

# Jack and the Ponies

By Moabite



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# Chapter 1

Ponyville lay slumbering in the darkness of Luna's night, its inhabitants all asleep in their beds... all but one. A single candle burned bright in the library of Twilight Sparkle, bathing the purple mare and the book she was reading in a warm glow. The book was a recent acquisition of hers from a second-hand store in Canterlot and it was proving to be an engrossing read. It made wild claims of Equestria's distant past, of a time before Princess Celestia and her sister. It catalogued ages of prehistoric creatures, of the dawn of civilisation, of the rise and fall of empires and of a great catastrophe that changed the shape of the land forever.

Twilight, however, remained sceptical. At the moment, she was taking particular interest in a woodcut of constellations, none of which she recognised. She held the book above her head, comparing the woodcut to the star chart that she had so painstakingly painted on her ceiling. No matter how she rotated the picture, it refused to align to any of the silver stars above her.

*If it's a work of fiction, she thought, it's remarkably detailed.*

One more try then. Twilight walked over to a shelf of carefully arranged and alphabetically-ordered books - the work of an afternoon for her beleaguered assistant, Spike - and pulled them down one by one, reading the title and discarding them onto the floor if it was not one she was looking for. Twilight was not known for her tidiness.

After a few minutes' search, the pile on the floor had risen to her knees and she held a few magical tomes on the subject of divination. If this failed to produce the results she desired, she would dismiss the book's claims as the result of somepony's overactive imagination and have Spike file the book under "fiction" in the morning. She propped one of the books on a stand along with the woodcut and flipped the pages to a locator spell. It was an intermediate spell, well within her capabilities and would not take longer than a few minutes.

She meditated on the spell a moment, intertwining a detailed description of one of the mysterious constellations into the components. Her horn glowed dully as she reached out to the night sky and allowed the spell to guide her to its destination. At first, the spell seemed to fail, directing her to nowhere

in particular and her closed eyes saw only darkness. She was about to give up when a brief twitch indicated an inclination to the west. She added some more power to the spell and her vision changed to a breathtaking flight over the valleys of Ponyville towards the faint stars on the distant horizon before, to Twilight's surprise, dipping sharply into the Everfree forest and the ruined castle of Princess Luna. There, it stopped and lost direction again.

Twilight increased the power to the spell again but it seemed as if there was something blocking her progress. A counter-force prevented the spell from continuing. Twilight strained against the force, her horn increasing in radiance until the entire library was bathed in a bright purple radiance. From outside, it seemed as if a light show had begun in the middle of the town.

The strange resistance buckled a bit, but held. With her curiosity piqued, Twilight shut her eyes tightly and summoned every ounce of her considerable magical power. Sparks began to fly from her horn and a low whine reverberated around the room. Books shook themselves off the shelves and picture frames fell from the walls. The resistance stood for a few seconds longer before shuddering and tearing.

Twilight got a brief, brilliant flash of a field of stars in an alien sky before the momentum of the spell, suddenly without any counterbalance, flung her across the room and into one of the piles of books where she lay dazed but uninjured.

Spike, woken by the noise and shaking, flung open the door from the upstairs bedroom and leaned over the banister to the scene of chaos below.

"Twilight! Twilight! Are you OK?" he yelled.

"I'm fine, Spike," she replied. "Just a little magical mishap; nothing to worry about."

Twilight rose from the pile and trotted dizzily back to the grimoire before her zigzag path led her into another pile where she tripped and landed painfully on her jaw.

"Ouch! Ooh. I've had enough for one night. Help me up, Spike. I'm going to bed. We'll deal with this mystery in the morning."

Spike didn't reply. He was staring at the devastation with the knowledge that he would inevitably be the one to have to clean it up.

Far away in the Everfree forest, in the ruins of a castle dedicated to the Princess of Night, a jagged shape hung suspended in the air as if someone had torn a hole in the scenery. Looking though it, a spiral wound itself into the distance through time and space. Around it, the Elements of Harmony stood on their pedestals and dreamed of times past.

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A chill wind blew through the trees in the forest of Chu-Het, sending red leaves scattering through the air. The floor of the forest was a kaleidoscope of colours, slowly shifting in the breeze. A stream carried a red-and-yellow bouquet of foliage steadily towards the distant sea. In the trees, birds huddled together against the cold and chirped softly. The air was fresh and crisp.

Brittle leaves crunched under a wooden heel.

The birds paused in their melody and watched as the intruder passed by. Human visitors to the forest were a rare breed, since it held little bounty for the surrounding civilisations.

The stranger marched onwards, his footsteps drowning out the whispering of the wind. His white robe swept his tracks clean behind him so no-one may follow. His left hand held his robe closed while his right nestled in its sleeve and a sword hung from his left hip. His head was low against the wind, sheltered by a wide straw hat.

Entering a small grove, the figure stopped and the hat rose up, revealing sharp, narrow eyes that scanned the surrounding area with a trained keenness. Satisfied, he chose a direction and continued on his path. Behind him, the forest seemed to stop holding its breath and resumed its song.

Jack had been travelling for three weeks straight ever since he saved Ferrule City from Aku's forces and the grateful citizens told him the prophesy of a new magical portal appearing in the middle of Chu-Het today. His journey had taken him through valleys populated by carnivorous fiends and over mountains home to shrieking wraiths, every one of which he drove off with steel and fist. Still, his step betrayed no weariness as he walked onwards, his mission to complete.

Rabbits scurried at his approach and dived into dens or hid behind trees. A particularly brave one stood its ground and stared at the samurai as he passed within inches. Jack spared it a smile for its innocence. He took a single step further before hearing a mechanical click from the rabbit.

Whirling around, his hand materialised out of the depths of his sleeve and pulled the sword from its scabbard in time to deflect a scorching beam from the rabbit's open mouth into the sky. The blade traced an S in the air before striking down on the rabbit, cleaving it in two and sending wires and circuitry flying.

*One of Aku's robot spies, thought Jack. Now he knows I am here.*

He sheathed his sword with a flourish and broke into a run. He had to reach the portal before the ancient demon found out *why* he was in the forest. He crested a hill, eyes darting left and right, when he spotted a faint glow between the trees in the distance. He turned in that direction, robe flapping behind him and picked up speed. Far away behind him, an unnatural darkness began to spread over the forest.

Squinting against the wind, Jack saw the light grow brighter as he approached. A branch swept his hat away as material for the nests it held. He ignored it and ran onwards. In the distance, a cacophony of splintering timber warned him he did not have much time. He weaved between trunks and bounded over the undergrowth until ahead he could see the portal - a black and white spiral that held promise of delivering him to the time he was needed most. The noise behind him grew louder as it gained on him. Birdsong grew to a shriek before being suffocated by the encroaching darkness.

There was no time to examine the portal before Aku was upon him. Jack offered a brief prayer to the gods before diving headfirst into the portal. From the tree line, a pitch-black tendril lashed at his ankle but fell short and a familiar voice echoed in his ears as he fell downwards through the cracks in time.

**"SAMURAI!"**

A bright light engulfed Jack, drowning out all vision. He felt a brief moment of vertigo before dropping on his hands and knees onto ancient stones. He quickly regained his footing and turned around, drawing his sword against anything that may have followed him. He stared into the hypnotic spiral of

the portal for several minutes, muscles tensed to strike at the slightest hint of danger.

Eventually, he was satisfied that no-one was coming through after him and relaxed. He sheathed his sword and finally took stock of his surroundings. He seemed to be in an ancient castle, now dilapidated and overgrown with vines. A field of stars shone where its roof should be. It was probably a grand monument to a royal once, but only its skeleton remained.

In the centre of the room was the portal, suspended beside a pedestal that held five stone orbs, each with a different symbol on it. Though everything else had a heavy coating of dust and grime on it, the orbs seemed clean as if they had been used recently. Curious, Jack reached out and laid a hand on one.

At his touch, the orb trembled and he pulled his hand back in surprise. The other four orbs began to shake and glow until, one by one, they detached themselves from their pedestal and floated into the air. As Jack watched, they hovered over the castle wall and headed towards the forest outside as if they knew where they were going.

"Wait!" cried Jack. "I don't know where I am!" He felt a bit foolish to be talking to rocks, but stranger things had happened to him in his eventful life.

Four of the orbs continued on their path, separating into subtly different trajectories. The fifth, marked with a butterfly on it, hesitated and slowed. Jack vaulted out an empty window and walked towards the orb but with every step he got closer, it would get further away. If he stopped, it would stop also.

"Very well then," said Jack. "Guide me."

He followed the beacon into the darkness beneath the trees. It directed him on a long and winding path through the undergrowth. After an hour's walk, the ground suddenly crumbled from beneath Jack's foot and sent him tumbling down a rocky slope. The ground rose up too quickly to react and he only had a brief flash of pain before mercifully falling unconscious. Above him, the Element of Kindness dithered for a moment before darting away through the trees.

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Fluttershy sat down on the soft grass and raised her baton again. Around her, a throng of small animals sat expectantly in a circle.

"OK, everybody," she said. "Let's try again from the top."

She waved the baton in a rhythmic motion and pointed at the rabbits, who began to stomp their powerful legs in time to her gestures. A deep bass rose from the ground. She waved the baton at the field mice and their high-pitched choir produced a sound not unlike a violin.

