

Brotherhood of the Moon

By Zak TH



Table of Contents:

Author's Notes	3
Chapter 1	4
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	22
Chapter 4	30
Chapter 5	39
Chapter 6	48
Chapter 7	55
Chapter 8	63
Chapter 9	72
Chapter 10	80
Chapter 11	90
Chapter 12	98
Chapter 13	106
Chapter 14	117

Author's Notes

-Time

In this fic, Equestrian time revolves around Princess Luna's banishment. Any years before the event are Olden Equestria time, or OE, descending in number until year 0, the year Luna is banished. Any years afterward are New Solar Era time, or NSE, ascending indefinitely. It works pretty much like BCE/BC and CE/AD for us. I add this note because the story will likely take place over a multitude of years, Firefly's life, so timeframes may often be sited as 7 OE or 1000 NSE and such.

Chapter 1

Princess Celestia overlooked her kingdom. The image of a perfect ruler overlooking a perfect land. There was virtually no crime in Equestria, and through magic, any sort of drought or famine could also be easily overlooked. Yes, Equestria was in all sense of the word a paradise. But it had not always been so.

The princess returned to her suppressed thoughts of a time before, a time of violence and bloodshed. It had been a thousand years since that time, but some things never died. The things she had been driven to do and witness would haunt her for the rest of her immortal life.

"Princess?" a sudden voice shattered the princess' train of thought. She turned to see a castle guard standing in the door way of her room. "The celebration is about to begin." he said sternly. His face betraying any emotion he might have been feeling.

"Oh, of course... I'll be down shortly." Celestia said, coming into focus with the present time. The guard gave a quick bow before turning to leave. "And also, Captain?" She said to the guard as he left. He stopped in his place and turned back completely, offering his full attention. "Please try to lighten up, I wouldn't want anypony looking so glum on this joyous day." the guard hesitated, but gave another small bow before leaving. Celestia almost thought she saw a smile breach his defenses before he left.

And yet, the princess still felt wrong. It was almost as if she was telling herself to lighten up instead of the guard. This day was supposed to be one of forgiveness, forgetting the past to make way for the future. But she still could not shake the images of history from her sub-conscious. It was as if an omen was befalling her divine mind, giving her a glimpse of what was to come.

Outside Canterlot Castle, thousands of ponies were cheering loudly. Music was playing, colors were everywhere, all in anticipation for the princess. The courtyard was packed with bodies, there was hardly room enough to breathe. And because the only ponies allowed in the air were guards, the third of the population that was usually unaccounted for in

terms of ground space was taking up what little room there was. Still, this did not make the spirit in the room falter; the place was literally explosive with anxiety.

Soon trumpets sounded an imperial fanfare, and anypony listening knew that royalty was about to make itself present to the common folk. The palace doors swung open, and flanked by two guards, out came the majestic Princess Celestia. Her long white legs moving toward the edge of the balcony with grace and poise. At reaching the edge, she lifted her head, spread her wings, and simply smiled to the crowd. The cheering grew. For a long time nothing happened, she simply waited for the crowd to die down. Eventually, the near endless supply of energy that was the ponies' enthusiasm cut low to allow the princess to talk.

"Citizens of Equestria!" she said with a gallant tone. "Faithful subjects!" she added. "And my dearest little ponies, thank you all for attending this celebration." The cheering's volume subtly increased. "As you all know, this year's summer sun celebration was very eventful, as it was on that day a thousand years ago that The Elements of Harmony sealed my sister Luna in the moon. Well, I am happy to announce that after a millennium of anger and regret, me and my sister have set aside our differences and decided to rule once again together, as it was intended!" the cheering again rose up to meet the announcement. But there was more to the princess' speech. "I am proud to present to you all, my beloved sister, Princess Luna!" the legionous cheering suddenly changed into a collective gasp as the palace doors once again swung open, this time revealing a blue haired alicorn of smaller size. Her fur was the color of the night and her eyes sparkled like stars. She timidly stepped out of the shade of the palace halls and revealed herself in the light. More confidently, she walked over to join her sister by her side. Up until this point, the crowd had been engulfed by stunned silence, no pony expected to see Luna so soon after the incident, especially at this time of day. But as she proudly stood by her beloved older sister and let loose the same caring smile Celestia gave them, the crowd's shouts of joy reached their highest intensity.

A guard at the gate angrily rolled his eyes at all this cheering. The biggest celebration Canterlot had had in a while and *he* had guard the door. No one was going to attack or intrude on a free to attend public celebration. The sky patrol hadn't sighted any griffons or dragons anywhere close to Canterlot, but security *a/ways* came first, even when it obviously didn't

matter. What's worse is he was the only one! Every damned captain of the guard and rookie in training was inside enjoying the party *except* for him. One of these days, he wasn't just going to agree, in fact the next time The captain asked him to do anything stupid, he might just shove his hoof down hi-

The sound of hooves striking stone snapped him out of his inner monologue. He looked up to see three ponies in hoods waiting for entry. They nodded silently and motioned for the door. Quiet guys wearing hoods, very suspicious, but their hoods were a clean white with the image of the Princess' sun on their sides and saddlebags. The guard figured they must have been political officials who just didn't like sunlight.

"Oh, you guys want in?" he said stupidly. Of course they wanted in. He almost thought he saw one of them put their hoof to their face in shame for his comment. "Well that's okay, you guys are bit late, but the party's just getting started. I'll just need a name from you all and you can go right in." He said. The three looked at each other. A mental debate passing between them that the guard was oblivious too. They all nodded to the one closest to the guard and he reached into his saddlebags. "What, do you guys have ID ca-" the guard was cut short from being stabbed through the neck.

"Thank you again for organizing all this just for me." Luna said to her sister in a hushed tone. "I really don't deserve this praise after the horrible things I did." she added, a light blush showing at her modesty.

"Oh this was nothing at all" Celestia replied, titling her head to look at her sister while still paying ample attention to the crowd. "And you deserve nothing less little sister, you made a bad choice, but you are still family, and family is forever." she said smiling brighter. Luna simply could not believe this was all happening. She had expected there to be doubt, in the position of a common pony, she would not have welcomed back the monster who had kidnapped her princess and threatened to take over so eagerly, and especially not throw a party in her honor. These ponies were so understanding though, she didn't know what Celestia did, but her subjects were so much kinder than Luna remembered.

"Well, I'm happy to finally be back." Luna replied. "Maybe now we can finally have some peace and quiet-" A sudden rush of air made Luna stop mid-sentence. Behind her, an arrow was now embedded in the wall, with a label dangling from its end. The label bore an image of a burning sun. Luna

noticed something else though, her mane had been cut. The arrow flew mere inches from her body. Whoever fired it, had been aiming for her head.

The royal guards did not give the archer another chance to shoot. Without missing a beat, they surrounded the princesses. Pegasi took to the air, earth ponies formed barriers from all sides of the court. A group of unicorns gathered round to finish the procedure with a shielding spell for the two royals. This was all before the crowd could come out of their stunned silence. Screams shot out as another arrow dived into a guard pony's skull, dropping him to the floor, lifeless. The shielding spell protected the princesses from any further arrows though, the assailant had failed. At this, a voice filled the courtyard.

"Subjects of Equestria!" said the voice, obviously enhanced by magic, but having no clear source. "Do not be fooled by the humble pony before you! Luna is a dangerous tyrant, and must be eliminated! Do not fall for the tricks of the moon! This evil will be purged from the world! So says the Flames of the Sun!" With that, the voice died, and the crowd's screams increased. All Luna could do was look at her sister through her protective crystal. She was met with the same worried look. Celestia could not hear her sister in her case, but she did see the look of mortal fright on her sister's face, and saw her mouth "They're back."

It was a dark night in Ponyville. In a cloud home above the village, Rainbow Dash was getting herself ready for bed. It had been a long day and she was tired, not that she did much of work, but man had she practiced flying. Today had been a very practice-centric day in particular; she had virtually ignored her friends and spent more time in the air than she had on the ground. Regardless of whether or not today could count as a hard day's work, she was tired, and nothing would ruin the comfort that sleep provided.

As if answering her invitation to intrude, a knock on the door forced Dash out of her bed and to her front door.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming!" she said with a cranky tone as the knocking continued. She unlocked the door to see a hooded pegasus standing outside her door. Behind him was a similarly dressed pegasus. Both wore a sun on their sides.

"Are you the pony they call Rainbow Dash?" the strange pony asked. It didn't take a genius to figure out the oddity of such a question, but just being suspicious didn't feel like taking enough action to Rainbow. She placed her hoof back on the door.

"Yes...why?" The hooded one lunged for her. Already prepared, Rainbow slammed the door on him, catching him halfway through. Spinning around, she grabbed a nearby broom and kept turning to bring it down on his head, knocking him unconscious. The second pony burst through the door, saw his ally, and attacked. He thrust his hoof at her in a punch, but still riding the instinct of before, Rainbow caught his hoof, twisted it, and brought the broom handle up into his face. With a bloody snout, he went down.

And then, realization struck her. Rainbow Dash had just knocked out two strange assailants that had tried to hurt her, using self-defense techniques she never learned. They were bigger and stronger than her, but she had disabled them. She didn't even know how, it just felt right, like a current had been sweeping her in the right direction. She might have spent all night there, just looking at what she'd just done, had a window upstairs not broken with a crash. There were more. Soon a pony came down her stairs and stood stunned, looking at her, then to his allies, then back to her, back and forth for a while. A different kind of instinct took over Dash at that moment. *Run*. She made a dash for her door, hearing the pony quickly follow. Taking to the sky, she escaped her house at a speed no normal pegasus could match.

Rainbow Dash landed in the main section of Ponyville. She could fly no longer, already tired from all day, her wings simply could not sustain her anymore. Still, she needed to find somewhere safe. At this hour there was probably only one pony awake, and her house happened to be closest. Dash ran to the large hollow tree near the center of town, the Books & Branches Library. Not even stopping to knock, she burst through the door. "Twilight!" she yelled. Inside the library she did not find the purple unicorn, but she did find three more of the strange hooded ponies. Skidding to a halt, she ran out the door just as fast as she entered. The three gave chase soon afterwards, calling out for her to stop and for someone to catch her.

Dash hadn't entertained the thought very often, but there was no denying what she felt right now; *Fear*. Strange ponies going after her was one thing, but if they had already been to Twilight's house, and considering

she had not seen her friends all day, this whole mess might have had something to do with the Elements of Harmony. She shuddered to think of what could have happened to all her other friends. She had to find them, make sure they were safe, but first she had to get away from her pursuers, and that was not going so well. Dash often took pride in her speed, but the fact was she was tired, and she needed energy to move as fast as she did. Fate working against her, two more hooded ones appeared in front of her, and she collapsed to the floor, falling into an exhaustion fueled sleep.

Rainbow Dash woke up in a bed. A strange thing, considered where she had fallen asleep. She got up woozily, not yet fully awake. "What a weird dream..." she said to herself, before actually opening her eyes and looking at the room around her. It was very comfortable; everything was a royal purple or a shimmering gold. She could see a small breakfast laid out for her on a bedside table. Needless to say, this was *not* her room. Remembering the ponies from last night, she quickly fell out of the bed like it was alive. Now realized of her situation, Dash looked around for somewhere to go, a vent, a window, anything. The only opening in the room however, was the front door. "Maybe if I can just run through fast enough..." Dash thought to herself. It was a stupid plan, but her only option at this point. She threw open the door and lunged for the hall at top speed, only to smack right into the back of the pegasus guarding her door. He turned around calmly as if someone had thrown a paper ball at his head.

"Oh, you're awake. Did you eat yet?" The guard asked calmly.

"Get out of my way! Or I'll...I'll do something!" Dash said menacingly, getting into an aggressive pose. The guard simply gave her a tilted look, as if to say "What the heck is wrong with this girl?" Dash then noticed something; this guard didn't look like the ponies from last night. This was a stark white pegasus in shining gold armor with a blue star emblem. And the room she was just in, with all the imperial colors and metals. It hadn't crossed her mind in the shock of being captured, but the room matched Twilight's descriptions of Canterlot Castle, and this guard was one that was loyal to Princess Celestia.

"Well...okay" said the guard moving to let Dash leave. "But the Princess wishes to see you after breakfast, so I'll have to lead you right there." Dash eased up and blushed a little with embarrassment.

“Uh yeah, okay...” she said, starting to walk out the door. Before leaving though, she suddenly remembered something. “But first...” she said returning to the room “I’d like to eat.” In all honesty, Dash was *starving*.

Rainbow Dash and the guard arrived at the top of a long flight of steps. Dash guessed it was probably one of the tall towers she’d seen when she came to Canterlot before.

“Okay, just through this door miss.” said the guard, motioning to the entrance to the tower’s top.

“Uh, thanks.” Dash replied simply. The guard, seeing his duty satisfied, left back down the stairs. Dash entered the door, expecting to find Princess Celestia and her friends waiting for her. To her surprise, there was only one pony in the room besides her. “Princess Luna?” Dash said with a mixture of shock of curiosity.

“Hello Rainbow Dash.” Luna replied simply. “We have a lot to talk about, I suggest you sit down.” The room lacked a chair though, the room was surrounded by bookcases, save for a few windows at regular intervals. In the center was a blanket with a pillow on the floor, and a chest next to Luna. Dash decided on the blanket, and sat down on the floor as the princess looked out the window worriedly. It was a beautiful day, sun shining, birds flying, a normal day in Equestria, but none the less perfect. The happy aroma did not match the air of mortal urgency the moon goddess had around her.

“Um Princess...” Dash began.

“No need to be formal, I’m afraid you can’t be worried about something like that at a time like this.” Luna replied quickly, as if they had little time to discuss her matters and were being watched.

“Okay...um Luna” Dash corrected, a bit taken back by the worried urgency. “Would you happen to know where my friends are? I saw some royal ponies at their houses like the kind that came to mine, and was wondering if maybe-”

“Dash...” once again she was cut off by Luna. “Your friends are missing, and those were *not* royal ponies.” With this Dash’s fears were confirmed. Those ponies had not been the ones to take her to the castle, and they had not taken her friends here either.

“Then...who were they?” Dash asked, now quite a bit frightened for the well being of her best friends.

“Before we talk about that, we need to talk about something else, namely your past.” Luna said gravely.

“My past? Like, my life back in Cloudsdale as a filly?”

“Actually, not so much *your* past.” Luna said, turning to look at Dash head on. “We need to talk about your family’s past.”

Chapter 2

"My ancestors were...what?" Dash said stunned.

"Assassins." Luna replied simply. "You come from a line of trained killers Rainbow Dash." Dash was still trying to grasp the idea. She came from a family of racing ponies, everyone in her family knew nothing but laid back lives and fast times. To think anyone of them could actually make a living of killing other ponies...

"Okay even if that's true..." Dash said skeptically. "What does my family have to do with all this?"

"Because, you're ancestors weren't just a bunch of crazed assassins, they were elite members of an assassin brotherhood known as the Stars of the Moon." Luna said, pulling out a book from the bookshelf with her magic. "You see Rainbow, the hooded ponies that attacked you and kidnapped your friends are a group of political extremists set on the destabilization of our two party system to grant them control of the throne." Luna said in a particularly educated tone. Dash could only blink in confusion. "They're...crazy ponies who wanted to kill me to give them power." Luna simplified.

"How would killing you do that?" Dash asked.

"They are, well *were*, Celestia's advisers, so they held a large part in what decisions she made." Luna placed the book on the floor and continued, flipping the pages. "They were the ones who convinced Celestia to imprison me in the moon, and after Celestia realized the gravity of her decision, she banished them all from political positions." Luna continued searching through the book. Dash caught glimpses of images in the book, a group of gems, a calm depiction of Equestria, and what she thought was a picture of Nightmare Moon. Luna continued. "It seems that now that I've returned, they want revenge for their shame, and considering how many generations have passed, they probably are convinced I'm some evil tyrant who wants to destroy them all." Luna rolled her eyes at the last bit, but kept flipping through the book. An odd silence followed the last statement. Dash

waited for Luna to spout out more information, but she never did. Still, she wanted to fill the void with *something*.

"So...you're not, right?" Dash said.

"Not what?" Luna replied.

"An evil tyrant or whatever?" Luna stopped searching her book to give Dash an unamused look. A nervous smile crossed Dash's face. Luna shook her head and returned to her book.

"Okay, I still don't see what this has to do with my assassin ancestors though." Dash said, finally offering a question. Luna stopped at a page and turned the book for Dash to see, it was a page on the Mare in the Moon.

"Do you remember the end of this story? 'The stars shall aid in her escape' ?" Luna asked.

"Well, kinda." to be honest, Dash had never read too much of anything.

"Did you ever wonder who these 'stars' were?" Dash nodded her head no, and gave a quick shrug. Again, Luna rolled her eyes. "That line was actually an old saying, the name 'Stars of the Moon' is not just a random title, the entire organization was created to combat the Flames of the Sun, the street name for Celestia's advisers and their allies. Your ancestors, along with other assassins, helped my side of the throne stay strong, and saved me on numerous occasions. They helped to make sure the Flames didn't control the entire land."

"But I thought you said they only *advised* Celestia!" Dash said.

"It was a different time Dash." Luna said shaking her head. "My sister was very easily persuaded. In a way, I was too."

She turned to the chest beside her. "Anyway, let's get to the point." Luna opened it and floated out something with her magic. It was a weathered old crown; it looked like it might have been very intricate and beautiful once, but now it had pieces missing and tatters everywhere. It was almost a sad sight to see something so pretty in such bad shape. The

only thing about the crown that did not look old was the shining bright ruby that crested it. It was in the shape of three bars, interlocking to make a triangle. "This is an old magical artifact." Luna said. "The Crown of Animus." the ruby seemed to brighten at the name's mention. "When worn, and with the right spell, it can allow the user to reach deep into their subconscious and relive memories embedded in their very DNA, it will allow you to re-live the lives of your ancestors." Dash was still mesmerized by the gem on the crown, but she did hear what Luna said. Could this crown really allow someone to relive the lives of their forefathers? Was something like that even possible? "I want you to live the life of your ancestor Rainbow Dash, and learn how to be an assassin." The revelation was enough to shock Dash out of her trance.

"Me? An assassin? I could never do that!" Dash said horrified. "I can't hurt another pony, I just can't!"

"It's in your blood Dash, you can, and you can do it better than anypony else." Luna said coldly. In her blood? Dash remembered the conflict with the Flames at her house. She couldn't deny that it felt natural, but could she have really killed those ponies?

"Well...why can't you just get your guards to help?" Dash suggested. Luna shook her head. "My sister insists that this attack was a freak uprising, that they have no real power. But I can tell, these ponies are not kidding, they've waited long enough to re-build their forces, and they won't stop till I am no longer a threat to them." Dash still wasn't convinced.

"But...what if...why don't you" Desperately she looked for an alternative, anything other than becoming some trained fighter. There had to be another way, she *needed* there to be another way....

"Do you want to save your friends?" Luna said suddenly. Dash nodded.

"More than anything." She said eagerly.

"Then I'm afraid you must do this. Only one type of pony can take on the Flames by herself, and that's an assassin." That was a deal maker. Dash didn't like the idea of hurting others, of training to be the best killer she could be, but if her friends were at stake, she would do anything,

absolutely anything for them. Such were the ways of the Element of Loyalty.

"...I'll do it." she said.

"Okay, I think the spell is prepared." Luna said. Rainbow Dash was lying down on the blanket and her head rested on the pillow. Their purpose had become clear. "Are you ready to begin?" No. Dash wanted to tell Luna no, she wasn't ready to be an assassin, and she didn't have any intention of becoming one, but she knew for her friends sake, she had to agree.

"...Lets just get it over with." Dash replied simply. Luna floated the crown up and onto Dash's head. It fit nicely, almost *too* well.

"Now, as your spell caster, I'll be able to communicate and guide you while you're inside The Animus' spell." Luna offered. Along with that, you'll gain a few advantages to compensate the time gap. For now just try to relax." Luna closed her eyes, and her horn began to glow. It started as a dull glow, but soon grew into a blinding shimmer. Dash closed her eyes too, tried to relax her mind so as to ease the spell. The aura around Luna's horn now bathed the room in a divine white glow. With a struggle, she lowered her head and touched the gem of the crown. Instantly the glow seeped into the gem, and it was the crown that glowed with such intensity. Dash began to slowly lose touch. As if she was falling asleep while conscious, she could hear the idle movements of the room dissipate, feel the ground beneath her slowly deteriorate. Eventually she could hold it no longer, and gave in to the pull of a past world, slipping into memories not hers.

Hoofington. 12 years before the banishment of Luna. It was a relatively small town, populated mostly by earth ponies, with a few pegasi scattered about. None of the unicorn aristocracy dared to touch the low class town though. This meant the local law enforcement was mostly made up of earth ponies, which was a very good thing for Firefly.

"Get down! You can't be up here!" yelled the guard, struggling to keep up with the blue maned pegasus ahead of him. She tauntingly stuck out her tongue. The two raced across tile roofs, jumping alley ways and climbing walls. Firefly found herself approaching a street, a gap between roofs too far to jump, but it was not a dead end, no, it was her ticket to losing the guard. Firefly jumped off the roof, making it about halfway across the gap. She then spread her wings and set herself to glide, riding the wind until she propelled herself to the other side, gasping onto the edge and pulling herself up. "You hooligan!" yelled the angry guard, stopping at the edge of the gap. "You know peasants are not allowed on the rooftops! Climb down or I'll have to force you down!"

"Oh yeah? Firefly replied. "You and what army?" she said smugly. A sudden hoof grasped the back of her shirt and pulled her up. The guard that had snuck behind her turned her to look into his angry eyes, feel his hate and anguish.

"The city guard." He said in a low tone.

Dash could feel herself slowly taking control of Firefly's movements. The Animus had started her out as a spectator, nothing more. But slowly she gained superiority, first her eyes, then subtle thoughts, then her voice. In a few seconds, Dash guessed she'd gain control of her body too. The guard didn't give her the chance though; he forced her to climb down and picked her back up as soon as they were on ground level. While she was being dragged along, she decided to familiarize herself with her new body.

"Dash, can you hear me?" said a voice inside Dash's head.

"Yeah Luna, I can hear you fine." She said aloud. Some passersby on the street gave her an odd look.

"You don't have to say it out loud." Luna said. "Anyway, in a few moments you should be able to fully control Firefly, and sometime after that, this guard might let you go and you can move freely." Dash rolled her eyes.

"Hey, it's not my fault!" she said mentally. A thought struck her then. "So wait, if I can control Firefly, won't I be able to mess up history and stuff?"

"Remember these are memories." Luna said. "Ideally you should follow your ancestor's actions exactly, but there is some leeway. However, doing something too out of character for Firefly or extreme will cause you to 'desynchronize' with the memory, and The Animus will bring you back to an earlier part in the sequence so you can try again."

"Okay." Dash thought, processing the information. "So I can't be too awesome if my ancestor wasn't then?"

"I think you'll find that you and Firefly are very alike Dash." Luna said. "But no, you can't act like yourself if it's not called for."

"Well, what if-" Dash was cut off as the guard suddenly stopped in front of a door and threw her in front of it. He knocked as she struggled to get up. The door opened up to reveal a lavender pegasus with a long blue mane.

"Yes? Oh!" she said as she saw Firefly and the guard. Dash looked up at the mare. She'd never seen her before, but through Firefly she knew who it was.

"He he, hey mom!" Dash said nervously.

Dash sat at the small wooden table in the house. While her surrogate mother conversed with the guard, she was forced to stay put for the inevitable verbal lashing that would follow the guard's departure. Still, Dash got a chance to look around the room a bit. It was a small home; there was a wooden table with some chairs, on the wall across from her hung a beautiful painting of a night sky in a forest. Underneath was a small desk, cluttered with ink bottles, quills, and parchments with various writings and sketching and such. The other wall was occupied by a window and the front door, along with some curtains which hung closed. On the opposite side was a door to another room, and a staircase leading upwards.

"Thanks you sir, we will make sure she does not do such things again." The mare said to the guard.

“Humph.” The guard scoffed. “Let’s hope not, we have archers up there with orders to shoot anyone who does not climb down. It would be a shame if there would happen to be an ‘accident.’” He said with an uncompassionate tone. The mare thanked him and closed the door. She turned to face her daughter. Dash tried her best to hide behind her own hooves.

“Firefly.” She said in a commanding tone. “Firefly, look at me.” Dash unwillingly brought her face up to meet the mare’s gaze. She saw just what she expected, an expression of anger and disappointment, but deep inside she also saw traces of worry. “How many times have we been through this?”

“Uh oh, better let you handle this one Firefly.” Dash thought, allowing her past self to control their collective voice. While the arguing began to heat up between Firefly and her mother, Luna decided to give Dash some background info on the lavender mare.

“Let’s see...” Luna said. Dash heard the sound of pages being turned as Luna looked through another book for information on her. “Ah, it says here that Starry Skies, Firefly’s mother, was the daughter of a merchant, and traveled a lot with her father. On a trip to a faraway village, she met Nightingale, and the two fell in love. She convinced him to move away from his village and travel with her and her father, until the two married and settled down in Hoofington. Nightingale became an astronomer and a few years later the two had Firefly. It says here that Both Starry Skies and Nightingale both died in an unfortunate appplecart accident. How sad.” Luna ended the story with a sad tone. Dash felt a bit of sadness too, but not much. It was hard to feel anything but annoyance at the volume her ancestors were arguing.

“That’s stupid!” Firefly exclaimed. “The city guards spend all day on the roof, and none of them get hurt!”

“The guards are not only older and experienced, but they have armor protecting them, and do not jump and gallop all over the rooftops like they were some sort of playground!” Starry Skies replied.

“I can handle myself just fine, I’m not going to get hurt! What makes me any different from them?”

“Did you forget your wing Firefly?” She said loudly. Wait, her wing? Dash turned to examine Firefly's wing and saw what her mother meant. One of Firefly's wings lacked a lot of feathers, and had a scar across the flesh parts. It suddenly occurred to Dash that Firefly had not flown while running from the guard. She opened her wings yes, but that only allowed her a slight glide, and even then she only barely made it to the other rooftop. Firefly, despite her name, couldn't fly.

“There's nothing wrong with my wing!” Firefly shouted, obviously not as shocked as Dash was by the sight of her injured wing.

“How can you say that dear? I'm only trying to keep you safe.” Starry pleaded. Dash could tell she was breaking, but Firefly seemed too steamed to notice her mother's concern.

“You're not protecting me, you're holding me back!” Firefly was almost red with anger, but this, even Dash had to admit, was unnaturally cruel. A slight tear formed in Starry's eyes, but she blinked it away, still, Dash could tell that last remark had hit deep. Firefly seemed to finally notice too, as Dash could feel her cooling down, but not completely. Still a bit angry, Firefly got up from her seat and walked to the stairs.

“Firefly...” Her mother called.

“Just...leave me alone for a bit.” She replied, and continued up the stairs.

