



Dungeons, Dragons, and a Little Friendship

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Prologue

Andur swung his morningstar with all the might that remained within him. Whipping through the air the weapon screamed, as it sank with a squash into the exposed heart of the grand monstrosity. It let out one last terrifying wail as it crashed against the ground, shaking the earth beneath Andur's feet.

Using both hands, he tore the weapon from the beast's flesh, shaking off the viscera that was still stuck to it. It was then that he remembered his friend, quickly looking about the destroyed city square. Amidst the destruction and pot holed roads he saw a small patch of cobblestone that was unbroken amidst the chaos, within lay an unconscious man robed in finery that was blue.

"CARTANIS!" Andur shouted as he sprinted to his broken ally.

Andur quickly righted the wizard so that he could see his face. Checking the pulse of Cartanis, Andur could tell that his friend was still alive; barely. Removing the symbol of his clergy he grasped it firmly in his hands, and spoke "Pelor, in your wisdom we are humbled, with your mercy we are grateful. Relieve the suffering of this just soul; remove the damage that evil has done."

Light broke through the smoke and clouds of the destruction and bathed the wizard in its rays. Cartanis' eyes twitched and his nose furrowed as he began to speak.

"Breathing," Cartanis drew a breath, "Check."

"Horrifying scars from earlier in life," Cartanis ran a hand across his pale face and sighed, "Check."

"Hat," Cartanis waved a hand over the top of his black hair, to find nothing there. He quickly sat up eyes still shut, then shouted, "HAT! HEEL!" a few feet behind the wizard a rather dashing blue top hat sprang from the rubble and carefully hovered through the air to rest at the top of the wizard's head. Immediately upon landing on the wizard's head a single gleaming monocle

descended from its side and rested in front of the man's right eye. "Last but not least," Cartanis began turning towards Andur

"Eyesight," Cartanis opened his eyes, "Let's see, green eyes on a human male of the hill-folk. Who sports one of the best full beard and mustache combo's I have seen in my life with a full head of tasteful brown hair. All on the face of a man who can't be over thirty-two."

"Glad to see you're going to stick around a little longer." Andur said.

"Good to hear you still have that inconceivable accent," Cartanis looked around the destroyed city square. "Where is the elf?"

"Lost sight of him after he used the siege ballista to peg that thing," He gestured towards the dead creature, "to the ground. He's still around though; he was taking pot shots at it while I was closing my distance to it." He then looked back towards Cartanis, "You know you didn't have to try and take that attack from the creature head on right?"

Cartanis scoffed "Like you would have been able to dodge a shot from that close, someone had to distract it and I had prepared an arcane barrier for just such an occasion today." As he got to his feet, he added. "Well I am sure the great Te'denithas will show himself once he's certain the danger has lifted. Now let's see to our old friend, Lord Ulanon."

Both of the warriors walked across the rubble surrounding a destroyed fortification of a barracks wall. Inside they saw the carnage that they had dealt upon the tiefling lord's horde, before being forced outside by his "pet" as he called it. Slouched against a wall was a bleeding Lord Ulanon, "I guess I should be used to seeing the impossible today." He took a deep pained breath, "First a ragtag army of lesser races beats my armies at the forefront of my oldest conquest in this new land. Then they manage to push us back into the fortress and send in you five with a teleportation spell. Holding out against what was left and managing to take me down before reinforcements could be called in." A smile ran across his face, "But I think I am going to have the last laugh here."

Air began to pour in from the outside through the hole in the wall. Andur rushed to the top of the rubble pile and saw the body of the pet glowing intensely as air rushed past his face. "What is the meaning of this!" he shouted back at Ulanon

"That thing was made out more unstable stuff than I care to list, some dead god here, a few innocent souls there. But let us just say that you just ignited a bomb that is going to take out a fifteen square mile area. Maybe your armies will make it out of here in time, but you won't." An evil smile crept upon the tiefling's face, "and without a competent leader, the rest shall fall! I am but a lordling in comparison to whom I bare as a messenger."

Cartanis walked upon the rubble pile and over to the outside, examining the growing sphere of intense space distorting force around the pet. He took a book from his waist belt and began writing within *Warning: To all officers in the army. The enemy has engaged a last ditch effort to end us all before we can escape. An area of twenty square miles must be cleared in order to avoid the danger. Don't have anyone wait for us, the Dungeon Masters are not making it out of this one, Stop.*

As he ceased his writing the words disappeared into the paper of the book and shortly thereafter a reply emerged, *Order's received, all forces disengaging from combat. Hope to see you all in the heavens once this is over, Stop.*

Cartanis wrote one more message. *To all trusted officials of sufficient rank, this was as we suspected not the entirety of the Tiefling Theocracy. Lord Ulanon revealed to us that there is apparently an even greater force on its way from their home after this force fails to report once the battle concludes. Good luck, Stop.* Cartanis then shut the book, not wanting to deal with doubters or questions at the moment, "By its rate of growth I say we got a few minutes before it collapses upon its own energy buildup and novas." He said aloud to Andur.

At that moment he noticed the elf that was standing beside him, "Any chance you can make another teleportation spell before this thing messes over on us?"

