimlessly in the flickering firelight, like a trail of ants cut off from their queen.

Soon the entire tree was illuminated both inside and out, like a dreadful beacon, sending a wordless message to the world. Smaller and smaller the tree looked, with every passing minute. Would she ever come back? Would she ever see her mother again? The questions hung like lead in her heart.

The light from the flames reflected off of the billowing pillar of smoke, ash, and intensely heated air, giving it an almost supernatural glow. Her last glimpse of the tree was as it collapsed in upon itself before the light receded over the eastern horizon.

The only light that shone upon the duo now was the silvery light of the stars and the moon.

She cried openly upon Spike's back, until she found her way into a fitful sleep.

Chapter One

Twenty Years Later

"See now the flowery way that leads to the broad gate and the great fire."

Winter came early that year, bringing with it a piercing and frigid wind. The cold ate through anypony caught in its path, and even Daylight's thick wool sweater did little to hold back the chill.

In an effort to be as quiet as possible, she had used her magic to open the front door of her house before carefully stepping out into the darkness, and managed to shut it behind her with naught but a barely audiblesqueak. With any luck it would not disturb her Aunt, who was curled up in her bed with the deep sleep only elderly and very young ponies could really manage.

Daylight breathed a sigh of relief as she relished the relative safety of the open night. She had spent a great deal of time memorizing the layout of the house she and her Aunt Applejack had always (as far as she could remember, anyway) shared so that she could navigate in pitch darkness. Any light, even the faint shimmer of a glow spell, would have immediately given her away to the Spectators placed on the main wall of every room.

The small devices looked almost exactly like living eyes, and disturbed Daylight in a way that she couldn't quite identify. She wasn't entirely sure what purpose the Spectators served, but was reasonably certain that it was a transmitter; the eye snapped open at the slightest sound or movement, pupil locked on everypony in view and seemingly content with simply *watching*.

In the dark and quiet, however, the Spectator was as good as blind.

The bright yellow pony closed her eyes and took a deep breath of the clean, chill air before beginning her nightly walk around the neighborhood. These walks were her only way to escape, at least temporarily, from the grey dominance of the rigid city. She gazed at the starlit sky in wonder as she trotted—what were they, really? What brought them out at day's end?

In her mind she saw them as a billion tiny candles hovering high above her head, flickering in the wind.

A drifting cloud brought her attention to the Moon, and she slowed to a canter. The silvery orb seemed almost like another world. The schools had never taught her about the heavens. Whenever she asked her Educators, they always said that the useless expanse above was not important and that no pony should bother asking such ridiculous questions. They told her that she must commit herself to things more pertinent to her immediate life, such as finding new and better ways to serve the State. Daylight never took much joy in doing the bidding of the State, but she had eventually learned to do as she was told. There was no other way to live.

As Daylight passed the numerous houses and bungalows lining the dimly illuminated street, she noted once again their obvious states of disrepair. Only the odd few seemed almost brand new—and probably were—but most were semi-rotten, overgrown with scraggly weeds. It wasn't a big mystery why the houses had been abandoned, though. When the town really began to take off twenty years before and started to become a full-fledged metropolis, the State had begun levying high taxes on the outer-city buildings in an attempt to entice ponies to spend all of their time and money in the city's center. Many ponies outright abandoned their houses in favor of moving to the far more affordable inner-city housing units. The buildings had stood vacant ever since, their once gaily painted exteriors faded to dull pastels.

When the shift had happened, however, Daylight and her Aunt Applejack had stayed right where they were. Thus, their house could be freely counted as one of the nicest of the still-habitable dwellings in the outer city divisions. Applejack had a penchant for yard work and gardening that helped to keep their small plot of land trimmed and well-kept, and she even managed to produce the occasional fresh vegetable in spite of the city's infertile, dry soil. Daylight doubted that she could manage as well even with the help of her magic.

The Change apparently happened during Daylight's early fillyhood, but she couldn't remember any of it. There seemed instead to be a huge blank in her memory, almost as if somepony had broken in and erased it. Every time Daylight tried to ask Applejack about the time period of her missing memories, the aging earth pony would abruptly change the subject. If

Daylight wasn't so sure that Applejack was losing some of her mental facilities in her old age, she would have thought that there was something that her aunt didn't want her to know.

Daylight followed her usual nightly route, humming a patriotic State tune that synchronized very well with her hoof beats upon the street's river-rock cobblestones. A small yellow drop-box drew her attention as she reached a crossroads, and she slowed as she passed it. The container hung on an iron post, just below a lantern containing a magical blue flame illuminating a single, bold word painted across its metal housing:

INFORMATION

The Department of Public Safety had set up a number of the boxes several years back to help, as they said, *'curb the rising tide of dissent among the citizens of the State.'* The objects were simply known as Information Boxes, and it was there that ponies were to submit the names and photographs of anypony they thought to be suspicious or subversive. Daylight shuddered as she remembered the tales of what happened to ponies whose names were submitted to the innocent-looking yellow boxes.

Some said that the ponies were simply banished, or that they wound up imprisoned in a secret dungeon the State had hidden in the mountains to the North. Others, however—particularly the younger ponies—were convinced that they were taken away to be killed and ground up in the Haylent factories as food, to be distributed to all the ponies within the State's numerous cities.

Daylight, however, was far more inclined to believe the official story that the Department of Public Safety had posted. The DoPS stated that ponies reported through the Information Boxes were first investigated thoroughly and fairly. If they were found to be of a criminal mindset, they were taken away temporarily to Re-Education Camps. *'No pony has ever been harmed in the execution of the system,'* Daylight had been told by an Official Representative of the Department, and that was good enough for her.

Daylight was snapped out of her thoughts by a familiar feeling, such as she had when she was being watched. She spun around in a burst of adrenaline, intent on seeing if anypony was behind her, to be met with nothing but an empty street lit with the dim blue flicker of the Information

Box. Worry gnawed at her stomach—she had always known that these walks of hers were dangerous. No pony was ever supposed to be outside after curfew without a Pass; if the Peacekeepers found her or if any pony ever spotted and reported her, she would be arrested on sight. Even being on the streets during the day without a Pass was a surefire way to land oneself in a heap of trouble.

Reluctantly, Daylight turned her back on the empty street and continued her walk. Her three-kilometer loop was almost complete anyway, so she might as well finish it. However, she hadn't gone a hundred meters before the eerie feeling began anew, prickling at her scalp. It suddenly felt as if a sixth sense was telling her that some pony, or something, had been right where she was standing not a minute before... almost as if a ghost was keeping perfect pace in front of her, invisible yet still there. Suddenly the fur on the back of her neck stood on end, forcing her to turn to check behind herself once more. Nothing.

Her heart pounded noisily in her ears as she slowly turned back around, and she let out a sudden yelp of surprise and fear as she came face-to-face with another pony not ten centimeters from her nose, leaning forward with a huge grin plastered on her face as if she had been waiting for Daylight to turn around. Scrabbling backward, Daylight took half a second to size up the new pony. The stranger was a unicorn, like herself, who sported a coat of grey. Both her mane and tail were blonde and styled somewhat messily, and a small pair of rectangular spectacles perched crookedly atop her nose.

"Well Hellooooo!" The intruder sang.

"Er... hello?" Daylight backed up apprehensively, preparing to bolt.

The grey mare took notice of her fright almost immediately. "Oh! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you." At the sign of no change from Daylight she continued reassuringly. "Don't worry, I won't turn you in."

Daylight eyed the newcomer suspiciously before speaking uncomfortably. "Who are you and what are you doing out *here*?"

"Well, the same thing as you I s'pose!" There was a short silence.

"...walking?" Daylight asked, still unsure.

"Of course!" the grey unicorn said in a voice just a bit too loud for Daylight's comfort. "I come out here every night to clear my mind. I see you every night as well, but I've never said anything before now. I guess I was just worried that you might, well, you know. Because of where you work and all. But then I realized that you were just a pony like any other and that maybe I should get to know you. After all, we seem to have similar tastes," she winked.

Daylight simply met the odd unicorn with a disbelieving stare.

"So, what do you say, want to talk?"

"No," Daylight said simply and quietly, beginning to trot away.

"Whoops, I just realized that I forgot to introduce myself! I'm Dinky. Dinky Hooves. My mother and I just moved here, so I guess that makes us neighbors. Isn't that great?" Dinky seemed to be following Daylight, still intent on talking.

"Yes. Great," Daylight replied, obviously annoyed.

"Say, I didn't catch *your* name." Dinky eyed Daylight inquisitively.

Daylight sighed. Responding now might only encourage Dinky, and she really didn't want company. One pony wandering about the neighborhood might go unnoticed, but two was asking for trouble. On the other hoof, if Daylight acquiesced this one time, perhaps Dinky might leave her alone in the future. "It's Daylight Sparkle," she finally replied resignedly.

"Daylight Sparkle," Dinky repeated, "That's a pretty name! So what do you *do* at the Department, anyway?"

Daylight rolled her eyes. The walk back home was going to be a long one. "Paperwork," she told Dinky, "I'm a secretary."

"Ooh, sounds neat," Dinky replied, genuinely interested.

Daylight raised an eyebrow. "Not really."

"Well, it's better than the job I've got."

"Why, what's yours?"

"I'm a food distributor... at the Rations Dispensary. Mind numbing, to tell you the truth," Dinky shook her head, "I really do wish that we could choose our own work. I think that ponies might be more productive that way."

Daylight frowned. "Well that's just not how things work, Dinky. They've never been that way."

"Well, I heard that ponies used to be able to choose for themselves only a little more than two decades ago! And not just their jobs, they could choose—"

"Stop," Daylight said plainly, cutting off Dinky's excited voice. "You know that's not true, Dinky. Whoever told you that was lying, trying to get you hurt or in trouble."

Dinky looked down, and then kicked at a pebble with her front hoof before saying quietly, "My mother told me that. She's never lied to me."

"...Oh." Daylight couldn't think of anything else to say. Why would somepony's own mother tell such a blatant lie? How could a parent care so little about their own flesh and blood to feed them falsities that would surely put them in danger? It didn't make any sense. She looked at Dinky again, and the light of the moon reflected in the unicorn's amber eyes. Dinky seemed so sure of herself, so certain that what she said was true... some part of Daylight, buried deep down inside of her, almost wanted to believe her. She'd have to ask Applejack... if anypony knew, it would be Applejack.

"Well, I have to go for tonight, this house is mine," Daylight told Dinky as she finished her walk, indicating a small yellow bungalow with her hoof.

"Okay! Good night," Dinky said, "And oh, just so you know, I live two houses down. I hope we can be friends."