As she flourished the baton, the other animals joined in. The birds on the branches began to sing. The squirrels rapped nuts together for percussion. Soon the field was awash with music, harmonious and soothing.

At the centre of it all, Fluttershy danced and swung, losing herself in the tune. Soon, though, her ears caught one beat out of tune with the rest. A tinkly tapping rose above the rest of the music, getting louder and louder until it overpowered all the others.

Fluttershy awoke with a start from the dream. The tapping was coming from the window of her bedroom, where silvery light shone through the thin curtains. Reluctantly, she got out of bed and pulled the curtains apart. She had a moment of disorientation as she mistook the white orb outside for the moon before it moved closer and tapped on the glass again. She recognised it as the Element she had been the vessel for nearly a year ago and could only stare in shock and confusion. The orb traced a circle in the air and then moved across her garden back to the treeline of the Everfree Forest. There it stopped and bobbed up and down.

Fluttershy trotted through the house and opened the front door. The orb again shook urgently and took off into the trees. Nervously, Fluttershy followed.

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Jack's own dream was not as peaceful. He floated alone in endless darkness, a testament to his failure.

A soft voice pierced the shadows. "Oh dear," it said. "Please wake up. It's not safe here."

Jack opened his eyes to find himself flat on his back staring at the forest canopy above. A bright pink tail flowed into his vision and he turned his head to the side. A yellow pony with a pink mane was circling him



concernedly. She was wearing a golden necklace with a familiar butterfly on it. Three more adorned her flank. Her attention, however, was not focused on him, but at the five grey wolves that surrounded them both.

She walked around his prone figure, stopping whenever a wolf took a step forward and would stare at it intently until it stepped back again as if scolded. The wolves were hungry, however, and the largest one had insane red eyes. Each time the mare stared it down, it took longer and longer to step back. The pony risked a glance back at Jack.

"Oh, you're awake. Thank goodness. Can you stand?"

Jack pressed his hands into the dirt and pushed himself upright, wincing as his back cracked in protest. His knees voiced their own concerns as he struggled unsteadily to his feet.

"Be careful," said the pony, now at about waist height. "You look like you took quite a fall. We need to go that way." - she waved a hoof towards a direction that seemed identical to any other - "I'll try to keep them at bay."

She shot a piercing gaze at the closest wolf and started to walk sideways out of the circle. Jack placed his back to her rear and followed. The wolves seemed to be letting them go when suddenly the large one snarled and pounced at Jack. With no time to reach for his sword nor willing to dodge it and leave the pony exposed to attack, Jack grabbed the wolf in the side of the neck and rolled it over his shoulder, slamming it roughly onto the ground upside-down.

The other wolves ran away into the bushes, leaving Jack with his knee on top of the leader's chest, trying to both keep it down and dodge tooth and claw. The yellow mare's eyes widened at the scene.

"That's perfect," she said. "Hold it there, please."

She looked about the clearing and rapidly collected a few carefully selected plants in her mouth and chewed them up, then knelt down in front of the struggling wolf and -careful not to get too close to its snapping jaws - spat her concoction into its throat. Jack stuck his tongue out in disgust. With a rapid movement, she stood up again and pulled him away. The beast got to its feet and waved its head from side to side, lapping its tongue out at the bitter taste. It followed its pack into the trees.

"That should get rid of the infection," said the pony happily. "And hopefully stop the aggressiveness."

Now that the danger was over, she looked up at Jack as if remembering he was there, then took a sudden interest in the ground. An awkward silence fell for a minute before Jack coughed discreetly and broke the silence himself.

"Thank you for your assistance. They call me Jack."

The pony mumbled inaudibly.

"Pardon?"

"I'm Fluttershy," she murmured.

"I am pleased to meet you, Ms. Fluttershy. I hate to impose further, but could you please guide us out of this forest?"

Fluttershy nodded mutely and led Jack through the tree trunks. Neither party given to small talk, the journey was uncomfortably silent but mercifully short. The two arrived at a small cottage just outside the forest. It looked to be home to scores of woodland creatures. Birdhouses dangled from every window and nests sprouted like plants from the thatched roof which itself was overgrown with moss and grass. Fluttershy opened the front door and entered. Jack followed, ducking his head under the lintel. The inside resembled a hotel for birds and rodents, with stairs and passages to tiny holes lining the walls and pillars. A squirrel poked its head out of one and twitched its nose at him.

At Fluttershy's prompting, Jack sat on a small but comfortable chair. Across the room in a basket lined with cushions, a small white rabbit glared at him. As he watched, it used a stubby paw to point at its eyes and then at Jack, then lay down again. The gesture was oddly menacing and Jack thought back to the metal spy in the forest. He moved his chair slightly to put the coffee table between himself and the furry creature.

Fluttershy returned with a cup of green tea which Jack accepted gratefully. The two sat in silence for a moment before Fluttershy's curiosity got the better of her.

"So, um, what kind of creature are you? If you don't mind me asking, of course."

Jack saw no reason to be wary. "I am a human. I came here looking for a certain time and place, but unfortunately I am beginning to think that this is not it. Where am I, exactly?"

"You're in Equestria."

"I have never heard of it. Is that a country?"

Fluttershy looked at Jack to see if he was joking but found only sincerity in his face. "Yes, but it's also the name of the world. You aren't from this planet?"

"Ah. No. No, it seems I am not."

Jack sipped at his tea grimly. His situation had gotten worse; even if this were the correct time period, he was further from home than ever before. He set his cup down and pushed his chair back from the table.

"Thank you for your hospitality, but I should return to the forest and see if the portal still remains."

"Portal?"

"Yes, a portal in space. A teleporter."

"Oh, you mean like Twilight."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Twilight Sparkle, my friend. She's a teleporter."

Jack considered this for a moment. If her friend had a teleporter, then perhaps she could return him to Earth.

"Ms. Fluttershy, could I possibly meet this person?"

"It's very late. I don't think she'd like..."

"It is a matter of some urgency."

"Oh, um. All right then. I'll take you to her."

# Chapter 2

Not a soul stirred in Ponyville as Jack and Fluttershy walked quietly through the dark streets towards the centre of town. Twilight's "house" turned out to be a massive tree, hollowed out yet still, somehow, living. Fluttershy lightly tapped a hoof on its small red door, producing nearly no sound at all.

"Twilight," she whispered. "Are you awake?"

The two waited for a minute, but no-one stirred inside.

"Er," said Jack. "Perhaps you should knock a little louder."

The pony gently patted the door again and winced at the tiny noise it made. Jack rolled his eyes and rapped the back of his hand on the door. The sound echoed through the tree and a few leaves floated down around them. A muted mumbling could be heard from above and a quadruplet of hoofbeats descended a flight of stairs. The door was opened by a small purple unicorn who looked blearily at Fluttershy.

"Fluttershy? It's the middle of the night. Is everything all right?"

"Oh, did we wake you?" mumbled Fluttershy. "I'm so sorry. We should come back tomorrow."

"We?" Twilight looked about sleepily, finally noticing Jack. Her lidded eyes suddenly grew to the size of dinner plates and she choked back a yelp of surprise.

Jack raised his hands defensively. "I mean you no harm. Please, I beg you, I need your help."

Twilight looked at Fluttershy inquisitively. The yellow pony nodded back. Reassured but still suspicious, she took a step to the side to let the two enter. Fluttershy trotted meekly into the house while Jack ducked under the low doorframe, pausing to bow courteously to Twilight. The floor of the circular room was mostly hidden by a carpet of books under empty bookshelves. Jack stood awkwardly in the clearest spot he could find. Twilight, meanwhile, kicked away an omnibus with each step and made her own space.

"OK. What is this all about? Who is this, Fluttershy?"

"Oh, um. This is Jack. I found him in the Everfree Forest. He wants to go back home but doesn't know how to get there and we were hoping you could help. You know, if you could, that is. Or want to. It's OK if you don't."

Twilight turned to Jack. "Where *are* you from? I've never seen anything..."

She faltered. She *had* seen something like him before, in the same book she had been studying earlier tonight. The resemblance to the crude etchings was superficial, but recognisable.

"I am a human from a planet called Earth. I regret I am unable to point a direction. I arrived from a point in my future to a castle ruin in the forest to the west. Ms. Fluttershy here tells me you have a teleporter that may be able to return me home to the correct place and time."

Twilight looked confused for a moment. "I don't *have* a teleporter, Jack. I can teleport myself short distances, but not between planets and definitely not across ti-"

A knock at the door interrupted her.

"More visitors?" Twilight opened the door again and Pinkie Pie fell in, borne by the force of her next attempted knock. She quickly hopped to her feet again.

"Hi Twilight! I know it's late and all but I came here as soon as I got it! What's going on? Hi Fluttershy! You have yours, too. Oh! You have a visitor."

Pinkie bounced lightly into the room and over to Jack. "Hi! My name's Pinkie Pie. I don't know you but I bet you're nice! You look like a nice pony, except you're not a pony, you're something else. Are you a fairy? You're a bit big for a fairy. Ooh! Do you grant wishes?"

Twilight closed the door again. "Hold on a minute, Pinkie. As soon as you got what? What's going on?"