Firefly's bedroom was meager, but satisfactory for her. It was a small room, with a bed, a night table, a dresser, and a window. An extravagant carpet also covered the floor of the otherwise bland room, most likely a gift from her merchant grandfather. The dresser also usually had a small mirror on top of it, but Dash was using it to examine her new body. Firefly was a young mare, around Dash's age, with dirtied pink fur and a light blue mane. She styled it in a similar fashion as Rainbow Dash too, though her tail might not have been as long. Dash had noticed that most ponies wore clothes in this time, only the poorer ponies Dash had seen were naked. Despite being from a supposed simple family, she wore a cloth shirt with a brown vest over, they seemed like colt's clothes, and used ones at that. Still, Dash

figured they must have been a privilege. Dash noticed something else about Fireflies wings while inspecting herself, it seemed Firefly had clipped some of the feathers off her good wing, so as to balance it out with her bad one. This way, she could at least glide a bit instead of having absolutely no use for her wings. "But how did it get this way?" Dash asked herself. The injuries intrigued her to go back further in Firefly's life. Maybe after all this was over, she could return to Luna and...

A knock at her door stopped Dash's thoughts. Instinctively she once again gave control back to Firefly. "Come in." She said calmly. A forest green pegasus with a scruffy beard and a red berete walked through her door, Based of his bird shaped cutie mark, Dash assumed this was Nightingale, Firefly's father.

"*Salute* daughter." He said with a foreign accent. "How are you?"

"Mom told you, didn't she?" Firefly said cynically. Nightingale sat down on the bed next to Firefly.

"He he, why would you say that? Can a man not just ask his daughter how she is doing?" Firefly rolled her eyes away from him. "Well, since you asked" He continued. "Yes, your mother let me in on your little adventure today, I cannot say it surprises me, but you know you should not be up on the roofs."

"I just wanted to get home quick." Firefly replied. "And I might have made it too, had it not been for that stupid guard, that *figlio di puttana*." She said, breaking into her father's native tongue.

"Whoa there!" her father said jokingly. "Where did you learn such words? I did not teach you them."

"Maybe not intentionally..." Firefly said with a smirk. Her father laughed.

"Well, just try to stay out of trouble, alright? And remember, whatever you do, I will be proud." He said hugging her.

"Even if I become a dirty thief?" Firefly said smugly.

"Especially so. These unicorns spend their money as if it were about to fly away from them!" he said, again laughing. He got up from his bed to leave the room

"You're going out again? It's kinda cloudy tonight." Firefly asked.

"Yes, I am. The clouds will cover most of the stars, but I thought I might study the moon tonight, it should be fully visible." he said, closing the door. "Good night Firefly." he said before leaving.

"Good night *padre*." she replied.

With her father gone and her mother told to keep away, it seemed Dash could finally gain full control of Firefly's actions. And yet, her want to climb the roofs stayed. Dash had always had a taste for fast flying, but since Firefly could not do so, it seemed as though she channeled that want for speed into running along the rooftops of Hoofington. Dash opened her window and climbed out, reaching the roof with ease. Pulling herself up on top of the houses chimney, she looked around at the town. It was small yes, but it seemed like an empire in the moonlight. Speaking of which, Nightingale was right, the moon looked beautiful. The perfect arrangement of clouds around its edge and its shine that was so crisp Dash could pick out the individual craters without her father's telescope. It was a truly awe-inspiring sight. Her will to run seemed to have run off by itself, because at that moment, all Dash wanted to do was stare at the beautiful moon all night, and hope it never changed.

Chapter 3

It turned out that Luna was right; Dash and Firefly were very alike. They both had a love for speed, as indicated by Firefly's blue lightning bolt cutie mark, they both loved to cause mischief, considering the joy Firefly took in angering guards, and they were both *humongous* show offs. This became clear now, with Firefly jumping from several wooden posts in a not-yet complete building. She laughed as she pranced along them, the guards behind her struggling to keep their balance. After a third guard had given chase, Dash decided that enough was enough, she was tired of playing with these guards. But how to escape? Luckily, Firefly subtly nudged Dash in the right direction. A group of pigeons sat on a ledge, And Dash ran for it with all her might. Not stopping, she leapt off the edge and flipped gracefully into a bale of hay. The guards above lost sight of her. She could hear them asking where she went, looking down the ledge. After a while they gave up and returned to their posts.

"He he he, suckers..." Dash laughed to herself, climbing out of the hay pile and into the busy street. "It's getting late, Maybe I should go get some shut-eye." Dash thought to herself.

"Returning home would be a good idea, especially since I'm getting an energy spike around the corner from Firefly's house. It's probably the start of a very prominent memory." Luna spoke in Dash's mind. "I'll highlight the spot in The Animus." A soft glow emanated from an alley way nearby. It turned out Dash was close to home already, so she turned into the alley. The spot in which the memory started was a glowing white cone, swirling with tendrils of light, but seemingly invisible to everyone besides her.

As soon as Dash stepped into the white spot, Firefly re-gained full control. Dash was once again put in a spectator position for the beginning of the memory. Turning the corner, Dash spotted the familiar door of her ancestor's home, but something was off. Two guard ponies stood at the door, as if to deny entry. A white unicorn with a golden mane and beard walked out of the home wearing extravagant clothing. Firefly retreated back to the alleyway. A Unicorn? In Hoofington? What reason could he possibly

have to be in the village, much less her home?" Firefly tried her best to listen to him talk.

"Well," the unicorn said in a regal tone. "That was a bit messy, but the job is done at last. I'll need you two to get someone to wash this though, ugh, so disgusting." the unicorn wiped at a red stain on his clothing. A reddish-brown stain, the color of dried blood? Oh no.

"Shall we stay here the night sir?" asked one of the guards.

"Heavens no! I'll need you two to escort me back to Canterlot, who knows what these pathetic peasants will attempt. Besides, no one will come here, I'll send a group tomorrow to clean up."

"As you wish Sire." the guards said bowing to him, then following him as he walked away. Dash once again had control, and ran to the door as quickly as she could.

"Mom? Dad!" she spouted absentmindedly as she burst through the door. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, but no one was inside.

"Dash" said Luna, chiming in. "The Animus allows you a heightened sense of perception, try focusing on seeing past your surroundings." Dash thought hard, she stared at the walls, trying what Luna suggested. "No, really concentrate!" Luna said. Dash tried harder, she closed her eyes and just stood there, focusing. Just when she was sure nothing was happening, she opened her eyes, only to see the room very different. Everything was in a darkened shade of navy blue, while certain things glowed. Dash herself glowed blue, and the desk in the room had certain papers glowing white. Dash picked them up and examined them to find not astrology maps or reports, but some sort of blueprint for an extending gadget. Deciding they were important, Dash stored them for latter.

The other glowing part of the room was the door to the next room, and a set of hoof prints leading into it. It did not look good, but she had to look inside, it was important. Expecting the worst, Dash opened the door to the kitchen and gasped. Starry Skies, Firefly's mother, lay on the floor lifeless, a pool of blood forming around her. Dash could see the green hoof of Firefly's father lying on the other side of the table. It was too much to bear; Firefly seized control once again, and ran to her mother. "Mom!" she yelled,

turning her mother's head to face her, but her eyes were closed, her skin cold, a bloody wound cut into her stomach. A sudden groan from the other side of the room moved Firefly's attention elsewhere. "Dad?" she said hopefully, running around to see her father in a similar condition, but still struggling against the pain. At the sight of her, he smiled a bit, but the grimace of suffering did not leave him. Dash noticed he had a sword lying next to him, as well as a strange brace on his left hoof. Firefly dropped to her knees. Speechless, all she could do was nod her head no. But her father continued to convulse with pain, soon he would lose his touch with the world. "...Dad, no!" Firefly cried. "Please, no! I'm..." she simply could not speak correctly at the sight. Her father was dying right before her eyes and she was helpless to do anything but watch and pray. Using the last remaining ounces of his strength, Nightingale took off his hoof brace and grasped his Daughter's foreleg. He placed it in her hooves and smiled again. Then, with a great grunt of pain, returned to lying down. Tears now flowed freely down Firefly's face. Her father opened his mouth to say something, but naught but air escaped his lips. His eyes growing heavy, he settled on another warm smile, and slowly passed from the world, still holding his daughter's hoof tightly. "...No!" Firefly screamed between coughs and fits of sobbing. Her sorrow overtaking her whole being, reducing her to nothing but a flow of loss and mourning. Her parents had just been killed...and she could do nothing about it.

Where Firefly was overcome with sorrow, Dash and Luna were more shocked.

"...That doesn't look like an unfortunate applecart accident to me!" Dash exclaimed.

"The Flames most likely staged an accident later on to make their deaths look natural..." Luna said. "Still, I could never have predicted them to die when she was so young..." The two onlookers watched the scene play out; watched Firefly reduce to a crying heap and watched her parents lay still. It was enough to break a pony's heart. Dash tried to take control again, but Firefly wouldn't let her, her emotions were raging. She still wanted control again, but Dash partly understood. She couldn't imagine what kind of misery Firefly must have been going through at the moment. Firefly turned to the brace. Her father had spent his last moments giving her it, but what was it? Was it special? She strapped it onto her left hoof. It seemed normal enough, just an intricate hoof brace, what could it...

A knife shot out. Firefly jumped back a little at the sudden weapon, and it retracted. She tried to repeat the movement, and found that with a subtle shift in her hoof, she could eject and retract the knife. The brace was not just for protection, it was also a hidden weapon. Dash felt Firefly change. Her sadness left her, her tears ceased. All her drowning sorrow had turned to a boiling hot anger. Her father had given her this knife, she'd seen the unicorn that did it, and she knew where he was headed. She was wrong to think she was helpless before. She knew what had to be done; she wanted to make that white unicorn feel all her sorrow, all her pain, and then some.

She was going to hunt down this pony, and murder him.

"I..." Dash said, shocked at the sudden change of emotion. "I thought you said Firefly was a lot like me..." She was surprised Firefly would so easily turn to murder.

"She is, you have to understand this may shake her a little." Luna said. "She probably isn't herself."

"That's...nothing like me." Dash said softly. "I can't do this Luna! I can't do this to other ponies! It's not me!" she pleaded. If she could see Luna, she would have looked at her with desperate eyes; she didn't want to cause other ponies this pain, even if they were evil.

"...Dash" Luna began. "Have you ever heard of 'the greater good'?" Dash mentally nodded.

"Sure, the good of the people and all that."

"Well, what is a life worth, if it's compared to many?" The strangely cryptic expression was a bit too thoughtful for Dash's tastes.

"What if I told you, that if Firefly kills this one pony, she saves hundreds?" Luna rephrased. Dash thought about it. She would really be doing good by killing him then? If he killed so many ponies, is it so bad for him to die? It still felt wrong. Dash could not shake that feeling, but if it would save so many, maybe it was something that had to be done...

"But...I'd be just as bad as he is." She said

"No." Luna said as if it were a fact, not her view of it. "The Flames kill for power and money, Assassins kill for justice and protection. The Flames burn away to consume the world, while Assassins work in the dark to serve the light." A strange Déjà Vu feeling overcame Dash.

"That sounds...familiar, but I don't think I've heard it before..."

"I'm sure it will come up eventually." Luna said. "Now, we should get back to Firefly."

A day had passed. Wanting to avenge her parents as quickly as possible, Firefly had left the next morning. She still wore the hidden blade on one hoof, while her father's sword dangled by her side. She'd also packed food for the trip, some bits for the inns, and had stopped by the doctor to see if he had medicine for light wounds. He'd given her some smelling salts. They wouldn't actually heal anything he'd said, but they would numb the pain as if she would be healed instantly. She now traveled by foot on the road from Hoofington to Canterlot.

Getting out of Hoofington was not a problem, the gates were usually guarded, but luckily Firefly had connections. It turned out she had old friends in the courtesan business. She'd payed them a few bits to distract the guards with their "services" while she slipped through. After that, it was just a matter of traveling. She didn't have enough money to hire a carriage, and she didn't want to steal a cart with so many guards close by, so she decided to go the route by foot.

Unfortunately, her timing was bad. Leaving the city at mid-day meant traveling the road at night, with the nearest inn miles away. Dash walked the dark road, trying to not fall asleep while walking, which was surprisingly harder than it sounds. As tired as she was, she had to find some place to rest. She imagined what The Everfree Forest must have been like at this time, probably filled with even more horrible and dangerous creatures. The last thing she wanted to deal with was-

Crack

She froze. A stick being broken, the recognized sound of bad news. She reached to her side and unsheathed her sword. The bushes rustled, something was in there, and She didn't think it was a little bunny.

"...Come out of the bushes!" She said through the hilt in her mouth. "I have a sword! I'm warning you!" She knew this couldn't have been an animal noise, it stopped suddenly, whatever it was, it knew she noticed them, and stood as still as it could. For a while nothing happened, Dash stood there with her sword out, and everything stood in place. But after a few seconds had passed, she heard a low chuckling. A dark brown colt came walking out of the brush. He looked dirty, and had naught but a hat on him. Dash noticed he didn't have a Cutie Mark, probably never worked for anything in his life, which meant one thing. A thief.

"Well hello there." He said with a rugged accent. "What's a nice mare like you doin' out alone in a place like this?" His eyes moved to the sword. "...And with a dangerous thing like that?" Obviously a pony did not hang out in bush in the dark of night to meet people and have a nice conversation, he wanted something. Whether it be money, or herself, Dash wasn't going to let him have it.

"Just...let me pass." Dash said, trying to look threatening while trying her best to keep her balance with a sword hilt in her mouth.

"Aw come on, you don't even know how to use that thing! Holdin' it in yer mouth like that, what are ya, a dog?" he laughed again, harder. It got louder as he went, or was it the sound of others laughing with him? Sure enough, three more thief ponies revealed themselves from the bushes; one even came out behind her. "I'm afraid I can't just let you go missy, not without a proper exchange..." They stepped closer to her, eyes filled with bad intention. She was getting boxed in, four against one, she didn't have a chance. She lunged at one, swinging the sword with all her might. It connected, slashing the criminal across his front hooves. Unfortunately, the leader had been right; there was a right way and a wrong way to hold a sword, and in her mouth was the wrong way. Her grip slipped, and the sword went flying with its target. He groaned and lay still, the sword impaled in his stomach. She was left with no weapon and three angry outlaws. "Why you little..." The front most one mumbled to himself, drawing a dagger and heading for her.

"Dash!" Luna yelled. "Do something! Use the blade!" Dash looked at her left hoof, she wasn't totally helpless after all, the knife was still there. The rough pony lunged, dagger in one hoof, murder in his eyes. This was her opening, this was where she had to act.

She hesitated. Dash was still not ready to willingly plunge a knife into a pony's heart and take his life. Her attacker did not, however, give her more time to think. With a sickening squelch, Dash heard the dagger enter her body, felt it penetrate her innards, saw her vest reveal a slowly growing red stain. The burning pain shot through her mind, she felt herself struggling to breathe. He assailant retracted his knife, now bloody red, and let Dash fall to the ground. She coughed, bright red splattering the ground. Her breathing quickened its pace, and she felt the tug of death pull at her consciousness. She tried to hold on, tried to keep herself awake from the eternal slumber, but fate was strong, and with a pathetic gasp, she let go of her last breath, and slipped away from the living world....

DESYNCHRONIZATION

The words seemed to appear from nowhere, but their presence was in no way subtle. No matter where Dash looked, they were in her central field of vision. The world began to shake, the ground made a horrible rumbling sound. White lines boxed in sections of the area, as if the world was built on a grid system. The air seemed to flash red like an alarm. Dash looked ahead, and saw the road ahead of her breaking, bit and pieces being pulled into a violently expanding white void. The wall of destruction drew nearer, and consumed the thieves, then her sword, then Dash herself.

Then, nothingness. A clear white slate of nothing. Dash found herself standing on a perfectly blank plane that seemed to go on forever. Before she could even begin to process her existence however, the world rebuilt itself around her. The dark forest returned, the thieves appeared again, along with her sword and the pony impaled with it. She found herself standing again, the head thief looking angry once again.

"Why you little..." The thief said again, re-drawing his now clean dagger. Once again, he made movements to harm her, threateningly approaching her well-being. He thrust the dagger once again, searching to impale her with it.

"This is how the past world works Dash." Said Luna. "You either fight, or you die. It's a dog-eat-dog world" The thief seemed to understand that perfectly well. Dash took a deep breath, and did not wait this time to take the offensive.

Clang! The sound of metal striking metal rang out in the air of the quiet forest. The thief's expression changed from one of hatred, to one of surprise when Dash brought up her hoof to knock the dagger away with the front of her brace. Her hoof still up, she exposed the hidden blade and brought it across her attacker's neck, slicing his jugular. With a spatter of red, he spun and fell to the ground lifeless, his face still one of utter shock. The other two thieves advanced, their own daggers flashing in the moonlight. Dash sidestepped to avoid the attack from behind and in front, and slashed at the thief behind her's hoof. Grabbing the dagger he dropped, she plunged it into his neck and kicked him down, turning to deflect the last one's knife. With another kick, she knocked the air out of him, and thrust her blade into his chest, right at the heart. His eyes rolled back as he fell over and died.

Once again, the forest became utterly silent. Her four attackers now lay dead at Dash's hooves, blood stained the ground, and she herself had sputters of red on her clothes and blade. Still, she was alive, and that was all that mattered. Even though they were cruel ponies, Dash felt like leaving them dead was not right. She wanted to offer something, even a passing phrase, just to prove to herself that she was not as cold-blooded as they were. Nothing came to her, but Firefly knew just what to say, her father's native language becoming readily available for Dash's speech.

"...*Requiescat in pace....*" she said softly, retrieved her fallen sword, and began on her way once again, the glittering city of Canterlot waiting for her.

Chapter 4

Canterlot. The city stood as a glittering utopia shut out from the cruel world around it. Towers rose above the skyline, swirling to the skies. Giant cathedrals displayed intricate glass work, casting colorful shadows around them. Tall walls protected the city and surrounded it standing formidable against the harsh forest surrounding it. It seemed as though everything was extravagant in Canterlot, but Dash wasn't here to see the sights, she needed to do something; and she needed it done quickly. No time to stick around and visit landmarks.

The gates to Canterlot were huge; giant metal cages that fit between an arched doorway. Many guards stood outside them, watching the road for trouble. Getting in to Canterlot would be a problem, Dash doubted they would just let her in, and the walls were too steep to climb. Hoping for the best, she approached the gate to try to gain access. However, it seemed somepony was already trying to negotiate their way in.

"Nonononono! You don't understand, I *really* need to get in! It's very urgent!" a pink Unicorn was begging the guard to let her into the city. The guard shook his head no.

"I'm sorry mam, but without your travel papers, I can't let you in." The unicorn was kind of young, around Dash's age, and was dressed very lavishly, but still enough to be functional. She had a white mane and tail, each very strait and with a purple stripe through them. Her saddle bags were surprisingly empty.

"I already told you, I lost my papers! I was attacked by some thieves on the road here from Trottingham, and they took all my scrolls and bits!" Dash's ears perked up.

"Um...did you say thieves?" Dash said, inserting herself into to conversation. The unicorn nodded.

"Yes, they emptied my saddle bags and left me in absolute tatters! It was horrible!" she said, wincing at the thought.

"And these papers, what did they look like?" Dash asked.

"They were travel papers, so they had my information, where I was going, what I had to do there, and a sketch of my Cutie Mark." She said, showing off her flank, which bore nine little white stars in an irregular pattern. Dash had seen them before.

"You mean like these?" Dah said, pulling out the missing documents. The unicorn's face lit up.

"Oh my gosh! Where did you get these?" she said aghast.

"Just, found them on the path." Dash said, which was not completely false. She did find them on the ground, lying next to the thief she impaled with her horrible sword skills. At the moment she'd thought nothing of them, but now, she was glad she did not leave them behind. This could be her ticket into the city. The pink unicorn took Dash into a tight hug.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!" she said gratefully. She then released her and almost shoved the papers in the guard's face. "There! Can I go in *now*?" She said smugly. The guard looked over the papers briefly. His eyes widened a bit at something he read, and he nodded.

"Looks about right, okay miss, you can enter." He said. He turned to the sky and yelled at a tower. "Open the gates!" He shouted, and sure enough, the gates slowly swung open. "And what about your papers mam?" he said, turning to Dash.

"...my...papers?" Dash said stupidly. "Well, you see I don't really have papers."

"You don't have traveler's papers?" the unicorn asked. "How'd you leave your city then?"

"umm...what I meant was..." Dash had to improvise; she didn't want to get this far only to fail. "...the thieves!" she said suddenly. "They stole my papers, couldn't find them afterwards." She said, lying through a thick smile.

"Oh that's terrible. I know, let me take you to the offices and get new ones!" the unicorn offered. "It's the least I can do after you found my papers." she smiled.

"Oh really? Sure, thanks!" Dash said. As she had expected, she could use the unicorn to get into the city. The two began to walk through the gates.

"Wait!" said the guard, not attempting to really stop them. "She needs papers to enter!"

"And you'll be the first to see them when we get them made! I promise!" the pink unicorn replied, not stopping. "Thank you!" she said behind her, the two now well into the city.

"Thanks again for getting me in here." Dash said once they were inside the city of Canterlot. It was very high-class; most ponies were unicorns, with a few pegasai and no earth ponies in sight. She could tell that they were in a market now, vendors shouting out their goods and prices. The smell of salted meats and fresh fruits was abundant.

"Oh like I said, it was the least I could do." She replied. "By the way, I didn't catch your name?"

"Oh, I'm Rai- I mean Firefly." Dash said, catching herself.

"Nice to meet you Firefly! My name's Twilight. Twilight Twinkle." realization hit Dash in the face. The strait mane, the striped hair, the star cutie mark, how did she not see this before?

"Luna?" Dash asked in her head. She heard book pages turning again.

"Twilight Twinkle." Luna began. "A very talented unicorn whose special talent was magic spells. She was apprenticed to a very high ranking official, but never made it into government herself. There's no date of death, but in the year 5 OE (Olden Equestria) she mysteriously disappeared without a trace. Also, as I'm sure you've guessed, her family tree can be traced down to Twilight Sparkle." Dash couldn't believe it, even their ancestors had met. And now that she noticed, old Twilight even looked like new Twilight.

"Why didn't that guard stop us?" Dash asked, trying to take her mind off the oddity of it all. "He seemed really stuck up about that 'no papers no entry' rule."

"Oh, that's probably because he saw who I was." Twilight said. "I don't mean to brag, but I have some pretty strong connections with the higher ups in this city." Of course, just like her descendant, Twilight must have been very close to Celestia, even if she wasn't quite as close as Twilight Sparkle had been. "Wait...you mean the Flames?" Dash asked.

"Well, that's not their official name, mostly only street rats call them that, but yes, The Flames of the Sun." Twilight said, a bit disgusted at the name. "It's almost a derogatory term, if you wanted to be proper, they are 'The Honorable-Fellow Knights of Celestia and The Temple of the Sun'. Or just 'Templars' for short." Dash repeated the name in her head to remember it. Templars: The true name for the Flames. "A very interesting story behind that name, they date back to the time of the Equine Revolutions, where they lead crusades to reclaim...."

Dash's mind strayed away as Twilight spouted information about the Flames' past. This was a large city, too large to find one pony. All she knew was this pony was a white unicorn in lavish clothing; that could be used to describe a good fifth of the population of Canterlot. She would be lucky for a chance to see this pony again, much less kill him. But still, she had to try. The drive to avenge her parents was too great. The problem was that it was not Dash's drive, nor her parents that were killed. It was Firefly's. Dash didn't know if she could put as much energy into it as Firefly had. And yet, while she was in the Animus, she felt like she was Firefly. She was beginning to have trouble distinguishing her thoughts from Firefly's, their two minds being intertwined into something new for them both. All the while, Twilight rambled on.

"...which lead to the establishment of- Oh." She stopped suddenly. "Looks like we're here!" They'd stopped in front of a large tower. Twilight led the way inside. The interior of the tower was stocked with bookshelves and books, but the walls were also plastered with maps, and in the corner a few pieces of metal lay scattered on a table under a sketching of some sort of mechanism. "Welcome to Office of Trade and Commerce!" Twilight said proudly. "This is where I live and work. Normally my master would be here

to issue you your documents, but he's out at the moment it seems." She explained. "Now then, you'll need to fill out some forms, hold on, Scale! Scaaaaale!" Twilight called out.

"Twilight! You're back!" said a voice from above. A small purple dragon came bounding down the steps from the top floor. "This is Scale." Twilight explained. "He's my Assis-"

"Ahem!" Scale interrupted. "Junior Apprentice!"

"I mean Junior Apprentice." Twilight said rolling her eyes. "He helps me out around here." She turned to face Scale directly. "Anyway Scale, I need you to go get the forms for a new Traveler's License. Firefly here needs a new one." She said with a smile.

"Right away!" Scale said, raising a hand to his forehead. He then turned to leap up the stairs again.

"Hey Scale, where's the old mule off to now?" Twilight said, asking about her absent master.

"He went to the plaza, Gilded Sword is making an appearance." replied Scale from above. Twilight stomped her hoof.

"Shoot! That was today? I have to work on my reports!" she said in frustration. "I really wanted to see him, but I need to finish those by tonight! Ugh!"

"Um, Gilded Sword?" Dash asked.

"You know, the Unicorn noble? White coat, golden mane and beard? I'm sure you've heard of him." Dash's wings almost shot out in surprise. That was the one, the pony she was hunting.

"Where's he speaking?!" Dash asked.

"The plaza, remember? Just in front of St. Red Hoof's Basilica up the street." A crash was heard from the second floor.

"Uhh...Twilight?" Said Scale from above. "A little help please?"

"Coming Scale!" Twilight replied. She turned to follow Scale upstairs. "Now, wait here and I'll get your papers ready." She said, bounding up the stairs. As soon as she was out of sight on the second floor, Rainbow made a dash for the exit. Twilight would have to wait, fate was calling.

"Let see...here it is." Luna said to Dash as she ran up the stone roadway. "Gilded Sword. A Unicorn nobleman of past Canterlot. He gained his position mostly from his family, and had very little experience or natural talent. A classic spoiled brat that grew up into a spoiled adult. He frequently took contracts from higher Templar officials to attack or destroy Assassin bases and headquarters, though he rarely completed the missions personally. In fact, it says here the only time he ever successfully completed a contract on his own, was also the last contract he ever took."

"So this will be a success then?" Dash thought. "I'll get this right?"

"Remember this is a memory Dash, not the past." Luna reminded. "You can still mess up, and you'll keep desynchronizing until you don't. No guarantees."

The crowd was huge. Really huge. Almost the entire plaza was filled with ponies. It was not as enthusiastic as the crowd that had been at Luna's welcoming celebration; this crowd was more shifty and un-easy. Their loud cries were ones of boredom and annoyance, not excitement and happiness. Dash pushed herself through the gathering as much as she could, but it was hard. She'd have to fight for a while if she wanted to get to the front. A white unicorn in ravish red clothing stepped onto a raised platform for all to see. The clamoring turned into a light cheer, but still not as enthusiastic as the yesterday's gathering had been.