Daylight sighed softly and pulled the door open with her magic as silently as possible. She stepped inside and pulled off her sweater, reveling in the

warmth of the house. Before heading to bed, she checked to make sure that the Spectators hadn't taken notice of her and that Applejack was still soundly asleep. Even once she reached the safety and warmth of her covers, though, sleep eluded her restless mind.

She dreamed of an ancient, gnarled oak tree more than fifty feet tall and that not even ten ponies, hoof to hoof, could have wrapped their forelimbs around. The tree's interior had been hewn into a spacious abode filled to the brim with books and scrolls. She saw herself inside the tree perusing the books... but the moment she moved to touch the first one it burst into flame. The fire spread, further and further, dancing across the shelf and engulfing book after book. It surrounded her, licking at her coat and slowly enveloping her form in its fiery maw.

Her fur was burning—searing fumes wafted up from the char, choking her lungs, suffocating her. Within the flickering flames before her there was suddenly new movement: a great eye blinked into existence, wreathed in the very flame that was destroying her. As it watched her wither away, its terrible gaze locked with her own horrified stare.

The next morning Daylight awoke to the sun peeking through her window, casting its radiant warmth through the frosted windowpane. She yawned widely—she hadn't been able to sleep much, given how her mind had kept spinning in circles chasing traitorous thoughts, and the little sleep she had been able to attain had been troubled by vivid nightmares. With another yawn, she shuffled out of her room and into the kitchenette, eyes squinted against the offending light.

Her mind briefly wandered back to her nightmare, but she mentally smacked herself. Dreams didn't exist. They meant nothing. Her thoughts echoed back to her Educators' lessons; the nonexistence of dreams was one of the first things she could remember being taught. The only existence was the here and now, in service to the State. Even offhandedly mentioning a dream could get a filly sent to the Thinking Room.

Applejack was already up and about, fixing a warm breakfast for the both of

them and filling the air with the pleasant smells of burning firewood, apples, and baked goods. The elderly pony looked up as Daylight slouched to her place at the small table.

"Mornin' sugar cube!" she cheerfully said, intently monitoring something in the wood range, "Ah thought you'd never wake up; almost figured I'd hafta eat this apple cornbread all on mah own!" The earth pony chuckled at her own words.

"*Cornbread?*" Daylight asked, a bit confused, "Where the hay did you get cornmeal?"

"Remember that patch o' corn ah managed to sprout last summer?"

Daylight nodded, perturbed. "Yes, I remember that we didn't eat any of it."

"Well, that's 'cause ah dried and ground it up, an' it's been here in the cupboard e'er since!"

Daylight's eyes drifted as she rested her head on the cool grey surface of the kitchen table. Her attention jumped from Applejack's worn-out hat to the drab white cupboards, the icy window, and finally a tiny, plain wall clock that Applejack had hung above the table just a week before. The hands read eight forty-five, and Daylight narrowed her eyes. Something about the clock just didn't seem right.

She felt a gaze on the back of her head, and turned to see the kitchen's Spectator peering at her intently.

"Say, Daylight," Applejack hummed, pulling the fresh cornbread from the oven, "Don't ya have work ta'day?"

"Oh no!" Daylight sat bolt upright, immediately awake, and looked back to the clock: eight forty-seven! She was supposed to be at the Department no later than eight thirty! Her sweater and hard-sided briefcase were almost forgotten in her scramble to get out of the door and thoughts of hot, moist apple cornbread completely flew from her mind. "I gotta go!"

Applejack stood alone in the kitchen as the front door slammed closed, an entire steaming apple cornbread in front of her. She smacked her lips as

she looked down. "Well shoot, ah guess ah will have ta eat this all by my lonesome after all! Oh, well!"

Racing at full speed, Daylight managed the ten kilometers to the Department in just under fifteen minutes. She stopped outside of the threatening basalt skyscraper for a second to compose herself before shoving her way through the revolving door. In reality the building was only ten floors, yet had been constructed in a roughly trapezoidal shape, playing on perspective so that the polished black erection—devoid of any windows—looked almost three times taller than it actually was.

The building's sterile interior had been brightly lit, and the glare reflecting off of the clean white walls, floor and ceiling momentary blinded Daylight. The unicorn pony—whose normally cheerful yellow coat even took on an artificial quality under the intense illumination—was forced to squint until her eyes adjusted. Her hoofsteps echoed as she walked through the large, silent lobby and up to a lone slate desk where a single disinterested earth pony sat. The old grey mare didn't even glance up as Daylight signed in before passing through the heavy metal door behind her.

Past a cramped, dim hallway lined only with a dull green rug was yet another metallic door—this time leading to a small silver room. As Daylight stepped inside the door automatically closed behind her, and spectral voice echoed in from all directions: "Floor?"

"Ten," Daylight tapped her hoof impatiently as the room began to glow with magical energy before surging upwards at incredible speed. Daylight widened her stance unconsciously, a habit formed by long practice, as the room accelerated faster and faster until it lurched to a halt at the top floor. The door of the lift clunked open, revealing a hallway almost identical to the first. Daylight turned and walked to the right, passing rows of evenly spaced black doors until she reached her own office.

The lock was swiftly opened with the key and a small burst of her magic. She set her briefcase down on the desk, relieved at not encountering any of her coworkers on the way up, but the feeling quickly evaporated as she noticed a note written in a disturbing red ink on her desk. It read, quite concisely: *Miss Daylight Sparkle, please see me in my office when you*

arrive. Signed, Chief Interrogator Redsky. The rest of the thin white parchment was blank.

In addition to being worryingly short and vague the message had come directly from the Chief Interrogator, a pony that you rarely ever saw—and never *wanted* to see. Stiffly, she turned left out of her door and walked down the hall she had just come from. Chief Redsky's office was at the very end, thirty doors down, and time seemed to slow to a crawl as she approached the only white door in the hall. There was no ornate woodwork, no handle, and no hinges. The only discrepancy that it bore was a painted image of the Eye, staring lidless, forever open and watching.

An enchantment caused the eye to flicker and follow Daylight as she swallowed her fear and trepidation before nervously lifting a hoof to knock. Before she had even raised her hoof an inch, however, a deep voice resonated from the room beyond.

"Come in," it said as the door swung open of its own volition, "Do have a seat."

The office that Daylight found herself looking into was almost as plain as the lobby downstairs. A red-furred Pegasus sat behind a mahogany desk and, behind him, rows and rows of filing cabinets lined the wall. The drawers were labeled with the letters of the alphabet, and Daylight knew that they contained the names and vital records of every citizen in City Seven.

Chief Interrogator Redsky beckoned her towards a single wooden chair positioned directly in front of his desk. He wore no uniform—only a pressed white collar and tie. The door shut silently behind her as Daylight took a seat.

"Well, Miss Sparkle," Redsky said in an unnervingly cold tone, "You're late." He reached out a hoof and rotated a silver desktop clock to face Daylight. The timepiece read nine o' clock exactly.

Daylight was shaking slightly as she answered, hoping that her meager excuse would be enough. "Well, I, ah, got held up."

Redsky sat motionless, eyes boring dangerously into Daylight. "Here at the

Department of Public Safety, employees are *never* late. Do you know why, Miss Sparkle?"

She shrunk in her chair, terrified. "No..."

"Because ponies who are late must be... how shall I put it? *Let go*, " Redsky told her. He paused for a moment to let his point sink in, and then continued, "I trust that this is a one-time occurrence, and that it shall not be repeated?"

Daylight nodded with relief, "Yes sir, it won't happen again, sir."

"Make sure that it *doesn't*. " He motioned for her to leave, turning his attention back to the files on his desk.

Daylight hadn't needed to be told twice—she was out of the door as soon as he had finished talking. She returned to her desk quickly, intent on make up any work she might have missed in the half hour she had not been at work.

Apart from the brief but terrifying encounter with the Chief Interrogator, her day could hardly have been considered eventful. Daylight had gone through countless files, pulling the names of specific individuals for various Departmental sections. She had also spent a great deal of time revising news articles, redacting certain tidbits of information that the State would consider dangerous. That afternoon, she put in half an hour of overtime to make up for her tardiness in the morning and signed out at precisely six o' clock.

The warmth of the day rapidly waned on her walk home, the sun's brilliant fiery yellow dimming first to a soft orange and then a smoldering red. Behind her, however, the Department reflected none of the sunset's brilliant colors—a black void in an otherwise sun-washed cityscape.

Daylight shivered slightly as a chill wind brought with it the promise of another cold night and quickened her pace, hoping to reach home before nightfall. Usually she made it home well before the State curfew, but today she was very concerned that she might not be able to make it. Her

commuting pass was only good until sundown, and she didn't want *any* more trouble today than she'd already dealt with.

As she rounded the corner onto Lane Twelve, however, her thoughts were interrupted by a loud ruckus in front of an aging warehouse. Four Peacekeepers, three unicorns and an earth pony all dressed in their trademark white suits and black bowlers, had surrounded an elderly grey Pegasus with an uncanny similarity to Dinky. The Peacekeepers snatched the Pegasus' satchel as they accosted her.

"I've seen this one before!" One of the Peacekeepers, the earth pony, grunted to the others, "She's that courier with the eyes, the one I was telling you about. I don't like her!"

"Oh, let me handle this one," a second Peacekeeper told the first. He turned to grin wickedly at the Pegasus. "Just what do you think you're doing on the streets without a Pass?"

The frightened grey Pegasus struggled to speak. "B-but... but sir, I *have* a pass..."

"Oh, do you?" The Peacekeeper magicked a worn scrap of paper from the bag and made a point of examining it closely before casting a fire spell. The pass fluttered to the ground as it was slowly consumed by the flames.

"Well—Mrs. Derpy Hooves, is it? I don't see any pass in here. Perhaps it's at the bottom?" With a spark of magic the satchel was upended, sending dozens of letters scattering into the wind.

"My mail!" Derpy yelled, mouth agape as she made a futile attempt to catch the postage before the other two unicorn Peacekeepers grasped her wings in their magic.

"You're not going anywhere, freak eyes!" The earth pony Peacekeeper lifted a baton in his mouth, and the unicorns followed suite with levitation spells. Derpy looked at them, eyes wide in terror.

"Wait, don't—!"

Her words were cut short as she was struck harshly against her spine. The unicorns released the magic holding her, allowing her to fall hard to the

ground under a hail of blows. Her pitiful screams for help echoed down the street as she curled into a fetal position, attempting to make herself as small a target as possible.

Daylight watched the onslaught in abject horror. Yes, she had heard of the Peacekeepers doing things like this, but frankly she had never believed it—such reports were obviously just disparaging remarks made by dissenters to mar the image of the Department and the State. Yet here, right in front of her, a group of Peacekeepers was fixing to murder an innocent Pegasus. Agitatedly, she pawed at the ground with her forehoof. She couldn't just stand by and watch her die—she had to do *something*!