"That thing took way too long the first time. I... We don't have the time or resources to do it again."

Andur walked down from the top of the pile. "As long as Leria and Balarash stopped Dra'nahb from escaping, I'll die happy."

"Oh you would of liked it if they were able to stop me wouldn't you?" Said a raspy voice that rounded the corner of the barracks. It came from a man

whose face was half covered with skin, old milky eye in one socket as to contrast the bones that openly show upon the other half. In a condescending tone, "It's just too baddie waddie that I had a deal in place just in case that fool decided to unleash that ticking time bomb on you lot."

Andur casually looked at Dra'nahb, the lich who had been at fault for most of this. The rune etched weave through his robes that were used to keep his dusty body from falling apart, the few tenuous runeweave laces that also glowed with a deep green hue against the bones in his face. Andur noticed that the Lich's phylactery was missing from the socket in his empty eye cavity. "Don't be so ecstatic, I know you can't do much without it on your person."

"Oh sure I can't, but that just means I get to spend a few months somewhere in a nice safe place to grow back again, as you all are dust in the wind. Considering if this thing will even leave dusty remains of you to scatter about."

Then a slender figure in plate mail walked over a pile of rubble across the other side of the square, followed by the silhouette of a figure larger than Andur himself. A tail lazily whipped back and forth to the stride of the plated figure. It approached Andur and stopped in front of him, removing its helmet to reveal the short trimmed head of a female teifling, horns back like those of a devil. She rested her helmet on a clasp with her backpack, "Sorry I forgot about your birthday a few weeks ago boss," she casually turned her head towards the smug lich, "But I think I managed to find you the perfect gift." Leria reached into a pocket on her waist belt and pulled out a large viscous orb that looked not unlike a large marble. Andur recognized it instantly as Dra'nahb's phylactery; he turned to see the lich's face show both shock and anger at realization of what Andur now held. "Next time don't send it off with some cocky wyvern rider who talks too much and bleeds far too easily!" Leria said with a triumphant flick of her chin.

"Got your message Cartanis," Balarash said in a deep rumbling voice. "And we felt that you," the red dragonborn said as he turned to Andur, "would like to do the honors yourself, considering what he did to your home and all."

Andur gently tossed the ball sized marble in his hand a few times before he took a stride towards the ever glowing rift. "Dra'nahb, answer me a question or two would you?"

The lich gained some measure of composure and addressed the cleric, "Well I guess I have suffered life long enough, ask away you curious brat."

"We found that old ruin of the city you founded so long ago, read of your legend, and what happened to your wife. So tell me one thing." Andur turned to look directly into the lich's gaze, "Did she love you?"

The lich let out a dusty cough that Andur guessed was a laugh, "Love is nothing more than a soul's attempt to escape suffering, and even though I am sure she did. It didn't save her from life's merciless reign that it has over us all." He sighed, "Too bad too, she was always so faithful to me," Dra'nahb stared off into the sky, "Life; It's like a parasite, it'll build you up into something, or take you to someplace amazing. And then BLOP it just crashes you into the ground uncaring as you ask it to stop. I was so close to ending this miserable existence and stopping that endless cycle of suffering"

Andur looked back at the Vortex that was beginning to give off sparks and show cracks in its distortion. "So why all of this, why all of this war and destruction? You just created more suffering for others."

"I may have," the lich casually scratched at his chin, "but I feel like I was ending more potential suffering than I was creating. At worst I was life's vehicle of suffering, and at best I was an adept bringer of mercy." Dra'nahb looked at Andur, "Don't tell me some part of you isn't all exhilarated to get on to your heaven and joy yourself in its ecstasy, meet all of your old friends as you wait for others to join in on your lovely rapture."

Andur could only think of one thing when the lich talked of old friends, "The one man that was not even of my blood, the man that was my father to me. My only parent. Had to sacrifice his soul to save me once, save me from you and your foul plans," He took in a quick look at his friends who stood behind him, all four of them each with their own approving smile. Andur then took a look at the lich, "So in short" Andur grasped the phylactery firmly in his hand turning back towards the ominous glowing sphere, "Have fun in Hell." Andur readied his arm and flung the insignificant thing with all

his mustered strength straight towards the breaking field around the sphere.

As it contacted the horizon of the event it solidly shattered the force around the energy, and smoothly sailed into the core of building power. Once the shell was broken a great quake shook everyone to the floor. Before anyone could regain balance they all began floating, and drifting around the ever growing light. The core then began to pulsate and expand, slowly consuming the city square. Then everyone began to slowly drift towards the ever expanding core.

Cartanis began shouting over the noise of the event and the earth's movement, "Something's amiss Andur, it shouldn't be doing this! It should have exploded once the shell was breached, this is different!"

Then a great blackness appeared within the center of the mass of light.

Cartanis' eyes grew wide, "Oh dear gods no, not that! Andur grab my hand, this is going to get bumpy!" As the friends locked hands Cartanis managed to let the elf grab onto his leg. They looked around but the tiefling and the dragonborn were too far away to get to before the next event occurred.

As if reaching some critical point, the small dark sphere within the mass of light violently expanded to overtake both the floating victims and the majority of the surrounding city and countryside. Once it reached the edge of its earlier approximated radius it stopped. Then as suddenly as it advanced, it receded unto itself and disappeared from view; leaving only a gaping crater that dug a divot into the ground below and the clouds above.