"My fellow subjects of Equestria!" He said in a loud voice, the spells necessary to boost his volume not yet discovered. "It pleases me all to see you gather here today. I bring forth to you all a pressing issue that I wish you all to be aware of." It was him. The unicorn she'd seen in Hoofington. Dash quickened her pace, pushing through the group to get closer to the speaker. "In the past few weeks, our city has been infected." He continued. "Infected by the harmful stain brought to us by a group of thieves, murderers, and scoundrels that call themselves the Stars of the Moon."

Now, as *glorious* as our Princess Luna is..." he said the last bit with a dishonest tone and a roll of his eyes. "...They are most certainly out to take away our beloved Princess Celestia and have Luna as our sole ruler and Queen. They are dangerous and sinful evil doers who must be stopped! Do not aid these killers, do not shelter them, and do not refrain to report them to the city guard! I will purge our glorious city of this evil, that you can count on!" he finished, taking a bow and smiling to the crowd. Applause broke out, steadily diminishing but loud nonetheless. He took another bow before stopping mid-pose.

"He's lying!" a voice from the crowd yelled out. All clapping stopped abruptly, and Gilded Sword rose to attention. The crowd around Dash moved back, getting away from her and giving her a clear space in the middle of the group. Her face was grim. "This unicorn is a liar and a murderer! He killed both of Fi...*my* parents and staged their deaths to look like an accident!" Dash yelled out, referring to Firefly's parents as her own. She pointed her hoof accusingly at the pony on stage. "He's the killer!" Gilded Sword let out a light laugh.

"It seems one of these Assassins has made herself shown! Guards! Kill the pegasus! Show these Assassins what happens to those who oppose Celestia!" Armored ponies leapt from the platform to the floor, the crowd growing further away to allow space.

"What? No! I'm not..." Dash's voice faded as the guards approached her. She had no choice, she had to fight. Dash un-sheathed her sword, this time trying to hold it in her hoof and not her mouth. She was surprised to find it easier to deflect sword attacks like that, and the guards all held their weapons the same way. She slashed away at a guard, pushing him back, but not striking a hit. He was trained with the sword, and not so easily defeated. Another guard joined the fray, and Dash found herself retreating from deflecting the two. Finally, one guard surprised her with an upper slice, and knocked away her sword. She heard it skitter onto the stone floor some bit away. The guard pushed her to the ground, and soon Dash found herself on her knees, and the guard with his sword raised above his head. "This isn't how this was supposed to go..." Dash thought, and closed her eyes, anticipating the feeling of death once again. She heard the sound of metal slicing flesh.

"I'm dead." was Dash's first thought. She'd be desynchronized any moment now and she could try again, maybe with a more subtle approach. But the shakes and flashes of desynchronization never came. "Maybe I stay dead this time?" She thought, but then she heard another sound, the moans of a dying pony. It was not her voice; it was much deeper, and more masculine. She opened her eyes to see the guard still in front of her, his forelegs still holding his sword high, ready to strike. But his face was one of pain and surprise, a bloodied knife sticking out of his chest. The knife retracted and the bleeding guard fell to the floor, revealing the hooded pony behind him, cloaked in a brown hood. She couldn't see his eyes, but she could see orange fur hidden under the shadow of his hood, and his left hoof holding a large butcher's knife. He flashed a quick smile before turning to defend against the other guard that had been attacking Firefly. The hooded pony was skilled with his knife, using it to defend against a full length sword, but he could not make an attack. Just when the guard made a move to strike again, an arrow shot into his back and he fell. The hooded pony nodded at a shadowy figure on a rooftop and ran to help Dash as more guards rushed to the scene.

"Assassins!" screamed someone in the crowd. The mass of ponies dispersed as quickly as they could. "C'mon kid, get up." The hooded pony said with a country twang. He took Dash by the hoof and ran to the edge of the plaza, guards following close behind. With a leap, he grasped onto the ledge of the building and began to climb. Skilled at it already, Firefly began to climb up behind him without missing a beat. Once up, the chase began. Every guard on the roof tops was alerted to their presence, and began to shoot and run at them. A horde of guards chasing them, the situation began to look bleak for Dash and her hooded hero, but they pressed on, running and jumping over rooftops.

"What do we do?" Dash asked, concerning the multitude of guards chasing them. The hooded pony looked down to the street, eyeing a yellow pegasus pulling a cart filled with hay.

"Now..." the pony said, turning with Dash to face the guards, as if to fight. "...we disappear!" he finished, holding up a small silver globe and throwing it to the ground. It shattered into many pieces, each of which then fizzled into a thick cloud of smoke. The smoke covered everything; Dash found herself gasping for breath in the shroud. Her eyes stung, her nostrils flared, but before she could suffer the gaseous torture any longer, she felt a

hoof tug at her shirt and pull her off the edge of the building. When the smoke cleared, the guards found that two of the ponies that had been there moments before were now absent. Meanwhile, a hay bale was being towed out of the city and onto the dirty road once again, its destination unknown.

Chapter 5

Dash slowly opened her eyes. The light of the morning came flooding in through the windows, and she sleepily got up in her bed. For a moment, the thought once again crossed her mind that the entire business of Templars and Assassins had been an odd dream, but those thoughts were dispelled when she saw her hoof was still pink, or rather, Firefly's hoof was still pink. She looked around the room; it was wood, seemed to be on the ground floor, and was quite small. It had a small table and fireplace in the same room, along with two chairs and her bed with a small table beside it. An entire living space, cramped into a small room, Dash deducted that this was some sort of small guest house.

"Oh, you're awake!" said a voice from the edge of the room. Dash opened her eyes fully in surprise; she hadn't seen the earth pony standing there. Once she stepped closer, Dash saw she had a kind face. Her full pink mane took up most of the left side of her head, and she seemed to hide behind it. She wore a flowing white dress and had six pink tulips on her flank as a cutie mark.

"Who...are you? Where am I?" Dash asked, rubbing the back of her head where a bandage was wrapped.

"You're in my guest house." said the kind looking pony. "My name is Posey, nice to meet you." she said, with a little dip in her stance.

"Posey." said Luna, beginning her analysis. "A yellow earth pony, she had a talent for growing flowers. She also had a passion for healing ponies and was an experienced medic, using her green hoof to grow herbs for her natural remedies. She was rumored to have another hobby though, a very dangerous one that she only did for her closest of friends. Her family tree can be traced down to your friend Fluttershy." Once again Dash was faced with the ancestor of her good friend, almost as if by fate. Maybe she'd meet more of her friends' ancestors?

"Ugh, how did I get here, and why does my head hurt so much?" Dash asked, the pain now becoming more evident.

"One of my friends brought you in, apparently you took a pretty nasty bump to the head while jumping into a hay bale." she said, snickering a little.

"Hey, where is that pony?" Dash asked about her rescuer. "I never got to thank him for saving me back there."

"And what makes you so sure it's a 'he'?" said another voice, entering the room. It was the brown hooded pony from before. Pulling down the hood, he revealed his face to Dash. By the elongated eyelashes and snout shape, plus the long blond mane pulled together at the end with a blue bow, Dash could tell that her hero was not in fact a 'he'. This was the head of a mare. "And ah guess you can thank me now." she finished.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks...what was your name again?" Dash asked. The pony just shrugged.

"Ah've been called a lot of things, but most of 'em boil down ta 'no good dirty thief'." she said. "Some folks up north called me *// Volpe* though."

"...'The Fox'?" Dash said, recognizing her father's native tongue and translating it.

"Is that what that means?" She said, as if it was the first time shed bothered with the name's meaning. "Anyway, the name's Applejack, but ah never caught yer name pardner." she said.

"Firefly." Dash said simply.

"Mighty nice ta meet ya Firefly." she replied. Luna turned pages looking for information.

"Let's see, it's kind of hard to find info on her, I guess they didn't call her "The Fox" for nothing. She stopped after a few seconds of searching. "Aha!" she said with delight. "*// Volpe*, or her real name; Applejack. She shares both her name and her family tree with the Applejack you know. There's not much in the book after that, other than the fact that she was a master thief, and that not much is known about her." Luna finished. Once

again, Dash was faced with the past ancestor of her friend in the present. At this point, she was just waiting for Pinkie Pie to appear out of nowhere.

Dash stepped wearily out of bed, she was a bit dizzy, and her head still throbbed in pain with every heartbeat, but she was alright none the less.

"Oh, do be careful." Posey said, moving to Dash's side to help her stand. "We wouldn't want you to get hurt again, now would we?" she said like a mother to a child. It was nice to rest after the last two days, but she still had work to do, the unicorn lived.

"I have to find him again..." Dash said, moving for the door, Applejack stopped her at Posey's silent request.

"Whoa there lil filly, find who?" she said.

"Gilded Sword..." Dash replied. "I have to kill him."

"You mean he's still alive?" Posey said with a gasp. She looked to Applejack worriedly. "Oh dear, if the master hears of this..."

"Applejack?" said a blue pony, walking in the door. "There you are! The master wishes to see you, I'd hurry too, he seems angry." he then left just as quickly as he'd come.

"Aw, horse-apples." Applejack cursed, not looking too happy about needing to see this mysterious master. "Oh well, c'mon kid." Apple said waving for Dash to join her. "I'll show ya around the city, give ya a tour of the Assassin HQ."

"An Assassin HQ? Here in Canterlot?" Dash asked, moving for the exit. Applejack snickered as they left.

"Kid, we left Canterlot days ago." She moved to give Dash a view of the world outside the front door. It was a different city, much more wooden and blue in comparison to Canterlot's stony golds. A river ran through the town, and some buildings had boat docks and back entrances. It was much smaller and more rural, much more like Hoofington, Firefly's home. "Welcome to Lunagrad kid." Applejack finished. Posey poked her head out the door to yell.

"Okay, bye! Please try to be careful Firefly! Remember you're still injured!" she said, waving. Dah waved back, sensing the same caring and compassion she'd come to expect from Fluttershy, even if Posey seemed more outgoing, and more of a plant lover than an animal lover.

After a short walk, they reached what Applejack had referred to as "Assassin HQ". A huge fortress, built upon a mountain within the humble city of Lunagrad. Banners and flags decorated it, red and white, bearing a triangle with a curved bottom, the symbol of the Assassins. Walking up the steps was a long task, but Dash didn't notice the exercise, still in awe of the castle all the while.

The study of the fortress was the very top room, where the final battle with Nightmare Moon had taken place. Instead of a clear floor though, it was filled with books and tables and torches, and other furniture. It looked like a very well kept place of planning and learning. Looking out the window at the back of the room was a black-hooded pegasus; Dash could see his tail was a steel gray, as were his wings, but nothing more.

"Um, Master Steelwing?" Applejack said upon entering the room.

"Applejack." The pegasus' deep and elderly voice said. "When you left for Canterlot, did I not instruct you to take the life of Gilded Sword?" His tone sounded serious.

"Well, uh, yes, but-"

"And did you also," he continued. "ask that Glory and Breaker accompany you on the mission to give you back up, even though it was classed as a one-pony assignment."

"Yes, and ah meant to-"

"And did I not..." he interrupted again. "allow this, if only to ensure that this mission be a complete success?"

"...yes" she said weakly.

"Then why..." his tone rose to anger. He turned around to face them. "does the Templar still live?" Dash almost stepped back at the sight of the pegasus in front of her. His long robes covered most of his body, but the fronts of his hooves were exposed, as was his face. He was nearly monochrome; his mane and fur a light grey. He had a scruffy beard that was white with aging, and his eyes were wrinkled underneath from hours of sleep deprivation, and simple old age. Worst of all, his eyes were a blood red, except his left eye, which was clouded over grey and bore a scar across the left side of his face. Dash assumed he was blind out of that eye. He was quite simply the most frightening pony Dash had ever seen.

Luckily, it seemed his anger was directed at Applejack.

"Well uh, Ah tried to get 'em, Ah really did." Applejack stammered. "but before ah could, Firefly here called 'em out in the square. The guards thought she was an assassin, ah couldn't just watch 'em slice a poor pony to bits, 'specially when she didn't do nothin.'" Steelwing seemed unimpressed by the story. He gave a sideways glance at Dash, but paid her no further mind.

"Do you remember the second tenet of the *asasiyun* brotherhood Applejack? 'hide in plain sight'." Steelwing said not giving her a chance to answer. "It is not only a good tactic, but at its core, the definition of an assassin. We do our work from the shadows, not in the spotlight. When we announce ourselves to our enemies we are no longer assassins, but brute warriors without strategy." his face still showed no emotion, if anything, maybe disappointment, but even that was hard to see.

"With all due respect Master..." Applejack retorted. "There's also the first tenet, 'stay your blade from the flesh of innocents', an Firefly was just that; innocent."

"Yes, stay *your* blade, not the enemy's. Your work comes first, you cannot save every little peasant that the Flames chose to prey on. The overall safety of ponykind must come first." he said, ignoring Firefly's presence.

"Hey!" Dash said, her natural aggressiveness surpassing her fear for Steelwing's appearance. "I'm not just some peasant!"

"Please, spare me the lecture." Steelwing said, unimpressed. "I have seen you many times, you, the heroic peasant who thinks they can defeat the Flames. You cannot fight them alone."

"I can take on anyone of those guys!" Dash said. "What makes you so sure I can't do anything?"

"You know nothing of our brotherhood child." Steelwing said, annoyance invading his tone. "And you have no business fighting the Flames, nor do you have the proper means."

"Yes I do!" Dash yelled, rage already consuming her voice. "That unicorn *bastardo* killed my family!" she shouted, her anger pulling her into her father's dialect unintentionally. "And I do have the means," Dash rose her hoof to the ceiling. "I have this!" She exposed the hidden blade, surprising Applejack, the other ponies in the room, and even managing a shocked face from Steelwing.

"Where...did you get that?" Steelwing said, returning to his neutral state. His eyes stayed fixated on the blade though, even his blind one seemed to gravitate to it.

"My father gave it to me." Dash said, wincing at the painful memory. "...as he died."

"Hol' on there. What did ya say yer pa's name was?" Applejack interjected, a thought brewing in her mind.

"Nightingale, why?" Dash asked. A sly smirk crossed Applejack's face. She glowed with confidence as she turned to her master.

"And you didn't want me ta protect the daughter of the great assassin Nightingale?" Dash grew more confused, but Steelwing's face once again fell prey to an emotion; sorrow, for a slight moment.

"So...Nightingale has been killed...." he said quietly, ignoring the fact that Firefly was Nightingale's daughter.

"And he gave it to ya as he died?" Applejack said. Dash winced further, forced to remember more, but responded.

"Yes, he made me hold it in my hooves with his last breaths."

"Well, ya know what that means." Applejack said to Steelwing. "Ya gotta let her join."

"Join?" Dash asked, still very much confused by all this. Applejack just turned and gave her a smile.

"Welcome to the Assassin Brotherhood Firefly."

"Absolutely not." Steelwing replied. "The fact that she holds a hidden blade does not make her an assassin."

"She was usin it ta kill a Templar, a target you've already marked for death." Applejack retorted.

"And she failed to do so properly, announcing herself like a fool and drawing the attention of the guards."

"She just needs a little guidin, someone ta show 'er the right way." Steelwing put the idea in his mind for a moment, his eyes passing over Dash as he passed the thought over in his head. It felt as though he was looking into Dash's soul, finding her weaknesses and faults so he could exploit them.

"...Alright..." Steelwing agreed. "She may join the ranks of the assassins as a novice. I trust that you can give her proper training Applejack?"

"Yesir." Applejack said eagerly.

"Then she may begin training, once she completes it she can be fully inducted and officially join the brotherhood. But, I must warn you." Steelwing turned to look Dash in the face. His stare alone dropped her to a lower stance, making her feel less. "This is a dangerous path that you cannot return from. If you chose to join our ranks you must pledge undying loyalty to us, and all that we stand for. Are you sure you want to do this child?" Dash was still not fully sure what this entitled; being an assassin. Would killing become a normal occurrence? Would she ever return to Hoofington? Would she ever feel free again? There were so many

uncertainties, but they could help her. They could supply her with the means to exact her vengeance on Gilded Sword, and after that, it didn't matter what happened. Her old life was already ruined, what happened now was her new life, so why not live the life of an assassin. She took a leap of faith.

"...Yes." She said. "I do."

"...so...all along, my father was never really an astronomer?" Dash asked quietly. She and Applejack had returned to Poesy after their meeting with the Grand Master. Firefly didn't have any money for the inns in Lunagrad, so Posey graciously offered to let Firefly sleep in her guest house again. Applejack had left afterward, off to check on her thieves she said.

"Oh don't sound so glum. I'm sure he actually was for a while. Once he married your mother and had you, he always seemed very intent on leaving the assassins." Posey responded, comforting Firefly.

"It's just...hard you know?" Dash said. "I always thought my dad was gentle, that he couldn't hurt a parasprite. To think he was secretly some assassin pony..." Dash hesitated. "...it makes me wonder what else he could have been lying to me about." Posey once again gave a comforting smile, but it didn't appear to help. "And my mom...the last time we ever talked, we fought. I told her I didn't need her and that she was holding me back." Dash began to water at the eyes. "...she must've died hating me."

"Oh don't say that." Posey said. "I'm sure your mother loved you still. A mother's love is unending." Posey's words finally piercing through, Dash did begin to feel better.

"...thanks for this Posey." Dash said. "for helping me get better, for giving me a place to sleep, for helping me get through this." Dash had been riding the adrenaline fuel that came with her parent's death for the last few days. She'd been so focused on killing Gilded Sword, but now that she couldn't focus on it, the gravity of her parent's deaths finally set in. Where would she go? What would she do? She couldn't stay with Posey forever, taking advantage of her generosity for free food and housing. She didn't

know if being an assassin would provide her with a bed and food and love. Three things she desperately needed and was so used to having.

"I wish there was some way to pay you back, I don't have anything to give though." Dash said.

"Don't you worry about that, I don't do this for money like some other ponies, I have a heart, and enjoy sleeping with a clear conscience at night thank you very much. I do this all out of the kindness of my heart, nothing more." It was an inspiring motive, and Dash saw that Posey was sincere, a light sparkle in her eyes that came at the word "kindness". "Now then, you should rest. Your head is still weak, and you're going to need energy for tomorrow's training. Congratulations for making it in by the way, it's not often that we get new recruits."

"Yeah, thanks." Dash said, getting settled into her bed. Posey left for the door. "Hey Posey" Dash said before she left. "You said 'we'. Are you an assassin too?" Posey didn't turn around.

"Oh, not really, I'm mostly a medic, but I do support the assassins with a certain service."

"And what's that?" Dash asked. Posey still stood there. She didn't move, she just stood still, as if she was contemplating how to respond. Eventually she turned around and gave Dash a warm smile like she usually did.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find out one day."

Chapter 6

Equestria had always been a beautiful place. Of all the many planets of the universe, ponykind was blessed with one of the most stunningly perfect, fitting for such a delicate race. Everyday Celestia raised the sun, pegasai pushed away the clouds, and birds flew without a care. The air smelled of summer, and the wind blew at just the right intensity and frequency to keep the outdoors a comfortable temperature. What some might consider a once in a lifetime perfect day, was often common place for ponies.

It was perfect for training. Firefly ran along the rooftops of Lunagrad, chasing Applejack as she swiftly leaped and climbed over and across tile roofing. When Firefly had told Applejack that she was already an expert at parkour and free-running, she had insisted on teaching her anyway. After a few minutes of arguing, Applejack had suggested a race. If Firefly won, then obviously she was beyond training. If Applejack won, they would start from the very beginning and follow all the way through. It had seemed like a good plan, but regardless of how good Firefly was, Applejack was better. Even though Firefly might not have needed training, Applejack was still much more experienced. She was keeping ahead of Firefly by barely a foot, but still ahead.

The goal was fast approaching; the flag post above the Thieves' guild that had been their decided finish line. A large gap lay between the roof and the end, it was just a jump away, and Firefly was losing.

"Heh," gloated Applejack. "Looks like yer not as good at this as ya thought!" She sprinted for the edge, and made a graceful jump toward the adjacent rooftop. She fell short, but still managed to cling onto the side. This turned out to be Firefly's saving grace, because when she made the same jump, she had wings. Faulty wings, but wings nonetheless. And spreading out her wings, along with a lucky updraft, gave her just enough lift to meet the edge of the roof. While Applejack was climbing up, Firefly still had the momentum to keep moving. The winner of the race turned out to be Firefly.

Firefly snickered, waiting by the flagpole as Applejack arrived. "Looks like the student turned out to be the teacher!"

"No fair, ya cheated with yer wings." Applejack said panting.

"Heh, sounds like sour apples to me." Dash interjected, already having experienced this conversation with the Applejack of the present. "Besides." Firefly said, taking control again. "My wings don't work, see?" She flapped them around a bit, but gained no lift. All she did was cause a slight breeze.

"Hmm...I definitely saw ta spread yer wings though."

"Force of habit." Firefly replied quickly. "Now, since we have that out of the way, what's next?" Applejack smirked.

"Oh, eager aren't we? We'll lil filly, next we get to the fun stuff. Combat."

Applejack and Firefly stood in a small clearing. The dirt was patted down from the constant beat of hooves, and a few straw dummies stood at the edge of the wall. "Now, the first thing ya gotta know about bein an assassin, is that we only strike once. An assassin is supposed to come out of nowhere, swiftly kill their target, and then disappear. Here, I'll give ya an example. You be the guard, and I'll be the assassin. Protect that dummy." She handed Firefly a sword and pointed at one of the straw dummies.

"Okay." Firefly said, determined to once again surpass her master. "You won't get to him though." she said smugly.

"Oh ho ho, we'll see about that." she said, and then ran off. Firefly drew her sword and scanned the area. She saw the building Applejack ran behind, and she was going to watch it for her next movement. She knew what Applejack might attempt though, and was careful to keep the rest of the field in her peripherals.

A short time passed. Firefly got bored. Very bored. But that was probably what Applejack wanted, and her will to beat her surpassed her boredom. Still, she needed entertainment. She began talking to the dummy in her boredom.

"So, where ya from?" she said. The dummy was silent. "Oh, that's nice." she replied, imagining an answer. "I'm from Hoofington, great little town, very small-time. Good if you like a place in the country, but that's probably not for you huh? Being the big, important official that you are." the dummy's expression did not change. "Did you hear about that assassin around here?" Firefly said, scanning the area. "Pretty crazy huh, thinks she can sneak into here. I mean come on, right?" she turned around to face the dummy, as if expecting a reaction. She received none. She returned to her work. "Don't worry sir, I'll make sure to keep you safe. You can count on me." suddenly, Firefly heard the sound of fabric ripping behind her. She

quickly turned to see applejack with a butcher's knife plunged into the neck of her target, a devilish smile on her face. "Hey!" Firefly said, running at Applejack. Applejack quickly sidestepped and grabbed Firefly by the back. She spun, threw Firefly to the ground, and thrust her knife at her. Inches before impact with her stomach, Applejack stopped her hoof. Firefly was on the floor, her target had been killed, and she probably was considered for the sake of the scenario, dead as well. Applejack had won.

Applejack sheathed her knife and held out a hoof to help Firefly off the ground.

"And that..." said Applejack. "is how you pull off an assassination."

"How did you do that?" Firefly asked, fascinated. Applejack had not been kidding when she said assassins were supposed to come from out of nowhere. Applejack pointed a hoof at the roof of the building.

"Yer first technique, the Air Assassination." she said. She gestured for her to follow her up to the roof. The two ponies scaled the building and stood at its edge. "When yer target is within jumpin distance of ya on a rooftop, ya can assassinate 'em from the air." She pointed to the two dummies. "Jus jump down and stab em before they can react." she said. She proceeded to show Firefly how she'd killed the dummy before, jumping from the rooftop and landing on her hoofs. She quickly struck the dummy in the neck once again. "Now you try!" Applejack called up to Firefly. Focusing on her target, Firefly readied herself to jump. She envisioned the dummy as Gilded Sword, it's wooded frame his white legs, it's ragged cloth his golden mane, it's disfigured head his diabolical mind, filled with thoughts of power and death. Needless to say, jumping off the roof was very easy for Firefly. She extended her hidden blade with a metallic shing, and jumped onto of the dummy, stabbing it through the skull and using it to cushion her fall. Unfortunately, the wooden legs were not made to bend, and so Firefly broke them with her weight. Regardless, Applejack seemed impressed.

"Woo-ee!" she swooned. "That's one way ta do it! And a mighty fine way too, why I'd bet ya could do it from much higher if you use them as a cushion like that..." she then noticed the state of the dummy.

"...but uh, maybe let's not do that on the dummies anymore, alright?" Firefly blushed a little.

Applejack set up another dummy, this time on the edge of a roof. She showed Firefly how to stab them and take them down from the ledge, that

way even if the knife didn't kill them, the fall would. She showed Firefly how to counter attack against sword attacks, she showed her how to hide in hay bales and use them to hide bodies, and she showed her how to defend against a sword using only her hidden blade or a small dagger. Applejack slowly taught Firefly the basics of being an assassin, and as she learned, so did Rainbow Dash

"Alright now, let's put ya sword skills to the test!" Applejack said. She set Firefly up with a sword, and placed her face to face with a dummy. She placed not a sword, but a war mace at the dummies hooves.

"You expect me to spar with a dummy?" Firefly said skeptically.

"One thing an assassin should never forget Firefly..." The dummy was enveloped in a lime glow. "...nothing is ever as it seems." the dummy sprung to life, picking up the mace and moving toward Firefly. A green unicorn colt appeared from behind a corner. He was animating the dummy with magic so she could spar with it. The dummy swung at her head, Firefly ducked. He swung again, vertically, and Firefly narrowly jumped out of the way. She took a stab with her sword, only to be deflected. She brought her sword up to push back another swing from the dummy, but was pushed back from the sheer force and weight of the weapon. She fell to the floor, her sword clattering beside her. She found herself in the same position as the when she'd tried to kill Gilded Sword, her enemy poised to strike, and her helpless. However, the dummy never tool the final blow. "Heh, looks like you need some more trainin in that department." Applejack gloated. "Alright Sawyer." she said turning to the Unicorn. "You can make it-" Before she could finish, an arrow flew through the air and embedded itself in the left side to the dummies head. Instantly the magic cut off, and the dummy fell to the side. Sawyer cried out and brought his hooves up to his head, pain in the spot where the arrow struck the dummy. He didn't bleed, and there was no physical wound, but any bystander would have said he was struck by a real arrow.

"Oh dear!" said a voice coming from the left. Firefly turned to see a white pegasus with a purple mane running towards them. She held in her magical grasp a levitating bow. "I'm terribly sorry; from far away it looked like this poor dear was being attacked! Oh Sawyer dear, are you alright?" She gushed. Sawyer gave her a fierce look as he rubbed the side of his head. She turned her attention to Firefly. "Oh, and you must be the new recruit everyone has been talking about."

"Uh, yeah?" Firefly didn't expect the news to spread so soon.

"Ah, you and yer gossipin." Applejack replied. "Glory, this is Firefly." She said, gesturing toward Firefly. "Firefly, this is Glory." She said, moving her hoof to motion at the white pegasus. "She's the 'frou frou' pony around here."