But these were agents of the State. If they thought that something was right, then it was right. That was how the world worked. It was how the world had *always* worked. She shouldn't even be considering this matter at all! She should just walk away and forget it had ever happened. This was just a glitch, it didn't matter.

When she tried to do just that, however, she found that she couldn't. Her body was rooted to the spot like a tree, her mind caught in Derpy's voice wailing, crying, pleading for help. The sound stuck in her ears, playing over and over like a scratched record. Derpy hadn't done anything to warrant this attack!

Maybe... maybe the Peacekeepers... were wrong?

No. No, stop it, Daylight, she thought to herself, trying to block out the quieting screams, *It's treason to even think like this! It'll just get me in trouble too!* She ground her teeth in frustration, thinking frantically. *What should I do? WHAT SHOULD I DO?*

Then, without thinking, she spat out her briefcase's handle, lowered her head, and charged at the nearest of the Peacekeepers. The earth pony was hit with enough force to be hurled right into the first unicorn, the wind knocked from both of them. All four of the Peacekeepers froze, taken by surprise—they'd never encountered resistance before.

Even Daylight herself was surprised—and shocked, and horrified—by what she had just done.

"What the—?" the lead unicorn began, "Oh, a little foal wants to join in the fun! How 'bout it, boys?" He stood up and raised the magically glowing baton high in the air before sending it crashing down at the base of Daylight's skull.

Stars exploded through her vision, and she dimly felt something warm and wet run down the back of her neck. She stumbled, head swimming, unable to think straight as blackness encroached on her field of view. Groggily, she inserted herself between Derpy and the Peacekeepers—as Applejack used to say, *'As long as you've already bitten off more than ya can chew, why not eat tha whole pie?'*

Oh, I can think of a few good reasons, she thought blearily as she saw the baton rise back into the air, ready to strike again. She shut her eyes, anticipating the impact...

...but the blow never came. All at once, a flash of light and a miniature clap of thunder overloaded her vision and ears. Head spinning, she looked up at the twilight sky—the stars were certainly dancing tonight—and then around herself in amazement. She was no longer on Lane Twelve, but was lying flat on her back in the street before her house. The only explanation that she could come up with was that she apparently must have somehow teleported through the use of her magic; before now, she hadn't even known that such a feat was *possible*.

She stood shakily and found Derpy crouched on the pavement, head beneath her hooves, quietly sobbing amidst several crumpled letters and bloodstained feathers that must have been caught in the teleportation's slipstream. Daylight nearly fainted outright as she saw the amount of crimson blood matted into the Pegasus's fur and draining out onto the cobblestones. Derpy's left wing hung limp against her side, missing most of its flight feathers and obviously fractured.

As Daylight's senses began to return over the growing pain at the base of her skull, her mind started racing. So many things had to be thought about. Where she had once been so sure of her beliefs, she was suddenly beginning to doubt them. This atrocity had been committed by the very ponies whose job was supposedly to protect the citizens of the State. *But protect them from what?* she wondered, never having actually thought about it before, *An elderly Pegasus? She was no threat to anypony.*

Her head was throbbing, and not just from her concussion. She turned to Derpy, extending a hoof. "Come on, let's get you home."

Derpy looked up at Daylight, cheeks ruddy from tears and eyes swollen. "You—you saved me," she said, disbelief evident before moaning mournfully, "They'll want *you* now!"

Daylight grasped Derpy, hauling her back to her hooves. "I don't think they got a good look at me." She supported Derpy's weight as they limped the few yards to Dinky's residence.

Dinky's home wasn't anywhere near as well-kept as Daylight's. The numbers painted on the door had long since been worn away by the weather, and the cracked stepping stones led through a yard overgrown with weeds.

Derpy winced in pain as she fumbled for her key, and Daylight helped her manipulate the key with what little magical energy she could muster. The door clicked like a dying beetle before swinging slowly inward, revealing a small and sparsely decorated room. An alcove containing a small table sat opposite to the door and the chipping paint was brighter in telltale shapes on the alcove's walls, giving Daylight the impression that they had once been covered with book-filled shelves. Dinky sat hunched at the table over something that Daylight couldn't quite see.

At the sound of the opening door, the blonde-maned pony frantically shoved the object into a drawer beneath the table and whipped around to see who had entered.

"Oh, Mother!" Dinky cried in shock at seeing Derpy, and quickly rushed over to take her from Daylight, "What happened?"

Derpy made no attempt to reply; instead, she only ambled over to a far corner of the room and settled down on a soft red futon propped against the wall. She shut her eyes and hugged a tattered yellow doll that had been left there.

Dinky looked towards Daylight as she began tending to her mother's wounds. "Thank you, for helping her get back home. What—what

happened, exactly?"

"It was the Peacekeepers. They were attacking her. I... I intervened."

A forlorn expression washed over Dinky's face. "I was afraid that would happen again."

"Again?" Daylight couldn't believe what she was hearing. "This has happened *before*?"

"Yes, twice before," Dinky sighed, "We used to live in City Two until she was singled out by the Peacekeepers and nearly beaten to death. We applied for a transfer to City Five, and it was granted. We moved as soon as possible, but not a week after we arrived it happened again. Worse that time—she came within an inch of her life. So we transferred again. To City Seven, thinking that we'd be far enough away from the State center that this wouldn't happen anymore. I see now that we were wrong. She got lucky this time; comparatively, she's not too badly hurt. If you hadn't come along..." her face screwed up in anger.

"But why? Why would they attack her?" Daylight asked.

"Because she's *different*, that's why! She's defected, according to the State. Inferior! And they say that she's bad because of it! They say that *I'm* bad because of it!" Dinky ranted furiously, quickly losing control of her temper. Her ministrations became a little rough, and Derpy squeaked in pain.

"Dinky?" Daylight fidgeted slightly as she noticed a flicker of movement on the main wall.

"It's this State that's defected! They say that they want to bring *happiness*, but they don't *mean* it! They thrive on our pain! All they care about is *themselves*!" Dinky clenched her teeth and dropped the roll of bandages as her anger made it impossible to concentrate on her levitation spell.

"Dinky! You need to—" Daylight was quickly cut off by Dinky's tirade, and began backing slowly towards the front door.

"Avarice! That's all it is! What happened to *love*? To *compassion*? Where'd

it all go? It's burned. Burned with all the books. Burned with all the ponies who ever spoke out against *them!* I'll tell you who needs to burn—*HIM!* Oh, you know who I'm talking about! *Even the Eye itself!* "

"Dinky, *please stop!* " Daylight keened frantically. The Spectator was wide awake, eye fixated upon Dinky. Daylight had backed to the door now, trying desperately to remove herself from the Spectator's view.

"Why, I'll do it myself if nopony else will!" Dinky shouted obliviously.

Dinky was going to get them both caught, and that was enough for Daylight. She turned, and with all haste threw the door open and bolted through. She galloped away, attempting to put as much distance between her and Dinky as possible.

Dinky stamped her hooves on the floor and snorted, "I can't take any more of this! This place is... this place is..." her outburst died down when she noticed the open front door and Daylight's absence. "Daylight? Where did you...?" she froze.

Her gaze turned to the wall and the lidless eye staring into her. A tiny red light blinked into existence below it and began flashing to a hellish tempo.

Cold fear slithered over her, rapidly turning to horror as she realized what she had done.

Chapter Two

Ghosts of the Past

"It is the bright day that brings forth the adder and that craves wary walking."

That night, Daylight was again haunted by nightmares. She found herself once more standing inside the hollowed-out trunk of an ancient tree, in the middle of the lowest room. A shattered wooden door lay in front of her, its crushed pieces strewn across the entryway like a spilled bag of oats. Outside it was dark—through the door-less entrance, the stars winked at her across an unfamiliar landscape. Though the scene was otherwise peaceful, tension and fear seemed to hang thick in the air, building with time and putting her on edge.

Suddenly she noticed another pony there—though she had been there all along, she now realized. Before her stood a tall and stately purple unicorn, and though Daylight didn't recognize her features an intense feeling of kinship warmed her heart. It was almost as if Daylight had known her well at some point, but had long since forgotten.

The unicorn's mane and tail were a deep shade of blue, broken only by two streaks of pink. Her gleaming purple eyes radiated a comforting familiarity, and filled Daylight with a feeling of peace the likes of which she could not remember having ever felt. They met each other's gaze, eyes locked, and simply stood that way for what felt like an eternity and yet no time at all.

Daylight wanted this moment to last forever. She felt as though she was truly home.

The moment, however, proved far too good to last. The flames that Daylight had grown to dread rippled out from the unicorn's very mane, slithering about the room like hideous burning serpents. The blaze spread out in a ring, rapidly consuming the ancient wood surrounding them. Still, the unicorn made no move to save herself. She simply stood amidst the fire and flames, watching Daylight with saddened, loving eyes.

A phantasmal force snatched at Daylight, dragging her from the innocent happiness of the book-filled room. *NO!* she thought, she didn't want to leave. She didn't want to leave! As she was drawn slowly into an enveloping blackness she reached out a hoof to the unicorn, beseeching help.

The unicorn simply looked at her as Daylight vanished into the darkness. Before the flames licking at her fur completely engulfed her, a profoundly forlorn expression came over her face and she spoke softly, ever so softly, to Daylight.

"I'll be with you every step of the way, Sweetie. Don't you worry."

Daylight awoke in the dark, her face pressed deep into a clammy pillow wet with tears. She looked quickly about the room, confirming reality before settling back into her chilly sheets with a huff. A faint glow shone through her curtains—it was too close to daybreak now to go back to sleep. Resigned, she threw the covers from her body and rolled off the bed and onto the cold wooden floor. She shivered slightly as she trotted from her room, her head beginning to throb and ache from her injury the night before.

Applejack hadn't woken up yet, she noticed as she checked her Aunt's room. Daylight desperately wanted to ask her about all the things she couldn't explain herself, but Applejack had gone to bed early the previous evening and was already asleep when Daylight burst through their front door in a panic. Daylight hadn't the heart to wake her, so the questionings would have to wait until that evening.

In the kitchen she lit the oil lamp on the dining table, revealing half of the previous day's cornbread still in its dish. She served herself a slice—it was a bit stale, but tasty nonetheless, and definitely filling. As she ate the last bite of bread, Daylight decided to head out early. There was something that she wanted to check on before work, and she did not want to be late two days in a row—who knew what Redsky would do if she were.

She didn't worry too much about staying quiet as she worriedly magicked her way through the front door, briefcase in tow and sweater bundled tight

against the early morning chill. Snow had fallen that night, wrapping the earth in a pristine white shell that crunched open beneath her hooves, and wind whipped down the boulevard. Bits of dusty snow swirled up in an invisible vortex before falling back to the ground in some other snow drift. The heaps of snow, sparkling in the morning sun, sat in glaring discordance with the greying and dilapidated houses.