She spotted the necklace around Pinkie's neck and its cyan balloon-shaped gem at the centre. Looking to Fluttershy, she could just make out her necklace peeking shyly from beneath her long hair.

Pinkie Pie continued unabated. "I don't know what to wish for. I like parties, so I guess maybe a big party, but it's not the same if you don't organise it yourself so something else. Like the biggest cake ever, with strawberry

filling and cream topping and that sponge that Mrs. Cake makes around the time of the Summer Sun celebration that's sooo good..."

"*Pinkie Pie!*" yelled Twilight. Pinkie stopped and looked around. "This is Jack. He's not a fairy, he's a human and he's here looking for help."

Pinkie turned back to Jack. "You're a human, huh? Do you grant wishes?"

"I do not."

"Aw, poop."

Twilight sighed wearily. "All right. Now, why do both of you have your Elements? They're supposed to be back where we found them."

"Mine showed up at my house about an hour ago," said Fluttershy. "It led me to where Jack was in the Everfree Forest."

"So did mine," said Pinkie Pie. "Well, the part about showing up at my house anyway. It didn't lead me anywhere so I came here to ask you because you're the smartiest pony I know!"

"I'm not sure. I guess I have an idea where to start. There's a book I was reading earlier that had something that looked like humans and it was related somehow to Luna's castle. It was called... er... *The Chasm of Equestria*, I think."

She looked about the piles of books. It could take hours to find it in this mess.

Pinkie brightened. "*The Schism of Equestria?*"

"That's the one."

Pinkie trotted in a small circle, scrutinising the books. She moved back to Jack and a look of concentration took over her face.

"Let's see. I was *here*."

She hopped backwards and looked down. She took another hop backwards, then another, retracing her path from the door. Halfway, she grinned gleefully and picked up a familiar tome.

"Here it is!"

Twilight took the book from her hooves. "It's kind of creepy the way you can do that, Pinkie."

She opened the book to the woodcut where stick-figure humans rode stick-figure horses through what she assumed was a forest, though the trees rose like pikes stabbing at the sky.

"*The dominant species at the Rise of Evil*," she read. There was no further information given. The book preferred to focus on the demographics of Equestria.

"I don't think this book is going to be much help, but if what it claims about the time before Equestria is true, then Princess Celestia will be able to tell us more."

Fluttershy stirred from her silence. "It's almost four in the morning, so she'll be asleep. Maybe Princess Luna could help us instead?"

"I guess so," Twilight concurred. "I'll have Spike write up a letter and send it to her. SPIKE!"

She ascended the stairs, yelling for her assistant. A muffled argument broke out and a purple head with green spines poked its head out the door and boggled at Jack for a moment before disappearing.

"What was that?" asked Jack.

"That was Spike," said Pinkie. "He's a dragon, but just a baby one. You wouldn't fit a grown-up dragon in here and how would you feed him? Gems don't grow on trees, you know. Unless they grow on trees where you're from. Do they? Rarity would love to see that. Anyway, Spike. He helps Twilight and sends her messages to Princess Celestia only this time she's sending one to Princess Luna, I guess. I wonder how he addresses them. Does he use stamps?"

The argument above resumed for a minute before abating. Twilight returned to the hall.

"He's sending it to Luna now. Hopefully we'll have a response soon."

There was another knock at the door. Twilight groaned but opened it anyway. It was Rainbow Dash, wearing her own Element of Loyalty: a red lightning bolt. Her mane stuck out wildly in all directions as if she had just gotten out of bed.

"Hi Dash. Come in. Let me guess: your Element showed up at your home about an hour ago? Uh-huh, thought so."

She was about to close the door when two more figures arrived. This time it was Rarity and Applejack, both wearing their Elements of Honesty and Generosity, respectively.

Twilight made introductions as brief as possible. Given that she knew next to nothing about the stranger, it was not hard.

"You got a serious weapon there, buddy," said Rainbow Dash, hovering at eye level to Jack. "You're not here to cause trouble, are you?"

"I assure you I am not."

Dash glowered at him, looking for some element of aggression in his eyes. He stared back blankly until she gave up and lowered herself to the floor. From behind, Rarity pulled at his robe and rubbed it between her hooves.

"Oh my. This fabric is superb. Why would you waste it on this ugly robe? I bet I could make a *wonderful* suit for you out of this."

Jack grabbed a handful of robe and pulled it out of her grasp.

"This is fine, thank you."

"Hey!" said Applejack, from somewhere near floor level. She was scrutinising his wooden sandals. "His hooves are fake. Why're you wearin' fake hooves?"

"Those are my -"

"Girls! Please, focus!"

Twilight stood with her front hooves raised for silence. She was tired, confused and irritated and this line of questioning was going nowhere fast.

"We need to focus. Now, we have a space alien in my house and for some reason, all your Elements have returned to you. To figure out what's going on, we have to do some research. Everypony pick a pile of books to search through and look for something that can help sort this mess out. *The Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide* should be around here somewhere..."



Pinkie pointed at a pile and opened her mouth to speak, but Twilight waved a hoof at her.

"Yes, all right Pinkie, go get it. If we all pitch together and if there are no more interrup-"

She was cut off by a knock at the door. Her face went livid and she stomped over to the entrance, piles of books shaking and toppling in her wake. She grabbed the handle and hurled the door open.

"*What the heck do you wa-*" she started, but her voice faltered and broke. Princess Luna stood in the doorway, taken aback by the red-faced demon that had answered.

"I got your letter. Did I come at a bad time?" she asked.

# Chapter 3

After a few minutes' work, they had cleared a space in the floor of the library and were all sitting around in a circle. Twilight nervously nudged another cushion under the princess.

"I am so sorry about earlier, Princess Luna," she said. "You won't -"

Luna rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to banish you, Twilight Sparkle. *Please stop asking.*"

She turned back to Jack. "Continue."

Jack was sitting cross-legged on the floor with his sword in his lap. Twilight had brought him a cup of tea that she said was someone named Zecora's special brew. It was, frankly, delicious.

"Once I reappeared," he said. "I found myself in the ruins of a castle in what I am told is called the Everfree Forest. When I touched one of the orbs I found there, they scattered."

Luna nodded sagely. "The Elements of Harmony are powerful relics from before the Rise of Evil. They remember what humans are and what it means to find one in the lands of Equestria."

She looked about her at the assembled ponies, all intent on her words. "What I am about to tell you does not leave this room. The truth of Equestria is a solemn secret held by few. We would prefer it be forgotten, but you need to hear it now."

"Cross my heart and hope to fly," said Pinkie, flapping her arms. "Stick a cupcake in my eye."

"And the rest of you," said Luna.

The other ponies gave each other some embarrassed looks but mimicked Pinkie's strange oath. Luna seemed satisfied with that.

"More than a thousand years ago, Equestria was part of a greater land known as Earth. Equestrians were created from the beasts of the fields though wild magics that bombarded the world during the wars against the rising Evil."

"Aku," said Jack, darkly.

"Yes, Aku. He was a demon born of pure malice; an indestructible force that swept across the globe and engulfed civilisations one by one. Any country that would not bow to his rule was wiped from the face of the planet. Some fought back using steel and were quickly overwhelmed, since he could not be harmed by mortal weapons. Others used sorcery, only to find it turned against them and their cities levelled by magical fire.

It was from the lingering magic after one of these battles that Equestrians came to be. They banded together and founded their own tribes. For hundreds of years they struggled under the cruel heel of Aku. Some ponies learned magic from the books they found in the cinders; they were the first unicorns, a select breed of pony blessed with natural magic, and they planned a better future for the Equestrian race.

They prepared the vast sorcery required for a Schism to remove Equestria from Aku's domain entirely. Making an entire planet in a pocket dimension, even a small one, was an incredible undertaking. Many areas were conjured from pure magic, others brought with us from Earth. The Everfree Forest was one of these places and it is still guided by Earthly laws of nature. Elsewhere, everything had to be done either by magic or by hoof. The pegasi race were created to manipulate the weather and the royal family gave up two of their daughters to become alicorns, a powerful pony breed who could manipulate the heavens themselves. That was, of course, my sister and I. Some other races like the griffons and dragons contributed to the plan so that they could escape Aku's clutches too. Others came simply by virtue of being within the radius of the spell when it was cast.

"The time of the Schism came earlier than expected when Aku learned of our plans from some traitors. There was a terrible battle as we struggled to hold back his army while bringing the plan forward, but we did it. The unicorns had gathered as much magic as they could into six relics called the Elements of Harmony and they expended it all at once, creating a vast spherical portal. Equestria and all its inhabitants were removed entirely from Earth into the pocket dimension outside of time and space. We erected a barrier that hid us from the greater universe and tried to forge a new life here. Times were hard, but never as bad as they were under Aku. Over time, Earth was forgotten and, we decided, best left that way."

Luna's hung her head and her face darkened. "We learned later that we were not truly free of Aku's clutches and there was still a price to pay for our freedom."

Twilight's eyes bulged and her breath began to quicken.

"Oh no," she said. "The barrier - I think I was the one who broke it. I was casting a divination spell last night and I forced it through an obstruction that was stopping me."