"I am not!" Glory insisted. "I simply want to look my best while doing my best." Dash saw what she meant. Her light leather armor was nice and clean, not a scratch of cut visible. Her arrows seemed to be tipped with diamonds, and her long beautiful mane was pulled back into a bun for efficiency. Her flank bore the image of a shooting star.

"This pony looks like a lot like Rarity..." Dash thought to herself. Perceiving the thought, Luna flipped through her database of the past and found an entry on Glory. "Glory." She began. "She was actually the daughter of a rich noble in Canterlot, but ran away at a young age, dissatisfied with her life as a noble. She fled looking for a smaller town, more specifically a colt that would catch her eye and lead her to a life of excitement and adventure. She was recruited by The Assassins due to her proficiency with ranged weapons, becoming one of the few unicorns in the Stars of the Moon. Her talents include finding gems, as well as projectiles; the two gifts coming together and represented through her shooting star cutie mark." Luna finished her entry there.

"...and?" Dash said expectantly. Luna paused before comprehending the hint.

"...Oh!" Luna said. "Yes, as you probably already know, her lineage carries down to your friend Rarity."

"This is...impossible!" Dash said. "How can this be? So far I've meet six ponies from the past, and five of them have been my friends' ancestors! It wouldn't surprise me if Pinkie Pie is wandering around this town!"

"Dash..." Luna said slowly. "Look, there are things that you should know, but not yet. Trust me when I say that you'll learn them soon enough, but now is just not the right time." There was a long silence afterwards. Dash did not like the secretive attitude Luna was displaying, but she would have to put up with it for now.

"...Alright...." She said, returning to her ancestor.

"Well, nice to meet you Glory." Firefly said.

"A pleasure to meet you as well darling, now if you'll excuse me I have business to attend to. Once again I'm truly sorry Sawyer." she rushed off at that, leaving the other three behind. Sawyer did not seem very forgiving.

Days passed, days filled with nothing but training. Days became weeks. Weeks, a month. Soon Firefly could hold her own in a sword fight, with only her hidden blade. With a proper sword she could not only defend against, but slay multiple guards at a time with relative ease. She was trained in other fields aswell; Glory taught her how to fire a crossbow, Posey taught her how to treat light wounds. Breaker, the yellow pegasus that had helped Firefly and Applejack escape, helped her learn to avoid brutes, guards with heavy armor and powerful weapons far too hefty to deflect with her sword. And as Firefly learned, so did Dash. She was with her every step of the way, doing exactly as she did. Dash was learning how to be an assassin with her ancestor.

The time came when their training was complete. It was a dark night, not very menacing, but not entirely calm either. Lunagrad was bathed in light from the top of a high tower. The highest in the assassin's fortress. Torch light blazed inside, as almost the entire assassin brotherhood crowded into one room. At the head of the room was Steelwing, along with Applejack and Firefly and a few other ponies. Steelwing began the ceremony.

"My brothers." he said to the crowd. "We are here tonight to welcome another into our ranks. From this night forward she shall be a sister to us all, and us all brothers to her." He turned to the fire, raising his hoof as it intensified. "*Laa shay'a waqi'un moutlaq bale kouloun moumkine*. These are the words spoken by our ancestors, that lay at the heart of our creed." He then turned to face Firefly, his blind eye shimmering from the fires. "Where other ponies blindly follow the truth, remember..."

"Nothing is true." Firefly finished. Steelwing nodded in satisfaction.

"Where other ponies are limited by morality or law, remember..."

"Everything is permitted." She once again replied. Steelwing turned back to the general assembly. "We work in the dark, to serve the light. We are the Assassins, The Stars of our beautiful Moon."

"Nothing is true, everything is permitted." The line was repeated by every pony in the room. Applejack went to the blazing fire and pulled out a white-hot iron.

"I'm warnin ya now sugarcube, this is gonna sting a little." She whispered to Firefly. Firefly held out her left hoof, and Applejack proceeded to sear the bottom of it with the iron. Firefly winced at the pain, but reacted no further, biting her tongue to keep from yelling out. What was left was a burned imprint of the Assassin's insignia. Applejack returned the iron and gave Firefly a quick pat on the back before returning to her position.

"Welcome Firefly." Steelwing said. "You are one of us now. A true assassin." He gestured toward a window in the tower, which an assistant to the ceremony opened up. It opened up to the night air, a drop to the ground. "Go now, and bring glory to the brotherhood."

"Meetcha on the ground-side" Applejack said before running and jumping out the window, falling to the ground many stories below. It was Firefly's last test as a Trainee; she had to exercise her trust for the brotherhood, show them that she would willingly jump out a window and trust her brothers enough to assume they'd catch her. She moved toward the window, carefully got up on its edge, but did not dare peer down. Looking instead up at the beautiful moon, still as stunning as ever, she threw herself off the side of the tower.

She took a leap of faith.

Chapter 7

"Oh congratulations! It's so exciting!" Posey gushed. Firefly nodded and repeated her thanks. "You know what this means don't you? You're an official assassin now, so many people try and fail to join, oh but not you, you persevered." Posey looked absolutely delighted at Firefly's achievement, more happy than Firefly even.

"Well, I had a good teacher." Firefly said, looking over at Applejack.

"Heh, you did, didn't you." Applejack said, taking another swig of her drink.

"Yes, we're all very happy for you dear." Glory added, levitating her cup and taking a much more graceful sip. The four ponies were seated at a table in Applejack's thieves' guild, which was actually a pub, only to divert attention. Over Firefly's weeks in Lunagrad, the four ponies had become very good friends. Glory and Applejack formed a sort of friendly rivalry, but got along pretty well regardless. "Still," Glory continued. "you should be ready to leave by tomorrow, Master Steelwing no doubt has an assignment for you, and we may not see you for a long time afterward."

"Aw, it can't be too bad. Heck, I'll be back before you know it, not like I have anywhere else to go." Firefly joked. Still, Posey's face and mood did seem to drop at the realization. They celebrated Firefly's induction, but this was at its core a going-away party.

"Still, we wish you luck." Glory said, lifting her glass.

"No matter where you go." Applejack added, raising her glass too.

"And remember we'll always be here for you." Posey said, joining in the cheers. Firefly smiled at the bittersweet gesture.

"...thanks guys." She said, completing the collective with her glass. They toasted, and spent the night laughing and drinking. Four ponies, the best of friends, the very image of a harmonious friendship.

The night passed, and the next morning Firefly was called in to see Steelwing as expected. Coincidentally, so was Applejack. The two arrived at the fortress and walked up to the head room, to meet with their master. Steelwing was as always, staring out the window when the two came in. This time when he turned, he gave both ponies the same amount of attention, instead of seeing Firefly as just a peasant.

"Welcome to both of you. I have two assignments that I wish you both to complete. One theft, the other assassination."

"They'll be done." Applejack said

"Yeah, we can handle them." Firefly added.

"Good." Steelwing nodded. "Applejack, since Firefly has completed her training, I trust you are once again available for assignments?"

"Yessir, that is correct." Applejack responded.

"Then you shall go to Canterlot. I'm allowing you another chance to kill Gilded Sword. Firefly, you will go to Fillydelphia and bring me back some documents I need. The Assassin's Bureau there should help you when you arrive." Steelwing turned, as if to be done with them. But Firefly wasn't done.

"Wait, what?" Firefly said. "Hey, I'm supposed to kill Gilded Sword; that's my mission!"

"An assassination mission is too dangerous for a novice; your first mission will be theft." Steelwing dismissed the issue.

"No way!" Firefly said angrily. Steelwing turned, annoyed.

"It was Applejack's mission that I assigned to her, you have no claim to it."

"Killing him was the reason I joined in the first place, / have to do it!" Firefly yelled. Steelwing's eyes narrowed.

"I'll grant you the chance to take back that statement child, we allowed you into our brotherhood because you promised it loyalty. If it is our will for you to take Gilded Sword's life, then so be it, but if the brotherhood calls for you to never lay your blade upon another living being then you **will obey**." He growled. Firefly couldn't believe it, this was not fair! She was willing to follow the Assassins, that was not the problem, but in return she asked only one thing: the opportunity to kill her family's murderer. And here was her chance, after all she'd been through, being taken away from her.

"I..." Firefly began. "I...can't believe this!" She was seething with rage. "I've been spending weeks here, training and preparing! I can do this, I have to do this! He killed-"

"Firefly!" Applejack said, stopping the pegasus before she continued on her tirade. Steelwing had a look in his eyes that neither Firefly nor Applejack had seen before; a look of hatred, of pure anger. His scar seemed to burn. But suddenly, he regained his composure. His muscles loosened, his eyes lost their fiery glow. His entire posture changed to one of relaxation than one of pent up anger. He turned around, and faced the window once again.

"Your assignments are final." He said calmly. "Now go."

"What?!" Firefly yelled. "No! I'm not-"

"Go now." Steelwing repeated. "And bring glory to the brotherhood." Steelwing was finished with them. He'd shut his mind out.

"But..." Firefly said in a mixture of confusion and anger. Now this old mule was ignoring her completely! Didn't he even care what she was saying?

"...ugh!" Firefly grunted in frustration and stormed away, leaving her lost cause behind her.

"Firefly! Wait!" Applejack ran after her.

"It's just not fair!" Firefly shouted outside the Lunagrad Fortress. Applejack was doing her best to comfort her, but was mostly just trying to calm her down. Firefly had passed logic and reason behind. The impact of such an injustice put her into a state of pure disarray, she didn't care what was happening she just wanted something, and was willing to yell and kick and scream until she got it.

"Listen, Firefly-"

"He can't do that! I have to do this!"

"Look, Master Steelwing has his-"

"My dad died giving me this blade, I want to use it to pay back!"

"Ah know sugarcube, it's just-"

"How could you know?" Firefly yelled. "How could you have any idea what it's like to have your parents taken from you?" Applejack's face turned grim. She lifted her hood over her face, as if to hide under it. Firefly noticed the change, and let up a bit.

"...ah've been there Firefly." Applejack said, suddenly quieter. "Y'ever wonder why ah became a thief? Ah had to tah be able tah eat." Firefly began seeing the truth behind Applejack's history.

"Your parents were..."

"Murdered." Applejack finished. "Not only that, mah big brother and little sister too. She was just a lil' filly. By Celestia, you shoulda seen the look on her face when..." Applejack trailed off. Firefly thought she saw a tear escape the dark void that was Applejack's face. "Ah joined the assassins, but ah didn't get to kill the pony who'd wronged me. But you know what? It didn't matter. Ah had a new family, Posey, Glory, all these other ponies, they're mah family now." Applejack turned to Firefly, despite her eyes still being a bit watery, she was smiling. "That includes you too Firefly. You're part of this family now. And as a part of the family, you jus gotta trust in Master Steelwing sometimes. He's been around a long time, and he knows what he's doin." Firefly was utterly speechless. She didn't

think she and Applejack could have such similar origins. She'd snapped out of her rage and realized how foolish she looked throughout the whole thing. Still, Applejack's story didn't calm her thirst for the Unicorn's blood. He had to pay, and it would be so much sweeter if she herself could deliver his punishment.

Applejack seemed to read this on her face. She wiped her eyes and sighed. "Look, tell ya what." she said. "I know it must feel pretty important to yah, and ah really don't have as much motivation for the mission as you do. So maybe tomorrow, while we're walking down the path, we take a wrong turn. I accidently end up in Fillydelphia and you in Canterlot. Might as well do the job while you're there, right? No sense in turnin around all that way." Firefly smiled.

"...Thank you Applejack." she said, and pulled her in for a hug. Applejack hesitated, but returned the embrace.

"Jus don't get used to it." She said, pulling away. "Yer gonna have to deal with most of the missions he give's ya, and succeed or not, he's gonna give us both hell when we get back."

"Yeah, but I'll take that consequence." Firefly replied. "Now come'on, we should get going."

"Oh, we should stop by Posey's first, Ah got a gift fer yer first mission." Applejack said.

"...A gift?" Firefly and Dash thought in unison. "What is it?" Dash asked Luna. From the sound of a quill scribbling, it sounded like Luna was filling out the missing parts of Applejack's biography, but she stopped in time to answer.

"Oh, I don't know for sure. However I think I have a pretty good idea of what it might be." She said with what sounded like a smile.

"Which is..." Dash asked.

"If I told you, it would ruin the surprise." Luna replied smugly.

Applejack and Firefly made their way to Posey's residence.

"Now, I go in first." Applejack said. Pushing Firefly out of the way before entering. Firefly rolled her eyes. "Hey! Posey!" Applejack called out into the cottage. "Do ya have it?"

"Oh yes, it's right on the table!" Firefly heard Posey yell from deep within the building. Applejack entered, and allowed Firefly to pass inside the building as well. On the table was a long sword, a short dagger, and some white robes.

"Had 'em tailored ta my size, hope they fit." Applejack said. Firefly took the robes and tried to put them on over her shirt and vest. They were much more complicated than they looked. "Heh maybe you wanna head to yer room and put those on proper?" Firefly nodded and went for her quarters.

Minutes later, she returned. Posey and Applejack were now conversing in the main room. Both looked at Firefly in awe when she came in. Her clothes were mostly stark white, and covered most of her body. She had a leather spaulder on one shoulder that had five small pockets, perhaps for throwing knives, but they were empty. The same shoulder had a short cape attached to it that draped over her left hoof. The white cloth flowed back to the end of her flank, covering her whole back side. More leather protected her back, and openings in the cloth allowed her wings to rest outside her clothes. The cloth's folds were dyed red, and gave the entire piece a look as if she were bleeding. Short ribbons also attached themselves to the outfit at the waist. At the back of her flank, where her cutie mark would be, a red assassin insignia was stitched beautifully into the fabric. A sword sheathe also hug at her side, as well as a smaller sheathe for her dagger. All this lead to the white hood that shrouded her eyes in darkness, leaving only part of her face visible.

The clothes gave her a very intimidating appearance, but she pulled back her hood to expose her smiling, gentle face.

"So how do I look?" She asked her friends.

"...wow!" Applejack said. "Almost wasn't sure it was you!"

"Gosh Firefly, you look pretty different in that hood." Posey added.

"No one would ever recognize you unless you took it off."

"You think so?" Firefly said. She personally thought it was very extravagant, too much to blend in, but it was also very comfortable, and quite easy to maneuver in despite its intricacy.

"Heh, don't worry." Applejack said. "Ah had Glory look it over, you'll fit right in over at Canterlot." She reached for the sword on the table and handed it to Firefly to sheathe. "Since you lost your ol' one in Canterlot, ah got ya a new sword. Strait from Horsyria, the finest there is." Firefly swung it experimentally. It was quite light, and very sturdy. She could tell it was quality crafting. Applejack handed her the dagger. "I'd use this for rooftop fights, much less cumbersome than a sword." Firefly slid the dagger into its sheathe and shook a bit. Both weapons hung loosely, but stayed in place

and didn't shake too much. Her medicines hung in a pouch at her side. With her back padding, spaulder, and foreleg brace, Firefly felt ready to go.

"Thank you both so much. This will really help me out." Firefly said gratefully.

"Oh, I didn't do anything. This was all Applejack's doing." Posey said with a hint of regret. "I wish I had though, I feel so horrible."

"Well maybe ya can still help her out!" Applejack replied with a smirk. "What about yer 'special product'?" Instantly Posey's face went from sadness to joy.

"Oh of course! She could definitely use those!" she giggled with happiness.

"Ah'm sure you've heard about Posey's secret hobby, right Firefly?" Applejack said, turning to Firefly. Firefly nodded.

"Right, you told me you had a 'special service' a long time ago, what is it, special medicine?" Firefly asked.

"Oh goodness no, if I had a more effective medicine, the last thing I would do is keep it a secret." Posey replied shaking her head.

"Then what?" Firefly asked with curiosity. A dark look flashed over Posey's eyes. For a brief moment, she bore the face of a pony with bloodlust, the want to kill, nothing like the Posey Firefly knew.

"...Explosives...." Posey said slowly.

"...wow." was all Firefly could mutter at the sight of Posey's basement. Tables were along the walls, each scattered with various plates filled with different powders, and parchments with formulas and reactions on them. A few spots around the room were scorched black, and all the lighting came from four jars at each corner of the room, each holding a glowing ball of light.

"It's too dangerous to have candles down here." Posey explained. "Too much gunpowder, so I asked Glory, Sawyer and some other unicorns to make me a few light spells. I have to keep them in jars or else they'll escape." She moved to a table and grabbed two silver balls, and handed them both to Firefly. "I don't have enough saltpeter for really explosive bombs, but I have just enough for three of these smoke bombs. Just throw them to the ground, and they'll spray out a misty fog you can use to escape." She said, then turned back to her table, and funneled some powder into another silver ball. Meanwhile, Firefly turned the balls over in her hooves. This was what Applejack had used to escape Canterlot; useful indeed.

"You know Posey..." Firefly said, finally asking the question she'd been wanting to since the three descended. "I never really took you for a pony who would be into this sort of stuff."

"Oh Firefly, you can't always trust your eyes." She said with an innocent smile.

"But...why? How?" She asked.

"Oh, it's quite a long story. Growing up as a filly, I lived in a very rural area. I loved to garden, it's my special talent you know, and I always kept a stock of fresh fruits and vegetables that were home grown. But I lived very far away from civilization you see, and food was scarce, so wandering ponies and run-away bandits would often steal from my garden. Not only did they take much more than they needed, they carelessly trampled over my other plants to get to their prizes. All my hard work was being destroyed every night." An angered look crossed her face. "I tried the only thing I was good at, mixing herbs. But unfortunately, I could come up with anything that could help, so I moved on to mixing other things, like minerals. I soon found that mixing rocks was also very boring, except for a certain kind; Sulfur." Her angered look became look of menacing joy. "I discovered a particularly safe explosive mixture, a flash bomb, nothing more. But when attached to a trip wire, it did its job effectively. Most intruders were scared away, and those that didn't flee were exposed to me, and I was alerted to their presence." She regained her innocent looking smile. "I'm sure that if I hadn't had gotten a cutie mark for gardening first, explosives would most definitely have been my talent." The story shocked Firefly. She was still having trouble imagining Posey in that light, and the more she saw it, the more she wanted to go upstairs, curls up in bed, and forget she was ever like that. If Posey was like this, what secrets could Applejack be holding, or Glory? She almost didn't want to find out.

Sundown in Lunagrad was a very stunning sight. The town was bathed in orange and purple light as the sun began to fade behind the horizon. Firefly, in her new assassin robes with her weapons by her side and her training in mind, stood with Applejack at a crossroads. It was not very far from Lunagrad, the town still visible, but the paths went in very different directions, one to the south and one to the west. A sign hung above them all, labeling different towns and their directions. One read "CANTERLOT", while another read "FILLYDELPHIA". The signs pointed in almost opposite directions.

"Whelp." Applejack said. "I guess this is where we part ways."

"Yeah...I guess...." Firefly replied solemnly.

"Aw don't be so glum." Applejack replied. "We'll be rootin for ya all the way, even if we can't be there with ya" She held up her hoof, showing off her burned-in assassin insignia. "Remember, yer family now. Ah mean it when ah say that, and truth is, as long as ya have that there symbol burned into yer hoof, you'll never be alone." Firefly smiled, it was good to know she had such good friends.

Glory taught her, Posey nurtured her, and Applejack comforted her; she didn't need anything else in the world other than their friendship. She held up her own burned hoof, and bumped hooves with Applejack, their burned skin touching and meeting at the symbol of their brotherhood. Without another word, Applejack turned and walked away, down the road to Fillydelphia. Firefly watched her all the way, until she was out of sight down the long road.

"...Goodbye." She finally said. She didn't want Applejack to hear it, because she knew she'd see her again, but at the same time, part of Firefly wanted to acknowledge that they were parting, as if she would worry about Applejack if they did not finalize the departure.

Firefly herself turned around and began her trek to Canterlot. Now prepared to finish what she had started. Trained in stealth, equipped for combat, full of never ending energy to complete the task: at that moment, Firefly was the model image of an Assassin, a Star of the Moon. Working to get revenge on a murderous noble, but in the process, protecting the very freedom of ponykind.

Dash watched her ancestor move; her stance was more confident, her stride more courageous. She saw in her a pony of power, of pride, a pony she wanted to be more like. And yet, this pony was above all an assassin. A killer. The steel she carried was meant to cut the flesh of ponies. Dash simply could not overlook the detail, even after fighting bandits and guards. She knew her friends were in trouble, and that this pony was the only type that could save them.

But she still did not want this. She did not want to be an assassin.

Chapter 8

The glowing city of Canterlot had always been a symbol of pony intelligence. Most animals of Equestria retained their feral nature. Even among those that were intelligent, most were still very tribal, such as diamond dogs and zebras. But ponies were more advanced; they progressed into the realms of architecture and art. The last few years of the Olden Equestria age were ones of a renaissance, a blooming of intellectual superiority among ponies. Canterlot displayed this perfectly; built in the center of the Everfree forest, it shut out the fierce wilderness and instead built a shining utopia of knowledge and power, the forces of science and magic combining to create the most stunning city ever built.

Firefly found herself once again staring down the huge metal gates that kept the outside out and the inside in. This time, there was no Twilight Twinkle to help her into the capitol, and she still had no travel papers to gain legal entry into the city. Without a visible entry, Firefly decided to move around the outer wall, see if there was a crack or hole that she could crawl through.

After some time, she found that one of the towers had a perfect setup to climb. The top walls had been corroded away, but a choice few brick stood whole among the rest of the wall. They looked like perfect hoof holds. Some conveniently placed wooden posts stuck out from the wall further down, and at the very bottom, an covered applectart was positioned in such a way that it was almost begging to be used as a ramp. "Alright." Firefly said with a deep breath. She pulled her hood over her face. "Here we go." Firefly made a dash for the applectart.

Being a pegasus, Firefly felt quite at home in the air. Even though her wings failed her, she jumped off the cart and soared gracefully over to the wooden post as if she had the wingspan of a griffin. Her hooves grasped onto the front of a wooden post, and she climbed up. She the leaped to another post, and climbed onto it as well. Using what little space she had, Firefly used the post to run up the wall, the momentum carrying her just high enough to reach one of the bricks. She hung there for a moment,

catching her breath. She then swung her hoof around and grabbed another brick, and then another, beginning her slow climb to the top.

With her white hood, Firefly seemed to blend in with the tower. Her bright pink fur and cool blue mane hid under her white clothes. She slowly moved from brick to brick, making sure each was strong before she hung on it. A fall from this height would kill anypony, especially if that pony was a flightless pegasus. She dared not look down. A slow and steady climb was her only way of reaching the top, so she was careful not to rush it. Despite its danger though, it was a relatively easy climb.

Her right hoof clung to the top of the tower. She moved her other hoof up to grasp it too. All she needed do was pull herself up and she was over the wall. A sudden voice made her stop in her tracks though, and almost made her lose her grip as well.

"Anythin?" said a deep voice from above her.

"What do you think?" replied a cranky voice also above her.

"I's jus askin is all!" said the first voice in a heavy accent.

"What the hay would there be to see? Nothing ever happens up here!" The angry guard moved to the edge and leaned over the side. Firefly saw he had a grey coat with a white mane styled as most Royal Guards did. She couldn't climb up if guards were there, but how to get rid of them? There was only one way.

"Maybe if ya shut yer mouth for a few bucking minutes, we'd get some peace and qui-EGH" the guard squelched. Firefly had brought her hidden blade up into his neck, just like in training, and pulled him over the side. His limp body fell to the ground with a large dust cloud. Firefly climbed up quickly to find the other guard still with his back turned.

"Wot was dat mate? Didn't quite gett'cha." he said turning to see Firefly in place of his friend. Her eyes were hidden under her hood, and her blade was still exposed and stained in blood. His eyes widened in shock. He opened his mouth to shout, but Firefly pounced and silenced him before he could cry out. Though no longer verbally outraged at this careless theft of pony life, Dash could not help but mentally cringe at the feeling of blood spilling over her hoof. It would take a while before she could do this with no reaction.

Retracting her blade, Firefly took note of her situation. She killed two guards; one fell to the ground, the other was still here. She probably had about 30 minutes to make it down to ground level inconspicuously, before

the next guard shift came up to relieve these two. Just to be safe, she dumped the other guard's body over the side. Just as she returned to the tower top to think of a way down, she heard a pony yell.

"Wha? Assassin!" shouted a rookie down below the tower, on the main wall. He had spotted her from below, and was now running away frantically.

"*Merde!*" Firefly cursed. She jumped off the side of the tower and rolled onto the top of the wall. It hurt her back, but she was generally alright. Still, she was now a good 7 feet away from the rookie. She galloped with all her might, but could not catch up.

The rookie ran around the outer wall, shouting and yelling. Instantly, every guard in the area looked over at Firefly. She became the central focus of every hostile pony she could see. Needless to say, things did not look good for her. She turned and ran in the opposite direction. Some of the guards there had spotted her, but less did than on the other side, where the rookie had made sure all were alert. She raced away from her crime, pushing some guards down along the way and constantly dodging crossbow bolts and arrows. The walls were quite high, and she didn't want to jump down onto the roofs and possibly get hurt, plus attract all the guards there. Still, running along the wall was getting her nowhere fast, she needed to escape. A hay bale would be good, or a cart full of flowers, but she saw neither. What she did see however, was two guards draw their swords ahead of her. Three followed behind her and also drew their weapons. Firefly was suddenly surrounded, and had nowhere left to run. Only one thing left to do.

She didn't dare waste time drawing her own sword; instead she extended her hidden blade and got into a defensive position. The guards snickered and circled around her, like wolves about to rush their prey. One was chuckling to himself.

"hehehe..." he snickered. "That little knife against out swords? Ya must have some sort of death wish, don't ya boy."

"Shut up." Firefly said quickly, not wavering in her stance.

"Well give me wings and call me Celestia!" the unicorn said. "She's a mare! How sad, this battle will be shorter than most..." he paused for effect before lunging. "But so much more satisfying!" Firefly expertly brought her blade up to parry the strike, and then kicked the guard down with her back hooves. A guard behind her took a stab, but Firefly turned and diverted the blade's tip, before stabbing the pony in the chest. Without giving either a

chance, she turned and plunged her blade into another guard's back, and another's neck. The last two guards left, the one she'd kicked and the last remaining one, decided to attack at the same time. Firefly had no trouble sidestepping one swipe, and then grabbing the guard's hoof and using his sword to defend against the other. She then brought his hoof further back and impaled the guard with his own weapon. Using the dying pony as a base, she jumped up, surprising the last guard, and stabbed her blade right into his forehead.

Wasting no time in pulling it out and galloping away, Firefly seemed to actually lose the guards behind her. Their shouts of halt and threats had ceased when the five now dead ponies attacked her. Still, she didn't leave anything to chance, and scrambled to find a way down. As luck would have it, a ladder was stationed nearby, and she quickly descended onto the city rooftops. She moved to the edge of the building, balancing herself on an eagle's perch. Now with a more open area and less of a guard presence, Firefly caught her breath and looked around Canterlot. It was a marvelous city, full of sights and sounds. Everything looked very high-class, even the city's outer slums. She could see a very large part of the city from her location; it was if she was a bird in the sky, looking down as she wished. Dash felt a hint of sorrow in the flightless pegasus' mind.