Instead of heading towards her workplace, Daylight immediately turned right and cut across the snowy lawn of the abandoned bungalow next door, towards Dinky's house. As she looked it over, everything seemed to be in order. The house was intact, the doors and windows still in place and as weather-worn as they had ever been, although no light shone from the windows. That was to be expected at this early hour, however; nopony was ever up *before* the State mandate.

A check of the door showed no sign of forced entry... all was quiet. Warily, she raised a hoof and knocked lightly upon the door.

There was no answer.

She knocked again; once more, no answer. Hesitantly, she decided to try the handle—to her surprise, it was unlocked. The door swung easily open with a light push. Although the room inside was darkened, enough pre-dawn light seeped in to allow Daylight to see that the house was... empty.

The residence wasn't just devoid of life—it was devoid of *everything*. Derpy's red futon was gone, and no yellow doll sat in the corner. There were no tables, and no chairs. The small alcove, once a haven for books, sat devoid of even the simple wooden desk Daylight had seen Dinky sitting at the night before. The only things left seemed to be the Spectators, lids still closed, outwardly asleep.

Daylight called out nervously, voice just low enough to keep the Spectator from noticing. "Dinky?"

When no response came, she cautiously moved into the building to inspect the other rooms. All seemed to have followed the same Spartan trend as the living room. To all appearances Dinky and Derpy seemed to have simply vanished, taking with them any trace that they had ever lived there.

Daylight bit her tongue to keep herself from groaning with worry. Something had happened last night—no pony could move out that quickly, not even with a State transfer order. Things didn't add up. Unless... Daylight's eyes grew wide. *Unless the Department took them. They'd be back, though, wouldn't they? The Department is supposed to only Re-Educate them, nothing else.*

She looked around in dismay. *But then where did all of their belongings go?*

A horrible suspicion told her that she wouldn't ever see Dinky and Derpy again. They wouldn't be back. If Daylight had been wrong about the Peacekeepers, then why couldn't she also be wrong about the Department itself?

...why couldn't she have been wrong about the entire *State*?

There was only one way that she could figure this out—she'd have to find their records at the Department. Surely, filed away somewhere, she could find information on what had happened to the two grey ponies.

Quietly, she left the deserted bungalow. The first true rays of sunlight peeked over the rooftops, cutting through the sagging holes to the rotted wood and furniture inside. Walking at a normal speed, she would be just on time for work. Despite the comfort of routine, however, worry and sadness gnawed at her heart. Despite Daylight's initial reluctance, she had begun to hope that Dinky could have become a kind of friend to her... she'd never had any real friends before.

The reception desk sat empty as Daylight signed in, and she vaguely recalled something about a presentation that day—mandatory for all employees. After taking the lift, she peered into the tenth-floor presentation room to see all of the other employees sitting facing a large tapestry of the Eye. Chief Interrogator Redsky stood next to the tapestry, and as Daylight took her usual seat at the back of the room he motioned sharply upwards with a forehoof. The lights dimmed.

For a moment the only light in the room came from the unearthly glow of the Eye, which shimmered momentarily before dissolving into blackness. From the darkness a spectral voice began to magically emanate—a familiar

voice, one that every pony had repeatedly heard, but a voice that they always tried to forget.

"My friends," it began slowly, seeping into the ears of the audience like a slick poison, "You are all loyal citizens of the State. You do what is asked of you, for the good of every pony in the land, and as such you reap the rewards of civilization. The State provides you with food, clothing, shelter, safety... everything you need. But there are a few... who *take* without giving."

The audience stirred.

"They take what you work so hard to create. They work to destroy our happiness. They work to destroy our reality. They spread rumors. They spread lies. There is nothing that they won't say or do to ruin all that we hold dear. They must be stopped. They must be *punished*."

The ponies around Daylight voiced their approval.

"Now look," the voice began once more, "Look upon the face of the one who instigates this... *dissention*."

Light flashed once more from the tapestry, momentarily blinding all the ponies whose eyes had adjusted to the dark. Upon the fabric was now a glowing image of a scarred older Pegasus, glaring evilly out at the audience. Her teal fur was matted with dust and her graying multi-hued mane was bedraggled, lending to her terrifying appearance. She was clad in a strange blue and yellow uniform, and cracked goggles hung loosely about her neck. Deep fuchsia eyes glittered, emanating a kind of wickedness that had Daylight unconsciously rearing back in disgust.

Jeers and hisses rose from the crowd as hooves were stamped against the floor. A dense cloud of hate began to build within the room, the ponies releasing their anger towards the image of the Pegasus, building into a frenzy. One pony, a records clerk with whom Daylight had spoken on a number of occasions, became enraged and seized a small notebook. The tablet was flung violently at the tapestry, which rippled and swayed while she and the others screamed angrily.

These presentations happened every other week or so, and Daylight

realized that this was her chance to see if things were really as she feared. She could go and check, just to be safe... find Dinky's records and prove that she and her mother were safe, find out when they would be returned and things would go back to normal. She would discover that Dinky really had been wrong about the past. That things really always had been the way they were and that the Peacekeepers really did keep the peace.

Unnoticed by her infuriated peers, the yellow unicorn slid back out into the hall. She trotted quickly, conscious of every second ticking by, to where she knew that she would find her answers: the only place in the Department that held the absolutely true information.

The Chief Interrogator's office.

The door was locked, as could be expected, and as the Eye on the door peered intently at her Daylight found herself hoping beyond hope that it really was just a painted facsimile and not a real Spectator. Drawing from the magic in her horn, she poked around inside the mechanism of the lock. She carefully manipulated the latch inside, shifting the tiny balls until each one fell through their respective hole with a tiny, nearly inaudible plink.

The door swung inward, revealing the terrifying office she had encountered only the day before. Wasting no time, she immediately set about trying to find the records. The most obvious place to look was the row of filing cabinets behind Redsky's desk—due to their alphabetical nature, the drawer labeled "H" was easy enough for Daylight to find.

A drawer nearly a meter in length rolled open smoothly to reveal an interior filled to the brim with file after file. Daylight began flipping through them: Habit, Halter, Highland, Hillock, Hip, Hiss, Hobnob, Hoof... Aha! *Hooves*. A sigh of relief escaped Daylight's lips as she saw the file with Dinky's last name. Quickly, she magicked it out and threw it on Redsky's desk before flipping it open.

It was empty. She cursed her luck—perhaps the papers were elsewhere? Flinging the empty file to the side in dismay she ripped open Redsky's top desk drawer. A vital records file lay atop a pile of papers, and she picked it up excitedly. Was this it? No—it was labeled *Montag*, not at all the name Daylight was looking for. She rifled through the rest of the drawer's contents. Inventory reports? No. Staff Timesheets? No!

"No, no, no!" Daylight groaned, scattering loose papers as she went.

"What's the matter, Miss Sparkle? Not finding what you're looking for?"

Daylight froze upon hearing the cold voice, heart pumping loudly in her ears.

"You won't find many files under *Hooves*, I'm afraid. There aren't any ponies in City Seven with that name. In fact, there are no ponies with that name in *any* of the Cities," Redsky stated plainly, standing unconcernedly in the doorway, "They don't exist anymore. Or, I should say... they *never* existed."

Daylight was visibly shaking now as a horrible, hard knot formed in her stomach and her breakfast's contents threatened to attempt a coup on her esophagus. Her worst fears were being confirmed—in her mind the only reality she had never known was crashing down around her piece by piece like trees in a hurricane. All that she had ever known and been taught by the State had been a lie. She slowly turned around, searching for a venue of escape.

"Oh, I wouldn't try it, if I were you," Redsky smirked, satisfaction evident in his words, "Even if you did make it out, how far do you think you would get? We were willing to overlook your little escapades in the night and your interactions with individuals of a... *less than proper nature*. Yes, we know about them. That *is* our job here, after all, and we make it a point to know *everything*. But it seems that you have crossed a line today, Miss Sparkle. And now you must face the consequences. My Peacekeepers shall be along momentarily."

Daylight's options were rapidly dwindling—Redsky blocked the only exit, and she was as good as dead if the Peacekeepers caught up. There was no way that she could fight her way out or push through without being killed; Redsky was much larger and more muscular than her, and she had never had any reason to learn how to fight. Redsky began to slowly advance on her, attempting to back her into one of the corners. She had to think quick.

A tiny glint of steel caught her eye from atop Redsky's desk—it was her

only hope. Without thinking any further about what she was going to do she magically seized the metal calligraphy pen from its holder and catapulted it, point-first, through the air at Redsky with all the force she could muster. It flew straight and true, arcing briefly through the air like a miniature arrow.

Redsky had no time to react before the pen's wickedly sharp point found its mark, just below his jaw. He fell to the floor with a gurgling choke, clutching at his throat with his forehooves. A horrible, dark stream of crimson flowed from between his hooves as he writhed about in anguish, spattering messily across the pristinely cleaned floor. Sluggishly, he jerked forward and looked up at a horrified Daylight, standing over him with her mouth agape in dismay. She met his eyes as the life faded from them, and with a final sigh he became stiff and motionless, a pool of blood growing steadily outward from his body. Daylight's mind went completely numb.

I... I didn't mean to KILL him! she thought frantically, as if somehow denying her guilt might help, *I only meant to HURT him! So I could escape!*

Now more than ever, it became apparent to Daylight that she needed to leave—and quickly. She galloped with all her speed from the office and down the emergency stairs at the end of the hall. She couldn't risk the lift stopping on her—as soon as the Peacekeepers found the Chief Interrogator, all Hell would break loose. Every Peacekeeper in the city would be on her tail. She wasn't safe there anymore, and neither was Applejack. They would have to run, but to where? Where could they go that the State couldn't catch them?

Daylight was at a loss. She knew first-hand the capabilities of the State.

And now, they were all turned against her.

Exhausted, Daylight stopped to rest momentarily, panting heavily. She had never run so fast in her life. The Peacekeepers hadn't found her yet—that was good. And the Siren hadn't been set off, either. She hoped that she could get back home to Applejack before it began as once it was tripped, the entire City would be after her.

As if on cue, an eerie wail broke the silence of the mid-morning air. It began

almost as a whisper but soon worked its way up to an ear-piercing shriek, emanating magically from the Department building a few kilometers away. Daylight winced and took off again. The Siren had started, and she was running out of time. The tone broke momentarily, switching over to a cool female voice.

"Attention all residents of City Seven: there is a fugitive from justice loose within the city. Name: Daylight Sparkle. Occupation: Department Secretary. She is wanted for murder and treasonous crimes against the State. Watch for a yellow unicorn alone on hoof." The voice shut off as the siren returned to its horrible blare.