Luna nodded. "That sounds like what might have happened, though until now I wouldn't have believed that any single unicorn could have broken it."

Jack, who had been listening to Luna's story intently up until now, urgently waved her to silence and placed a cupped hand to his ear. Outside the library, far in the distance, he could hear a familiar, dreadful sound. He gripped the scabbard of his sword and jumped to his feet.

"Everyone outside, *now!*" he commanded. The assembly did not need to be told twice, quickly rising to all fours or ascending into the air and sprinting for the door.

Outside, the noise became a cacophony of tortured timber. Ponies were spilling out onto the streets in droves and some cried in panic as they spotted the massive shadow rising from the Everfree Forest. Its black silhouette blotted out the moon as it grew to the shape of a hill, then a mountain and finally a colossal tower that dwarfed even the distant spire of Canterlot.

Weaving like water, its horned peak cast about as if searching for something and it turned towards Ponyville. A vast green face framed by fire bore down on the small town until it noticed Jack. It opened its mouth, revealing fangs the size of houses, and a deep booming voice spoke in elongated tones.

"Ah, Samurai. *There* you are."

The figure rose again to its full height and then sunk into the forest. From the forest's edges, black tendrils burst forth and flowed towards Ponyville's centre, driving panicked citizens to its eastern edge. Jack's eyes had narrowed to slits and he stood defiantly in front of his hosts, sword drawn against the encroaching ink. Luna stepped beside him and dug her back hooves into the ground to brace herself against attack. Applejack and

Twilight Sparkle came to her side, while Rarity and Pinkie Pie moved to Jack's. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash took to the air and hovered above them. Fluttershy skittered back and forth nervously. She could hear the fearful cries of the animals in the forest and was too worried about them to be scared for her own safety. Dash, for her part, regarded the approaching shadow with casual scorn.

The darkness began to gather and coalesce on the other side of the town square, forming into a smaller version of the figure they had seen before, though it still towered over the rooftops. The face reappeared and two great flaming eyebrows burst into view above it.

"Aku," said Jack, with a hatred that seared through him like fire.

"We meet again, samurai," said Aku. "I must thank you for guiding me here. I've been looking for the Equestrians for over a millennium. Soon they will learn what it means to defy the Shogun of Sorrow."

Luna raised her horn and it began to glow with power. "You don't rule here anymore, Aku! Go back to the pit where you belong!"

Aku focused his attention on the ebony pony. "Oh? Oh-ho. Is that the princess Luna I see? The years have been kind to you. No, I think I shall enjoy reminding you ponies what I am capable of."

A burst of silvery light shot from Luna's horn towards Aku, who dodged it with resounding laughter. He continued to laugh as Luna gritted her teeth and prepared another blast, but he suddenly stopped and stared at her with interest. Quick as lightning, a clawed hand formed at his shoulder and slashed down towards them. Jack brought his sword up to parry the blow until it stopped above them, its palm over Luna's head.

Aku's eyes widened as if seeing something the others could not. Again he laughed in that echoing voice.

"You have a part of me in you, Luna. I can see it deep in your soul, gnawing away at your spirit. Did you let it in during our last battle? What did it promise you?"

"What lies are you spouting now, Aku?" shouted Jack.

"You've known its touch, too, samurai. Even a small part of me can consume a person's soul, driving them to evil. You beat it by force of willpower, but this pathetic creature here obviously could not. Am I wrong,

Luna? The samurai was an accident, but you *let* it in. You were so overwhelmed by your own pitiable insecurities that you *wanted* it to take over - to live your life for you and free you from your burdens."

The glow flickered and died in Luna's horn. She took a fearful step back and tears began to roll down her cheeks.

"No," she whispered. She looked about at Twilight and her friends, who stared back in shock. "No, I didn't -"

"You did," cried Aku. "You coveted something so much that you were willing to give in to the darkness to get it. What was it, Luna? Power?"

"Enough of this charade!" cried Jack. He leapt in the air and swung his sword in an arc at Aku's hand, who drew it back with a surprised shout.

Luna was slouched on the cobblestones under the heavy stares of the other ponies. She closed her eyes. "I was weak," she whispered. "I'm sorry - I'm so sorry. I let it in. I just wanted people to like me."

"Is this true?" she heard Twilight say. "Nightmare Moon got in because of that?"

"How could you?" said Applejack.

"You monster!" said Rainbow Dash. The words drove a spike through Luna's heart and still they continued.

"How low can you get?" asked Rarity.

"So many people suffered because of you!" said Fluttershy.

Luna heard Pinkie Pie's hoofbeats canter past and her voice joined the rest.

"We won't forgive you for this! You big green meanie!"

Confused, Luna opened her eyes and blinked the tears away. The six ponies were all glaring at Aku, throwing insults and accusations at him that she had thought were directed at her. Twilight stamped her hooves in fury.

"Manipulating someone using their need for companionship against them - you truly are the lowest of the low, Aku!"

Aku grinned evilly. "Perhaps; but now that I'm in, there's no getting rid of me, as I shall demonstrate."

He raised a jagged arm. "Nothing up this sleeve," he laughed and wiggled his fingers as a puppeteer would do. Luna choked as a familiar blackness welled up inside her, overwhelming her senses and driving away all of her own thoughts.

No! she cried through a throat that could no longer speak. Yes! replied Nightmare Moon. Within the circle of ponies, Luna disappeared from view while a mare taller than Jack and black as the night stood up and shook her starry mane. Above them, the pre-dawn light dimmed and vanished, leaving only the twinkling stars and the moon to light the town. The Mare in the Moon had returned.

Jack roared in anger and charged Aku. "Release her now, demon!"

Aku's body slithered away from the striking sword and rose into the sky on vast wings.

"I have no need to fight you today, samurai."

"Jack!" cried Twilight from behind. Jack turned in time to deflect a thrust from Nightmare Moon's horn, but it put him off-balance and he stumbled backwards before a second glancing blow sent him to the ground. He rolled aside as a heavy hoof slammed into the ground where his head was a moment ago, shattering the cobblestones beneath it.

Twilight beckoned her friends. "Come on, girls. We beat her before, we can do it again."

Nightmare Moon turned her evil smile to the six ponies. "I am *far* more powerful with my master here. You will not get the chance this time."

Her billowing tail stretched out and swept across the length of the town square. In its wake appeared three pegasi, two male and one female, dressed in flashy purple outfits emblazoned with lightning bolts and goggles covering their eyes. Where their cutie marks should be were three identical skulls with a wing.

"It's the Shadowbolts!" yelled Rainbow Dash. "The ones who tried to -"

She was cut off as the female Shadowbolt slammed into her with surprising speed, driving the wind out of her and sending her flying into Rarity. The two landed in a heap on the northern side of the square.

Meanwhile, one of the other two indistinguishable Shadowbolts rushed Pinkie Pie, picking her up and continuing into Twilight. The two were dragged to the southern side of the square before he dropped them and distanced himself from Pinkie's furious kicking.

The last Shadowbolt made to attack Applejack but the orange pony had seen what happened to her friends and was bracing herself to defend. Instead of charging her, he took to the air and grabbed Fluttershy by her rear right hoof, swung her in a half-circle and let go, sending the skinny pegasus hurtling towards the eastern side of the square. Applejack broke from her stance and chased after the yellow comet, catching her before she hit the ground.

The six ponies had been separated into three groups, with Jack and Nightmare Moon facing off against one another in the final side of the square. Above the spectacle, Aku flapped his wings, laughing maniacally.



# Chapter 4

Applejack circled Fluttershy defensively, trying to keep an eye on the Shadowbolt at all times, but it was difficult. It seemed to her that he was easily as fast as Rainbow Dash and whenever he struck, it was with such little warning that she was barely able to block in time. Right now, he was circling them, preparing for another attack.

"Keep behind me, sugarcube," she told Fluttershy. "This is gonna be a tough nut to crack."

This time she saw the attack coming. The Shadowbolt swooped down in a wide arc to pick up extra speed. Rapidly, she turned and pulled her rear legs back for a bucking, but her powerful kick found nothing but thin air. The Shadowbolt had beat his powerful wings once and hopped over Applejack's head. He was too high now to hit them dead-on, but he swung a foreleg down wildly and his hoof struck Fluttershy on the side of the head, eliciting a sharp cry from her and sending her tumbling to the ground.

Applejack ran to her side. "Fluttershy! You OK? Speak to me!"

Fluttershy rose weakly, touching a hoof to her pink mane and coming back with a small trickle of blood.

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Rainbow Dash and the Shadowbolt were an indistinct blur above Rarity's head. The two were chasing one another in a wide circle, whipping up a dark rainbow-coloured tornado that pulled at her hair. She tried to ignore it and concentrate on the fight above. Her horn glowed softly as she summoned her magic.

*"You should give up now before you embarrass yourself!"* yelled the Shadowbolt over the wail of the wind.

*"What?"* shouted Dash.

*"I said you should give up now before you embarrass yourself!"*

*"What?"*

The Shadowbolt rolled her eyes and turned her head back towards Dash. *"I SAID YOU SHOULD -"*

She was cut off as Dash vanished, replaced by a blur of white. Turning her head back, she found herself enveloped in a puffy raincloud. She banked right in the hopes of finding her way out - she was created to be a stunt flyer and didn't do well in poor visibility - but the cloud continued on in all directions.