Small white words suddenly appeared in the bottom left corner of Firefly and Dash's field of view. "Synchronizing..." It read.

"What the hay?" Dash asked.

"The Animus is using your current viewpoint to update Canterlot's map and floor plan. It will help me label locations in the city so you can begin memory sequences. In fact, if you could do this from other viewpoints around the city, it would help me a lot."

"Map Synchronized" appeared in the center of her view. With that, it seemed she was done there. When Firefly turned to get off however, a flock of pigeons flew up to the rooftop and settled on an edge. Firefly turned back and looked down. As she suspected, the birds liked to perch near hay, so that their nesting material was not too far away. In the street below, a convenient hay cart stood unattended and full. Firefly smiled at her good luck. With a graceful leap, she dived into the hay and became one with the populace of Canterlot.

Mane Street was a big road, spanning the distance from Canterlot's entrance, right up to the front steps of the Royal Castle. While in the poorer

section of the city, the street became a huge outdoor market. Various vendors yelled out everywhere, claiming to have the best prices and highest quality goods. Meanwhile, a bustling crowd was constantly shifting, trying to buy from the vendors or just pushing to get where they needed to be. It was the perfect hiding place for a white hooded mare just trying to blend in. It was also great for an assassin trying to gather information. Even if she did not intentionally eavesdrop, Firefly could hear many conversations about her target.

"...I heard he keeps the tax money in his private safe, and always leaves a little behind 'by accident' when taking it out for distribution." She heard a group of gossiping mares say.

"Such a shame out city must be run by men like him, he is no leader." said a different mare.

"Well I think he's very charming" another said. "The public speakings he makes are so amazing!" she said dreamily.

"You just like his face, his policies are dreadful." the first mare said.

"Like it or not, he and his family control all of Canterlot." the second replied.

Despite the value of the conversation, one of the mares looked in Firefly's direction, and she was forced to move away to avoid suspicion. Could they have been talking about Gilded Sword? The mention of public speakings suggested so, but it could have been anypony. Another group caught her ear.

"What a joke these taxes are." a dirty looking pegasus said. "We make much less than those Unicorn foals, why should we pay more?"

"The Gold Family has to keep us down," his friend replied. "So that they stay in power. The government is killing us!"

"One of these days my friend, I won't just sit down and take it, I'm going to do something!" he said menacingly. Firefly suddenly noticed both ponies were carrying heavy looking swords. Most likely, they weren't just regular ponies, but mercenaries trained in fighting. The angered pegasai was hushed by his friend.

"Quiet! Don't say such foalish things in this public place. Come, lets discuss this elsewhere." the two flew off. Again, no direct reference to Gilded Sword, but they did mention a "Gold Family". Could he be a member? It seemed very likely, but still just speculation.

"Did you hear about the conflicts in the capitol? It seems that Gilded Sword and Golden Shield are in a struggle for power." Finally! A

conversation she knew was about her target. It was being held by another gossip group of mares.

"Oh, that cannot be good." the other mare replied. "Golden Shield is surely a better politician, being as talented as he is, but Gilded Sword is so much better with the people."

"Oh I know!" The first mare replied. "He is so charming, unlike my dreary husband." She said with a hint of dissatisfaction in her voice.

"Oh, but it must be so exciting being the wife of a politician!" the other replied. "Surely Ink Quill can't be as boring as you make him out to be?"

"Oh but he is!" the mare whined. "Every day he comes home from his work, only to shut himself into his study up into the darkest hours of the night!" She rolled her eyes at the thought. "Ever since that dreaded government project began, it's all he's been worried with, and he won't even tell me what it is! Can you believe it? His own wife!" Her mood took a dramatic drop. Tears began to well up in her eyes.

"Oh, come now, don't cry!" her friend said comforting her. "Listen, you can tell me anything you want, I'll be here to...." Firefly lost interest. The conversation was obviously moving into a different topic, and she didn't want to waste any time. It was a helpful little discussion though, it seemed Gilded Sword was not alone in this business of his. She moved down the Mane Street, looking for more info.

Meanwhile, Luna was busy searching away, trying to find information to help Dash. She found a page, and began to dictate it. "Golden Shield and Gilded Sword were members of the Gold family, a line of rich nobles in Canterlot that held a strong presence in The Flames. Golden Shield, although being socially awkward and very introspective, was much better with politics than his brother. In addition to being a good politician, he was also a remarkable strategist, and planned out many Templar raids and attacks."

"So, there's another guy?" Dash asked.

"There's a lot, but yes this is one." Luna replied.

"Hmm...Maybe we should seek this guy out?" Dash asked.

"Oh no no no, too risky. We have to gather more information first." Luna replied. Reluctant, but obedient, Dash continued down the road, listening for more ponies talking.

Hours passed, and Firefly found herself at the end of the road. The next section of path extended over a river and into the higher class sections of Canterlot. Firefly decided against wandering into such places without

reason, as it might be easier to be sighted. By this time, the sun was now lingering over the edge of the horizon; the night had practically already taken over. It wasn't so much that Mane Street was long, but more that Firefly had had to pause every few steps to try and overhear info. Still, she found little information, and now found herself at sunset with nowhere to go.

"Well now what?" Firefly thought to herself. As if answering her question, a loud voice suddenly boomed across the plaza.

"A message to all ministers and officials of The Royals' order, an important meeting will be held tomorrow at Saint Redhoof's basilica in the main square!" Firefly turned her head to see a brown cloaked pony on a pedestal shouting to the crowd.

"That's a Herald." Luna said. "Before newspapers and such, these ponies stood in meeting centers and shouted out any news to passing ponies." Interested, Firefly moved closer, pushing herself into the crowd that had gathered in front of the herald. He continued without notice.

"Celestia's advisor has called the meeting of only the Solar house of officials to take place at noon. The Lunar house of officials is not expected at this gathering, and in fact is encouraged to treat the day as one of rest. All members of the Gold and Feather families are invited to spectate, but all other citizens are to be absent from this meeting as enforced by the Royal Guard. Citizens are encouraged to plan ahead, as to not have appointments in the area at the time of the meeting." It was a perfect opportunity, Firefly was looking for a chance to strike, and here it was laid out for her, all down to the exact time. Her plan had essentially been made for her; nothing could get in her way.

"In other news," the herald continued. "Citizens are to be on the lookout for a wanted criminal roaming the streets of Canterlot. Just this morning, a pink pegasus wearing a white hood breached our city's outer wall and murdered 7 royal guards on duty before escaping into our streets. The royal guard has warned bystanders to not approach her if she is seen, as she is likely hostile and dangerous. An artist has created this rendition to aid in her capture." the herald turned and levitated a piece of paper out of his robes and showed it off to the crowd. On the paper was the word "WANTED", below which was a charcoal sketch of a feminine pony in a dark hood. The bangs of her mane hung below the hood and in the bottom right corner was a sketch of the Assassin insignia.

It was essentially a perfect description of Firefly, and ponies began to take notice. Gasps and yelps escaped the surrounding ponies as onlookers to the herald connected the image on the parchment to the pony standing next to them. A space began to form around Firefly, and soon enough, he herald himself was flipping the drawing around to compare it with Firefly's face. "It's...the assassin!" the herald yelled. "Guards! Seize her! She's right there!" He cried in horror. At that point, everypony around Firefly ran for their lives, save for three city guards that ran towards her, weapons drawn. They formed a circle with Firefly in the center and blocked her off before she could even react. In the flow of the incident, and without thinking, Firefly reached into one of her bags and pulled out one of Posey's silver spheres. With a flash and a fizz, the ground was suddenly enveloped in a thick smoke. The guards coughed and gagged, but Firefly remained generally unaffected, being in the center of the cloud. Dash closed her eyes, concentrated, and switched to Eagle Vision. As the world became a blue wire frame, the guard's bodies became prominent through the smoke, as did the buildings beyond it. Dash pushed Firefly to run off, and climbed up to a roof while the grey mist of the bomb slowly dissipated.

She didn't make it in time to escape unseen, and although far behind her, the guards now saw her climbing up and followed suit with surprising agility. She paid no mind to their yells for her to stop, mixed among profanities regarding her birth-class and her faulty wing.

"You shadowy coward! How dare you call yourself a pony!" one of the guards shouted. "When I get my hooves on you, I'm cutting those good for nothing wings right off!" the sheer thought of such a thing made Dash cringe, Luna was right, Equestria of the past was a much more different place.

Consumed in her thoughts, Dash was absentmindedly heading for the edge of a roof, and soon found herself flying off the edge. She less than gracefully rolled onto the ground and into another pony, cushioning her fall but knocking him down.

"Augh!" the extravagantly dressed colt exclaimed. "What is wrong with you? Have you gone mad?" Firefly didn't even stop to apologize before getting up and galloping across the square.

"Ahhh!" she heard a shout of pain behind her. Turning, she saw that one of the guards had attempted to follow her off the roof, but did not roll when he hit the ground. He was lying on the ground shouting in pain, with what Firefly could assume was a broken leg. The other guards were taking

more time in getting down, and Firefly put some distance between them. Finally turning a corner, she found herself in a small park. She was out of their sights for the moment. All she needed to do was hide, but where? No immediate hiding spots became evident, but she only had a few seconds to cover herself. Feeling she had maybe half a second left, she improvised.

"Hurry up!" one of the guards shouted. "We just had her, she can't be that far off!" He and his ally were rushing around the corner they'd seen the assassin turn into. They could still hear cries of pain behind them, but their friend would have to wait for his medical assistance; they had a criminal to catch. They sped through the park, passing many worried looking ponies along the way. At the end of the park, they turned into another road, and ran down in pursuit of the killer.

Firefly had her head down, looking at the ground. Once she was sure the guards had left the area, she calmly got up from the park bench and walked in the opposite direction. So it seemed her plan would not be so easy after all. The meeting would be planned yes, and Firefly knew where and when it was to happen, but she would have to get past the guards, which would require stealth, speed, and agility. Luckily, those were three things she had at her disposal; it was only a matter of using them correctly. The short facade had done little to stop her cause, but reminded her that she was now in the Templar city of Canterlot; nearly every pony in this city was against her. It would be difficult moving in such an environment, but she was confident in her ability to complete her task. She knew deep inside that no matter what would happen tomorrow, she would find a way to overcome it with efficiency and stealth.

After all, she was an assassin now.

Chapter 9

It was late at night; Canterlot had dimmed its lights and fallen into a hazy state, though the city did not truly rest, even at this hour. Firefly soon found that just because she was a wanted criminal, didn't mean she could stay up all night in the streets. She needed somewhere, anywhere, to stay. Any of the inns were out; even if she had the money, they'd ask for her name, and that was something she'd like to keep to herself at this point. She was running out of options, besides maybe sleeping in a hay bale. The idea was stupid, however it didn't seem too bad at this hour. The warm, comfy, soft embrace of the hay cushioning her head like a...

Her eyelids grew heavy just at the idea, and she stopped her train of thought midway. She kept lazily walking through the streets, avoiding any guard she saw. Even as notorious as she was at the moment, the streets of Canterlot were still a very dense place, full of tons of ponies. There was no way the Royal Guard could find her as long as she stayed away from them, their reach was not so far as to restrict her from the common roads and streets.

And yet, energy leaked from her hooves with every step. With each passing moment, Firefly could feel the powerful grasp of sleep approaching ever closer, threatening to leave her unconscious on the ground where she stood. Firefly was not a very religious pony, but at a time like this, she prayed.

"Dear Celestia..." she mumbled lazily. "Just give me somewhere to lie down." Obviously, such a request was not answered very spectacularly, and even as she said this, Firefly began to give into the desire of her eyes to shut. She kept walking strangely enough, but put her head down lower than it already was. Maybe if she could just close her eyes for just a few moments...

"Whoa!" Firefly felt another body slam into her and sent her sprawling to the ground. Her eyes snapped back open, to an open view of the night sky. She was on the floor.

"Oh my, I'm so sorry! I wasn't looking where I was going, and I'm in quite a rush to...Firefly?" Firefly looked around for the source of the voice. She saw a few books scattered on the ground, probably dropped when they crashed, and a pink unicorn with a white and purple mane staring at her.

"...Twilight?" Firefly responded, pushing off her hood to get a better view of the unicorn.

"It is you! Gosh, I haven't seen you in weeks, especially after you left so suddenly, I got a bit worried to be honest." Twilight responded, telekinetically putting her books back into her saddle bags. "How have you been? And what's with the...uh...get up?" She looked Firefly over, a bit skeptical at her fashion choice.

"Oh this?" Firefly said nervously. "It's uh, really cold out tonight, so I thought I'd cover up!" she said with a chuckle. "Anyway, I've been fine thanks, and you?" she said, quickly changing the subject to something less dangerous.

"Oh, great, just fine. Scale and I have actually finished our apprenticeship! I'm all on my own now." Twilight responded happily.

"Oh, that's great!" Firefly said.

"So, what are you doing out so late? I was just coming back from the merchant's, I had to get some books for my library." the unicorn inquired.

"Oh nothing, just looking for a place to settle down for the night. To be honest, I'm a little low on bits..."

"Really? Well if you don't mind sleeping in a guest bed, Scale and I have some space, and we'd love to have you over."

"Oh I couldn't, I don't want to impose..." Despite Firefly's words, she was shouting with joy in her head. Luck had shined on her yet again, and it seemed that luck's name was Twilight Twinkle.

"No no, it's no trouble at all!" Twilight insisted. "It's always nice to help out a friend in need."

"Well, alright then! Lead the way." Firefly said, holding out a hoof to motion Twilight forward. *Yes yes yes!* She thought. *Finally, a place to*

sleep! Twilight was surprisingly hospitable for a high-class unicorn. Even if she was loyal to the Flames, and technically her enemy, Firefly found she did like the unicorn very much. In fact, were she not on a mission, she might actually want to get to know her a little bit better, her so called "friend".

===

Twilight's "place of her own" was quite meager for a Canterlot house. It was one room, with two levels, though the top one was barely half the size of the first floor. Still, it had an extra bed, and that was all Firefly really needed. The fact that there was also a small kitchen and library was just a plus, and in general the entire place was very lavish. Meager for a Canterlot house yes, but still far above what most other cities could offer. Currently, Twilight had to go through and sort all her new books into their proper places, and along with Scale, and Firefly had offered to help. In reality, Twilight was quickly organizing tons of books at the flick of a horn, while Scale and Firefly worked together to sort books at a slower rate, seeing as one of them had fingers and the other could reach high places.

"So, lots of books ya got here." Firefly commented. She and Scale had already put up a few dozen, but Twilight had even more to store, as if she spawned them from thin air.

"Yeah well, I am quite the studious type." Twilight replied.

"You can say that again." Scale interjected. "Sometimes this pony gets 3 hours of sleep, spends the whole night studying. There isn't even a test or something to study for!"

"Thank you Scale." Twilight said with disdain. She rolled her eyes, then got back to work.

"Still," Firefly said. "What are all these books for? I mean 'Super Naturals', 'Teakettle's Tome of Transformations', 'A Foal's Guide to Alchemy', these sound like a bunch of different spell books. Aren't unicorns only supposed to have magic based on their special talent?"

"Oh yes, but I'm sort of a special case." Twilight said, pausing for a moment and setting her books to the ground. She turned and pulled back her clothes to show off her flank. Firefly's wings stiffened a bit, but the thought was soon dismissed from her mind. Twilight was just showing off

her cutie mark; a collection of nine five-pointed stars in an almost circular pattern. "You see, my special talent *is* magic. I can replicate any spell I see or read about, so I try to read about lots of them."

"Oh yeah, Twilights amazing with magic!" Scale bragged, suddenly enthusiastic rather than sarcastic. "In fact, she was almost taken in as Princess Celestia's personal student!"

"Scale!" Twilight scolded. "There's no need to brag." She turned to Firefly before the pegasus could ask. "It was nothing big, I casted a few spells for my entrance exam at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, and lost control. Spells went everywhere; one of them turned the furniture into solid diamond, one made sunflowers sprout from the chairs, and one turned one of the examiner's mane into a bunch of snakes." She added a smirk. "I didn't particularly like her."

"Solid...diamond?" Firefly asked stunned.

"It was only temporary of course, everything went back, but The Princess was nearby and saw some potential in me. She wanted to make me her personal pupil at the school."

"Wow! That's amazing!" Firefly said. To think, she could've been so close to royalty, no, divinity? "Why didn't you take the offer?"

"Well...I didn't actually pass the exam." Twilight said sadly. "You see, the exam was hatching a dragon egg, which I couldn't do. I was only a filly at the time." her mood visibly shifted down. A glimmer of sadness lingered in her eyes, but she snapped out of it soon enough. "Still, it wasn't all bad!" she said happily. "I did actually get my cutie mark that day, and they let me keep the dragon egg, which eventually became Scale." Scale took a quick bow.

"And look how great that turned out!" he said with pride. Twilight laughed.

"Yes yes, you're my number one assistant and I couldn't be without you. We know." she said, putting one last book away. It seemed that sometime during her story, Twilight actually started organizing books again, and had finished all of her and Firefly's pile. "Now then, it's getting kinda late." she said, glancing at a clock. "Let's all get some rest. Who knows

what tomorrow will hold for us?" Firefly snickered. If only Twilight knew the gravity of her words.

===

Right on time, at 6:00 sharp, the sun rose over the horizon and spread light over all of Equestria. Firefly gently opened her eyes as the light from the window came streaming in. She lazily sat up and yawned, stretching out her hooves. It had been a while since she had gotten a good night sleep on such a comfortable bed, and it would likely be another while before she could do it again. In this thought, she savored every moment she had left in the plush bed, getting up as slowly as she possibly could. Once she got on her feet, she moved to the small drawer beside the bed. Opening the bottom drawer, she pulled out her assassin robes and put them on again. It took a few minutes to tie all the knots and don all the folds, especially by herself, but she eventually got her uniform on. She closed the drawer, as the rest of the drawers were occupied by Twilight's clothes. She experimentally extended her blade, and retracted it again, repeating the process a few times to make sure the mechanism was in working condition.

A marvel of pony engineering, she started to wonder about its origins. Who made it? And how on earth did they do it? Surely her father was not that skilled, and some of the other assassins had similar blades, though most were variations. The strange device fit somehow perfectly around her hoof, yet the blade extended to a great extent. Its inner parts must be very small, and difficult to make. It seemed as though even magic could not explain such wondrous workings.

A knock at the door broke her concentration. She looked over the railing of the top floor to see Twilight already awake and dressed, going to answer the door. She pulled it open with her horn to reveal two white guards at her doorstep.

"Good morning miss, we're conducting a search for a criminal that was last seen in this district. Have you seen any suspicious activity around here?" Firefly simply could not have a calm morning it seemed. The guards were already awake and eager to resume yesterday's activities. She quickly backed away from the railing and looked for another way out. There was no back door, but there was a window on her level. She turned back,

hesitant. Twilight had been gracious enough to give her a place to rest, and here Firefly was, about to run off for the second time with not even a "thank you". Some friend she was. Still, she couldn't afford to be caught, not in here. They might hurt Twilight for sheltering a criminal, or worse.

"Oh uh, no not at all," she heard Twilight respond.

"Is there anyone else in the household?"

"Just my baby dragon and another pony upstairs. Scale! Firefly! Could you come down here?" It was best for both of them. She had to go, *now*.

With a running start, she jumped out the open window and grabbed onto the windowsill of the adjacent house. Climbing up to the roof, Firefly took off along the rooftops, leaving Twilight and the guards behind. *Sorry Twilight*. She thought. *Maybe one day I can explain this to you*.



The Canterlot town square was a very expansive place. It was a good 100 yards across and was generally flat. On this day however, the area in front of Saint Redhoof's basilica was occupied by around 70 different ponies. All of them wore a wide red hat and read robes inscribed with a sewn-on replica of Princess Celestia's cutie mark. With so many ponies wearing such wide circular hats, it almost looked like the square had become a sea of red. Around the perimeter of the square, a line of gold armour-clad unicorns held a strong line; allowing only officials through, while pushing and sometimes beating any stray peasants away. Above the streets, similarly equipped pegasi walked along the rooftops. There was no way unto the square it seemed, but such an outlook did not faze the pink pegasus in the white hood. She stood alone, silently watching from the rooftops. She didn't expect full entry, but she hadn't anticipated this much security. Still, she didn't necessarily have to get into the meeting; she just had to wait for a certain unicorn to come out. The meeting was almost finished anyway; she most likely would be still working her way in by the time it was done with.

She went over her plan in her head, or really her lack thereof. Despite the effort it had taken her to get to her current position, her main source of drive was still her rage full thirst for vengeance. As soon as she caught

sight of him, she was going to pounce. Afterwards, she didn't necessarily care if every guard in the city was alerted to her presence, as long as she could make the noble suffer as she had.

Still, it seemed as though Applejack had not truly left her. A small, nagging voice remained at the back of her mind, telling her to stop, pleading her to reconsider her plan. She'd been lucky enough to escape this pony with her life; it would be pointless to throw it away in taking his. An assassin needed to be able to disappear after being seen, but that meant waiting until the time was right to strike, and frankly it was hard to think she could hold herself back. Of course, if she didn't, then she was to die soon after her kill. What would be the point of that? Perhaps this was the entire wrong way to complete her task. She needed him alone...

Lost in her thought, time passed around Firefly, and the meeting soon ended. The crowd began to disperse. The guards left their posts and continued on their way, as red cloaked ponies left the square and began to flow out of the exits. Firefly scanned the crowd, looking for Gilded Sword, but did not see him.

"...where are you." she muttered to herself. As if answering her, the white unicorn noble then left the square, careful to have his personal guards form a barrier around him, as to not let the other pedestrians touch him. With him inside the circle of guards was another white unicorn, this one had a tired face, bags under the eyes and wrinkles all over, most likely from excessive stress and lack of sleep. He wore almost the same red clothes that Gilded Sword did, and had the same golden mane, though it was much more ravaged and generally unkempt. It was a stark comparison, Gilded Sword's happy and well-groomed smile, against this pony's tired, depressed frown. He group moved to the side wall of the street. They were positioned directly below Firefly. It took every ounce of self-control she did not to fall on top of them with an outstretched blade.

"What a long meeting, ay brother?" Gilded Sword said.

"Yes, though not a particularly productive one." the pony Firefly now assumed was Golden Shield, the noble's brother, said.

"Oh, lighten up will you? The people love us! And the government is under our hoof."

"How much longer will we have to lie to these people Sword? How long until we reveal our true intentions?" Shield asked.

"Don't say it like that, we're not lying." Sword replied. "We simply chose to not mention certain details for the good of everypony."

"For the good of everypony', do you even believe yourself?" He asked disgusted. Gilded Sword grew visibly angered, but the expression soon faded.

"I wish you wouldn't be so dramatic. We are doing this for the good of Equestria."

"I...suppose so..." Golden Shield said solemnly. "I just wish there was another way. We can't hope to find all the pieces. All we have is The Core and one of the-"

"Shh!" Gilded sword shushed urgently. "Let us speak in the privacy of our home, the open streets are no place to discuss these matters."

They began to trot away slowly. Firefly followed on the rooftops, keeping a keen eye on the pair. What was it they spoke about, The Core, and lying to the public? Nothing good, but what could they have meant? She needed to follow them to their home, surely she could get inside and listen to them speak unrestricted.

The Gold family did not have the humble abode Firefly expected. This was not a simple tower, or a large spiraling building, but a castle. One that almost rivaled the Royal Castle, falling only a bit smaller. Not only was it big, but it was protected. Guards surrounded the walls, and a large gate stood at the front. Firefly could see more guards patrolling inside even. The two unicorns were brought inside, and the gate was immediately closed. There was no way Firefly could get in alone, she needed help. But she was alone in this mission, how could she get help in a Templar city? She was a wanted criminal, why the only people who would so much as look at her if she talked to them were...

A crack came from behind her. Firefly turned to see a group of four dirty ponies jumping across the rooftops like she did, a loaf of bread in one's mouth, an apple in another's.

...thieves. Firefly smirked and made her way over to the group.

"Hey, you!" she called when she got close enough. Some of them drew their blades in reflex, but most stopped when they saw the source of the voice.

"Who the hell are you?" one asked.

"An outlaw," Firefly said. "Just like you all."

They retracted their attacking stances, and relaxed. Still, they didn't lose their looks of suspicion.

"Well...what do you want?" the one asked.

"What do you guys think of the Gold family?" Firefly asked. Most frowned in disgust. One spat at the name's mention. She leaned in, and took out a few bits. The thieves instantly became interested.

"I have a job for you all..."

Chapter 10

Firefly made a mental note as she ran; "Never trust a thief." She carefully logged the thought away and continued running for her life through the dark tunnels under Canterlot. Behind her, a heavily armored guard chased her. Despite his size, he was just as fast as either of the two other guards chasing her. It seemed like it wasn't just the city guard opposing her at times like these, the entire world had some sort of unspoken hatred towards the pegasus. And to think, how easy the task had sounded before...

Firefly was walking along the rooftops with the four thieves she'd found. Despite her offer to pay them, and their interest in taking her money, they insisted that the Gold family's stronghold was impenetrable. When she persisted in trying to employ them, they bid her to follow them, and walked off. Now, of course a sane pony wouldn't follow a bunch of rotten thieves without asking where they were going, but Firefly was armed, and could probably handle anything she might walk into. Still, that didn't stop her from inquiring.

"If you don't mind me asking..." Firefly said out loud to no pony in particular. "Where exactly are we going?" To her surprise, one of the bandits actually turned to answer her, happily even.

"Well, you didn't think we haven't tried to infiltrate the Gold family's residence before, did you? Many times, I can assure you, and from experience I know that five little ponies like us won't do a whole lot. This sort of job will take careful planning and organization, and provided you're willing to pay, I'm sure our guild leader can assist you." Firefly was surprised, she'd been expecting them to take her into a dark alley and try to take advantage of her, and was preparing to have her question refused, as well as preparing her sword to fight. The fact that they would go to seek help for her task was an unexpected response. She also realized that their hold on her was not as tight as she believed; they were keeping their space, and if she needed to run she most likely could.

"I...have to say, I'm surprised." Firefly stammered. "I didn't think thieves would be so eager to help a pony out."

"Ah, but you aren't just anypony, are you?" the thief replied. "You are an outlaw, are you not? Just like us, an enemy of authority, a child of the night." Firefly turned away.

"I'm no thief..." she said.

"Yet I and the rest of Canterlot have seen your face and heard of your braveries. Seven guards dead? A victory for us as well as yourself." he said with glee.

"It was only self-defense." Firefly replied, though even she had trouble believing the statement.

"Regardless, it's seven less mules we have to deal with!" he with a hearty laugh. His comrades chimed in with a quiet cheer. Dash was also baffled by the strange friendliness of the thief, but she couldn't deny his logic. Firefly had killed two guards initially with no motive to harm her...had they deserved to die? She couldn't be a murderer, Gilded Sword was a murderer, and Firefly, her ancestor, couldn't be as bad as him...could she?