Andur was disoriented from the sudden jolt that was given alongside the transportation from where they were to where they are. "Cartanis." he said to the wizard he held onto in the quiet blackness, "Where are we."

An explosion of color and light broke the shadow to reveal the horizon in all directions to be of the same shifting colors, as they all floated helplessly amongst ruins of the city they had recently fought over.

"Welcome to the Void, Andur," Cartanis began, "The place where nothing belongs, not for long anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"See all those lovely lights and colors on the horizon there? Well that is the void breaking down anything that doesn't belong into pure data or energy categories, and once we run out of atmosphere and matter between us and the edge of this we are as good as dead."

"There has got to be a way out of this!" shouted the elf in fear.

"We got one shot I think, let go of me for a minute you'll be fine. If I can get enough matter around us with a force orb I think I can buy us a few extra minutes." The wizard began concentrating and a field of distortion began to become visible around the three.

"What about Leria and Rash?" Andur called out to the wizard.

"We can't worry about them right now; we are on enough borrowed time as it is."

Andur knew the wizard was right, but he couldn't help but feel angry at the situation.

As the air around them became heavier and more pressing the wizard eventually spoke up, "OK too much more and our lungs won't be able to handle this, look around everyone try to find something that should look like the sea on a dark full moon night."

The elf looked about and noticed reflection from a moving surface in the distance, beyond the disintegrating horizon. "Over there," he said as he pointed, "But it looks farther out than I would have hoped."

Concern was evident on the wizard's face, "That event must have shot us farther from home than I thought, but I am not going to stop now. It's time to get back to our own dimension." With a shout of strain, the wizard waved his hand and the distortion with the three included began blazing across the decomposing landscape. As they broke through the horizon, the orb they were within seemed to ignite around them, spitting and hissing as though it were aflame as it faded away into light and color. It was then that one of them looked back towards the fading sphere behind them, and noticed a sudden change in intensity of the colors.

"Cartanis! Something's happening back there."

Cartanis took a second to look behind him, "The void must have made contact with a dense patch of matter and not liked it. Let's hope it won't be too bad."

As the light intensified it could be seen that the intense field of light was separating from the original sphere of weakening matter and energy. Then in an intense flash a shock-wave ripped across the void, fragmenting the original sphere sending it out as a shrapnel blast of colorful energy spheres towards the three.

"I don't like the looks of this wizard!" Proclaimed the elf.

"Calm down, I might be able to ride the shock-wave and get us there faster."

"But we've got more than just that shock-wave to worry about; it fired all of those leftover bits at us as well."

Cartanis quickly looked about, noticing all of the spheres of light hurtling towards them. "Okay here is the plan. Elf, you keep an eye out for spheres tell me which direction to go corresponding to my facing; not yours. Andur, watch for the shock-waves, I'll have to give it all the forward momentum I've got if we don't want to get scattered. I can't take my eyes off the prize or we could get lost just trying to dodge things, and we don't have time for a second chance." As each nodded in confirmation of their received task, the first wave of matter arrived.

Quickly the wayward comet dodged up, as a ball of color erupted past it at intense speed. This continued as each piece of flaming matter entered their trajectory. As the shock-wave approached, the comet ceased its rag-tag maneuvers and began blazing a trail straight ahead. The comet was rocked within the force of the explosion, but it quickly gained speed and actually began to catch up to the slowing fireballs in front of it.

"CARTANIS!" shouted the elf.

"I know, just worry about our flanks I can worry about our front."

Once again the wayward comet ached its way past disaster, narrowly escaping as two spheres began to cross paths and then collided. Sending even more shrapnel about that headed straight for the trio.

Andur was shocked as he watched the thousands of tiny sparks ricochet off the orb, causing multicolored streaks of light to erupt from the shell, "Umm, Cartanis we are going to get hit by the shock-wave from that last collision."

The wizard seemed to stop and think for a second, looking towards the closing wave and the geysers erupting from their safe haven. He nervously rubbed his hands for a moment, "I can't heal the orb and have us survive that wave, so... We're going to have to try something else." He looked to Andur and the elf, "I'll ride this last shock-wave, and it'll destroy the force orb. We might make it through the last stretch to the end, but you all have to listen and remember what I tell you. This place will destroy our bodies; there is no question about that. But it takes far longer for it to thread apart who we are, our souls and memories. The harder we try to remember who we are and what we did in our lives the longer we should stay together before the void can break us. Now Andur, you will be our guide, you're in the pilot's seat this time my friend. We," the wizard said gesturing to the elf, "both know you from the impact you had in our lives, if we can keep ourselves together we should be able to drift along with you instead of scattering randomly."

"So how do I fly through the void then?" asked Andur as he switched position with the wizard for the front of the formation in the disintegrating globe.

"It's like dreaming, just don't look down; so to speak."

Andur took a look behind him towards the nearing shock-wave, and then around in other directions. He noticed that they seemed to be at the forefront of the strange thing in front of them, the sight almost stretched the entirety of his view. He could make out the rippling patterns of its surface, looking much like a pond that was recently disturbed. He closed his eyes and looked at his hands; he pushed doubt from his mind and faced the darkness head on.