Dash, meanwhile, was used to adverse weather conditions even without her goggles. She placed her front legs ahead of her in a V shape - proper cloud-bursting form. Squinting, she could make out the Shadowbolt ahead, slowing slightly out of trepidation. Dash beat her wings faster than ever, determined to show this pretender what *real* flying was all about. Adrenaline pumped through her as she gained on the purple-suited pegasus and finally struck the first blow of the battle.

Unfortunately, both pegasi had been travelling in the same direction and Dash's foreleg smash had little force to confer. Nevertheless, it sent the Shadowbolt staggering a few feet to the side.

"Ha! I gotcha!" said Dash between gulps of air.

"All right, you're a talented kid," replied the Shadowbolt, equally winded. Sweat was pouring off both of them. "But that took everything you had for such a weak shot. Look at you - you're breathing as hard as I am. You might be able to beat me on a level playing field, but all I have to do is keep you occupied until I get some backup, because if that's what it takes to defeat me, then your friends have no chance."

Dash hated to admit it, but she was right. She looked down for Rarity, hoping for some assistance. Normally she would fight her own battles, but she didn't have time to be arrogant right now.

"Hey! Rarity! I need a helping hoof here! Can't you do anything from down there? How about one of your illusions or something?"

The Shadowbolt raised an eyebrow. "Illusions?"

Around them, the false cloud began to dissipate into thin air, broken by disbelief. On the ground below, Rarity's horn stopped glowing. The unicorn placed a hoof over her eyes and groaned.

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Twilight and Pinkie Pie were already sporting a few bruises from the battle with the third Shadowbolt. He was using quick repeated strikes, not giving

her enough time to prepare any useful spells. Whenever she did manage a spell, he never stayed in one spot long enough to aim at him.

With some effort, she completed preparations on another beam. Looking about, she saw the Shadowbolt strike Pinkie in the flank with a quick jab, then fly back to a safe distance. Pinkie's usual cheerful demeanour was fading under the continuous attacks, and Twilight suspected that her puffy pink mane was beginning to droop a bit.

"Oof! You- you meaniepants!" said Pinkie through gritted teeth.

Twilight waited for the Shadowbolt to reach the zenith of his arc, then pointed her horn at him and released the spell, but it was too late. The beam shot wildly into the sky as the Shadowbolt dodged it. She was projecting her attacks too much and they both knew it. As she reeled from the exertion, he swooped down again and she had to duck as a hoof swung over her mane.

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Jack had regained his feet, bruised but not hurt. The black mare kept her distance for now, lashing out with her prehensile mane. Wherever the stars in the purple mane struck him, tiny cuts appeared in his robe and flesh. He weaved and dived to avoid the thrashing mist, rolling to a safe distance. He slashed at the mane with his sword but it passed through harmlessly. From so far away, he had no way to attack Nightmare Moon herself and had to settle for purely defensive tactics while looking for an opening.

The Mare in the Moon lowered her head, directing her long horn at Jack, who dived to the left. A thin blast of moonlight passed over his right shoulder and carved a deep trench in the cobblestones behind him. He reflected a second blast with the flat of his sword, sending it glancing into a nearby wooden furniture store where it split solid oak beams in two. The third blast he reflected back at Nightmare Moon, only to have her absorb it. She tilted her head back and laughed.

"Foal! I am the moon ponified! What did you hope to accomplish with that?"

Jack took advantage of her gloating to close the distance between them. He leapt over her winding tail and rolled under her mane where razor-sharp stars hung like dust motes in the moonlight. She whipped her horn about to stab at him, but he dodged it expertly and raised his sword above her neck... and hesitated.

He remembered the princess who he had taken tea with only minutes before. She had made mistakes in her past, but she seemed genuinely repentant and her friends spoke very highly of her. Destroying Nightmare Moon in this manner would almost certainly destroy Luna as well. Jack had taken lives before, but never the life of a bystander. To cut her down would erase her from this world... but ensure that the world would survive to see tomorrow. His mind reeled and his hand slowed.

*There must be another way*, he hoped, before pain as he had never felt before blotted out all rational thought. Nightmare Moon had slashed her mane into him and the stars raked at his flesh. Some even passed through it and the sheer number of them picked him off the ground and tossed him backwards some fifteen feet. He landed on his back and roared his pain at the sky.

Nightmare Moon brandished her wings and posed theatrically, cackling in triumph.

"Did you really think you could beat *me*? I am a *god* and you are a weak, insignificant mortal barely worthy of my sky. You and all the ponies here will worship me and the darkness for the rest of your miserable lives!"

At a scraping sound, she looked back to Jack, who was using his sword as support to climb to his feet. His long black hair was raging about his head, freed from its bonds. His robe was in tatters and what little remained was stained a deep crimson. Grabbing it at the waist, he ripped the top half of the robe away and let the breeze take it. His torso was a maze of shallow cuts but still he stood defiantly against her. Holding his sword in both hands, he levelled it at her.

"For the light of this world, then," he said. "Let us finish this."

# Chapter 5

Applejack turned blazing eyes back to the Shadowbolt.

"You know I ain't gonna let you get away with that."

She stamped her hooves heavily on the ground where stones cracked and split at the force of her anger. She snorted hot puffs of air and gnashed her teeth. The Shadowbolt looped around lazily and down towards Applejack. She stood stock still, all four legs on the ground and no apparent defences. Sensing an easy shot, the Shadowbolt increased speed and straightened his front legs to ram her. Still she did not move, and his two hooves struck her full force in the chest. She thought she felt a rib crack, but she bore the brunt of the attack without flinching. The pegasus' front legs buckled under the impact, bringing his head close to hers.

This was the chance she was waiting for. She slammed her forehead into the Shadowbolt's nose, which responded with a satisfying crunch. He reeled back dizzily and Applejack moved forward for a second go at him, but pain shot up her chest and she grunted loudly, stopping short.

"Applejack!" cried Fluttershy, running to her side.

"Ah'm all right, sugar. Ouch. Actually, Ah'm just gonna lean on you for a sec."

She leaned against Fluttershy's left flank and tried to bring her breathing back to normal. In the sky, the Shadowbolt held his shattered nose in his hooves and tried to do the same, taking gulps of air through his mouth. This battle was getting rough, but he would rather get every bone in his body broken here than go back to Nightmare Moon without a victory. Forcing himself to let go, he circled around the pair again. Now the yellow one was glaring at him with an intensity that made his eyes itch. He found his eyes watering and shook his head, swooping around to approach them from behind, out of sight of that menacing glare.

Fluttershy moved to turn and follow the Shadowbolt, but Applejack was still leaning heavily on her, gasping. Her first movement caused her friend to slide down her flank slightly before she leaned back in to support the earth pony.

"Applejack?"

"Just a minute more."

"Applejack, he's coming back."

"One sec."

The Shadowbolt darted in towards the pair, legs outstretched for another strike when Applejack suddenly whipped her head to the left, driving her flank solidly into Fluttershy's and flinging to the two apart. The Shadowbolt passed harmlessly between them, but Applejack's abrupt movement had left her hat behind and he struck it face-first. Panicking, he put his feet on the ground and stopped before he could blindly cannon into a wall or something.

He pulled the hat off and found himself face-to-face with the yellow pegasus, who stared at him with wide, angry eyes. Losing himself in the burning scowl, he tried to look away but could not. Fluttershy seemed to be staring into his soul. It tore away all pretences of duty that he had and scolded him like a little boy caught fighting with his sister. He wilted under the stare, feeling as if his brain was on fire. Beside him, he could hear Applejack trotting unsteadily towards the two.

*You idiot!* said the voice of his mistress in his head. *You don't have a soul! You're just an artificial puppet who's never had a childhood to be scolded!*

He struggled to rise to his full height again and continued to look into Fluttershy's eyes, but now he was fighting back.

Fluttershy moved in closer. "Applejack," she cried. "Get him before he breaks free!"

*She's looking for something to use against you, but there's nothing but evil in your heart! You have nothing to hide - nothing to be guilty about - because you don't know anything else!*

Face contorted in effort, he forced his eyes closed and turned his head away.

"Ha!" he shouted. "Too late!"

He opened his eyes again to see two orange hooves a few inches away from him.

"Yup," said Applejack, and let him have a trademark Apple family buck straight in the face. He exploded into a cloud of purple smoke which slowly dissipated, scattering tiny stars across the cobbles. Applejack put all four hooves on the ground again and let out a sigh of relief. Fluttershy moved to her side and the two leaned on one another again, panting heavily.

"Are you all right, Applejack?"

"Ah've taken worse beatings in rodeos. Bones heal. C'mon, let's go help the others."

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Rainbow Dash and the female Shadowbolt were engaged in another evenly-matched race as Rarity watched uselessly from below. It was times like this she wished she was more adept at magic in general instead of limiting herself to dressmaking and fashion spells. Twilight's butterfly-wings enchantment would go a long way right now.

Looking about, she realised that she had been following the fight without watching where she was going and it had led her to the front door of Carousel Boutique. A plan hatched in her mind. She looked up and yelled at the duo above.