A familiar symbol came into view as the group approached a building. A deep navy banner hung on the building's side that read "The Apple Core". This is not what interested Firefly though, but more the symbol under the title, an apple with a large section of the middle cut out to form an almost crescent moon shape, along with three white stars dotting its center. It was the sign of a thief's guild. These ruffians were not just run-of-the-mill thieves, but an organized group of bandits working to steal as efficiently as possible. Normally, Firefly would not want anything to do with them, but Applejack had shown her a different side of the thief mentality. Still, in her mind a thief was a thief, and nothing would change that.

The inside of the building was lively to say the least. Occupying the room was maybe 30 thieves; some drunk, some fighting, and all dirty. The air almost thickened with the stench of alcohol and body odor. The flickering torch light that lit the room seemed to grow weak in the stench. It was hardly what Firefly would call a "decent establishment", but it was a pub after all, and such an influx of stereotypical male stupidity was common in such places. Firefly was not a stranger to the effects of alcohol on

stallions; she knew just how it could bring out the worst in a person. And what she was seeing was certainly not the ponies at their best.

The thieves led her past the drunken mass into a back room. It was full of wine barrels, and appeared to be some sort of storage room, but inside was also a table with a map, along with a significantly cleaner dressed, but still very dirty pony. He was standing over the map, studying the paper as if the land masses would come to life in front of him. He had a yellow coat and golden mane that was generally unkempt, but seemed to fall into a somewhat reasonable styling. Surprisingly, considering Canterlot's standards, he was an earth pony, with no wings or horn to set him above the rest.

"Oi, sir!" One of the thieves said in a formal, and yet informal tone. "We've got someone here to see ya! Says she wants to get into the Gold's place." The cleaner stallion looked up from his map and looked at Firefly with a dismissive frown on his face. He looked her over a few times, his eyes moving up and down her white robes, and then broke out into a smile and rolled up his map.

"Well howdy! Welcome to The Apple Core miss, what can ah do ya for?" Firefly noted he had the same accent in his voice as Applejack, and even had a red apple as a cutie mark. Coincidence? Or possibly something else?

"Uh...you're the leader of the thieves' guild here, right?" Firefly asked.

"Well, not publicly, no." He said with a sly voice. "But to you, why yes ah am. Surely ah can trust a member of the assassin brotherhood, right?"

"You know about the brotherhood?" Firefly asked.

"Well of course ah do." He replied, lifting up his front right hoof and, to Firefly's surprise, exposing a branded assassin insignia. "Ah'm a member."

"Like I said." piped the thief behind them. "You're just like us, a child of the night."

"Then...do you by any chance know a pony named Applejack?" she asked.

"Applejack? Why, she's mah cousin, and leader of the Lunagrad thieves' guild if ah remember correct. You see, thieving kinda runs in the Apple family." He said proudly. Firefly mentally recorded that comment for reference later on. "Oh, shoot, where are mah manners?" the stallion said suddenly, slapping himself on the head lightly. "The name's Cortland, pleasure tah make your acquaintance miss...?" he said, prompting the pegasus.

"Firefly." She replied simply.

"Miss Firefly." Cortland finished. "Anyways, you said something about the Gold family?" he said curiously.

"I need to infiltrate their stronghold and kill Gilded Sword." Firefly said "Master Steelwing commands it." She added quickly. Cortland's face twisted.

"Oh, that's quite an order there, and not an easy one at that. The Gold family makes a point by keeping very tight security around themselves at all times, especially in their home." His eyes said what he didn't have the heart to; getting into the Gold's home was near impossible. "Ah'm afraid Ah'll have tah pull some strings tah get into there...but if the Master says it's so important ah guess ah don't really have much of a choice, do ah?" Firefly said nothing. She felt slightly guilty, taking advantage of this pony, but she saw no other way to get close without a mass of guards attacking her. She needed to get into that castle, and it became apparent that she couldn't do it alone.

"Still, if yer lookin to make some money while ah sort things out, ah have a favour that would be perfect for someone like you." Cortland said, pulling out the map he had been studying.

"Really," Firefly replied "...I'm interested." As urgent as her mission seemed, she could use a few bits in her wallet, especially since there was no way she was going to sleep at Twilight's again. Cortland opened up the map and revealed a very lightly drawn map of Canterlot. However, the real focus seemed to be a collection of underlying lines that were drawn much darker and had more right angles and strait sections that the street plan above them.

“This here is a map of a tunnel system under Canterlot.” Cortland said, pointing a hoof at the map. “It leads through most of the city and comes up in tons of different places. However, the ponies up-top shut the whole thing down a few years ago. Obviously they found it too useful for us thieves to be available for use. Course, that didn’t stop us from using it anyway,” he snickered to himself, as did the other thieves in the room. Obviously, some mischief had been made in the tunnels on more than one occasion. “Anyway,” he continued. “The tunnel entrances have recently been put up for sale for a very hefty price, ah guess they figured a bunch a rotten thieves wouldn’t be able to afford them. Of course, they shoulda expected we wouldn’t let a chance like this slip away...”

Cortland nodded at one of the thieves at the door, and the unicorn levitated a brown sack off a shelf in the room. He tossed it to Cortland, who caught it in his mouth by the cord. He dropped the sack onto the table and grabbed the string that held the sack closed in his mouth. “These...” he said through clenched teeth. Pulling away the string, the bag opened to reveal a large mass of golden coins that shimmered in the torchlight. Each one had “500 bits” inscribed on them, along with the image of two beautiful alicorns. Firefly’s eyes widened at the large amount of money before her. “...are counterfeit bits.” Cortland finished. Firefly’s surprise greatly diminished, she should have expected this from thieves, but yet her sense of wonder was not affected. The coins were each sparkling like polished gold, and each was uniformly engraved with stunning calligraphy. They could have given her the bag as her payment, and she would have not noticed anything strange about them.

“But...how? They look so real.” She asked.

“What, did you forget the rules already missy? Ya can’t trust yer eyes, ‘nothing is true’.” Cortland said, referencing the Assassin’s Creed. He reached into the bag, pulled out a coin, flipped it into the air, and caught it in his hoof, covering it on the table. “Heads or tails?” he asked casually.

“Um...heads?” Firefly guessed. Cortland’s trademark smirk once again spread across his face.

“Wrong.” He pulled his hoof off of the table to reveal a simple pebble where the coin had once been. “We had one of the unicorns enchant these pebbles with a simple illusion spell; the whole bag is absolutely worthless.” Firefly once again glanced at the open bag, full of glittering currency that

was apparently just a pile of rocks hiding behind a magical shroud. Could've fooled her.

"Anyway..." Cortland went on. "Normally this idea wouldn't work. Any official with his head on straight is gonna think something's up if a dirty street rat comes up tah him with a bag full a bits. But...you on the other hand, are much more convincing. They won't immediately suspect *you* if ya try to buy the tunnel entrances, and of course, bein a mare..." Cortland trailed off, raising an eyebrow at the implication.

"...What are you suggesting." Firefly phrased the statement as a demand, not a question.

"Well, ah assume that if they start to get the wrong idea you could use some of that...er...feminine charm on 'em?" Firefly was not amused. Not in the slightest.

"I'm not that kind of mare." Firefly said with a hint of danger in her voice. "Let's get that straight right now. I'm here to do my job and then leave. I'm not like those types, not like you. I'm no criminal." Cortland did not lose his smirk.

"Ah think you'll find we '*criminals*' aren't so bad miss Firefly. Remember, 'everything is permitted.'" He finished his quote.

"Whatever," Firefly said, rejecting the idea from her mind. "So what's the catch?"

"Well, the spell *looks* convincing enough, but we don't have professional magicians here; the spell wares off when touched." He emphasized his point by taking another coin out of the bag. It's golden sheen fade into a dirty stone in his grasp.

"You're kidding right? What a lousy spell!" Firefly exclaimed.

"Ah swear tah ya, it'll be an easy job. Just give the official the money, open up the tunnel entrance, and get the hay outta there before he notices ya gave him a sacka rocks." Cortland said, waving away any doubt with his front hoof.

"Easy as apple pie!"

It was now, running through the tunnels under Canterlot that Firefly decided that this job was *not* in fact, “easy as apple pie”. Or any pie for that matter. When one analyzed Cortland’s plan thoroughly, it became obvious that any official of the government would thoroughly inspect a sample coin from the pouch to check for counterfeit upon payment. Firefly was lucky enough that the official had waited until she was unlocking the gates to the tunnel entrance to pick a coin from the bag and bite it to check the metal’s ductility. Needless to say, he was quite angry when he found himself biting down on a rock. A quick dip into the bag with his hoof revealed all the coins to be false, and he subsequently sent the nearby guards to seize her.

Her hooves skidded as she frantically turned a corner, hefty and bloodthirsty guards still behind her. Unfortunately for her, the path ahead of her was dominated by a flow of water. She couldn’t tell how deep, but she decided it was better not to jump in with metal swords, daggers, and two more bags of coins that were actually rocks. Still, she quickly found an alternate route in the form of a few posts extending from the wall. With a flap of her wings, she jumped and pranced across the wooden supports and across the gap to land onto the path. The heavily armed guard behind her, which Firefly had mentally nick-named as a brute, did not seem to see the expanse of water through his dark metal helmet, and promptly tripped into the dark watery abyss. His generous metal plating didn’t give him a chance at floating, and he disappeared into the murky waters. A few bubbles of air signified his death.

Yep, swimming across had been a bad idea.

However, jumping across did not work out completely in her favor either, as the less agile guards tried to jump across the posts as well. However, the first fell short and was forced to grasp the last post and hang under it rather than jump on top of it as Firefly had. His momentum allowed him no time to hang though, and he promptly swung off the post and crashed into the hooded pegasus in front of him, toppling them both to the ground. Firefly moved frantically to get up, avoiding a magically levitated stiletto by mere inches.

Something in her mind switched, she stopped running and started fighting. A buck to the face was all she could manage for the guard

immediately behind her, but it was effective enough to knock him to the ground with a dull thud. She was sure she heard something crack on impact with her back leg. The other guard was now floating a heavy looking war hammer in front of him. Firefly drew her own sword. A flash of sparks lit the dark tunnel briefly as their weapons collided. Firefly stayed on the defensive, parrying and deflecting all the guard's passionate attacks. She was wearing him out, as the amateur fighter was using the faulty logic that if he struck hard enough, her defense would break. Eventually he showed signs of fatigue, and Firefly took advantage of it, moving from protective swipes to aggressive slashes. The guard's face became less determined, more worrisome. The seemingly harmless mare under the white hood was gaining the upper hand, and although her face was one he couldn't bring himself to mortally harm, the hatred in her eyes spoke otherwise for her feelings.

The tables turned, in more ways than one. Firefly was now the one administering powerful attacks, while the guard was barely moving his sword fast enough to keep up. In the heat of their duel, they'd spun around as well, and Firefly now had her back to the expanse of water, and the guard was backing away from her position. The small sound of flesh slicing was heard, as Firefly's sword nicked the guard's hoof. His worried face broke into a mask of absolute terror. This mare was going to kill him, and he could only postpone it for so much longer. His slow and steady backpedal began to accelerate into a backwards half-run, and Firefly matched this retreat with more vicious pounces, fuelled by the added momentum of jumping toward her opponent.

The guard's fleeing courage signed his death warrant, as his sturdy defense began to fall into his abysmal fear. His swings became more reckless swipes than concentrated parries. With a final attack pattern, Firefly swung the sword with all her might, and slashed the guard across the chest. Brining the blade back the way it came, she battered the hammer at its hilt, knocking it out of the guard's hooves and onto the floor a few meters away. His back pedal was faster than ever, and so was Firefly's charge. Rainbow Dash felt Firefly let go of her own sword, heard it clatter behind her, and watched as she jumped into the air towards the guard, her left hoof raised above her head, and a small metal knife revealing itself at her wrist, pointed right at the guard's neck. The world seemed to slow down as the final strike progressed. The guard slowly tripped and fell on his tail,

and Firefly slowly drifted towards him, the blade at her left sliding out to its fully extended position.

Time continued to decelerate exponentially, until Firefly was frozen in the air, and the guard was frozen in front of her. The look on his face was not something she had seen before from the city guards, it didn't harbour a hatred for injustice or disgust for lowly street ponies; it was one of utter terror. This guard was new; it was obvious now more than ever. He had not expected to deal with such things in this line of work, or at least not so early. Dash's vision twitched as if the screen she was looking at had lost connection for a few fractions of a second. The all-too-familiar gridlines of the Animus' simulated environment faded into existence, and a set of bright white words materialized in the center of her view in an equally familiar font.

OUT OF SYNC

Once again, the world imploded into a blindingly bright glow of white, but this time Dash felt herself pulled away from the world, a current of nothingness dragging her away with unimaginable force. Her eyes snapped open as she lifted her head from the pillow with a gasp, the crown falling from her head and onto the ground. Luna's horn sparked and popped, the white glow at its point exploding in a tiny burst. Rainbow Dash took large gulps of air, sucking oxygen into her over-active body. It was like waking up from a nightmare. She felt dampness on her body, was she sweating? No, moving a hoof up to her face, Dash revealed the source of the feeling.

She was crying. Dried tears streamed down her face. She patted the liquid away, but felt their presence still haunting her. The experience she'd witnessed had brought her to tears. She was not controlling the actions of her ancestor, but being forced to witness and experience the savage actions that her burning heart committed, powerless to stop what transpired before her. She almost felt like crying again, but her now conscious pride didn't allow it. Luna rubbed her head as if it ached suddenly. With a twist of pain in her face, she momentarily looked up at Dash's condition before shutting her eyes in discomfort.

"Are you alright?" She said, any compassion in the remark drowned out by her grunts of pain as she massaged her temples.

“I...I...” Dash stuttered, looking down at her hooves as if the hidden blade was still strapped to her. She was shaking, not quite recovered from the vision of the past.

“What was that?” Luna asked.

“I...can’t...” Dash whispered.

“I...can’t do it.”

Chapter 11

Luna magically levitated the glass to her mouth and took a sip of the liquid inside. She and Rainbow Dash were sitting in the tower room, eating lunch. Luna ordered the food be brought to her, so she and Dash could discuss the Animus session over the meal. Still, Dash didn't want to talk very much, or eat for that matter. Her appetite had been stunned by the event. She had calmed down a great amount, thinking her tears were a bit melodramatic in retrospect, but still could not refuse the gravity of the situation. All she could do presently was stare at her food and try to remind herself how hungry she should be.

Luna replaced her glass on the table and looked at Dash. She was still staring at her dandelion sandwich like it was talking to her. Obviously, she was still in shock about before, but Luna was starting to worry that she'd never recover from the incident. It took some time to adjust to the new era she was in after her return from the moon, but at times like these Luna had to keep reminding herself that these ponies were not the ponies she knew. Celestia had reduced the crime rate in Equestria to be almost non-existent; Dash would not be so accustomed to Firefly's new assassin mind-set.

Both ponies, Dash and Luna, sat in silence. Neither pony wanted to address the metaphorical elephant in the room, but both knew somepony had to eventually. Luna decided she'd finally break the ice and get it over with.

"So," Luna said, shattering the silence that had overtaken the room. Dash jumped a bit, as if she'd forgotten ponies could talk in the long period of quiet. "Are you feeling better now?" Luna asked.

"Yeah, I guess..." Dash replied in a dry voice, an effect of keeping quiet for so long.

"Do you think you can handle another session?" The question was just a formality. Time was of the essence, and Luna simply couldn't wait for Dash to feel up to the occasion.

"I'm just..." Dash couldn't think of the right word to describe her feelings. On one hand, she could understand Firefly's want for vengeance, Gilded Sword's thirst for power, the guard's hatred toward felony. But at the same time, it was hard for her to imagine Equestria, her home, in such a poor state that anypony would resort to such awful violence as a solution to their problems.

"It was a very different world, the past..." Luna said, reading Dash's expressions, though it seemed more like she was reading her mind. "I'm amazed that my sister somehow put the world in order while I was gone. The Equestria I knew was one of never ending conflict. There was always a war going on, always a fight breaking out, no matter what you did somepony somewhere was angry, and willing to harm others to get what they wanted."

"But...I just don't get it." Dash said. "Why? What does that accomplish?" She found it hard to believe sane ponies would be so quick to kill; she saw the real Firefly, she felt her before her parents died, and it wasn't the pony she'd been watching in the tunnels under Canterlot. Dash had felt almost identical to her ancestor; Firefly shared her thirst for speed, her zeal for adventure, her energetic love of the wind in her mane and the air below her hooves. Dash felt Firefly the night before her parents died; she'd seen an image of herself in her ancestor. The pony she was following now was nothing like the Firefly she'd seen.

Luna shook her head.

"I don't know myself to be honest. Any logical pony will see that in the end, violence leads to more violence." She turned to look out the window of the tower, as if remembering an event long past. "I think it's just an unfortunate part of pony nature. Sometimes we tend to act without thinking..." Her eyes floated away from the window. "...or considering the consequences of our actions." A sense of regret lingered in Luna's tone. Dash herself could feel a bit of remorse as well, many times have her friends reminded her to think before doing something drastic.

Luna lifted the weight of her past off, and focused back on the topic at hand. "Still," she continued. "That's why we have to make sure we stop the Flames now while they're small. The fact that my sister somehow put

Equestria in order for so long is a miracle in itself, we simply can't allow these ponies to bring us all back into an age of violence." Luna looked more determined than ever now. It was clear that the attack on her had struck hard on a personal level. She didn't just want this for the good of Equestria, she had an emotional need to defeat the Neo-Templars before they could cause any more harm.

Dash finally managed to take a bite of her lunch. The princess' words weren't the most motivational ones she's heard, but they were comforting enough to calm her stomach enough to consume. This of course was also helped by her body's hungry cries for sustenance.

"There has to be another way to do this though, I mean, what kind of order are we bringing if we have to kill them too? We're just like them, using violence to solve our problems!"

Luna sighed. She couldn't blame Dash for feeling like this, but she still needed the young pegasus to understand.

"Rainbow Dash," she said, a bit softer than her former tone. "Do you know why the Animus broke its spell?"

"I dunno, it overheated or something?" Luna once again shook her head.

"The Animus allows the user to view memories of the past through their ancestor's bodies. It usually only allows you to view the memories as a bystander, with no control over what's happening." She paused to take another sip of her drink, levitating the cup to her lips and drinking without moving a muscle. "But," she continued. "sometimes, usually in the time between important memory sequences, it allows the user to control the body they possess as well, allowing your consciousness to manipulate the ancestor's mind so that it decides to do what you want to, giving you control while not disturbing the ancestor's consciousness. By watching their ancestor, and eventually controlling them in the context of their memories, the users of the Animus tend to develop talents and skills known by their ancestors quicker and more thoroughly than they would through simple teaching." Luna continued, now in a very scholarly tone. "It's called 'The Bleeding Effect'".

"However, this method has its flaws." Luna's tone changed from one of insight to one of warning. "This type of magic, putting two ponies' minds in one body, causes problems. The matter of who is in control is usually determined by strong emotional impulses, which makes it hard to determine who has superiority at times. If both minds feel strongly about opposite choices, they could effectively tear the pony apart from their fighting!" Dash cringed. In all honesty, she was understanding very little of Luna's colourful word choice, but the idea of being ripped in half sounded unpleasant regardless. "This is why the Animus ended your session." Luna continued. "Your feelings were overtaking Firefly's, and thus your minds fell out of sync with each other. The world dispelled before you could harm yourself."

"I can't help it!" Dah interjected. "I...I don't want to be like that."

"And you don't have to!" Luna retorted. "At least not completely, but you still have to go along with the memories as they flow. If you keep tearing away from the main synchronization, you could permanently drop yourself out of sync."

"Permanently?" Dash asked. Luna nodded.

"Yes, permanently. Eventually your subconscious will be so displeased with its environment, that it will reject any invasion of privacy by magic. I won't be able to cast the spell and put you under the Animus' visions. You'll be locked out forever." A pleading look invaded Luna's eyes. "Please Rainbow Dash, if you can't do this, no one can. You're the only one who has the ability to learn these skills, and I need them if I'm going to solve this problem."

The last part of Luna's qualm brought up a question in Dash's mind. One she'd considered before, but didn't think to ask before now.

"Why is it that I'm the only pony who can do this by the way?" Dash asked. Her quick personality did not stop her from asking a question completely out of context, and the surprised look on Luna's face only enforced this notion.

"...Why?" She asked simply, Taken back by the seemingly random question.

"You keep talking like I'm the only pony in all of Equestria who can fight these guys. What about the Royal guard? That one who woke me up today seems a lot stronger than me, I'm sure he could fight better than I ever could."

"Well, he's strong yes." Luna explained. "But this type of enemy doesn't require brute strength to defeat, you need stealth too. And-"

"But you guys have to have some sort of 'special forces' group right? Or why don't you ask a pegasus who's faster than me, like the Wonderbolts?"

"Well, that's because the Wonderbolts are...stunt ponies!" Luna said, grasping for excuses. "Yeah, not good for something not planned out, but you are-"

"Or what about any of the other twenty-something ponies I saw in the memory? There's gotta be hundreds of other ponies in Equestria who have ancestors in the Stars of the Moon! Why me? Out of all the ponies in the world, why me?"

"Because...you're just special!" Luna said desperately. "You have to trust me on this Rainbow Dash, you'll understand later, but just know you are the only one who can do this." Again, Luna's only defence boiled down to trust. Dash was finding it hard to trust somepony who holds so many secrets, but the look on the princess' face let Dash know she was sincere. Still, she was *not* about to believe everything the moon goddess said out of sheer trust. A familiar phrase floated into the back of Dash's mind: "Nothing is true, Everything is permitted".

"Please Rainbow Dash..." Luna begged quietly. "Just please believe me now and do this, not just for me, for all ponies everywhere." The words triggered something in Dash's head. The familiar faces of her five best friends floated into the view of her memory. Her friends, taken. Captured. Stolen. If not for the good of her homeland, Dash was most definitely going to do this for her friends. They'd always trusted her unconditionally, and she wasn't about to betray that trust. She'd get them back, even if she had to resort to resort to violence against these so called Templars.

Dash had insisted that she was different from Firefly, at least her more recent self. They were very similar once, she had to admit it, but she had made it clear she didn't want to be anything like Firefly the assassin. Despite this, she could feel herself mirroring her ancestor now. The irony was that it was an inverted similarity; whereas before she'd thought Firefly to resemble herself, what she barely noticed now was her current state becoming more like Firefly's. At the thought of her friends capture and the spiteful ponies who took them, she felt the flame that had consumed Firefly's heart ignite in her own; Revenge. She wanted to lash out, make them pay for what they've done. Normally she would have spoken against this kind of feeling with all her heart, but this was different. She was too drunk on the feeling to reprimand herself, too occupied by vengeance to realize her moral contradictions. It wasn't nearly as passionate as Firefly's, she wasn't about to *act* on her desires just yet, but the feeling was there, and it wanted nothing more than to go out and wreak havoc on the Flames of the Sun.

"You have to do this Dash." Luna said, filling in the void of quiet that had filled the room. "You have to stop them from continuing. If you don't, the results could be deadly."

Another realization suddenly hit Dash. If the Flames weren't stopped soon, the horribly violent world of the past would become the present once again. If Luna used sheer military force, or if the Flames succeeded in killing her, there would be an outcry. Ponies everywhere would shout out for revenge and war. The world would quickly spiral down into another age of fighting. That's why Luna needed an assassin, she need the Flames to go quietly and quickly. If she made a show of it, there would be recoil. She was a prime example herself, just the brief encounters she's had with them was enough to consume her mind in violence.

No, that wasn't her world. This reality of blood and rage, this wasn't real. Her world was a peaceful one, a simple one. The worst that happened was an occasional creature near Ponyville, which usually could be tamed with compassion and understanding. She didn't want this, she wanted her peace. She wanted a world where she could ascend to the clouds and fly for hours on end, where she could play pranks or go to parties with her friends, where she didn't have to worry about anything but the occasional weather problem. She extinguished her vengeance for now, she put away

her thoughts of fighting. She just wanted this over with, so she could go back to normal and forget this entire ordeal.

Dash still hadn't reacted verbally to Luna's argument, and Luna had not answered Dash's question. No progress was being made, and eventually Dash and Luna silently agreed on one thing, they wanted this whole ordeal to be over as soon as possible. Dash wanted her friends and her life back, and the sooner this was dealt with the sooner she could return to Ponyville and pretend this never happened. With a renewed vigour, Dash grabbed her glass of the table and quickly chugged down the rest of its contents. Slamming the glass down, she stood up from her seat and held a confident stance.

"Alright, let's do this." she said with fierce determination. Luna nodded, pleased.

"Yes, let's."

The set-up for the Animus was pretty much the same as before. Dash laid down on a blanket resting her head on a pillow. Luna carefully placed the delicate crown on Dash's head and knelt as well in order to get into a more comfortable position. She closed her eyes and let the magic flow through her body and converge at her horn.

"Ready?" she asked slowly, as if in a dream state already.

"Yeah." Dash replied simply. She closed her eyes as well, and tried her best to relax. Luna's horn met the crown's jewel, and Dash was pulled away into the memories of the past once more.

Chapter 12

Nothing. The world was nothing. Just a white void of endless light, searching for something to illuminate. At this point, Dash was no stranger to this purgatory; she knew it was just a matter of waiting to reach her destination. She wasn't conscious in the waking world, and yet, she wasn't consumed by memory either. She was waiting for the spell to warm-up fully, and for the world to build itself beneath her.

Sure enough, a great crashing sound soon arose, and entire mountains were built before Dash's eyes. Whole towers and century old cathedrals materialized, their bricks and mortar flying into place as if by magic. The whole of Equestria built itself instantly, and soon the white void Dash was staring at became the great city of Canterlot. Her bird's eye view of the city shifted dramatically, jumping all around the city, as if it was looking for something, or somepony. Eventually it located its target, and Dash's viewpoint flew down into the city to focus on a white robed mare with blue hair and an unusually diverse armory. Firefly: the assassin.

Dash assimilated into the body, their points of view becoming one. She could feel her hooves pacing the ground, but still couldn't quite grasp control over them. Dash was a watcher, not a driver. Still, she could see the mare's path, and had a feeling she knew where Firefly was headed.

The young pegasus kept her head low as she walked, her hood covering her face and keeping her presence generally unnoticed. As she walked, a small piece of paper caught her attention. It was a wanted poster, hung on the wall by an arrow. It bore the image of a young mare, with a boyish mane and a serious expression. Her head was covered by a hood. It took Firefly a moment to realize who the mare in the poster was, and she hastily ripped it off the wall.

She instantly realized the stupidity of her action. Civilians gasped behind her as she defiled the government issued warning, and gasped again when they realized she was the outlaw it was about. They backed away, some ran for their lives. Down the road, a group of guards on patrol began to notice the disturbance.