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"Come on Twilight! You can do it." Said Spike, the eager baby dragon hopped up and down.

Twilight carefully picked up a dart in her hoof. Aiming it in her mind she pictured the trajectory it would take. Then, with an easy underhand toss the projectile began its lazy arc through the air. *Hit center, hit center!* Twilight thought to herself. With a humble thunk, the dart stuck cleanly to the eighteen point black zone.

"I keep trying to tell you Twi' you over think the simple things." Dash stated to her friend, as Twilight removed the darts from the board using her magic telekinetic powers. Her horn dimming as she halted the flow of power to her magic, allowing the darts to rest on the table they had between them to mark the distance from the board. "You gotta just feel it! Take the dart, take note of the weight and BAM!" the Pegasus exclaimed as she quickly tossed the dart in the air and then kicked the dart with her back hoof sending it at the board. Cleanly hitting the double nineteen marker ring.

Spike quickly wrote something down on a notepad, "Rainbow Dash one eighty-seven, Twilight Sparkle umm seventy-two."

"Thanks for letting me hang-out with you today Twilight, it's not every day that the weather patrol gets a day off."

"No problem dash, the library was slow today anyway." The purple unicorn picked up her dart, gently flipping it in her hoof. "OK, here we go." *Don' think, throw;* she let the projectile fly. Aiming for nothing in particular, just to hit the board. As it approached the board, it looked as though it may very well land center.

At that time abruptly, Twilight, Rainbow Dash, and Spike were rocked by a concussive air shock. Slamming into them, the library, and Ponyville.

Groaning as she regained consciousness, Twilight shakily got onto all four hooves. Looking about she could see Spike digging Dash out from under a pile of books. The blue Pegasus shook her head around, trying to dispel her wooziness. "Oh no, the town!" Twilight said as she went for a nearby window, carefully brushing aside the broken glass on the floor with her magic. She looked out the window with dash hovering over her shoulder. Both gasped as they looked out from the viewpoint. Windows had shattered across the town, doors had blown off hinges, and a few even had rooftops

missing. Ponies milled about in the streets helping others up as they began to regain consciousness, it looked like a disaster zone in the morning sunlight. "Come on Dash, we've got to help." Said Twilight, as both went for the library's door.

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Andur coughed and groaned, realizing he could feel again. For he was lain against cold earth. It was too dark to see, but he laughed a little to himself "Made it."

Chapter 1

Andur coughed and groaned, realizing he could feel again. For he was lain against cold earth. It was too dark to see, but he laughed a little to himself "Made it."

"Andur? That you?" said a familiar voice.

"Cartanis?" Andur attempted to get up, but quickly fell to his hands. His legs didn't wish to make the movements he wanted. Neither did his hands, which both felt petrified into a fist. "You still able to cast anything wizard? I know you've got to have a light spell."

"One second." he heard the wizard mumble something to himself against the quietness of the surroundings. A small orb of light appeared in the distance, slowly growing brighter until it revealed the rock walls and ceilings of a cavern. The light was too bright to look into directly, at least right away.

"You think you can find your way to me, I can't seem to move too well."

"Fine just let me, *oof*" exclaimed the wizard as he to fell over. "Umm, Andur... promise me you won't freak out if my theory is correct."

"What? What theory?"

"One that I believe I just proved two seconds ago, I'm sure it will become apparent to you soon as well."

"WHAT THEORY CARTANIS!"

The orb of light slowly moved closer, its light preventing Andur from doing much besides hide his eyes behind his arm. When the orb was but a few feet from his person it stopped, dimmed and floated next to a figure. "This theory."

Before him stood a blue quadruped, "What, how?" Andur looked down, and in the light saw a partially metal covered horse leg. Which subsequently

twitched when Andur recoiled at what he thought was his hand. "But I lead us home; I made it to that thing, that ocean."

"You lead us to safety, from the void that is no doubt. But I am afraid this isn't where we are from."

"Well where are we, the plane of madness?"

"Do you not understand what happened out there, where we were? That wasn't the astral sea, we were in the void. We were not between planes, Andur; we were between realms of existence. Dimensions, where rules that we accept as fundamental in our own could very well be poppy-cock over here."

"Alright... But why are we horses, at least I think we are. We definitely don't look exactly like the counterparts in our world." He noticed the bright colors of himself and his friend, as well the oversized eyes.

"The fundamentals, as I said. Here it seems things have a little less intricate detail, far more colorful too. Not as, watered out, in places. Now don't take me for being lazy but I tire of standing with you backed up against a wall."

"I do as well; I am not used to this yet." Both backed away from the wall and did their best to imitate what they remembered of horses laying down.

"Well as serious as this situation is, my curiosity is eating at me. Would you mind telling me exactly what I look like?"

"Move the orb around a bit I can barely make out your silhouette."

The orb of light began moving about Cartanis, slowly revolving to try and keep light on him.

"Well you're blue, your eyes are purple now."

"What about my scars?"

"Still there, you look like you lost a fight. Like you lost a LOT of fights"

"Fascinating, I wonder... oh don't let me interrupt."