"Rainbow Dash! Hold her there for a few minutes longer, I'm going to go get my spellbook!"

*You don't have a spellbook*, thought Dash, but bit her treacherous tongue before the words could escape her mouth.

The Shadowbolt eyed Rarity warily as the white unicorn bolted for the door of the boutique. She sensed a trap, but the unicorn seemed pitifully weak compared to the blue pegasus, so if she got one off her back for a minute then she could deal with whatever the other dished out. Dash was giving her a lot of trouble, though, so some cheating was in order.

Beating her wings alternately, she rolled to her side, banked a sharp left and headed north. The manoeuvre took Dash by surprise and she had to come to nearly a complete stop before she could change direction and resume the chase. The Shadowbolt traced a road below, seeing the awed faces of the ponies who were watching the battle from a safe distance. Spotting a likely target, she swooped down and grabbed a pink-coated young unicorn from her mother's back. To the mother's credit, she reacted

with unexpected speed and bit down on her daughter's tail, but only succeeded in pulling a few hairs out. The Shadowbolt arced into the sky again with the struggling filly in her hooves. She built up speed and, making sure Dash was watching, looped upwards in a half-circle and flung the filly into the air. Turning back, she headed for Carousel Boutique and that plotting unicorn.

Dash ignored the retreating pegasus, gritted her teeth and redoubled her efforts, her wings becoming a blur. High above, the pink unicorn slowed, reaching the height of her arc. She seemed to hang there for a moment before descending again towards the ground, shrieking. Dash turned into an upward climb heading directly towards the filly, but began to slow.

Long before she reached the rapidly-falling unicorn, Dash pulled a hairpin turn in the air, moaning as G-forces tugged at her muscles and her joints popped at the effort. Now heading towards the ground herself, she tried to approach a slightly slower speed than her target. Catching her at a dead stop would be as bad as if she hit the ground, so Dash needed to soften the landing.

The filly had her eyes closed and was sobbing when she came into range. Dash wrapped two comforting hooves around her and looked ahead. The ground was far too close to stop in time, but she tried her best. If she were on her own, turning ninety degrees in this distance would be nothing but it would surely kill any filly who had not yet learned magic. Her wings thrashed at the air, slowing the two down rapidly. Fifty feet turned to forty, then to thirty and twenty. Ten feet above the ground and still going too fast, Rainbow Dash stopped beating her wings and instead put the filly between them, holding her steady. She turned her legs towards the cobblestones and hit them hard. Remembering her emergency landing procedure from flight school, she dropped to her knees, then to her shoulder, rolling the unicorn across the stones. Through the ringing in her ears, she was glad to hear the filly start to cry out of fear and distress rather than pain.

The crowd, led by the filly's mother, ran up to her. She tried to get up and pose heroically but found that she couldn't. She lay down for a moment, hoping the world would stop spinning.

Meanwhile, Rarity ran about her shop, pulling drawers from cabinets and emptying the contents onto the floor, knocking over boxes of buttons and sequins, unravelling thread from carefully-organised mounts and generally causing as much mayhem as she could. The inside of Carousel Boutique



looked as if a particularly slovenly tornado had stayed the night. Parts of her mind screamed obscenities at her, but she ignored them and continued about her task.

The door crashed open at a powerful kick from the Shadowbolt, breaking the window on it and adding shards of glass to the already busy floor. She looked about the room and her eyes rested on Rarity, still seemingly trashing the place in search of something. Perhaps she was telling the truth about the spellbook, but it never hurt to be cautious in case it was a trap. She took wing again, hovering just below the room's high ceiling, and made her way towards Rarity. Experimentally, she took a quick swing with a front hoof at the unicorn and connected with her flank, making Rarity cry out in pain and stagger away.

More confident now, the Shadowbolt took a dive at Rarity but the unicorn ran around a rack of dresses and took refuge behind a workbench that had been knocked on its side. Chuckling, the Shadowbolt flew straight into the makeshift shield, hitting it with her front hooves and knocking it back into the wall. It was a lot heavier than she'd expected and didn't move as much as she would have hoped, but nevertheless the unicorn gave another howl of pain and, pulling herself from the wreckage, darted for the door. The Shadowbolt followed and finished the job with a rifling manoeuvre, rolling rapidly and driving her spinning front hooves into the back of Rarity's head.

The blow was pathetic. Rarity, noticing the light tap, turned her head and grinned. The Shadowbolt was suspended in the air a few feet off the ground, struggling against an invisible force. Slowly, Rarity released her illusion and a thick web of thread in a rainbow of colours began to appear around the inside of the boutique, hanging from every possible fixture and winding through every post, shelf and rack. The Shadowbolt had flown through it all and hopelessly tangled herself in it.

Rarity trotted over to her captive and smirked at her.

"Why, if you wanted to try it on, all you had to do was ask, darling."

The Shadowbolt snarled bestially at her. She bit into a clump of thread and began to chew on it. The thread was thin and snapped easily so she quickly freed one of her hooves and then began to work on another. Worried, Rarity tried to add some more thread but couldn't keep up with the pegasus' escape attempts. Finally, she reared up and clouted the side of the Shadowbolt's head with her front hooves, but her punches had little

muscle behind them. Bruised only slightly, the pegasus kept Rarity at bay with one flailing hoof while breaking thread with the other.

Rarity took a few trepidatious steps backwards as the last few threads snapped under the Shadowbolt's weight and she dropped to the wooden floor with a thump. She removed some lingering threads from her wings using her mouth and turned back to Rarity, her face red with fury under the goggles.

Beating her wings, she took to the air again - then quickly snapped back to her original position with all four hooves on the ground. She looked about in confusion. There didn't seem to be any more thread now that she had broken the illusion, but the unicorn was grinning widely at her again, her horn glowing with a cyan haze. Looking down at her own hooves, she saw why. She had been nailed to the floor by her jumpsuit using a forest of pins, needles, shears and scissors. She pulled a hoof up but the elastic material stretched with her and refused to break.

Rarity knew she didn't have it in her to deliver the final blow, but she knew a pony who could. Trotting back to the door, she leaned out and raised her voice to an ear-splitting yell that carried across the town.

*"Rainbow Dash! Triple-S!"*

Far off in the distance, a rainbow rose from the streets and arced into the sky. It gained height until it was nearly invisible, then turned an impossibly tight forty-five degrees and sped towards Carousel Boutique. Rarity wasn't sure, but she thought she heard a voice shout:

*"Super..."*

She stepped back into the room and held the door open. The Shadowbolt began to panic, pulling at her bindings with her teeth. The approaching rainbow was only a few hundred feet above the rooftops now and accelerating downwards.

*"... Speed..."*

The Shadowbolt went insane with fear and, whimpering, tried to struggle out of an outfit designed without the intention of ever being removed. Outside the door, Rainbow Dash hit the cobblestones with all four hooves and, with a flick of her wings and a pegasus' natural magic, transferred all her downward momentum into horizontal.

"... *Strut!*"

At a lazy three-hundred-miles-per-hour canter, she tore into the shop and hit the Shadowbolt with a cloud-bursting manoeuvre. The dark pegasus erupted into a fine purple haze and Dash continued into the back, ripping through the thread and scattering the debris. She ended up upside-down in a heap of dresses and mannequins, a triumphant grin on her face so wide that it threatened to remove the top of her head.

Rarity trotted over and lent a hoof at extracting her friend from the pile. Around them, colourful buttons rained down with a musical clattering.

"Did you see that? Did you see it? I've never done a Super Speed Strut indoors before." said Rainbow Dash. "That was so *awesome*."

Rarity looked about at the ruins of her store.

"Ten out of ten for style, dear, but try not to make a habit of it."

The two limped outside and under the fading rainbow contrail.

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Twilight lined up another futile shot at the Shadowbolt and released it but the bolt passed harmlessly over his head as he dipped under it. At the nadir of his flight, Pinkie Pie jumped surprisingly high in the air and swiped at him, grazing his knee with one hoof. The damage was minimal, especially to a pegasus who didn't need to walk, but Pinkie whooped in triumph at their first shallow victory.

Her jubilation was short-lived, though, as the pegasus' tactics became even more careful and cowardly. He made sure to stay well out of Pinkie's range while still keeping a careful eye on Twilight's aim. The fight had been going on for a frustrating ten minutes so far and she had not hit him with a spell one single time. Offensive spells were frowned upon by her Canterlot tutors and she was limited to one powerful but cripplingly slow evocation that she had picked up from a rebellious fellow student.

She let one more shot loose and growled in irritation when it innocently passed its target. Looking about, she noticed that Pinkie Pie had disappeared, leaving her alone against Nightmare Moon's minion. She bit her lip uncertainly. It wasn't like Pinkie to abandon her, but she hadn't told Twilight about any plan of hers.

A warlike cry from above reminded her that Pinkie's communication skills were lacking where it came to plans. From the top of the town hall, a shrieking figure bounded off the roof, ten stories up, and hurled herself at the Shadowbolt, who flinched and turned towards the incoming pink projectile.

Pinkie cannoned into him, driving the wind from his lungs and landing a solid kick to the jaw, but whatever plan she had concocted unravelled from there. She scrabbled for purchase on the pegasus, sinking her teeth into a wing but only coming away with a few feathers. She grabbed for a rear hoof and managed to hold on for a moment before a kick sent her into thin air again. She dropped like a stone towards the square below.