"*merde!*" Firefly cursed under her breath. She had to escape, and she had to do so quickly.

She pushed herself up the front of the building to her side, and dashed away along the rooftops. She jumped, rolled, and climbed across the treacherous and un-even environment. Still, although she avoided the attention of the guards in the streets below, the guards on the roofs quickly took interest in the fleeing pony. Soon, Firefly had to watch her step even more as she ran, while avoiding arrows and crossbow bolts that whizzed by her head by mere inches.

A safeguard came into view. Over the edge of the rooftops rose a familiar banner with the familiar symbol. "The Apple Core", Cortland's thief guild. There she would be able to escape the guards, or whatever was left of them. Most were archers, content with attacking from afar and not pursuing their victim too much. She was almost home free, just a little more and...

whack A blunt force struck Firefly in the hoof, sending her tumbling to the ground. She rolled along the stone tiles painfully, skidding to a stop at a dangerously short distance from the roof's edge. Now on her back, she looked up to see her attacker approaching. A city guard, a burly grey unicorn, had been hiding behind a chimney. Seeing Firefly coming, he'd struck her in the fore hooves with a heavy looking war-mace. He now levitated the weapon high above his head, rearing to bring it down on Firefly's skull.

Just as he was about to strike however, something caught his eye. He looked to the side and redirected his mace, swinging it horizontally to his left. A thief pony jumped into Firefly's view and in front of the guard. He ducked under the mace's swing and turned himself around. With a powerful buck, the thief kicked the guard in the head, and off the roof, falling to the street below. Firefly heard a dull crack and the shouts of many surprised pedestrians, confirming the guard's death.

The thief sighed and wiped his forehead. Turning to Firefly, he reached out a hoof.

"Need a little help getting up?" he offered with a smile.

"Haven't you done enough?" Firefly said viciously. She didn't know why, but she felt an aggressive tone was necessary for interaction with a thief. However, this thief had saved her life. It was a thief who was going to help her get at Gilded Sword, a thief who gave her a place to stay in Canterlot when she was a wanted felon, a thief who was above all else, her sworn brother assassin. She had the notion that she needed to interact with these thieves aggressively, but now that she really thought on the idea, it made no sense. These ponies, thieves as they may be, were her allies.

"Whoa, excuse me." the thief said, retracting his hoof. "I thought I was talking to a pony, but you seem to have the attitude of a griffon."

"Actually, you're right." Firefly said, getting up. "I should be thanking you. Sorry." she apologized. The thief's smile returned. He waved a hoof.

"Don't mention it, all in a day's work. These guards practically kick themselves off the roof, and I'd do anything to help an ally."

"That's...very nice of you to say." Anything to help an ally? Firefly had thought that sort of loyalty was absent in dirty thrives like this. It was the reason they stole, because they had no morals. Yet, in the last few months she'd only met moral-less ponies in the ranks of Templar politician and city guards, whereas every organized thief had been welcoming and kind to her.

Maybe these thieves weren't so bad?

The familiar stench of beer and sorrow was present when Firefly entered The Apple Core once again. However, a certain feeling of welcome was also present that hadn't been there her last visit. Of course nothing had really changed; the thieves had given her their full hospitality the moment they realized she was an assassin, but regardless, the thieves' guild seemed friendlier now. It was obviously Firefly who had changed, that any feelings of hostility she might have felt before were simply a reflection of her own attitude toward the bandits.

She made her way to the back room once again, and as expected, she found a yellow earth pony waiting there; Cortland.

"The tunnel entrances have all been renovated." Firefly said. "You might find a few guards down there, but other than that they're free to use."

"Ha ha, fantastic!" Cortland replied, clapping his hooves on the ground a bit. "On behalf of The Apple Core, let me extend mah most sincere thanks to ya Firefly. Now, ah have another task for you tah complete around the city." Firefly frowned. He had another task? No doubt one filled to the brim with angry guards. Out of the frying pan and into the fire it seemed.

"I'm not too sure I want to do this 'task' for you," Firefly confronted. "Especially after you promised the last one would be so simple, which, by the way, it wasn't." Cortland dismissed her worries with a roll of his eyes.

"Oh, Ah'm sure ya can handle this, it should be nothin above tha 'great assassin' Firefly's level of expertise." He said in an almost mocking tone. "why, Ah'll bet a simple recruit ca'd do this job, it's just a messenger's task. The only reason ah ask you tah do it, is because it's relevant tah yer mission regarding the Gold family..." Firefly's ears perked up. Just as Cortland predicted, she was quite suddenly interested in the petty mission he had set up for her. Cortland bore a smirk at her interest, and continued. "The Gold family's stronghold is well protected, but tha bastards aren't rich enough to hire their own set of guards, at least not yet. The buildin's protected by a fleet of Canterlot city guards instead, boastin the excuse that as a political target, they need protection in the interest of Canterlot's well bein." His face twisted in disgust for the lazy excuse to luxury.

"Anyway," he continued, "the point bein that the guards there have other responsibilities, and probably would rather be out an about in the city than stuck patrolin one place for so long, so...here's mah plan." Cortland rolled out another map of Canterlot, this one with a visible diagram of the streets and buildings above, no tunnels in sight. "Ah'll organize a few of mah boys tah cause a ruckus around town all at once, that way, a bunch of the guards will be drawn away from the patrol tah help calm the streets. The weakened defense will make it easier to get ya into that place, so I'm thinkin you can fly yer way in, an-"

"I-I can't fly." Firefly interrupted. Cortland looked a bit confused by the notion of a flightless pegasus.

"But, uh, yer wings..." Firefly spread her wings outward for the earth pony to see. It took a moment, but he eventually noticed the unnatural look of the damaged wing. "Oh..." he said. "Um...Ah'm sure we can get one of mah boys tah fly you in then, but that means you'll have tah find yer own way out once we drop yah in there."

"No problem, understood" Firefly responded.

"Anyway, what ah need you tah do, is just go around the city and let the bandits there know when tah make trouble with the guards." Cortland pulled out a few scrolls, supposedly letters to his recruits. "Like ah said, a simple messenger's task."

Unlike the last mission, Cortland was not understating the difficulty of this task; it really was easy, almost boring in its simplicity. A few guards here and there, but nothing Firefly couldn't handle. It wasn't a mob of them like before, just an occasional archer, usually easy to sneak past or out-run. It seemed like things were finally looking up.

"Alright, so we attack on Cortland's signal." a relatively young thief said to Firefly, reading the note she just gave him.

"Signal?" Firefly asked. She had been wondering how the attack was to be coordinated, but all the other thieves had simply mentioned that they would attack on signal. What that signal was remained to be seen.

"Oh, you'll see, don't worry." the young thief replied. "Let's go guys." He called over to his fellow thieves, and the group of rascals disappeared onto the rooftops. With a nod of satisfaction, Firefly went the opposite direction.

"Okay, just two more." Firefly told herself as she ran across the Canterlot skyline. In all honesty, she was quite tired, and welcomed the idea of a nice bed to sleep in at the Apple Core, as dirty as it might be. Pretty soon she'd settle for another haystack to sleep in.

Firefly slowed down her pace as she approached a large gap in the rooftops. She'd arrived at Mane Street again, and numerous roof guards would be watching this route in particular. Luckily, the road below was so

packed with ponies even at this late hour that she would easily be able to blend in with the crowd. Thus, the busy street was hardly an inconvenience, maybe even a fortune. It was a simple matter of changing her route's height level, nothing more.

She calmly pulled her hood over her face to hide her identity, and dropped down inconspicuously from the heights of the shops lining Mane Street. She made her way calmly down the road, trying to drown out the noise of street vendors and shop callers. Although noisy, the walk down the normal street with no parkour, guards, or thieves to deal with was a nice break from the discord of Firefly's everyday life lately. In fact, Firefly found herself smiling. She was temporarily lost in the happiness of normality, and gained a certain spring to her step as she walked down the road. Soon enough, she stopped suppressing the cries of cheap wares and low prices, and embraced them as the soundtrack of an average pony's walk down the street. Her gaze moved upward, and her hood slid off her head onto her back, letting in a flood of lights; candles, torches, glowing unicorn horns, and almost the most brilliant, stars. The aroma of fresh vegetables and burning metal filled her nostrils as she inhaled. Dash found herself quite happy as well; the scene was hardly what she was used to, but something about the town reminded her of Ponyville on a market day. She felt like prancing down the street along with her ancestor, smelling the air, seeing the lights, feeling as if everything in the world was going normally.

At this point, Dash noticed she was actually doing these things. She was actively prancing down the Canterlot of the past and taking in its atmosphere. She didn't know how long she'd been in control of Firefly's body, but it felt right. Being there, hearing ancient ways of speaking and seeing out-dated machinery, it was as if Dash had always lived in the past. She felt strangely at home among the ponies of days that were long past and widely forgotten. Her mind and that of her ancestor synchronized to a new level; it was difficult to tell who really had control here. Dash found herself even having trouble differentiating between who was moving the body and who was taking a backseat, but frankly, it didn't matter much. Both ponies were enjoying the simplicity. The burden that was the fight for control had all but disappeared, and both Firefly and Dash couldn't feel better.

But of course, the greatly malevolent Murphy and his law would not allow this simple joy to last. Firefly froze up in a shock that jerked body

control away from Dash. No more than a few feet ahead of her was a pink unicorn with a striped white mane walking with a green and purple baby dragon on her back. Twilight Twinkle.

Before Firefly could even think of moving away from the pony, it was already too late. Twilight moved her gaze ahead of her and spotted the assassin, almost mirroring her expression of surprise. Firefly couldn't approach the mare, there was too much Twilight didn't, and couldn't, know. Trying to explain why she'd graciously accepted her invitation to stay and then disappear the next morning without even a nod of thanks would only lead to more issues. Firefly liked Twilight; she'd been a good friend and helped her in a time of need, but for the sake of preserving whatever good impressions she had left on the unicorn, she'd hoped to never see the Canterlot scholar ever again.

With a hasty quickness, Firefly pulled her hood over her face once more and started moving in the opposite direction. She tried to walk as fast as possible without drawing suspicion, but it was difficult.

"Wait!" she heard a voice call behind her. "Firefly, please wait!" She didn't need to turn around to tell who the voice came from, and she didn't dare. She only boosted her pace a bit to leave the area faster. "Firefly, please stop!" She couldn't hold out anymore, Firefly broke out into a full-fledged sprint. The complaints of pedestrians arose in all directions as Firefly pushed and shoved her way down the busy street.

"Watch it!"

"Why such a hurry?"

"What the- Hey, slow down!"

"He must be late...and she must be beautiful."

A crash broke out as Firefly knocked over a pony carrying a wooden box. He proceeded to curse and shake his fist at her, but Firefly was too preoccupied running, she could still hear a set of hooves chasing her and the Twilight's cries for her to halt.

"Firefly, I just want to talk!"

Ignoring her further, Firefly turned a corner, quite hazardously, and ran into a group of guards on patrol. They looked at her dumbfounded as she got up and dashed away as fast as hooves would carry.

Spotting an apple cart up ahead, Firefly leaped up and bounced onto the wooden transport, propelling herself up onto a wooden post, then a tile balcony, and then swinging on a potted plant around a corner and to the rooftops of Canterlot, where Twilight couldn't follow.

"Firefly! Please, wait!" she heard her yell from below. Still, she couldn't stand to wait. She knew the unicorn could not follow her here, onto the roofs of the city where only guards and thieves roamed, but she kept running regardless. Not from Twilight, but from herself, from the thought of abandoning such a good friend behind, from not being able to enjoy a leisurely walk in the evening, from having to hide, steal, and murder other ponies. She wasn't running to escape the unicorn behind her, she was running to escape the un-escapable.

She was running away from what she'd become.

Chapter 13

It was still evening in the city of Canterlot. Ponies were abundant in the streets, making their way home for the night, trying to find a place to buy dinner, or just taking a nightly walk to admire the sky. Firefly even thought she saw an astronomer as she darted along the rooftops, jumping, rolling, and climbing over the tops of houses and buildings.

She was still a bit saddened by her encounter with Twilight, but for the most part she wasn't dwelling on it. Dash herself was a bit troubled by the encounter herself, picturing in her mind the sadness of having to run away from her own friends without so much as a "goodbye", possibly never to see them again. The mere idea was depressing, and both pegasai fought to push the thought to the back of their minds for now.

Firefly dropped down from the roofs as she approached her destination, The Apple Core. It was probably better to enter the already highly suspicious thieves' guild from the front entrance. Unwanted attention was the last thing she needed at the moment. Right now all she needed was to walk along the roads as inconspicuously as possible.

As if to personally deny her hope for normality, a pair of hooves suddenly appeared from a back alley as Firefly passed by. The two appendages grabbed the mare and pulled her into the shadows, pushing her up against a wall. Her eyes adjusting to the dark shadows of the alleyway, she turned to see the hooves belonged to a thief pony; and earth pony no less.

"What the hay are-" Firefly began before being cut off by the thieves' hoof, now covering her mouth. Her moved his free hoof to make a "shh" motion with his mouth, then tried his best to press himself up against the wall like Firefly. With the idea of silence in mind, Firefly began hearing a mumble coming from up ahead. She had to really concentrate, but could make out roughly what was being said.

"...not even worth the time. Ya'd think we would've found the rats earlier with them advertising around like that."

"Yeah well, it wasn't really that obvious either, hay, could've fooled me."

"That's because ya'd take a drink over an arrest, ya bloody drunkard."

"Is that really such a bad thing?"

"...yea, I guess I would to." As the talking grew louder, Firefly saw the source of the voices reach them. Two city guards on patrol passed by the alley's exit and continued down the street without noticing the two outlaws, their talking now fading into silence as they moved further away.

Something was wrong. Not only did their conversation seem suspicious, but city guards generally ignored the back-lots of Canterlot, especially this far out. Why two guards would be on patrol here was out of Firefly's reach of explanation. She turned back to the thief pony who'd pulled her out of sight from the guards. He let out his previously held breath, heaving a sigh of relief as he did.

"What was that about?" Firefly asked.

"Thank Celestia they're gone. I think we may be the only two left in this area." He responded absentmindedly.

"What? What happened?" Firefly asked, now a bit worried.

"You weren't here huh? I don't know what happened, must've been a traitor among us or something, but somehow they found us!" he said, distress once again filling his eyes.

"What?" Firefly half-gasped.

"The guards found us out! Somehow they know the pub was a thieves' guild! They beat their way in, arrested anyone they could get their hooves on, and took them all away in a caged cart, including the guild master!"

"Cortland's been arrested?" Firefly inquired. The thief nodded.

"Aye." he said simply. "The ol' Apple Core's nearly choked with armored guards, and they're patrolling the area to catch any other stray thieves."

Firefly didn't know what to do. It seemed that justice had finally been served to the band of thieves residing in The Apple Core. Deep inside, she felt the law abiding citizen telling her she should be happy, that they got what they deserved. And yet, she couldn't feel anything but worry. Yes, they were thieves. Yes, they are guilty of their charges. And yes, on any day before this she would have snickered to herself about how effective karma is in repaying these who do wrong. But she couldn't just leave them be. She had to do something.

"...Surely ah can trust a member of the assassin brotherhood, right?"

'You know about the brotherhood?' Firefly asked.

'Well of course ah do.' He replied, lifting up his front right hoof and, to Firefly's surprise, exposing a branded assassin insignia. 'Ah'm a member.'

'Like I said,' piped the thief behind them. 'You're just like us, a child of the night.'"

That was it. She had to help them now. If not because they had helped her out, or because they'd been so kind, than above all else, these were her assassin brothers. She never fully understood the connection she was supposed to have with her fellow assassins, but she felt it now.

Applejack had been right; this was her family now. And Firefly was to be damned before she was going to let her family go again; not to the Templars, not to anypony.

"Where did the cart go, do you have any idea?" Firefly said to the thief with a now pressing urgency.

"Uh, toward the Merchant's district I believe, but you aren't going to try and fight the guards are you?" he replied.

"I have to go, now." Firefly took off down the alley, getting a running start before kicking the wall and making her accent.

"Are you crazy? There'll be tons of guards there! And civilians! There's no way you'll make it out!" The guard yelled behind her.

"Of course I will!" Firefly shouted back from the top of the building. "I am an assassin after all."

"Hang the bloody snakes, break their necks!"

"Kill the dirty thieves!"

"Let them have what they deserve!"

These were only some of the shouts of anger Firefly could hear from the crowd ahead of her. She recognized her location as the city square; the large expanse of flat tile floor that took up the space in front of the famous basilica. This had been the plaza where she'd first tried to kill Gilded Sword, and where Applejack had saved her. The place seemed to regularly attract misery, as the angry mob that took up most of the square was cheering and standing in front of a large wooden platform that was raised above the floor about 3 feet. On the platform were two guards, and what appeared to be a high ranking Templar official. Strung along the top of the platform's frame was a set of ropes that draped down to end in nooses. Held inside the gallows' hold were an indiscriminate group of criminals, chained and bound, the ropes fastened around their necks as they waited their demise. From this distance, none were totally recognizable, but Firefly could just make out one of the colts' bright orange mane and yellow coat. Cortland stood tall with his fellow thieves, about to be hanged for public view.

No time to hesitate. Firefly walked toward the crowd at a walking pace, but still moved with a little more urgency than most. Guards lined the outer edges of the plaza, and archers stood ready to fire all along the roofs. Wedged in the bustling crowd, Firefly would be invisible. That is, until she made her first move, but she knew from previous experience that the very moment she acted out of line the crowd would recede and isolate her from the rest, and every guard in view would be alerted to her position. It looked quite impossible, even ignoring the numerous guards surrounding the area, the two unicorns on the platform itself were heavily armored, and by the

strange circular markings on their helmets that surrounded their exposed horns, she guessed these guards must have been specialists in combat spells. Still, her tactics and strategies were only secondary in her mind; her focus was on saving her allies' lives. She continually pushed through the crowd, assertively pushing other ponies aside as she worked her way to the front.

The official at the front of the stage magically levitated a scroll out of his saddlebags and unfurled it in front of him. He cleared his throat before dictating the scroll as loudly as he possibly could.

"By decree of The Solar House of The Royal Equestrian Court in Canterlot; Cortland Amadeus Apple, Swift Marquis Skies, Roller Demetrius Stone, and Vance Archer DeLarossa are charged with the crimes of robbery, murder, evasion of arrest, and treason." Despite the emphasis he put on the last accusation, the official carried the formality out in a very dull tone, as if he was reciting a list of upcoming social events. "Therefore, these four listed are hereby sentenced to execution via hanging, to be carried out in public view for all to bear witness." The crowd's roars of agitation amplified at the listing of the crimes, and even more so at the dooming of their humiliation and death. Firefly tried her best to retain a somewhat calm composure as she fought her way through the group of aroused locals, but due to the finality of the official's tone she found herself all but sprinting her way towards the source of the booming voice.

"Ya no-good rotten mules, ya'll pay for this, ah swear it!" Cortland exploded from his bondage. "Just a buncha corrupt bastards, all of ya! We didn't even get a trial, ya'll can't prove nothing!" This outbreak only fanned the fire of the crowd's fury, as more and more voices cried out for the earth pony's killing. She couldn't hold back any longer, Firefly was running as fast as she could through the angry mob, shoving and throwing pedestrians to the floor as she desperately made her way forward. The guards at the head of the group began to take notice.

Rolling up the scroll, the official stored it away and moved to a wooden level on one side of the stage. His horn formed a sparkled glow as he telekinetically gripped the handle and prepared to drop the floor from under the four condemned, leaving their fates in the unforgiving hands of gravity.

"May Celestia have mercy on your darkened souls, I now say to thee, face the law!"

The tension rose as the four thieves braced for their untimely demise. The crowd watched intently to witness the criminals' punishment. The official turned his attention to flipping the lever and sending these four ponies to the great beyond. And all the while, a white figure sailed above them all. Like a low flying cloud bringing a slight rainstorm, or perhaps a pure white angel descending onto the four souls to be executed. Inexplicably the official turned and looked skyward to see this white apparition float down. However, the figure grew dark, and more shadowed. Now it seemed more like a menacing thundercloud, or a dreadful angel of death. It soon dawned upon the official that this almost ethereal force was directing its descent toward him, enveloping him in its mystery, swallowing him up. Where did it come from? The sky? The crowd? Was he imagining it? Was it even of this world? He would never know the answers to any of these questions.

As Firefly landed on the Templar's body, her hidden blade pierced his heart, severing his life as he prepared to take the lives of four others. The glow around his horn faded, as did the telekinetic glow around the wooden lever. With a single, fluid motion, Firefly unsheathed her sword and cut the noose of the four criminals, releasing them from their looming deaths. Cortland gasped for breath, his lungs taking time to realize they did indeed still function.

"What now?" He asked looking up at Firefly, his hooves still chained together. The assassin pegasus looked around. Sure enough, two menacingly crackling balls of energy were now formed at the tips of the two guard's horns, both aimed for the five other ponies on the platform. Elsewhere, guards drew long lengths of steel and charged for the central plaza. Up above, Crossbows clicked into a firing position almost simultaneously from all directions.

"Now...now..." Firefly muttered hopelessly. It seemed like it was all too late. Enemies on all sides, two extremely powerful attacks on the verge of reaching them from point blank, countless patrol groups now focusing on their location. There was surely no method of escape.

"...we disappear."

Both unicorns finished their incantations. The spheres of blazing fire propelled forward with blinding speed toward the five outlaws. At a single call to fire, a thousand arrows and crossbow bolts flew from the rooftops at once. The central point of Canterlot Square exploded into a deafening boom as a cloud of smoke enveloped the entire gallows.

Lagging behind the extremely fast-paced actions, the audience only now began to shriek and wail in confusion and terror. A number of mares in the crowd that were particularly weak of heart fainted to be carried by their accompanying stunned civilians. Slowly the smoke cleared, and the damage could be fully surveyed. To everyone's surprise, not a single pony could be seen on the wooden platform. As the now even more confused ponies searched their surrounding area, their gaze fell to the outer edges of the plaza, and found the two unicorn battlemages lying dead at either side. From the burn wounds and distance their corpses flew, it could be concluded that both had been hit by the others spell, and knocked across the square. The convicts and their hooded savior however, were nowhere to be found. Curiously enough though, the lever to activate the gallows was now thrown to the active position, and as such, the floor beneath where the four nooses hung previously was swung down, exposing a hole to the square below. Had any guards thought to search inside this opening, they'd have found that the wooden platform had been placed right above a sewer entrance on the ground, the cover of which now lay askew, as if somepony had entered it recently and re-placed it in a haste.

"Find them! Find where they went!" The shouts of angry guards rose from the streets below and up to the upper heights of Canterlot's cityscape. Chaos engulfed the street below; ponies screaming, yelling, and crying in one big symphony of disorder and confusion. A hoof reached up from above and grasped the edge of the roof, and then proceeded to pull the rest of its body up to join it. Firefly slowly made her way over to a flat section of roof that was next to a wall of the taller building next to it. She leaned her weight on the wall, resting her fatigue there, Four other ponies following her to the roof and then over to the wall. All four wiped their brows in near-unison, and for a long moment, the only sound they made was the panting of each trying to catch their breath.

Finally, Cortland mustered up enough strength to barely voice his ideas.

"What..." he said gasping to Firefly, "...what was...that?" Still a bit tired from running through the extensive Canterlot sewers, Firefly couldn't respond immediately. Instead, she reached around into a pouch at her waist and opened it, removing its contents. She held out two small spheres, each covered with a silvery coating and with a small pull-fuse hanging from their tops, making them look like some sort of metallic breed of cherries. Cortland seemed to recognize what they were instantly. "Smoke bombs?" he asked. Firefly only nodded in confirmation. She took a deeper breath and swallowed, her breathing pattern now, for the most part, normal.

"Gifts from a friend." she replied simply, putting Posey's little secrets back in their pouch. Cortland put on his usual smirk at this remark, and Firefly silently gave a sigh of relief; she was beginning to think she would not see him wear it again.

"Ah would very much like tah meet this friend'a yers one day." he said, then got up to look out onto the Canterlot skyline. Firefly joined him, both staring out at the city's lights and shapes. Another long moment passed, both ponies lost in the night-time cityscape that lay out before them.

"Beautiful..." Cortland said quietly.

"...what?" Firefly replied, blushing a bit.

"The city: It may be a hell-hole during the day, but at night, all the towers and spires, ah swear ah've never seen anything more...beautiful." He replied astonished.

"Oh." Firefly said simply. Half of her mind had thought the remark was directed at her. She returned her gaze to the city. She had to admit, there was something about Canterlot's spirals and gleaming towers that made the city look absolutely stunning in the low light. For all the trouble the city had caused her, Firefly had to appreciate that.

"Ah wanna thank ya Firefly. Ah don't know- actually, Ah do know what would'a happened if ya hadn't shown up when ya did." Cortland said, turning to the mare.

"It was nothing, after all, you're my assassin brother, we're in this together, right?" Firefly said casually.

"Ah still can't thank you enough. Ya've done us a lotta good since ya got here, and ah appreciate that, ah mean it, from the bottom of mah heart." Cortland was obviously very grateful, and Firefly was happy to help. But she still felt the need to ask...

"Cortland, I've always kind of wondered, why be a thief?" She began. "I mean, you're an honorable stallion, you're nice and compassionate and honest enough, why would you steal?" Cortland didn't take any offense to the question, and even began to laugh a little.

"Firefly, there's a concept we always try tah establish before anypony joins the thieves guild." Cortland replied. "We may be thieves, but we're not bandits. Bandits are evil ponies who think tha easiest way tah get something is tah take it from somepony else. They don't care how hard that pony worked for it, they don't care what it'll do tah them, they just take it and run. And that's not what we do." He severed his gaze from the city scape and looked back at his comrades. "We only take what we need, nothin more, and always take it from somepony who don't deserve it. There's a lotta rich ponies in Canterlot, but there's a lotta poor ones too. Some of these wealthy ponies help the less fortunate, they try tah donate money for food or shelter, but sadly, that's not the case with most." His face twisted into a frown momentarily. "Greed is an issue that plagues this city; most of these rich an high-class families don't do squat with it: They walk around, seein' little fillies and colts dyin' of hunger in the pourin' rain, an just point their snouts higher an strut the other way. It's enough tah make me sick just talkin' about it."

At this point, he was visibly shaking with rage; however, he calmed himself and regained his normal expression. "We thieves just force tha degenerates to do what they should'a been doin' all along. We steal from tha rich only tah aid the poor. When we take money or valuables from Templar bureaucrats, we spend every last bit on helpin' out a family who's sufferin' in the back streets, or begging in the alleyways. We're just lookin'

out for those who need it." He stood proudly on the edge of the roof, as if the city before him was his domain, his territory to protect and sustain. His city.

"Wow..." was all Firefly could respond with, "That's just...amazing. I never thought you guys were that... moral." She felt ashamed she ever doubted their intentions. The ponies who attacked her in the forest were nothing like these ponies. The allies she had thought so badly of were not what they appeared to be on the surface. They weren't thieves, they were heroes.