"And I think I see a... horn? By the light, I think you're a unicorn!"

"That's absurd Andur," the statement drew a curious eye from the cleric, "look, I either am or I am not. Is there a horn or not?"

"Well it's just that it seems broken somehow, like it was chipped apart. Kind of like an old drunk's tooth."

Cartanis began scratching his chin with a free hoof.

"And as for your overall body well, you seem to still be wearing your robes. But, they've been tailored to fit you as you are it seems. Not very stocky, rather stretched looking. Your, umm hair would it be? It's still black and short, but I think I see some salt mixed in with your pepper." Andur recognized the various pouches and vials of the wizard's blue robe attire. "Although I think your hat is gone."

Cartanis looked about for a second, ears raised. "HAT! HEEL!" both waited patiently for a minute as a top hat slowly hovered into view of the light orb, gently plopping onto the unicorn's head.

"Well I think that covers me pretty well. How about we talk about you now."

The orb of light quickly hovered over to Andur, and began rotating around him.

"Well your armor has definitely had the same treatment as my robes, in all its sun embellished glory. Brown? Did not expect that, thought you would be a lighter color. Eyes green, and... You still have your beard and moustache too?"

Andur mindlessly scratched at his beard with a hoof, just to make sure.

"This world definitely works differently. Anyway your mane, as I think it should be called, seems to still have the traits of your old hair light brown and not too messy or long. Your tail is cropped short, and thank you for telling me about mine I can feel it tickling my ankles."

"Well now that we are done admiring each other, can I ask what fascinated you so much about your clothes and appearance?"

"It's a long story of why I know the how of this, but just take my short answer for now." Cartanis took a deep breath and rubbed at his temples for a moment, "In the void our bodies were destroyed, and for the last stretch we were drifting souls."

"Correct"

"When we made contact with this dimension we seamlessly passed through its barrier and into this world, and I believe it read us like a book. Well by "it" I mean the forces that determine the fundamentals of this universe. It went along a checklist and sorted us into a category fitting of our soul and memory. So if I had to guess, anything else here with magic and sentience would also be a unicorn. Hold on to that magic bit for a second," Cartanis quickly snapped out a hoof towards an able rock wall and a bolt of lightning whipped from hoof to wall, leaving a black mark where it struck as well with an echo from its crack. "Andur do me a favor and try to do something related to your god helping you out."

Andur calmed himself and emptied his mind; he called out for a blessing from his god to show him the way. A floating ethereal beacon of light appeared next to Andur, bathing him and the cave in warm rays before disappearing.

"Well this is troubling, anyway back to where I was."

"Wait why is your magic not troubling and yet Pelor answering my call so dangerous?"

"My magic also concerns me Andur, but I can't properly tell you without further knowledge of how this world works; why it upsets me. You could somehow be contacting our old world, or there is a horse version of Pelor somewhere out there."

Andur snorted in frustration at the answer, but let the wizard continue.

"As for our equipment, I guess we were bonded enough to it that it was recreated alongside these bodies. I guess the old stories of some weapons and armor being alive has more credit to it than I initially thought."

Andur checked for his weapon, Morellia the Dawn Breaker. He found it sheathed along his back, when he awkwardly attempted drawing it using

his teeth he heard the weapons familiar voice in his mind. *Call to me in your times of battle, and we shall cleave the darkness from the land.*

"Good to know you're still here," Andur said to his weapon.

"Well I think I've had enough questions for one day. Let's find a way out of this cave."

Before Cartanis could receive an answer, a third figure entered the range of the light. "Already found it for you, hope you two didn't mind the solitude." said the figure

"Ted?" asked Andur.

"I'd recognize that accent anywhere you old mud mouth."

From the snide insult, Andur knew immediately it was the elf. "My accent isn't that bad."

Cartanis snorted a short laugh, before attempting a cough at Andur's gaze.

"I take it we've all realized the situation we are in?" Andur began.

"I heard enough of the wizard's explanation to know how many kinds of danger we might be in, and no I don't need a look-see from one of you. I'm a zebra, short grey and black hair, in my light scale still hidden by my green cloak. Although there is one curiosity," The zebra lifted a part of his cloak to show a feathered wing tucked under it, "Before you ask, no I don't know how to fly and I may or may not have tried."

"A strange world indeed." Cartanis blurted out, "Well take us to this exit then oh great Te'denithas of house Zavyard."

The ranger cracked a smile at hearing his full name, "You know calling me Ted like Andur does is easier than that."

"Yes I know."

"It's less rude than "elf" as well."

"Point taken."

Ted then showed them the way out, leading the trio around a bend and up a formation which took them to the bright entrance to the outside world. As they broke the veil between the darkness of the cave and brightness of the rising sun cresting the morning horizon they drew scope in on the world they were within. Andur was almost taken back by his size compared to the other two, as he finally had a chance to see clearly. Ted and Cartanis were roughly the same, but he himself was a good head or two taller than both of them. Then he noticed what the other two had been staring at.

A forest of tree's lay partially scattered in front of them, at the base of the rocky slope they stood on. Fallen over for a few hundred feet in a semicircle from the cavern entrance that they were in front of.