Daylight dashed into the shadows behind a large warehouse, knee-deep in snow. Trudging onward, she found her way into a long snaking alley that led six blocks in the right direction. Too soon, however, she found herself facing a broad, open street clear of snow. In plain sight.

Slowly, she peeked out around the corner and onto the frosty road. There was a shopkeeper standing outside of his shop only a few yards from her, intently gazing about the road. Waiting for somepony. *Waiting for her.*

An idea came to her: these ponies would be looking for a pony who was running. Maybe, just maybe, if she were to simply walk out across the street, as calmly as possible, she would not be noticed. It was a risk, but Daylight had no other option that she could see. She dusted herself off and composed her sweater so that it looked a bit less unkempt. Taking care not to rush, she trotted out onto the street, looking neither left nor right, just walking straight ahead as if she had someplace to be.

She was halfway there...

...three quarters...

...and she was across. Her plan seemed to have worked—either the shopkeeper hadn't noticed or hadn't followed. On a side street she broke into a full-out gallop, following it towards home as the Siren repeated its message. As she rounded the last corner to her house she gasped for breath, sprinting the last few meters to the door and flinging it open to reveal a very distressed Applejack standing in the main room.

"Daylight! What in tarnation is goin' on!" She huffed angrily, "They say you killed somepony!"

"No time to talk now!" Daylight rushed to her room, grabbing her saddlebags from the corner, "We've got to go! Run! Get some food and stuff together, we only have a minute or two." The Spectators in each room glared at her, red light blinking furiously. When she returned to the main room Applejack was still standing there, staring off into space. "Come on, Applejack! Quickly!"

Applejack shook her head and blinked, snapping herself out of it. She immediately grabbed her own bags from her bedroom and began packing as much food from the kitchenette as would fit. Then, she opened the cabinet beneath the sink and began rummaging through the rags and bottles.

"Applejack?" Daylight asked nervously. She had already finished packing and was getting antsy waiting for Applejack.

"Ah'm a-comin'. Just give me a sec, will ya?" Applejack said from inside the cabinet, "Aha! Here 'tis!" She pulled out a small brown paper package, slipping it quickly into her right saddlebag.

"What's in that?" Daylight asked, curiously.

"Later," Applejack stated, "Now, would ya mind explainin'—" A pounding on the front door that rattled the windowpanes interrupted her.

Daylight whipped around to see the door beginning to buckle, splinters forming on the inside. "I'm going to try something, Applejack, get close to me!"

Applejack's eyes flicked warily between Daylight and the rapidly disintegrating door. "Ah—ah don't know, Daylight. It's magic, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is, but it may be our only hope! If they get through the door, they'll kill us!"

"Okay..." Applejack moved to Daylight's side worriedly. Daylight began concentrating on her spell. She wasn't entirely sure how to do this, or if she

could even manage it a second time, but she had to try. She wracked her brain for the magic, searching for its power desperately. Her horn began to glow brightly, a hazy yellow aura flickering, waving back and forth and enveloping the two terrified ponies.

With a mighty CRACK the door caved inward, revealing six Peacekeepers. As they stormed into the room, the rush of adrenaline was enough to push Daylight's magic over the edge. With another mighty thunder-crack, the two vanished into thin air.

The Peacekeepers were left staring at each other in wonder, none of them able to understand what had just happened.

A tall shadowy figure sat encircled by burning incense, deep in thought and as motionless as a statue. The pungent smoke permeated the air of the darkened room, hanging in heavy clouds. The figure stared into the swirling trails of smoke as if entranced by some otherworldly deity as a bizarre feeling entered his consciousness. A buzzing ran through his mind, as if some far-off magic was tugging at him, offsetting his thoughts. He inhaled sharply.

"What is this..." he concentrated on the feeling, searching with all his power to bring it back, but found it slipping from his grasp. "...I haven't felt an aura like this for a very long time."

He stood, donning his white coat, and made sure that both his tie and silvery glasses were straight. He walked over to a plinth made of volcanic glass and peered down into a thick, gooey substance held in an inset basin. The unicorn began to channel his magical energy, directing it downward and into the fluid. The goo swirled rapidly, glowing from within, and at once showed him a city street down which a single yellow unicorn was frantically running. He concentrated harder, bringing the image into better focus, and information concerning this new pony flooded his mind.

"Ah, so this is the one. It seems I may have overlooked something... important," he muttered quietly, "Come back to haunt me once more, have you? We'll see."

The image faded once more into dark stillness as the flow of magic ceased, and the pale figure strode from the smoky room and down a long, gilded hallway that led into an enormous, column-lined chamber. A white velveteen carpet spanned the entire length of the marble hall, leading up to an immense banner of the Eye, towering over the chamber and easily soaring twenty meters to the ceiling.

He sat himself on a plain, boxy throne beneath the Eye and stared forward, towards the grand entrance to the hall. He had to wait only a moment before a lone pink figure came skipping through the doorway and up the lengthy carpet. She stopped a couple of meters from his throne, looking upon him with crazed, pin-point pupils, before bowing deeply.

He spoke. "Ah, my most faithful servant. I see you have anticipated my need."

The pink pony looked upward, causing her long curls to bounce around her face. "Of course! Don't I always, Mr. Malevie?" she sang gaily.

"Yes," he said calmly. "I have a new game for you."

"Oh? What is it? What is it?" she bounced in excitement.

"It's a bit like hide and seek: I give you a pony to find, and you go and get them for me."

"Ooh, sounds fun! Do I get to play with them when I find them?" she asked eagerly.

A wicked grin slid over Maleve's face. "Certainly. Take the Public Servant along with you as well—it should make things more... interesting."

"Okee-dokey-lokey! So who do I look for?" the pony asked curiously.

"Find me the one called Daylight Sparkle."

Chapter Three

Bitter Recollections

"There is no pain so great as the memory of joy in present grief."

A powerful bang rent the frozen air as two ponies, one brightly furred and one greyed with age, were dropped unceremoniously from the air and into a deep bank of snow. Immediately the younger one righted herself, horn still glowing slightly from the residue of her magic, and cast her eyes around to find her bearings.

The sun hung just barely above the horizon here, falling ever closer to sleep, and the air was biting cold. It was obvious that this place was much farther to the northeast than City Seven, which had still glared brightly with the harsh light of noon. A slicing wind picked up and drove down upon Daylight, whipping her mane about her face and stinging her eyes. Squinting, she looked around, adjusting slowly to the dim light.

Tall buildings surrounded her, the likes of which she had never seen before. Spiraling towers of glistening white stone reached their fingers high into the sky, towering far taller than any building in City Seven—even the monolithic Department of Public Safety would be dwarfed in comparison. Gilded patterns stretched across their clean stone faces, and at their very tips Daylight saw metallic golden roofs sparkling in the last remnants of the day.

But what caught her attention most was the tangible power that hung heavy and thick in the air. The city almost seemed to pulse with a magical energy, sending vibrations down Daylight's horn. Every brick, every mortar seam, every door and window, decoration and fence, crevice and crack, felt as though they had been made by the combined magic of thousands upon thousands of unicorns. There seemed to be another presence as well; the feel of something indescribably ancient, a power that wasn't quite there anymore. Like the echo of an entity that Daylight couldn't quite comprehend.

The unicorn turned her head, looking in both directions down the narrow

street upon which they had fallen. Although she doubted that word would have reached so far so quickly, she couldn't be too careful. Wherever she was, she was still under State jurisdiction, and that meant that they had to leave. As she turned to sit back down she noticed her companion face-down in the snow beside her, singed mane blowing in the wind. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Applejack!" In a panic she turned her aunt over, searching for signs of life. The elderly earth pony was breathing, and that was good, but she wasn't conscious. She nuzzled her aunt, trying to rouse her. They couldn't stay here, or somepony would surely find them... especially if somepony saw two strangers, one badly singed and unconscious, in the street near curfew.

"Applejack, please wake up!" Daylight checked over her shoulder even as she tried to gently wake her aunt. The way was still clear.

Applejack stirred, and Daylight's heart shone with hope and relief. "Come on..." she nudged Applejack once more, and the earth pony's eyes opened a crack.

"D... Daylight? That... you?" she asked softly, craning her neck to look around. "What the hay happened... where are we?"

Daylight helped her aunt to her hooves, steadying her concernedly as she wobbled. "I... I don't know. But we've got to get out of here. It's probably not safe. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, ah'll be fine. That spell of yours just knocked the wind from me, s'all." Applejack smiled weakly as they began to walk, Daylight keeping a close eye on her aunt's balance as they walked down the street. The marble corridor stretched out before them, long and winding, farther and farther, like the slithering coils of an ancient sea serpent. The darkened windows in the white stone glittered at them as they trudged past through the snow.

Dark glass, white stone, dark glass, white stone, shadowed stoop, white stone... the buildings and their void-like fenestrations seemed to stretch on forever, but at least the terrible wind seemed to be dying with the last rays of the sun. Magical street lamps flickered on as the orb's last traces

vanished, and Daylight cursed inwardly. There would be few places to hide here, should anypony notice them. She picked up her pace, Applejack doing her best to keep close behind.

They had not long to go before Daylight found herself presented with a dreadfully similar situation... one she had faced not an hour before, back in City Seven. A broad center street lay before them, brightly lit and obviously well-travelled. The snow had been stomped flat by the beating of many hooves, and even lay frozen in some places where it had been melted by the ponies' combined body heat. But at least the Siren had not been tripped here; its eerie wail was conspicuously absent from the frigid city air.

Hopefully, no pony would be waiting on the street for her this time. With Applejack in tow, she doubted that she could easily trick any shopkeepers.

Peering about in the dark, Daylight spotted a small alcove in the face of a nearby building, completely cloaked by shadow. "Applejack," she whispered, catching the older pony's attention, "Wait in there while I check to see if the coast is clear." The old pony nodded reluctantly before complying; what else was there, really, that she could do?

Daylight took a deep breath to compose herself and once again straightened her sweater... which was unfortunately singed. Then slowly, ever so slowly, she peeked around the corner at the end of the road and into the main street. To the left, she saw no pony: just an empty, illuminated street. Cautiously she turned to the right too, and let out a sigh of relief as she saw the same. Before she could withdraw her head to call Applejack over, however, something caught her eye.

At the very end of the main road, not even a hundred meters off, was the entrance to a massive marble fortress. The façade of the construct was every bit as ornately carved as the elegant architecture of the rest of the city and stood barely illuminated, rising as a grand and terrible monolith into the night sky. Where it rose into the inky darkness it blotted out the stars, leaving only a dark void in their place. Smashed stained-glass windows bespeckled its visage like dark, unhealed wounds. The construct exuded despair and pain...