Twilight ran to the falling figure, shouting as she did.

*"Go limp! Go limp!"*

Pinkie seemed rather relaxed already, as if this were a mere setback. Her interpretation of Twilight's instructions involved laying one hoof under her head, looking more like a pony reading in bed than one plummeting to her death.

Twilight caught the earth pony with her telekinesis, struggling to slow her descent gently. Pinkie Pie landed unharmed on the cobblestones with a soft "oof".

"Pinkie!" yelled Twilight. "What were you thinking? You could have been killed."

Pinkie Pie laughed at the notion. "Not while you were here, silly; I knew you'd catch me. Hey, I got him good that time. Let's try it again!"

Twilight boggled at Pinkie's recklessness, but felt touched by her friend's trust in her abilities. Nevertheless, she refused to allow Pinkie try again.

"Besides, it won't work a second time. Look: he's avoiding the tower now."

Sure enough, the Shadowbolt had decided to give the surrounding buildings a wide berth to avoid a repeat of the incident. He had the height advantage against his two opponents and was unwilling to give it up. He swooped down for a quick swipe at Twilight but, since she wasn't concentrating on a spell, she saw it coming and dodged, sprawling on the ground in the effort.

"This is pointless," said Twilight. "He's too high up for us ground-bound ponies to hit and every time he comes down, he'll abandon an attack if he thinks we're ready for it."

Pinkie Pie brightened.

"I know! Maybe we could give him an invitation to a party and then he'd come down and POW! We'd give him what for!"

Despite herself, Twilight laughed. "Oh, Pinkie. Not everything can be solved with a party."

"Wait. Say that again."

"Not everything can be solved with a party."

"That's it! A party! I have an idea!"

"But I just said -"

"No no no! It's not a party. Remember that spell you cast at Rarity's birthday last month?"

"That? Yes, I remember. But that's not an offensive spell. In fact I can't even aim it. It just goes -"

"That's OK. Just get it ready and I'll tell you when to use it."

"But -"

Pinkie wasn't listening to her anymore. Instead, she stood in a wide stance, glaring at the circling pegasus above. Twilight began casting the ridiculously simple spell that she had picked it up from watching Trixie's pompous show last year and had been using as a party trick ever since. It was the work of a moment to ready it, but holding it meant that she couldn't move from her current spot. The Shadowbolt sensed a prime target and swooped down again to strike.

"Pinkie..."

"Hold the spell. Don't let it go until I give the signal."

Pinkie galloped around Twilight until she was between her and the pegasus, who broke off the attack and shot up into the sky again. He looped once and came down from the opposite side. Again Pinkie stood

between him and Twilight and he abandoned the attack. The third time and the same scenario, he took her by surprise and didn't break off, bludgeoning Pinkie with a hoof and darting away. Pinkie didn't move an inch from shielding her friend.

"Pinkie, you're hurt!"

"I'm fine. Wait for the signal."

"What's the signal?"

"You'll know it."

"Pinkie, remember when we had that talk about explaining yourself properly because we don't understand what the hay you're doing most of the time?"

Pinkie deflected another blow from the Shadowbolt. A pained grunt escaped her lips but she held fast. More blows rained down on her but she moved in a circle around the concentrating unicorn, making sure that not a single attack reached her friend.

High above, the Shadowbolt was getting worried. The pink earth pony was taking all his attacks without complaint while the unicorn continued her magic.

*She must be preparing a particularly powerful spell, he thought. Take her out at all costs.*

He slowly started a wide circle above the duo, picking up speed until he was a spinning dark blur. Pinkie watched intently. In an instant, he dropped out of the circle and spiralled down to attack Twilight's flank, but Pinkie Pie appeared out of nowhere and he cannoned unexpectedly into her. Pinkie dug her hooves into the stones and held her ground, clearly winded but mostly unhurt. The Shadowbolt bounced off and took to the air, beginning his circling again,

"That trick won't work with me," laughed Pinkie. "I'm the local cup-and-balls-game champion!"

*Then let's cheat,* he thought. He began looping faster and faster until the air battered at him and he couldn't stand it anymore.

Down below, Pinkie got a familiar feeling that zapped up her back. Her eyes widened.

"*Twitchy tail!*" she screamed.

Twilight's brain took a moment to translate the non sequitur before the significance hit her like a brick. She released the spell.

At the same time, the Shadowbolt pulled a gut-wrenching left turn that put him directly above Twilight, then another turn that sent him hurtling downwards towards her.

He found a small fizzling bolt coming in the opposite direction, which struck him in the ribs, then exploded. An immense firework lit the town square in an array of colours and sent sparklers spiralling in all directions. Mixed in with the expanding cloud of glitter was a rapidly-dissipating purple mist and twinkling stars.

Twilight and Pinkie Pie cheered at their victory, punching the air in elation. Then they tottered about unsteadily for a moment until their ears stopped ringing from the blast.

"Pinkie, you're a genius!"

"Nope. I just know how to get a party started. Come on, let's go mingle."

# Chapter 6

Nightmare Moon was proving surprisingly strong. Jack had locked his sword with her horn and was pressing down on it with all his might, but she pushed back with equal force, powerful muscles in her neck straining under the pressure. Her tail lashed out and Jack pulled away again; another missed opportunity. His strikes lacked conviction and were being parried too quickly for him to steel his resolve and harm her. All his life he had fought against demons and monsters and snuffed them out without a thought but Nightmare Moon was, in a way, holding Luna hostage.

Her horn glowed for a moment and Jack moved out of the line of another blast, but it never came. Instead, he heard the roar of fire above and, without pausing to see what it was, jumped over the mare to a safe distance. A small meteorite smashed into the ground where he stood only a moment before and more began to rain down around him. He weaved between them, careful to keep an eye on Nightmare Moon as he did. She reared back and whinnied menacingly as fire from the heavens showered the town square, spitting and sparking on the cobbles.

Cold, calculating thoughts coaxed him to go for the killing blow - to strike her down and free the land from her plague of darkness. His heart, however, begged him to seek another option.

*Father, mother; guide me now, he thought. How can I make a decision like this alone?*

The memory of his parents rose as bright as a beacon in his soul. *Your mind sees only the flesh, my son, they told him. Your heart sees the truth in all beings. Remember that our will is your will and you wield it as a weapon. Not cold steel, but the searing light of all that is good in the human spirit.*

*But how can I see what is inside the hearts of others?*

*Through the words of those that have.*

From behind him, a flash of light lit the peripheries of his vision and Nightmare Moon's expression became one of astonishment. Looking round, Jack saw that Luna's friends had gathered together and were moving towards the melee. Some were limping badly and others took deep ragged breaths, but all were alive and walked side-by-side in solidarity. The



necklaces five of them wore were glowing softly and Twilight now had a tiara of gold with a large six-pointed gem on her head. A harsh light shone behind her eyes.

"Nightmare Moon!" yelled Twilight. "The Elements of Harmony have banished you before and will do it again."

The black pony stepped back in fear.

"No!" she cried.

The six ponies closed their eyes and began to float off the ground. A rainbow of light whirled around the figures, who became silhouettes in a blinding halo.

Above the whine of powerful magics being unleashed, metal struck metal and the rainbow vanished. The six ponies dropped heavily to the ground and Twilight landed ungracefully on her hooves. Beside her, her tiara - the Element of Magic - clattered to the pavement, knocked aside by Jack's sword. He stood with the sword raised against them.

"No," he said flatly.

The six ponies lowered their heads aggressively at him.

"I thought you were on our side!" said Rainbow Dash.

"You turnin' traitor on us?" asked Applejack.

Jack lowered the sword.

"Do not insult me. I stand against Aku and all his kin, but you cannot hope to destroy his handiwork with the Elements. They are made from the same sorcery used against him a thousand years ago; they did not work then and they will not work now. The last time you banished Nightmare Moon it merely locked her away to torment the princess Luna from within. I am the only one here capable of destroying the entity completely... but I risk killing Luna too."

The ponies cried out in anger and disbelief. Behind Jack, Nightmare Moon watched the scene with interest.

*Let them argue. At the moment, all stand against me. If they continue this, perhaps they will split or - better yet - fight amongst themselves.*

"Don't you dare harm a hair on her mane!" said Rarity.

"Please, consider this," replied Jack. "What would Princess Luna want? What kind of person - er, pony - was she?"

Fluttershy poked her nose out from behind her curtain of pink hair. "She was kind and caring."

"Do you forgive her for becoming what she did?"

"That was Aku's manipulation!" snapped Pinkie Pie. "It could have happened to any one of us, so she didn't do anything that needs to be forgiven."

"Would she have allowed Nightmare Moon to be free if she could have prevented it at all?"

"Of course not!" said Twilight. "She fought against the influence of Nightmare Moon every day of her life since that night a year ago."

"And would she have laid down her life to free Equestria from Nightmare Moon forever?"

The ponies looked at each other and then at their hooves. They knew the answer, but no pony wanted to say it. Eventually, in a small hoarse voice, Twilight conceded.

"Yes, she would."