Ted broke the stunned silence, "You may not be able to see it but I could make out a village of some sort a few miles from here, we should head in that direction."

"What inhabited the village?"

"Don't know Andur, but the wildlife in that forest below makes me believe the village would be a better direction to head than in a random one."

"Off we go then."

As the Cleric and Ranger walked off down the slope, Cartanis took a moment to look at the devastation in the forest and the unnatural cavern entrance which they had just left. *I hope we are the only things that make it through the void, if three creatures entering a world do that with the force of their re-entry.* He shuddered at the thought of anything more massive making an entrance; Cartanis heard a shout and realized that he was being left behind. Slowly but surely he caught up to his comrades as they headed off in the direction of the village.

Chapter 2

It had been approximately a day since they reached the village; they took shifts going to and from the edge of the forest to scout out the inhabitants. Each shift exchange more information was gathered, but eventually even the supplies of the travelers began to dwindle. Action was going to be required soon.

Ted wandered into view of the dwindling campfire as night was soon coming to an end. Andur was busy tending to something over the warm coals. Ted approached and lay in front of the fire across from Andur. "Not much happened tonight, they seem to be finishing up more of the repairs. But, they still have plenty left to do." Ted noticed that Andur was only half listening, lazily stirring the pot of stew with a ladle held out of the side of his mouth. "You're not still upset about your rations are you Andur?"

"I just... I just never expected I'd have to do without bacon... or jerky... or meat in general." Sadness was evident on his face and in his voice.

"I told you, no living thing would need that much meat in travel rations." Retorted Cartanis as he emerged from the tent they used for whoever needed it for sleeping. It was shoddily put together, considering how much they didn't know about their new forms. Cartanis' arcane powers helped however, here and there. "Now let's hear Ted's report."

"They seem to still be repairing whatever damage occurred to their little hamlet, as we noted when we first got here. I saw more of the flying ones tonight though, the Pegasai, they flew through the night sky dispersing cloud cover over parts of the village as it rained everywhere else. They seem to be having trouble getting building supplies as well. Other than that, the usual amount of activity around their town square and markets."

Cartanis spoke up, "How much food is left."

Andur pointed toward the pot on the fire, "Whatever is thrown together in there and a few pieces of bread still in the bags."

"Looks like we won't have much choice."

"Perhaps we could scavenge for more food?" Ted interjected.

"No, no, no, last time we did that we almost got eaten by the plant we tried to harvest. If Cartanis didn't have that fire spell ready I think we would have been ended right there. We just don't know enough about things around here as to what is even edible, let alone the experience of fighting in these forms to know how to defend ourselves." Andur sighed as he realized what they needed to do. He got up from his spot and walked over to the tent, grabbing his bag of holding.

"Here is the plan," Andur began, "I'm going to go into that town alone, in the old clothes that I seem to still have. They all seem to have some form of birth mark or tattoo on their flanks, maybe they use them for status or caste identification. Seeing as how we don't have any we can't risk too much attention. You two are going to wait at the forest's edge, from where you can see the town square. I'll try to stay in sight of you and go to the market, I doubt our money will be any good but we have to try something or we starve." Andur then began to remove the armor he had worn for so long, awkwardly mouthing straps apart to loosen armor as he struggled to get it off properly, and then stuffed it into the bag which never bulged at the size of the items stuffed into its small frame.

"Wait, why are you going Andur? You're almost twice the size of any of those horses; you'll draw too much attention just by walking past them!" Ted stood up and stomped a hoof in protest.

"Any more attention than a zebra with wings, even if you hide them under your cloak you're still a zebra. They are all horses, unicorns, and pegasi. If zebras are anything like elves in our world, you are all few and far between which would definitely draw attention." Andur looked down at Cartanis who was still laying by the fire. "I don't suppose you want to contest my idea as well?"

"I won't, it's better than any I can think of at the moment, and besides if I go in there they are liable to think me some vagabond ruffian looking for trouble and either shun me or hide. I would hate to put the whole village on guard just from my presence around you." Cartanis glumly rubbed a hoof across his face, obviously concerned over his appearance. "Just one thing Andur, try not to say anything to them. Based on their signs we can

assume they speak some form of common. But your accent... is a little thick."

"I'll try, but you get no guarantees from me about it. I'll have to say something eventually."

"Fine by me, but just in case something goes wrong." Cartanis got up off the floor and walked over to Ted, and pinched a small green book off his belt which he then gave to the zebra. "I made these from my messenger book; its old network didn't work anymore so I made a new one between these three." He then went over to Andur and gave him his own small brown book. "I modified them to open only to us three, well not strictly immunity from opening more of a resistance to deter casual observance. Also I managed to make it so you can write the text in by thinking your sentences clearly."

Andur put his on the ground opening it with a careful appliance of his hoof and decided to test it out, clearing his mind he pictured the words in his head on the paper. Sure enough, *My name is Andur*, clearly appeared upon the paper before sinking into it. The green and blue books almost instantly began glowing slightly and humming a low buzz.

Ted was the first to open his and was surprised at what he saw, "It is written in Elven! But... Andur doesn't know Elven."

"He doesn't," Said Cartanis, "But just for an extra level of security, responses will appear as Elven in yours and mine. Andur's responses will be in Dwarven, in which he is rather fluent if I recall correctly."