...much like a tomb.

She found herself drawn inexorably into the street, cautious steps plinking, muffled on the wet stone. Two colossal pillars held a roof above a reinforced door that could easily have been ten meters tall, and above them a massive, striking banner loomed. The Eye's piercing gaze looked down upon her, drilling into her with mesmerizing potency... she could almost feel it pulling at her senses, tugging her closer, blanking her mind.

Her eyes locked with its single enormous pupil, pitch black and unblinking, and suddenly a feeling of contentedness washed over her as the Eye seemed to suck everything negative right out of her life. She found herself unwittingly setting down her haunches as the waves of peace rolled over her, just staring up into the Eye, not caring about anything else in the world. A whisper began to slide into her mind. It crept up from the darkest recesses of her consciousness, unintelligible but fascinating, tugging at her memories and thoughts, plucking at them as a spider plucks at its web.

"Hey!" A high-pitched voice suddenly broke the spell of the Eye and Daylight started, turning quickly to see a pink earth pony smiling behind her. Suddenly everything rushed back into her mind: the danger, the fear, the sick guilt. Her heart beat like a drum in her chest, terror surely visible in her wide eyes. She did her best to hide her fear and act calm, to act as though she was supposed to be there, but she was sure that the minute tremors rumbling through her head and legs would give her away.

"Hello!" the pink pony sang, cocking her head at Daylight. "I don't know your name! I haven't seen you around here before, which means that you must be a new transfer, what's your name? Mine's Pinkie Pie."

Daylight looked the pony over as she struggled to form coherent speech. The pony was about her size, and appeared to be the same age. Her mane was a brilliant pink, filled with wild and bouncy curls that fell across her light fur in undulating waves. It was her eyes that Daylight noticed the most, however. Pinkie's pupils were unnaturally small, and her eyes flickered about, darting everywhere while all the while maintaining a focus on Daylight.

"I said, *what's your name?*" As the pony repeated herself all of her previous elation drained from her voice, turning cold and hard.

Daylight swallowed, throat dry. "Oh... uhm..."

The pink pony's eyebrows furrowed, a scowl crossing her face. Her teeth clenched. "Name!" The word was spouted angrily, gratingly.

"My name... it's... uh..." Daylight frantically searched for a believable name that wasn't already taken. "...Tourmaline. Tourmaline Treasure," she finally lied.

A frown snaked its way across Pinkie's face and she leaned forward, uncomfortably close to Daylight. Their eyes locked in a stare, Pinkie's no longer darting about but stone-still, and Daylight could feel the hot breath from the pony's nostrils across her own numb nose. Pinkie's eyes narrowed dangerously as she began to speak slowly.

"Okee-dokey-lokey..." Pinkie stayed there for a moment, seemingly deep in thought, before suddenly all of the happiness returned to her voice. "Well!" A smile crossed her face, one that Daylight found deeply unsettling. "I've got somepony to find. See ya!" She skipped away, humming a gay tune.

Daylight stood in the street for a moment, utterly confused. What was *that* all about? While it was unbelievably good luck that the pink pony hadn't recognized her—that meant that they were probably safe on these streets, at least until a particularly keen Peacekeeper spotted them—she was entirely unnerved by the encounter. With shaking legs she slowly made her way back to the alley.

Something about that pony was nagging at her. She seemed oddly familiar, as though they had met some time long, long ago, and she couldn't quite place the feeling; trying to grasp at it was like trying to hold water in your hooves. No matter how hard you tried, it just wouldn't work. As she neared the alcove where Applejack was hiding, she shook it from her mind. They needed to get out of here.

Before she reached her destination, however, a horrible thought trickled into her mind. The buildings here were so ornate, so massive... such buildings weren't allowed in other cities. There was nowhere else that this could be.

This was City One.

Though she'd only heard little snippets of information on City One from various coworkers at the Department, she knew enough to recall that the only way out of the city would be through the immense front gate. The gate that was, without a doubt, the most heavily guarded and watched location in the entire State. And unless Daylight could manage another teleport, or they both somehow managed to sprout Pegasus wings, she and Applejack would have to pass through that very entrance.

They were going to need a miracle.

With haste, she trotted the last few yards to Applejack's hiding spot. "Okay, it's safe. Just cross the road quickly and don't look at the Eye... there's something funny about it."

Applejack nodded, but her mind seemed to be elsewhere and her expression was troubled. Had she heard the conversation between Daylight and Pinkie?

At any rate, she seemed quickly enough to shake it off. They darted across the street as quickly as they could without causing their hoof beats to echo in the cool night air before slipping into another darkened, twisting side street. The avenue was roughly parallel to the main street, and Daylight hoped that this meant that it led in the same direction... toward the City Gate. Her hopes were weighed down heavily by dread, and fear of what might be waiting for them should they be caught.

The alley wound around the curved buildings of City One, large-paneled windows reflecting the lamps' light on either side of them. Within, dusty shelves displayed the rotting remnants of forgotten trades: old stained plates that may have once displayed baked goods, bins that might have held vegetables, moth-eaten mannequins and trinkets of all sorts and sizes. Daylight's eyes drifted from side to side, her eyes wide and awed by the strange things surrounding her.

Her eye was suddenly caught by a dress-form sitting inside the frost-encrusted glass of a bay window display. A fancy dress was artfully arranged upon the rotting form, and the bluish hues of the fabric had lost their luster to time and sunlight, but the fifty or so silvery stars that had been masterfully sewn into the fabric still shone with the same brightness and clarity that they had no doubt possessed the very day that they were

created.

An inexplicable sense compelled Daylight to stop in front of the dress so suddenly that Applejack, still cantering along behind her, ran directly into her rump and spilled the contents of one of her saddlebags in the process. Daylight gave no notice to Applejack's startled exclamation or her aunt's efforts to pick the items up. She simply stared at the dress, conflicting emotions bouncing around her mind. This dress was more than a piece of clothing. It meant something.

...Such splendor. Whoever created this must truly have been a master of their trade. Whoever wore this... must have been a pony of importance. Applejack glanced up from replacing the contents of her bag and followed the path of Daylight's longing eyes.

"Oh..." Applejack muttered upon seeing the garb. "C'mon Daylight, we gotta go." Her voice wavered as she pushed lightly on Daylight's flank to keep her moving. Very reluctantly, Daylight tore her eyes from the faded fabric.

"Right..."

As they resumed their previous course, Daylight turned one last curve and found herself looking at the end of the avenue. She slowed down, Applejack following suite. The intense beams of magical light that flooded both the end of the avenue and the area beyond glared in Daylight's eyes, but through them she could make out the enormous gate beyond. It was tremendous, built with such weight that one pony never could have opened it by themselves, and it was closed. The bronze-like metal was smooth, criss-crossed with frosty patterns. It stood still, perfectly unified with the marble curtain of the wall as if it were a seamless part of the stone.

And it was surrounded by guards. Daylight counted the Peacekeepers: seven, all unicorns, and all intently aware of their surroundings. A groan of frustration bubbled up through her lips. There was absolutely no way that she and Applejack would be able to make it past the Peacekeepers. And even if they could, the gate was firmly shut and locked.

Resigned, Daylight turned back to Applejack. "We're going to have to find another way out..." Worry pervaded her tone, and Applejack slowly

nodded.

"Ah think yer right. Say, can't ya do that tele-thingy again? Ah can't say ah enjoyed it... but it sure as hay worked!" Applejack allowed a small amount of false cheer to enter her tone.

Daylight shuffled her hooves together nervously. "I don't know... I can give it a try."

Applejack sidled up beside her, pressing close, as Daylight began to draw upon her magic for the third time in the past two days. She concentrated, picturing the spell in her mind and forcing her magical essence to go to work. Every ounce of energy she had left in her body she focused, holding her breath as her horn began to warm and glow slightly before petering out. Daylight gasped for air and tried once more. It was no use.

"I just can't..." Daylight sighed, close to frustrated tears. She clenched her teeth.

"It's alright, Daylight," Applejack soothed. "We'll find another way."

"No... don't you understand? There is no other way!" Applejack recoiled at Daylight's harsh tone.

"Now Daylight, ah know it may seem—"

"NO! It's not about what it seems! It's about what it is!" Daylight cut Applejack off, stamping a hoof. "And it's my fault... it's *all* my fault. I got us into this and now it's going to *kill* us both!"

"It's alright, sugar cube." Applejack returned to sit down next to her, tentatively reaching out a hoof to touch Daylight's mane. The yellow unicorn shook it off.

"It's *not* alright. If I hadn't gone looking for Dinky then none of this would have happened. We wouldn't be *here*, we'd be at home... safe..."

"Daylight, ah want you to listen here. Dinky was your friend. In mah lifetime I've learned a thing or two about friendship. Were ah in your place, ah would have done the same thing."

Daylight sniffed, disbelief evident in her tone. "Really?"

"Yes, really. It's even in our blood."

Daylight cocked her head. "what do you mean?"

Applejack sighed. "This may not be the best time, but ah have to tell ya eventually."

"Tell me what?" Daylight's voice had faded to little more than an exhausted whisper.

"About your mother, Daylight. And your father, too."

Daylight's eyes grew wide.

"Way, way back, there was no State. There was a land called Equestria, ruled by two kind princesses: Princess Celestia and Princess Luna. You weren't but a little filly then, so ah ain't surprised you don't remember. Our family owned a farm—Sweet Apple Acres is what we called it. We grew the best apples around." Applejack licked her lips wistfully before continuing. "Your father and ah worked the orchard. His name was Macintosh, but we all jus' called him Big Mac. And he was a big feller, that's fer sure."

"But one day a new pony came to our little town—Ponyville, that's what we called it. She came from the Royal city of Canterlot and took up residence in the local library. Her name was Twilight Sparkle."

"Library? As in *books*?" Daylight gasped, almost in horror.

"Yes, Daylight, books. Everypony read them in those days. Well, almost everypony. But your mother loved them especially. As ah recall, it was almost impossible to get her away from them. She knew a lot of things... more than any other pony ah knew."

"What... what did she look like? My mother?"

"Well, a lot like you actually, but you get most of yer looks from yer father. She was a unicorn, purple coat with a deep purple mane. She had probably

the prettiest dadgum cutie mark ah'd ever seen. A six-pointed star, surrounded by five smaller stars. Just like the night sky."

Daylight was utterly confused. "A... cutie mark? What's that?"

Applejack frowned, brow furrowing angrily. "Back then, everypony had a special talent all their own. And when they figured out exactly what it was, an image would appear on their flank, each one completely unique to the owner an' showing what they were good at. Ah had almost forgotten it wasn't there no more." She looked back at her own bare flank sadly. "From what ah understand, it was some of the most powerful magic in Equestria."