"Then she is truly honourable," said Jack. Fast as lightning, he spun and charged at Nightmare Moon. Taken by surprise, the mare lashed out with her mane but Jack dropped to a roll and rose again under her head. With conviction supporting his arms, he drove the sword deep into her throat.

Nightmare Moon gave a small choking sound and tottered backwards. Jack released the sword and it remained in the wound, following her thrashing. Around the sword, the mare's black flesh began to glow with a red flame and peel back like paper. Divine fire flowed into her body, burning away Aku's demonic ichor. The sword dropped to the ground and rattled on the stones, but the fire continued to consume Nightmare Moon until she was invisible in the blaze.

The ponies put their hooves over their eyes to protect them from the horror and Fluttershy began to cry deep, hitching sobs. Tears flowed freely from the other five.

When the crackle of flames died down, they opened their eyes again and gasped at the scene. Princess Luna stood before them, confused but alive and well. Beside her, Jack bent down and picked up his sword.

"This sword was forged in purity and strength," he said with a smile. "In the battle against evil, it will not harm one whose heart is pure."

Twilight tackled Luna with a hug, sending both of them to the ground in a cloud of dust. Fluttershy, Dash, Rarity and Applejack followed, piling on top and around her and crying tears of joy. Pinkie Pie hugged Jack instead, squeezing him tightly in silent thanks. Ponies began to emerge at the edges of the square and a great cheer rose from them.

"Fools!"

The ponies and Jack looked up to see Aku in the form of a long dragon, looping in a figure-8 over the town.

"You have only delayed the inevitable. My reign of terror has just begun!" His eyes widened comically. "Oh, I made a horse pun, ha ha haaa!"

"I remain standing, Aku!" shouted Jack, peeling the clingy pink pony from his waist.

"You cannot hope to defend this realm by yourself, samurai."

"*He does not need to,*" said an echoing voice. On the horizon, a brilliant sun rose, sweeping away the stars and tinting the dim sky a fiery red. A bright flare blinded all present and when the spots in their eyes cleared, a white pegasus unicorn with a flowing pastel-coloured mane stood among them.

"Princess Celestia!" cried Twilight joyfully. She made to move to her mentor, but Celestia held up a hoof to tell her to stay where she was.

"All of you, keep back. I will take care of this."

Aku roared with laughter, swooping down to the ground ahead of Celestia. His body warped and twisted into his familiar towering form.

"I remember a Celestia all those years ago. You were the one on the walls at the battle, shouting defiance at me and trying to hold me back with your pitiable excuse for magic. I suppose a thousand years would have been enough to heal the scars I gave you then. And still you stand against me, when I am more powerful than ever and you have nowhere to run?"

"I stand here between you and my sister. No force in the universe will move me from this spot."

"Celestia..." whispered Luna.

Aku laughed again; a deep, mocking laugh that echoed in the far-off hills.

"You cannot harm me, little pony."

Celestia seemed to glow with an inner fury. "I am Princess Celestia, ruler of the lands of Equestria and master of its sun. I am a force of nature here, a goddess in physical form. You have attacked my lands in an act of war, threatened my people and hurt my sister. *I will not allow your presence here any longer.*"

Aku's expression slowly changed to a more serious frown.

"Very well, then. I have killed gods before."

Celestia dived to the side as a black claw smashed into the ground where she stood a moment ago. She slashed at it with her horn, but Aku pulled away.

Twilight grabbed her tiara in her mouth and beckoned for the others to follow her, retreating to the perimeter of the square. Jack, however, did not retreat. He made to run at Aku, but a white hoof on his wrist stopped him in his tracks. He looked down to find Rarity pulling at him.

"Come along now."

"I have to -"

"Let our princess handle it. She's tougher than you think and she needs to prove to that horror that he has no place here."

Jack looked back at the battle uncertainly, considering her words. It was true, though, that he could not remain here to defend them forever and they needed to fight for themselves sooner rather than later. He sheathed his sword and followed Rarity to the rest of the group.

With a blood-curdling roar, Aku's body shifted and took the form of a monstrous spider. He lashed out with legs like steel at Celestia, who dodged and danced with ballerina-like grace. Weaving as she went, she galloped to beneath Aku's bloated body and leapt into the air, trying to drive her horn into his gut, but he shifted form again. Black liquid flowed and re-formed behind her as a jet-black tyrannosaurus rex.

Aku leaned over and brought his massive jaws down on Celestia. The crowd cried out in fear as their princess disappeared into his maw, then cheered as she came into view again, her front hooves holding his upper teeth and the back ones pressing down on his jaw. Her swanlike frame disguising incredible strength, she forced his mouth wider and wider until she could step out and back onto the plaza. Aku's teeth snapped shut on thin air.

Lowering her horn, she charged at Aku's underbelly again, but he turned around and his thick scaly tail slammed into her flank, lifting her from the ground and sending her crashing into a store on the other side of the square. Bricks and timber toppled down, burying her completely. Aku chuckled but kept a wary eye on the rubble. He was not foolhardy enough to think that would stop her.

Sure enough, Celestia rose on ivory wings from the debris, tossing heavy bricks aside. She took to the air and dived at Aku, who contorted his body aside and transformed into a colossal eagle. He took wing as well and the two circled each other, Aku's sharp claws and beak lashing at her and Celestia's vicious horn thrusting at him.

In a surprise attack, Celestia turned upside-down in the air and, using her hooves to defend herself from Aku's claws, swooped below him and stabbed her horn into his chest. Aku roared in pain and slapped her away with a wing.

Swirling and transforming, Aku dropped to the ground and took his normal form again. He looked down at the newly-formed hole in his chest that crackled at the edges with red embers that died after a few seconds. He closed the hole, shortening his height by a few inches.

"Impossible," he said.

With a whistle of wind, Princess Celestia landed hard on the stones in front of Aku and eyed him defiantly.

"They say the only thing that can harm you, monster, is the might of the gods and the will of good people. Well, *I* am a god and *these* are my people. Good, honest folk whose will is my will and mine theirs."

Aku hissed in fury before exploding into a mass of tentacles that swung at the princess. Too many to dodge, she was forced backwards until her rear struck the wall of a store, stopping her in her tracks. She leaned her head to the side as a tentacle thrust at her and went through the wall.

"You forget, Aku. I am not *just* the form you see before you."

Her horn glowed with a fiery aura. Above the horizon, the sun seemed to get brighter until the ponies had to shield their eyes from the glare. A blast of invisible heat shot down from the sun at Aku's writhing form. Around the square, the grass between the stones blackened and died. A nearby tree burst into flame. The ponies closest to the ray stepped back, closing their eyes and mouths before the heat dried them out completely. The tips of their hair darkened and curled.

Within the beam, the air boiled while stones melted and turned to lava. Aku received the full force of the attack and his body blistered before bursting into flame. He howled in pain as the fire burned away nearly half his body before he could put it out.

His tortured and diminished body reformed on the opposite side of the square where he growled at the assembly.

"You win this time, Celestia! But we will meet again! You and your people cannot hide here forever."

Black liquid flowed from the square and disappeared into the Everfree Forest and the portal that hid there. Aku was banished. A thunderous cheer rose from the crowd and they stamped their hooves in applause.

Celestia trotted over to her student and her companions, where she put a hoof to her mouth and tittered. The six of them were blackened from the heat on the front only while their rears still had their usual bright colours, giving them a ridiculous appearance. She remembered herself and forced herself to stop laughing.

"I am sorry, my little ponies. A trim will sort that out."

"That was awesome!" said Rainbow Dash. Applejack nudged her in the ribs. "Oh, er. That was awesome, *your majesty*."

"Quite remarkable," agreed Rarity. "You certainly showed him a thing or two."

"We knew you could do it," said Twilight, beaming.

Luna stepped forward and placed her neck aside her sister's in a warm hug. Tears of joy rolled down her cheeks and she did not let go for a long time.

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"Are you sure you have to go so soon?" asked Fluttershy. "Pinkie Pie is going to throw a party tonight in celebration."

"It's going to be the bestest party ever!" whooped Pinkie, dancing from hoof to hoof.

The six ponies plus Jack, Luna and Celestia stood in the ruins of Luna's castle. The Elements of Harmony had been returned to their pedestal and Jack was preparing to go back through the portal. He had been given a satchel full of provisions and a supply of Zecora's tea that he had requested. Rarity had designed him a new robe that he had accepted gratefully, though he vowed to remove some of the superfluous pockets and pleats that she had added once he was on the other side.

"I have a duty I must fulfil. There are people depending on me."

Fluttershy nodded in understanding. Each of the six ponies took turns to shake his hand and then Luna and Celestia stepped forward.

"I cannot thank you enough for ridding me of Nightmare Moon," said Luna, kissing his cheek. "Please, take this with you."

She handed him a small bundle of cloth that he unwrapped to find a copy of *The Schism of Equestria*.

"Give it to the people of Earth. Let them know that we broke free of Aku's dominion and that hope is not lost."

Jack smiled and put the book inside his robe. He bowed to Luna and Celestia and waved to the six friends, then stepped through the portal and onto the dead leaves of Chu-Het. Behind him, the portal shrank and disappeared under the power of the Elements of Harmony.

Gripping his collar closed against the cold, he walked onwards towards his destiny.