"Well thank you Cartanis, this will help part two." Andur plopped the book into his bag of holding with the rest of his belongings. "If I don't manage to get anything right away, I'm going to have to improvise. Maybe find some work around the town."

"What and we just wait out here in the wilderness?" Ted said sarcastically.

"If you have a better idea, I'd love to hear it."

"You shrink to half your size and lose that mud mouth accent." Ted retorted

Cartanis just sighed at Ted.

"We leave at dawn." Which Andur noted, appeared to be almost upon them Ted looked over to the fire, "I think our breakfast is burning."

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Andur looked out over to the village, standing next to the road which lead out from the woods and into the town. Looking back over his shoulder he could make out the silhouettes of his friends amidst the various foliage of the dark forest. *Well, it's now or never,* He thought and began to trot out from the covering leafage, hooves clapping against the dirt before beginning to clop louder against the cobblestone road.

Then he began to approach the first house near the outskirts of the village, a small white horse was threading together materials into a tile which matched those of the house's broken roof. As Andur trotted by, the horse's ears turned back towards him before the face did as well. It looked at Andur with a curious raised eyebrow, before the mouth fell half open with a gaze slowly lifting up to meet Andur's eyes. The small stout face managed to give Andur slight pause in his trot, not sure what to do. Then from inside the house a light voice could be heard, "Dear? What's all the racket outside." Another appeared on the other side of a stall door, with a round head that was bandaged at the top.

The white one then looked quickly to the one in the door, concern on its long face. "Honey," It said in a deeper worried voice, "You're not supposed to be up yet; Nurse Redheart said you needed bed rest."

With a curious eye, the bandaged horse looked at Andur. "Who's that stallion, is he here to help."

"I don't know, now please stop being such a stubborn mare and get back to bed." Concern evident in its order.

*So the men are stallions, and the women are mares.* Andur also took note, *long squared faces for the stallions then, and apparently round ones with smaller noses for mares.* He moved on before the white stallion could look back at him, he thought it better to walk from then on. His large hooves did make a rather loud noise when he moved too quickly. As he approached the more open marketplace, the small horses could be seen going back and forth between piles of supplies and various houses around

town. Andur looked about and managed to see a stall that shouldn't break the line of sight to the forest; he approached and was greeted by a stallion.

"Hello there sir, can I interest you in some fine carrots this morning." Even though the vendor had done his best to not sound shocked, Andur could see the horse gaping at him with his eyes. Andur simply nodded his head in a confirming yes motion. "Well, that'll be fine. Five bits per carrot please."

*Moment of truth*, Andur thought as he reached into his shirts pocket and mouthed some silver coins onto the table. The vendor raised a curious eye, and picked up a coin with a hoof. *How did he do that!* Andur was shocked to see the vendor holding up one of the silver coins with a SINGLE hoof.

"Sorry sir, but we only accept Equestrian bits here. I'm not really sure what currency this is." The vendor then put down the coin amidst the others, which Andur then brushed back into his pocket. "Well if you don't have any money sir, then I can't help you. But maybe you could help around the town a bit, we've been trying to rebuild since the disaster and well... you look like a strong pony. Head on over to the town hall board over there," the vendor pointed to a billboard sitting in front of a large structure "I'm sure you'll find some work to your liking."

Andur thanked the vendor, who looked confused at hearing the single word smothered by his accent. *Guess it is too much to hope they could understand me*; he thought and walked off towards the board.

After making sure none of the small horses were near, Andur swiped at his messenger book with a hoof. It simply slid past the cover, leaving it on his waist belt. *It wasn't one of the magic unicorns, I'm sure of that, how did he do it?* Andur resolved to simply, yet awkwardly, sit down for a moment to pinch the book between his two front hooves before he let it open within his upper arms. He began a message. *As we suspected, our money is no good here. I'm going to try to find some work around town, they seem to need help anyway. They were rather stunned by me, but didn't seem to mind much beyond awkward stares. If you have to talk, I think we should use the word Pony to describe them or call attention, not Horse. Also, the men are referred to as stallions and the women as mares. Cartanis, one of the vendors managed to pick up an item using only ONE HOOF. It wasn't a unicorn it was a blasted regular pony, figure out how they do it!* Andur



allowed the report to sink into the pages of the book before continuing to the board.

As he approached the board, he saw various posts of paper about things needing work. Help with roofing, supply runs, door manufacture, glass replacement, even a few missing posters. As Andur looked about for a job that suited him he stopped on one with a barn-house on it. The poster read, *Sweet apple acres is in need of some hard working farm-hooves to help replant the crops. I know we just finished planting a few weeks ago during the last Winter Wrap-up, but the disaster decimated the seedlings and we must replant. If we can manage to replace most of it now before the next rain in a few days we can cover our losses and prevent a food crisis. So for anypony who wants to help out, just head on over here and speak to Pa Smith. Who knows, if you're good enough we might even hire you as a full time farmer.*

Andur patted his hoof against his chin. *I always did enjoy farming before I was forced from my hometown.* He looked about. *Well I guess I'll have to as-*

"HELLO THERE SIR!" Andur almost jumped out of his skin at the sudden voice behind him. Turning around he saw no one, "are you lost or perhaps want to see the sights of Ponyville and are in need of a ride?" Andur looked down following the voice this time, a young pony with a pink bow tie in her mane was talking to him. Looking about Andur nodded his head yes. "GREAT! Umm... I mean, have no fear traveler. For I have the answer to your woes." The rambunctious child spun quickly in a circle and was joined by a white unicorn of approximately similar age.