"But... where'd it go?"

"Ah don't rightly know. They all seemed to vanish right after the State came into power."

There was a pause.

"What was she like? What did her mark mean?"

Applejack looked up at the stars. "Her cutie mark was all about magic. She was the personal student of Princess Celestia, you know. No pony else in all of Equestria could match her one on one in terms of magical ability. She was one of the nicest ponies ah knew, too. Ah learned so much from her while she was, well..." Applejack stopped to swallow. "'fore you ask, ah don't know how it happened. Ah'd left Ponyville long before that."

Daylight was silent. This was a lot for her to take in. After a moment, she piped up. "Why did you leave?"

Applejack hesitated. "Macintosh... your father... there was an accident," she said, obviously distressed by the memory. "Ah couldn't work the orchard without him. Mah friends all tried to help out, but ah couldn't take advantage of them forever. Mah younger sister, Applebloom, had run off someplace after what happened, so ah just had to let the farm go under..." she sniffed, looking away from Daylight. "So then ah went off to help mah cousin Braeburn with the orchards in Appleoosa. Apple growin's all I ever really knew... without Sweet Apple Acres, ah just had to find someplace else."

Daylight stayed silent, unsure of what to say.

"Right when the State took over, she sent you to live with me, back in Appleoosa. Er, City Seven ah guess, now..." Applejack trailed off, her gaze moving from the stars to Daylight who sat in front of her, eyes puffy with unshed tears. "She sent something to you... a little package, ah was supposed to give it to ya—but ah never did. Ah'm sorry ah never gave it to you sooner... Ah jus' wanted to keep you safe..."

Applejack slid her saddlebags from her back, unlatching the faded green cloth of one of the pouches. From underneath the bags of Haylent she pulled a small package, wrapped in dirty brown paper and tied off with a length of aged twine. Daylight took the package in her hooves and looked up at Applejack, unsure of what to do.

"Go ahead."

Daylight drew upon her magic and, with the utmost care, slid off the twine. She didn't want to damage even the knot that her mother had tied all those years ago. Luckily the string slipped off with ease, and Daylight unwrapped the brown paper with the same care, folding it neatly to the side. Beneath the crumbling wrapping she found a small letter, sealed with crimson wax and ribbon and sitting atop an ornately bound tome.

She took up the letter, prying the delicate seal from the parchment with the utmost care. Afterwards she let her magic take hold and unfolded the letter before her. A thin gold band fell out and sang with metallic resonance on the cobblestones. Daylight almost couldn't bring herself to read the letter—she was afraid of what might be written on that page. She was afraid of the past... afraid of hearing her mother speak to her, for the first time within her memory.

But soon her desire to hear just that became overwhelming, and she began to read. The writing was lacy and fanciful, more so than any pen work Daylight had ever seen. Yet something seemed off about it; the words were tilted and uneven. It was almost as if the writer had been hurried, frantic, desperate.

"Daylight,

I don't know when or even if you'll receive this, but you must listen carefully. Dark forces are at work in Equestria, and I fear that they will take from you what you haven't even yet had the chance to experience.

I send this with you in the hopes that it might help to reignite the spark, should it ever be extinguished in your heart. With this letter I have given you my copy of 'The Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide' and the ring that your father gave me on the night of our wedding. With these I hope for you to learn and remember what true magic is.

I am sorry, Daylight, that we must part like this. Perhaps someday we will see each other again. But should we not, I want you to know that I will always love you, no matter what.

Twilight Sparkle"

Daylight read the letter again, and then a third time. Though painfully short, it was all she had. She looked down at the thin golden ring that had been folded in with the letter, almost invisible among the clumps of snow and cobblestone. These were the last precious relics of a happy time long ago. Irreplaceable treasures, a link to the past that she had long forgotten. Daylight levitated the ring in front of her—it was plain and unadorned save for a faint inscription that Daylight could just barely read along the outside:

"For my one and truest love."

Daylight quickly slipped the ring onto her own horn, wanting to keep it close. Her face screwed with grief as she felt the cold metal come to rest on her forehead and tears ran openly down her cheeks, quickly freezing in the ever-falling temperatures of the winter night. She held the book tightly against her chest. Memories were flooding back to her now, all of her fillyhood. She remembered the smell of the library, with all its books lining the walls. She remembered Spike, and the donuts that she loved so very much, and even the telescope that she had broken.

She remembered the night that *they* came.

But most of all, she remembered the warmth of her mother's embrace.

She could almost feel her.

The night was silent as Applejack waited for Daylight to speak, save for the soft drip of half-frozen tears on the stone walkway.

Why, Mommy?

Why did you have to leave me?

Chapter 4

Dark Allies

"It is a heretic that builds the fire, not she who burns within it."

The wind bore down heavily on the dimly-lit streets of City One, stirring up eddies of snow into miniature demons that flitted about the orange-hued forms of two near-motionless ponies—the biting cold stinging, slicing, and carving their miserable bodies. Daylight swallowed back tears as she carefully slipped her mother's book into the front of her torn sweater before swiping at her frost-encrusted eyes with a forehoof. Applejack moved to sit close to her, giving her a soft nuzzle.

"She was a good pony, Daylight. Come on, let's see if'n we can't get outta this snow," a shiver wracked the elder pony's frail form and Daylight looked up, concerned. "Ah'm not sure ah'll make it much longer out here..." Her kindly, world-weary eyes were frost-rimmed in the worsening weather as a forlorn smile crossed her face. In the glow of the magical street lamps, she almost seemed to shine.

Grasping and failing to find words to express her feelings, Daylight simply gave a slight nod. She looked hollowly around, trying to decide which course of action presented the least danger. The guards at the gate were of far too great a number to even attempt an escape, and the gate was too heavy to be moved in any case. And even if they did, by some miracle, succeed, Applejack was right—the cold would get the best of them. What had seemed at first to be a simple if unpleasant snowstorm was now rapidly descending into a deep freeze, making even Daylight's young bones ache and her flesh sting and numb.

There was nothing back the way they had come, either; only the broad street, on which she had encountered the eerie pony... What was her name?... Pinkie Pie. Suddenly Daylight gave a short gasp of surprise that quickly turned to a moan of pain as the frozen air rent her throat and lungs. She did know that name! That pony. Though she had only spoken to her as a filly on a few occasions, Daylight began to recognize her. Pinkie Pie had been friends with her mother. She tried desperately to remember anything else, but her memory fell short and presented her with nothing more than an association between Pinkie Pie and pastries from a sweet shop.

Maybe Pinkie Pie wanted to help them, though, and that was why she had been looking for Daylight! Maybe, just maybe, she was their key to escape! But then, swifter than hope had warmed her heart, it fled. Daylight had seen how Pinkie had behaved, and there was no doubt that she was aligned with the State. They'd have to make their own way out... somehow.

"The shops," Daylight whispered, almost to herself.

"What's that, sugar cube?"

"The shops," Daylight repeated, looking into Applejack's eyes. "We can wait out the night in one of the shops... out of the cold. Think of an escape plan."

Applejack, suddenly more animated, beamed and pressed closer against Daylight's body heat. "Ah, now I see! Seems like a plan! Lead the way."

As they quickly trotted back up the alley Daylight craned her head to and fro, searching for one very specific shop... the one that had caught her eye so intensely. The one with the dress. It was easily enough found despite a thick covering of hoarfrost, and Daylight stopped to examine the door. Although the pane of glass that housed the dresses may have been thin the door was made of thick and solid mahogany, faded from time, its golden gilding peeling from ornately carved grooves.

Biting down on the freezing knob and attempting to twist, Daylight tried desperately to open the door even as her teeth sent sharp, sour signals to her brain. When that failed she jerked her head back and forth, jiggling the knob as best she could, but to no avail. No matter how she pushed the door was jammed, its frame packed tightly with thick black ice. No doubt the ice had even seeped deep into the mechanism of the door to freeze the lock and hinges shut.

Suddenly Applejack stood beside Daylight, determination in her aged eyes. "Step back, Daylight. Ah may be old, but ah think ah got this."

Daylight watched her aunt creakily position herself facing away from the door before throwing all of her weight onto her forehooves. Her tattered hat flipped off of her head as she powered her legs backwards into the door in

a mighty buck and small chips of ice flew in all directions to spatter piercingly on Daylight's bare face and hooves. A massive crack pierced the frigid air, easily audible even over the howling of the wind, as the door groaned and shifted. Despite her obvious discomfort Applejack moved herself into position once more; this time the crack was cut short as the door flew inwards, taking pieces of the jamb with it.

Applejack seized her hat from where it lay on the street. "In, now! They'll have heard that for sure!"

Once both were in the shop Applejack bucked the door tightly shut once again. Luckily the shop also had a door bar, which Daylight hastily but firmly slid into its holders to lock the door from the inside.

The street lamps' light filtered through the ice on the window to illuminate the interior with a wintry mithril light; just enough for Daylight to see. Dust motes swirled in the air, disturbed by the ponies' rapid entrance and drawn by a slight draft towards a staircase in the back corner. The faded, beautiful dress sat resplendent in its glass housing, stars shining even more exquisitely on this side of the window. Other articles began to catch Daylight's eyes as well: a magnificent purple sun hat, wide-brimmed and jaunty, sat atop a hat form beside the dress; a tarnished wreath of golden leaves rested beside that. Upon the shelves were a multitude of neatly folded dresses, covered in dust though they were... one clearly red and white striped, one rosy pink.

Slowly her eyes were drawn down from the shelves to countless piles of cloth strewn about, hanging off of their bolts, many torn to shreds. Needles and thread were carelessly thrown about. Amidst the wreckage a maroon lounge chair lay smashed and torn, a white shred of fabric bearing a dark and ominous stain atop the splintered wood. Applejack stared at the debris, shaking violently.

Daylight found herself disconnected, timidly stepping across the mess to the star-speckled dress despite the broken glass from what might once have been a magnificent vase crunching beneath her hooves. Ever so carefully she held up a hoof to touch the fabric of the dress, as though it were but a mirage that would shimmer away if she came too close, before touching it to her cheek. The faded blue fabric was luxuriously soft and finer than any she had ever felt, obviously woven from the most expensive of

silken threads. The stars themselves were made from the thinnest metallic foil; not silver, but something different. Something magical.

Suddenly Daylight's eyes landed on a single metallic star positioned just behind the dress form's right ear. This star was different from the rest; it was far more radiant, far more glorious. Carefully she pulled it down, a tingle teasing her mind upon seeing it directly. Sometime long, long ago, her mother had shown her a star just like it. Using what magic she could muster, she clipped the star carefully into her mussed mane.

A shadow crossed the frosted glass and movement outside startled Daylight back into reality. She froze in horror as another shadow went by, closely followed by a third.