"Heh, well. Honesty runs in the family." Cortland said before turning to his fellow thieves. "But enough'a that, you filled yer end of tha bargain, and then some. Now it's time for me tah fill my end." He nodded to one of his subordinates, and the pegasus nodded back, unfurling his wings and approaching Firefly. "Go easy on 'er Swift; she's probably not used tah flyin'." Firefly had almost forgotten about her mission after so long. It was time for her to finally take her revenge, and after hearing Cortland's story, she wished for the corrupt politician to pay now more than ever. As the pegasus Firefly remembered from the hanging as Swift Skies grabbed hold of her, Cortland took out a small green tube. It was decorated with an intricate pattern, and had a string tied to one end.

"What's that?" Firefly asked curiously.

"A gift from a friend." Cortland replied with a sly look. He pointed the tube skyward and pulled on the string.

A loud "pop" rang out, hurting Firefly's ears from its close range and un-expectance. A small ball of burning material shot up instantly, and after a few moments, a brilliant explosion spawned multiple globes of green light that floated slowly downward. All along the horizon of the city, more pops were heard, as multiple other pyro technics exploded in the sky and bathed the city in a mystical green glow. The colorful bursts were visible for miles, and lingered in the air for about a minute before sluggishly fading away. This was no doubt the signal that would alert thieves all around the city to distract the guards. Even now, Firefly could almost hear faint sounds of steel clashing and guards shouting.

"Good luck assassin, ya gonna need it." Cortland said confidently.

"Don't worry, I'll get this done. For the brotherhood." Firefly responded.

"Oh please, do ya really expect me tah believe yer doin this on Master's orders?" Cortland said. Firefly almost yelped from the surprise of being exposed.

"Wha...what are you talking-"

"Now ah may be young, but ah wasn't born yesterday. I've been in this business long enough to know ol' Steelwing would never send a rookie on a high-level assassination mission for her fist run." Cortland said laughing. He placed his hoof on Firefly's shoulder and gave a more compassionate face. "Look, ah don't know why yer doin' this, but ah trust ya have yer reasons, and ah'm not gonna hold ya back. Make sure ya give 'em an extra kick in the flank for me, ya hear?" Firefly was frankly stunned. How long had he known? Did he ever believe her story? Regardless, she eventually returned his smirk and nodded.

"I'll make sure of it." she assured. Cortland returned her nod.

"Give 'em hell pardner." With that, Swift began to beat his wings up and down repeatedly. The extra weight caused the pair to have a very slow acceleration, but eventually, they took the skies high above. With a large flap, the pegasai caught a gust of wind and soared away, their path headed for the all but impenetrable Gold family's stronghold. Tonight, the fortress would finally be infiltrated.

Chapter 14

The air was rushing around the two as Firefly and Swift soared over the city of Canterlot. The feeling was invigorating, and Firefly was loving every second of it. She'd forgotten the feeling of flight, the wind in her face, the expansive land below her, the minuscule ponies walking below her. Out of sheer instinct, she spread her wings wide, if only to feel like she could fly. She wished Swift would live up to his name and fly a bit faster, as her cutie mark's thirst for speed soon recognized flight once again, and desired more. Of course, it was doubtful that Swift would actually be able to go much faster, given the extra weight he was carrying, but the sensation of soaring over the city was bittersweet none the less; she was loving every second, but she realized it would soon end.

Sure enough, the Gold stronghold soon came into view above the surrounding spires and towers of the inferior buildings beside it. Notably less protection patrolled it now, only a few earth guards and virtually no pegasai.

"You ready?" Swift yelled over the sound of rushing wind.

"...Yeah!" Firefly shouted back. She didn't want the flight to end just yet, but she needed to keep her priorities straight. The mission was her focus, it had to be.

Swift made one last dive toward the building and headed for its center. The two were descending at a monstrous speed, simultaneously satisfying Firefly's longing for speed and almost giving her a heart attack. The winged thief shouted something over the wind that Firefly could only assume was "Good luck" and violently swung his trajectory upward into the sky, releasing the assassin and leaving her in a perfectly vertical free-fall. Extending her own wings, Firefly adjusted her angle of descent to the right, and entered enemy territory.

Below, a group of unicorn guards were patrolling the perimeter of the Gold Family's residence. None of the four stallions looked particularly

interested in their duty, especially the one in the very back, who looked as if he was about to fall asleep mid-trot.

"Dear Celestia...what time is it?" He asked sleepily.

"Time fer you tah shut yer trap and stop whinin' like a little filly!" The patrol group's head snapped back at him. The sleepy guard proceeded to mumble something under his breath, but for the most part stayed quiet as he was demanded. Still, his undeniable fatigue caused him to lag behind the group by some distance.

A sudden noise caught his attention. The hay bale behind him shuddered as if something had moved inside it. Of course, that was impossible; They would have seen anypony sneaking around on their patrol. The only way somepony could have sneaked into the hay bale would be if they fell from the sky or something. Still, his paranoia got the better of him.

"Wait, I think...." The guard called out to his patrol group, but it was obvious they had no patience for him. He could only see their shadows moving away around the next corner. He paused, unsure what to do, before turning around and approaching the hay bale. He carefully leaned into it, looking through the stack to see if anything was visible inside.

A hoof shot out and grabbed the guard by his neck. A second hoof covered his mouth and pulled the surprised unicorn into the haystack. There was small sound like metal clicking into place, and then silence.

Firefly cautiously peeked her head above the surface of the haystack, scanning the surrounding environment for trouble. When she saw the coast was clear, she slowly walked out of the stack of hay, shaking of pieces of dead plant material as she did. It would be a while before anypony noticed the guard's body, but she still needed to hurry before another patrol group found her.

She looked around. The inside of the stronghold's walls were surprisingly busy. Small buildings outlined the corners, most likely servant homes and storage rooms, and a few windows actually protruded from the sides of the wall. These would make good holds to climb on, and the homes would provide platforms. Most importantly however, were the

wooden posts extending to various parts of the complex. Firefly eyed them all gleefully, they would make maneuvering through the compound very easy, especially one in particular that extended from the far left corner all the way to the central tower itself.

She took no more time for scouting, now was the time for action, and quick action at that. Firefly took off on a running start and used the momentum to propel herself up the wall of one of the servant homes before grabbing onto its higher sections. She carefully but steadily took hold of the wall and began to climb. Cracks, dents, misplaced bricks, anything Firefly could get a hold of she gripped and pulled herself up with. Climbing seemingly flat surfaces was nothing new.

Not a moment after she lifted herself up to the roof, the second patrol group came trotting slowly around the corner. The four unicorn stallions did not appear to suspect anything amiss. Firefly had officially done what was apparently impossible; she was now hidden inside the Gold family's stronghold. The vengeance she desired so much would soon be hers. What would happen? Would the wretch regret his choices? Would he try to justify them? Would he even remember who she was? The internal questions only served to fuel her will to succeed. She turned to the wall beside her and resumed her ascent.

The guard swung his heavy sword down on the pegasus behind her back. Before the weapon could impact however, she ducked to the side and avoided any injury. Whether the evasion was due to the assassin's honed skills, her acute perception, or just dumb luck, she managed to spin behind the brute as he strained to lift his weapon and slashed at his back hooves, piercing him through the chest as he fell to the ground afterwards.

A stunned silence followed the encounter, as if Firefly expected another guard to attack her. Once it became clear that one would not, she re-gained her composure and sheathed her sword. The roof of the building, like the surrounding ground, was not heavily patrolled. The three guards Firefly just dispatched seemed to be the only ones in sight. Resistance to her presence had been dealt with, and it seemed as though she could finally get inside the building.

As she turned to leave, a thought struck her. She returned to the corpses and began patting them down. Sure enough, she soon found a total of about 35 bits inside the deceased guards' coin purses. Thinking of

Cortland and his thieves, she pocketed the money and decided to put it toward good use. She then resumed her exit and walked away. All that was left now was to find a way in.

Alas, her salvation came in the glowing form of an open window. Practically begging to be entered, Firefly leaped through the portal without a second thought, and soon found herself in the rafters above a stunning indoor garden. Mystical torches burned all around the room, glowing a bright white light that didn't seem to ignite the surrounding foliage despite its fiery appearance. Colorful flowers and blossoms bloomed in every direction, and a few birds and butterflies had seemed to make the artificial Eden their home. Though the cold wind outside suggested late fall, the warmth and splendor of the garden gave Firefly the impression that it was surely spring time. Her thoughts went back to Posey; the earth pony would have loved this room, despite its Templar owners.

A noise clattered at one side of the room. Firefly instinctively hid, before realizing that the shadows of the ceiling and her high position were more than enough camouflage to mask her presence. The door swung open, and walking into the room was none other than Gilded Sword, along with his brother Golden Shield and two lance wielding guards. Even in the safety of his home, the unicorn was still too hard to reach. Firefly had to restrain herself from pouncing on the noble from her perch, but managed to keep her ambiguity intact.

The two bureaucrats began slowly walking down the garden path, carrying on a previous argument as they did.

"I swear brother, at times it seems like you aren't thinking at all." Gilded Sword spewed with an aristocratic and sarcastic tone. "You are an excellent strategist, how can you not see the tactical potential in Canterlot?"

"This is about more than mere strategy brother, this is about morals!" Golden Shield replied, his tone a more aged and stressed accentus.

"Pfft, morals." Sword replied with a scoff. "What you speak of is not morals brother, but foalishness! The real moral thing to do would be to help ensure a brilliant future for ponykind! Is that not a noble goal, to help create a better future?"

"But this is not the way to do it!" Shield said back. "I want nothing more than that of which you speak Sword, but there are other ways of attaining this goal. You speak of treachery and blasphemy!"

The statement impacted Firefly. Half of her was burning in rage at the affirmation of her suspicions. Gilded Sword and the other Flames of the Sun wanted to control the government themselves, and rule how they saw fit. However, part of Firefly was also somewhat shocked and surprised. Gilded Sword was already a huge political figure, and could graft his political power without the slightest consequence, and yet he still aspired for control? What more could he do? How much more authority could he attain? What did he actually plan on achieving to gain complete control of Canterlot?

Gilded Sword stopped walking. He abandoned his sarcasm; the tactic obviously did not persuade his brother. "Please brother, you have to find a way to see the light in our efforts! We can change things for the better, all we need to do is try! Why, we just got a report this morning that suggests we may be close to locating The Globe of Elation in Trottingham!"

"No, I'm sorry Sword, but I can't go on living like this." Shield stated firmly. "I have to tell the public, this can't be the way things change, it will only turn bad for us later on." He turned away and trotted to the room's exit with a quicker walking pace.

"Brother please!" Sword cried out behind him, but it was too late. The doors slammed shut behind the Templar strategist. His disheartened brother let out a sigh of despair. He glanced shortly at the beautiful flora that surrounded him, attempting to lighten his mood presumably, but failing in doing so. "I can't believe it's come to this. My own brother abandons me." he said to himself. Exhaling once more, he continued down the path toward the door.

Firefly followed him along the rafters, still trying to process all that had just been said. It was now obvious that Gilded Sword wanted power, but it seemed that it wasn't limited to political influence. Whatever the wealthy aristocrat was aiming to do, it was enough to lose the affinity of his best tactician and own family. What could be so immoral about his plot, and how

could it be so easily justified by attempting to sooth the burdens of future generations? Could something that sounded so beneficial be so corrupt?

And then, there was a particular detail that stuck out to Firefly; the supposed "Globe of Elation". Whatever it was, it was instrumental to the Templar's plot. Perhaps, after this business was over, Firefly would go to Trottingham. Something this important had to be powerful, and therefore dangerous in the wrong hands. She couldn't allow someone like Gilded Sword to obtain it, no matter what.

It could have been a few minutes, maybe an hour or two, but for Firefly, it felt as though she had been stalking her target from the shadows of the ceiling for ages. The two lance holding guards, who Firefly mentally dubbed "Seekers" due to their habit of stabbing lances into hay bales and flower piles in search of stowaways, had shadowed the politician where ever he went in the castle. She had waited through task, after task, after mediocre task of Sword's duties, just waiting for an opportunity to strike unnoticed. Even worse, through the entire timespan of observing the Templar write documents, talk to officials, order servants, and other such things, not one thing was revealed to her that could possibly prove useful. Needless to say, though Firefly's fiery thirst for retribution had not burnt out completely, the flame had definitely weakened a bit.

Currently, she was watching the bureaucrat enter the Gold family's dining area. The long table, despite seating dozens, was totally empty. If she had to guess, Firefly would have predicted that Gilded Sword and his brother would be dinning alone.

"That should be enough for today, you are both dismissed." All at once, the ears of both Seeker guards and Firefly perked up to attention. Hiding smiles of relief, the two guards calmly made the way to of the room, leaving the unicorn completely alone. At last, it seemed that Firefly's long awaited punishment would be given. Her late parents would finally be given peace.

The aristocrat took a seat at the table's head. Already laid out on the surface was a neat arrangement of plates and cups, a layout for two. The main course was some sort of marinated grass topped with an indiscriminate dressing and with a side of fresh daisies. The smell wafted up from the display, reminding Firefly just how hungry she was. The meal

would provide a perfect distraction, as long as she could strike before Golden Shield arrived, she could-

"I'm sorry that it came to this..." The unicorn suddenly said aloud.

Firefly could swear her blood froze with fear at that moment. No one else was in the room but her, who could the Templar be addressing? Surely he wasn't aware of her, was he?

"I desperately wish I could have convinced you. Maybe if I had tried harder, maybe, but it's too late now." Gilded Sword reached into a pocket on his red coat and pulled out a tiny green vial. He turned it over, looking at it from every angle, as if the pony he was conversing with was within the vial's contents. "I simply cannot allow you to reveal everything we've worked for; I must do this...for the good of all ponykind."

Firefly's mouth fell open as she witnessed the aristocrat open the small vessel and pour a clear liquid into his drinking cup. He lifted the glass, made a melancholy expression, and switched it with the glass of the dinning set up adjacent to his.

Once again, anger welled up inside Firefly, giving her the urgent desire to distribute punishment. If she understood what she was seeing correctly, the corrupt politician had just poisoned his own brothers drink. He was committing murder for personal gain once again, and his own family none the less! All the worse, from how empty she had seen the Gold residence, the victim was possibly his only family left that was still alive. Of all the ponies she'd met in her short experience in being an assassin, this was the most despicable stallion she'd ever seen, and this crime made it all the more difficult to stop herself from descending onto him from above and giving him the retribution her deserved.

The doors of the dining hall opened, and as if called by his own death, Golden Shield entered the room. He shut the doors behind him, once again isolating the room, now to him and his brother. Sitting down at the table and remaining silent, he closed his eyes and gave a short prayer to the meal, then began eating. All the while, Gilded Sword stared at his brother, his stoic face betraying his previous actions.

"Have you re-considered brother?" He finally asked. Shield was mid-chew and did not answer immediately, but soon enough swallowed and responded.

"It's something I must do. I'm sorry, I realize how convinced you are in your actions and what you see as their beneficial results, but this is just not right Sword. We can't deceive so many people at once, even if it does benefit them." He reached for his cup and lifted it to his face. "Tommorow I will call a meeting of the Solar and Lunar Courts. I will explain what we've been doing, and what we expected to occur. I trust our peers will forgive us when we reveal our motives."

Gilded Sword took a large breath. It seemed he had given up on persuading his brother, and decided to allow his fate to pass.

"Well then." Gilded Sword said, lifting his own glass in toast. "I wish only the best for you, for both of us." The two drank from their glasses in unison.

Firefly was leaning over the edge now. Her rage was uncontrollable, almost feral now. She didn't dare reveal herself now, but she could not calmly watch this abominable injustice pass before her. Her self restraint was at its peak now, all she wanted to do was drop down onto the table and...

A sudden shift in balance caught Firefly off guard. Caught up in the emotion of her internal tirade, she'd leaned too far over the edge of the rafter, and found the muscles in her forelegs were no longer able to sustain her weight in such a skewed position. With no surface to land on, she found herself falling off the rafter and onto the floor below, making a rather loud crash.

She wearily got up off of the floor, rubbing her head. The impact had not been very comfortable, but luckily she had no major injuries. The far more pressing concern was the two unicorn nobles that were now staring at her as if she'd just fallen from the sky and through their ceiling, which for all they knew, she might have. An awkward pause followed for a moment, filled only by the silence of the three ponies staring at each other in shock. It was as if father time himself had stopped moving, for fear of breaking the silence with his footsteps.

Finally, Firefly found her voice, and her conscience returned to her with it's pleas for justice

"You!" she said, pointing an eccentric hoof at Golden Shield. "You're in danger! This *bastardo* poisoned that drink!"

Shield still seemed lost in confusion. His eyes quickly darted to his brother, then to his cup, and back to the peculiar pegasus in front of him. At first, his face was one of disbelief, like he though the unexpected visitor to be insane. However, as if on a verbal cue, his face dropped in realization as a tinge of pain flashed in his eyes. The poison had begun taking its effect, he could feel it strongly now. He directed his expression of absolute dread toward his brother, looking afraid to be near the unicorn.

"You...didn't...but you did! How...why...." he erupted into a violent fit of coughing, his body trying its hardest to expel the liquid saboteur.

"I...had to brother. I cannot allow everything we've done to be ruined by anypony, even you." His face still hid any traces of compassion or pity he might have had, but deep inside, Firefly could sense a glimmer of guilt.

Golden Shield's coughs grew louder, more scratchy. He spit, his saliva staining the floor bright crimson with blood. His fearful eyes moved all across the room, but eventually focused in the Firefly's direction.

"You...Assassin! You m-must...the Globe...fi-find...The pieces...." His voice shuddered, struggling to hold together. Finally his strength failed him, and he collapsed on the floor, blood sputtering from his mouth as his body convulsed in pain.

The dying pony's gaze was painful even to receive, but Firefly took the words to heart none the less. Still, the scene was horrible, Firefly couldn't stand it. For a moment, her consciousness almost seemed to give up the body to Rainbow Dash, but her mind was none the more willing to be near the frightening display.

"Guards! Guards! An assassin has killed my brother!" Firefly recognized the shouts immediately, and to her further surprise, she found

that The dinning hall's doors now swung open, and the steady beat of running hooves could be heard in the hallway. The Templar had escaped.

"...Eden...."With a last, pitiful breath, Golden Shield finally passed from the mortal world. He lay on the floor, the front of his coat drenched red. Firefly couldn't leave him like this, the unicorn had begun to see the light and turn away from his evil, only to be stabbed in the back by his own kin. The circumstance was depressing just to think of. Firefly quickly made her way over to the pony, laid his body in a more dignified position, and gently pulled his eyelids closed, making his eternal rest seem a bit more comfortable.

"Requiescat in pace." she whispered.

Not a moment left to loose, with the sound of metal clanging now audible and nearing the dining hall, she pulled up her hood and made a swift sprint for the window.

Firefly was backed into a corner, three guards now focused on her position. The one in the center, a particularly angry looking Seeker, seems poised to skewer her through the front at any second.

The assassin's creed was held sacred among the brotherhood, and it was now especially that Firefly realized just how important "hiding in the dark to serve the light" was. As soon as the call went out that an assassin had infiltrated the Gold stronghold and killed Golden Shield, nearly every guard within a mile's radius pooled back to their normal positions, even exceeding the normal amount of guards present at the Gold residence. Firefly had used all her medicines, smoke bombs, and other assassin tricks to escape the Templar headquarters, and still found herself deeply wounded and surrounded by enemies.

Still, she would not die so easily. As the Seeker thrust his weapon forward, Dash felt the same feeling of blind action she'd experienced at her cloud home back in Ponyville now overtake Firefly, filling her with energy, sharpening her senses, and accelerating her mind to process battle at sonic-rainboom speeds. Firefly expertly deflected the lance, using the edge of her hidden blade to circle the point away from her body as it approached her. Not only that, but she managed to retract the blade and let part of the lance fall into her own hoof, pulling the weapon away from it's owner and using it to trip all three guards in front of her. She leapt over the three,

kicking of the back of another guard and knocking him to the floor. With the path ahead of her clear, she made her escape.

A sword flew in her direction, but she battered it with the front of her brace and executed it's wielder. More swords, axes, maces, all sorts of weaponry came in Firefly's direction. It was hard to even see who was attacking at times, how many there were, or where they came from, but none of that even mattered. The instincts that drove both Rainbow Dash and her ancestor ignited, and she quickly, efficiently, and expertly subdued anything that came her way. Her movements were unnatural, alien, but also very graceful. It was like a strange dance, the way she would bring her hoof up to somepony's chin, then spin around to block the sword of the guard behind her. It was like nothing Dash had ever seen before.

Currently, Dash watched as Firefly jumped onto a lone guard. The momentum pushed him to the stone floor, and Firefly to sit on his chest. She reared her hoof back and extended her blade, reading the kill. Just as she did, a voice arose over the sound of battle.

"Hey! Firefly!"

She turned her head, her hoof still ready to strike, and saw a yellow earth pony standing on the outer wall above her.

"Cortland!" she exclaimed. Completely forgetting the guard in front of her (whom had been knocked unconscious by the fall anyway), she turned and ran eagerly to the wall's base to greet her friend.

"What are you doing here?" she called to him from below.

"Well, ah got tah thinkin; after all Miss Firefly did for us 'dirty thieves', it wouldn't be very nice of us tah just drop her into the fryin' pan and let 'er claw her own way out, so once we made sure you were in, ah rallied up somma the boys and threw together another little...diversion tah help you get out easier!" He directed his sights toward the front gate, and by following his line of vision Firefly could see her short-notice rescue party.

Sure enough, a bit more than just "somma the boys" were charging a full frontal assault on the stronghold's front entrance. The scattered collection of street riffraff and alley rats were attacking the well armored

and well equipped guards with whatever weapons they could gather, and faring quite well to Firefly's surprise. The poverty-class militia made up for their lack of protection and arsenal with superior aspects of speed and agility, avoiding more attacks than they actually dealt. Still, while the fatalities they were achieving were minimal, the battle provided a perfect gateway for Firefly's departure.

"Come on!" Cortland yelled playfully. "Race you to The Apple Core!" With that, he took off. Firefly followed not far behind, maneuvering around swinging steel and clashing hoofs. The world around her was convulsing with battle, but for a brief moment, running alongside the earth pony in playful sport, Firefly felt her old life again. However, it wasn't in sad remembrance like before, but a strange feeling of excitement as the simple joys of her past fit into the chaotic environment of her present. What had been done was over, there was nothing she could do about it. She was an assassin now, so she might as well enjoy it.

The silhouettes of two ponies sat alone on the roof of the infamous Apple Core tavern. After all of the night's excitement, it seemed that both Cortland and Firefly felt it best to get lost in the beauty of Canterlot once again. It was a much different scene now, the Gold family residence was still loud with the sounds of continued battle, and quite a few fires had started in the confusion, but still, the disorderly scene held a sort of strange, disfigured beauty that both ponies found relaxing.

"...I failed." Firefly said softly. It had been the first words spoken since their encounter at the stronghold. Cortland didn't respond, or seem to react at all even. He just kept smiling, maybe even a bit wider than before.

"Yeah, ah figured." he said finally. It was a simple response, and sounded very much inappropriate, but for some reason the stallion's charm made it seem perfectly normal.

"I didn't manage to kill Gilded Sword, I came all this way to get revenge, and I couldn't do it," Firefly reconfirmed. "But you know what?..." she paused, as if expecting a response. "It doesn't matter to me anymore. After all this time, I think I've finally realized what being an Assassin means. It's not about getting revenge, or what you want, it's about a different kind of justice. It's about helping the little guy, it's about showing compassion when nopony else does. It's about making sure that everypony, even the

lowest of the low, get what they deserve, and that nopony gets taken advantage of. "

"Work in the dark to serve the light." Cortland quoted. "So, do yah still need tah go out an make Gilded Sword pay then?" Cortland asked, turning away from the cityscape to look Firefly in the eyes.

"No." she responded simply.

"Well shoot, ah guess ya learned somethin' after all!" Cortland's mouth didn't move. The accent was familiar, but it was not his voice that said it. Firefly turned around to see a third figure on the roof along with them. She was standing tall, with a proud look on her face.

"Applejack!" Firefly said, shocked at her presence. "What are you...." She trailed off, aware of a growing snicker coming from the stallion beside her.

"Ah'm sorry, this is just too perfect." he chuckled.

"Do ya remember the story ah told yah back in Lunagrad Firefly?" Applejack said, finding a seat on the roof's edge beside the two others. "'bout how ah was in the same place as you, family murdered and the killer got away. Ah can tell yah, ain't nothing more ah wanted than tah give that sonuva-mule a good beatdown, but you know what?"

"You didn't get to." Firefly finished.

"And?" Applejack hinted.

"And...it was okay. Because you had a new family now." The uncanny resemblance to their situations now became clear. Applejack nodded in satisfaction.

"That's right. Ah wasn't lyin' when ah said you're family now, and families don't run on hatred and grudges. Ah sent ya here in hopes ya would figure that out, and by the looks of it, yah did." It all became clear now, the reason Applejack switched missions, the reason Cortland didn't believe her story, and the reason he helped her out anyway. Applejack had set up the entire trip to Canterlot in hopes Firefly would find out what her

creed meant. Like the thief she was, she had deceived, cheated, and taken advantage of Firefly to get what she wanted, and Firefly couldn't be more grateful.

She wrapped her hoof around Applejack and pulled the orange earth pony in closer.

"Thanks Applejack." Firefly said, tightening her embrace. Sure enough, the thief soon returned the hug, feelings of mutual gratitude and trust now flowing through their hooves and into each other.

"Aww shucks, ain't this a tear jerker." Cortland said jokingly. Applejack gave him a condescending look and reached over to him as well.

"You get in here cuz." she said, dragging him into the group hug. Despite a brief moment of resistance, Cortland did not seem too off put by the hug either and soon shared the gesture with the two mares.

After a short amount more of affection, the three ponies unanimously decided to separate, and discuss other matters.

"Welp," Applejack began. "Ah reckon we should probably get back tah Lunagrad. Need tah report tah Steelwing and all that, maybe he won't-"

"No." Firefly interrupted. Applejack choked on the words she was prepared to say next.

"What was that sugarcube?"

"I can't go back to Lunagrad, not yet." Firefly's expression was grim. "There's something else I discovered in there." Applejack seemed sincerely intrested, and leaned in closer, as did Cortland to a lesser extent. "The Templars are planning something...something big. I don't know what it is, but I do know I have to go to Trottingham and find something called 'The Globe of Elation'" Both of the Apple family thieves seemed puzzled greatly by the vague importance the pegasus placed on the even more vague treasure.

"Well, why do yah suppose it's so important?" Cortland said curiously.

"I have no clue, but I just...feel that it's really special." For no particular reason, Firefly turned her gaze skyward, once again looking above to the moon for comfort. It almost seemed to Dash that Firefly knew Luna was watching, even if indirectly and from the future. This particular night was perfect for star gazing; it was mostly cloudless and the moon was full and shining bright, its surface surprisingly pristine.

"I have a bad feeling about this." Firefly said quietly.