"Over here, *Daylight!*" Applejack's harsh, urgent whisper allowed Daylight to turn her head even through her sick fear. Applejack was standing over an open trap door, holding the hatch open with one hoof. With the other she motioned down into the darkness.

Loud voices echoed through the front door.

"I know I heard it! Sounded like somepony bangin' on something!"

Panic coursed through her and Daylight moved to Applejack as quickly and quietly as she could manage as a second voice filtered angrily into the shop.

"Check these doors!"

"Which ones?" The first voice again.

"All of them!"

Daylight rapidly passed through the hatch to descend the rickety flight of stairs into darkness, Applejack close behind. With a sputtering jolt Daylight magicked her horn to glow, dimly illuminating the basement room as Applejack seized a rope attached to the trap door with her teeth and yanked savagely downward. The hatch threw itself closed with a thud and a shadow from above indicated that a piece of fabric had fallen down over the edge, partially obscuring its outline even as thin rays of light from above

shone down through the floorboards.

Daylight shivered from fear in the dank, moldy space, surrounded by mildew-speckled and rat-eaten piles of cloth. Two dress forms stood staring at the two ponies from a corner, like frozen corpses, their wretched skin sagging under years of decay and disuse. Beneath the forms lay a small patchwork mouse, a cat's toy, long ago forgotten. She retreated back to the top of the stairs, loath to stand amidst such a disturbing arrangement.

"Daylight! Douse the light!"

Upon Applejack's harried whisper Daylight immediately acquiesced, and just in time. The horribly familiar sound of a breaking door reverberated across the shop, the pieces of the lock board clattering across the floor before coming to a deathly silent rest only a meter from their basement door. A moment later, the tell-tale clip-clop of hooves echoed through the darkness.

"Search this place! I know somepony came in here!"

The hooves approached their hiding place, stopping dangerously close to the hatch. Daylight peered cautiously upward through the thin space between the boards. A shadowed figure was just barely visible, soft blue light illuminating a stark white coat underneath which gleamed a sharp glint of shined brass. She could see as the pony turned his head back and forth, ears rotating this way and that as he searched. Searched for her. Daylight held her breath, silently willing them to leave. *Don't come here. Go away! Please, please!*

The Peacekeeper narrowed his eyes as he checked the room one last time before hesitantly turning to leave, hooves clopping slowly on the scarred wood. Daylight let out the breath she hadn't even realized she had been holding, the slightest whisper of a sound issuing from her nostrils with a puff of vapor. The Peacekeeper abruptly stopped, and creeping fear washed over her in a wave. He turned again and light issued from his horn, dancing about and glittering in his cold eyes. He had only to search for a moment before the outline of the hatch became visible to him.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...

He peered through the floorboards and his own cold gaze caught the glint of Daylight's terrified eyes. Their gazes met for one split second.

"Looks like we got us a mouse hiding under the floor, boys!"

He reared up and brought his forehooves crashing down on the brittle wood of the hatch, splintered wood flying in all directions. Daylight shrieked pitifully in pain as the sharp slivers struck her face to draw forth streaks of warm, sanguine blood. She tumbled backward down the staircase, landing hard on the stone-cold masonry with a thud and a cry. The Peacekeeper stood ominously above her on the stairs, advancing down with a horrific gleam of sick pleasure in his eyes.

Daylight shakily righted herself and a vein of blood dribbled from her lacerated forehead to land on her sweater, forming a dark and messy stain and bringing with it a sharp pain. She stared at the approaching Peacekeeper and anger began to bubble deep within her chest. A deep scowl tore at her face. *No!*

No, it wasn't going to end like this. They were going to get out of here one way or another!

A piece of loose stone was seized from beneath her hooves as her anger fueled her magic and with all the force and speed of a catapult was flung. She closed her eyes before the impact.

A sickening, wet crack. A thud.

Daylight's head swam woozily, the expenditure of magic having been almost too much. Blood continued to drip from her nose and forehead. She collapsed to her knees, and blackness very nearly fell. With a tremendous effort she fought it off. "Applejack..." she felt groggy, disconnected, unreal. "We gotta go Applejack... away..."

Applejack blinked as she turned her head to gaze at Daylight with a look of horror... and fear. She shuffled over to the unicorn, silent, no words. As Daylight opened her eyes and struggled back to her feet, Applejack looked away.

With as much speed as she could muster Daylight ascended the stairs.

There would be more soon, and she was in no state to fight any more Peacekeepers. She froze as she passed the broken hatch. They couldn't go back out into the street. They would die. Instead, she turned her attention to the staircase she had noted upon first entering the shop.

The narrow metal steps spiraled upwards and up was somewhere, and somewhere, which was anywhere, was better than here. Halfway up the stairs, the sound of harsh voices was once again heard from below. It would be reinforcements, no doubt discovering their comrade in the room below.

"What in the... The stairs! I hear somepony going up there! To the roof!"

The metal staircase rattled like old bones with the rapid hooves of galloping Peacekeepers and terror once more set in. Daylight picked up the pace, adrenaline quickening her blood and driving away some of the wooziness. The Peacekeepers were not yet in sight as Applejack paused, taking a nervous glance down below her.

"Come on, Applejack!" Daylight yelled, throat raw.

"Ah'm a-comin'!"

The path to the roof was blocked at the top of the stairs by a rickety, ancient-looking door. It hung loosely on its hinges and was held shut only by a rusty padlock easily smashed by one of Daylight's hooves. As the brittle form easily shattered she swung it open to rush through into a dilapidated attic. The blizzard outside was visible through holes in the roofing, pieces of useless insulation and old furniture strewn across the floor. The only other exit was a small window on the far wall, no more than a meter across. Daylight shut the door behind her before using her magic to yank down a piece of the ceiling to wedge beneath the door. It wouldn't help much, but it could slow the Peacekeepers down just enough.

The window was heavily frosted and shone translucently, but was nailed shut. Without stopping to consider the consequences Daylight gave the glass a stout kick, sending broken glass and ice flying into the night. She winced as thin slivers of glass struck her legs and hindquarters and shivered from the pain, forehead still oozing blood. Through the shattered window stretched many rooftops, dark chimneys jutting towards the sky like

gravestones. They were dizzyingly high... almost a full twenty meters up. Not a pony's length from the window, however, lay a long and flat roof.

A pounding came at the door, and Daylight knew that it wouldn't hold for long. Cracks were already visible, the center bulging dangerously. There was only one option.

"We gotta jump!" Daylight shouted.

Applejack's face was arrested in a look of shock. "What! I ain't jumpin'! Are you crazy?"

"You have to trust me," Daylight keened, glancing at the deteriorating door. "There's no time. Just follow my lead!"

A few steps back, and then Daylight was charging directly at the open window. She sailed through with a mighty leap and landed heavily on the next building's roof tiles, cracking several in the process. A few slipped, but the footholds were steady enough that she was able to keep from falling. She looked across at Applejack, still framed in the window.

"Now! Jump!" she hollered, the icy wind carrying away most of her voice.

Applejack uneasily took a step back, but then came flying through the window herself. She landed in a heap next to Daylight, shaken and bruised, as an audible crash echoed through the broken window. They began to run across the roof before Daylight suddenly stopped, attention broken by a noise. A tone was slithering through the chill air, eerie and familiar. No... it was the Siren. The City One Siren. Her heart sank as the words were spoken by a calm mare.

"Attention all residents and Peacekeepers of City One: there is a fugitive from justice loose within the city. Last seen attempting to flee on hoof. Name: Daylight Sparkle. Occupation: Department Secretary. She is wanted for multiple counts of murder and treasonous crimes against the State. Watch for a yellow unicorn accompanied by an orange earth pony."

Daylight winced and cursed. Just one more thing, one more problem barring their way to freedom. The wind began to lull, though it was an incredibly small relief. At least there was one good thing. There had to be

some way out of here, even if they had to fling themselves from the battlements atop the castle and over the outer wall. They *would* escape!

A shape whistled through the air millimeters from Daylight's nose and embedded itself into the ceramic of the roof. She reared back in shock and looked down, startled. The feathered shaft of a long bodkin arrow still vibrated from the force of its impact, its venomous tip buried deep into the wood beneath the tiles. She took off, the Siren forgotten to her. Another arrow whizzed past, once more just barely missing her. Her hooves clacked sharply on the tiles as she galloped across the roof and dodged around the corner of a sloping tower, Applejack coming swiftly behind her. A few meters away she spotted a raised window jutting from a low slope of the roof and made a run for it, dashing with all of her speed, the frozen air like salt in her wounds.

THUNK! More arrows were loosed through the night sky.

The window was open, and she thanked the heavens that it hadn't been locked as she slid through the window frame with Applejack on her tail. They were in another attic, this time filled with many boxes and crates, stacked up one atop another like bricks in a wall. Their dark forms reached all the way up to the invisible ceiling, extending before them like a wooden maze. Daylight just barely managed the smallest spark from her horn to light their way; just enough to see for a couple of meters. She wobbled clumsily on her hooves, exhaustion setting in. She shook her head quickly, staving off the feeling for just a few more moments.

She searched the floor; somewhere would be a door or hatch that would lead out of the attic. There it was: only a meter distant, with a tarnished silver latch clearly visible and shining in the light from her horn. The hatch was easily lifted to reveal a gaping stairwell. She allowed Applejack down first, and held it open carefully as she sidled down herself. The hatch closed with a metallic ping, as though some sort of lock were being engaged.

The stairs were incredibly narrow, only wide enough for one pony, but quickly opened up at the bottom into a crumbling antechamber. Another door lay before them, this one a smooth hardwood that was nearly as dark as ebony. The handle was solid brass, dulled by a thick layer of dust that Applejack blew off before attempting to pull the handle. It didn't budge.

"Aw horsefeathers—ah guess ah'll have to buck this one too." She moved herself into position.

With a bang the door flew from its hinges, but not because of Applejack. It fell inward, almost crushing the elderly earth pony as she dodged the falling wood. Two Peacekeepers rushed in, stark white uniforms gleaming in the light of Daylight's horn and wielding batons. With a fierce blow the first viciously struck Daylight across the head. The world dissolved into chaos as light exploded around her, her silver star clattering noisily to the floor a mere second before she collapsed.

Everything began to spin, numbness spreading through her limbs. She stumbled and hit her head on the floor heavily, blood once more flowing from the gashes. The light from her horn gave out and blackness fell. Scuffling, thuds, and screams surrounded her. More ponies.

Voices now.

What are they saying?...

Daylight managed to look up weakly from where she lay on the floor. A shadowed figure hovered above her, blurred and out of focus. Her will gave out as she clutched the precious book hidden within her bloodied sweater, and she finally gave in to the darkness.

Silence.