As they both hummed out a little jingle, Andur could hear a buzz behind a few crates stacked up not far from where he was standing. Out from behind them shot an orange Pegasus child who wore a helmet while on a small scooter, with a toy cart joined to it, wings buzzing furiously as it gained speed. With a screech the vehicle turned into a one eighty slide and solidly stopped right next to the other two small children. The rider effortlessly back-flipped off her scooter, landing triumphantly with her eyes closed and front hooves in the air, then all three said "The Scootalong Taxi Service!" As the orange Pegasus opened her eyes to look at Andur, her mouth dropped open.

"I'm not buzzing him around town, he's bigger than Macintosh!" she said in a huff.

"Oh come on Scootalo, don't you want your cutie mark." said the one with the bow tie in her hair, pointing with a hoof to the Pegasus' bare flank.

"Yes I do. But I would like to still be able to fly when I get it, Apple Bloom."

Andur then heard another voice from a distance, "Sweetie Bell! Apple Bloom! Where did you girls run off to!" a white unicorn mare with a lovely bluish mane streaked around a corner, "There you fillies are!"

As the concerned mare came closer Andur made a quick mental note, *fillies are little girls, and I would guess colts are little boys.*

"Oh great it's my sister." The unicorn filly said who Andur inferred must be Sweetie Bell.

As the worried older sibling closed the distance she saw Andur and was slightly taken aback. "I'm sorry sir, I hope these fillies haven't given you any trouble." Andur shook his head with a no. Then scorn read on the unicorn's face, "And just WHAT exactly were you thinking running off like that in the middle of all this turmoil." The three little fillies stared at the ground.

"We just wanted to get our cutie marks Rarity." Apple Bloom said with large sad eyes to the white unicorn, as the other two looked towards their flanks.

"Oh this again, look I know you all really want your cutie marks. But please don't run off like that, I was really worried you might have gotten hurt because somepony could have dropped something heavy on you." Rarity said with compassion in her voice. "Maybe we could just try to go around looking for your special talent, together, safely."

"That sounds like a good idea," Sweetie Bell said, gladly.

"Hey, we should help Mr. Big over here find what he's looking for!" Scootalo shouted.

"That's a great idea Scootalo." Apple Bloom stated.

"We could be umm... Bodyguards!" Sweetie Bell said with an excited tone.

"YEAH! Escorting our VIP to his destination, making sure no monster brings harm to him!" Scootalo and the others began kicking and punching at pretend threats.

Rarity then motioned for Andur to kneel so she could speak into his ear. "Please play along sir, this could probably be the least dangerous thing they've done all day."

Andur was then belted with three beaming smiling faces as if they were pleading with their very souls for him to agree. *Don't say anything, umm...* Andur got an idea. He turned back to the board and simply pointed to the Sweet Apple Acres ad with an outstretched hoof.

"You wanna' go to the Farm?" asked Apple Bloom.

Andur nodded his head yes.

"No problem, sir, I actually live at the farm." the ecstatic little filly stated to his reply.

"Quick gals, to the squad car!" Scootalo announced, as Apple Bloom and Sweetie Bell jumped into the cart. Scootalo took lead position at the helm of the scooter and began buzzing up.

"Now girls, don't go off too far ahead." Rarity scolded.

"Don't worry sis, we'll keep danger away from our Very Important Pony AND lead him to safety!"

"YEAH!" the other two shouted.

And so the group began a march westward towards the farm, the three fillies being buzzed around in their little improvised cart, shouting challenges at makeshift dangers.

[M/M/M/M]

Applejack loaded another cart full of seed bags; she looked out over the small group of ponies that had gathered to help with the re-planting. She sighed. *Doesn't look well for the ol' farm,* She then looked out over the hills which surrounded the farm, *at least all the healthy apple trees made it.* It

had been three days ago when that strange disaster struck. Luckily, she had been in the apple cellar at the time and had been little more than shaken up. *It was like thunder*, Applejack saw Big Macintosh's harness hung up on the wall of the work shed, *too bad you weren't down there with me*. Big Mac had been out in the fields, tending to seedlings when it happened.

"Howdy, sis." Applejack snapped out of her haze and saw her big brother Big Macintosh standing in the front door to the work shed, a little black cap over the top of his head.

"What're you doin' outta' bed mister!" Applejack said with an accusing hoof, Big Mac only absently stared at her. Then she noticed the small chalkboard around his neck, which he then hoofed to her along with a piece of chalk.

*What are you doing out of bed!*, she wrote and showed to her brother.

"I can't let you do all of this alone, even with those other ponies you're going to need me to haul around the big stuff. I won't let it stand that the farm fell apart without me trying to help," Big Mac said in monotone, as he went over to his harness and draped it over his head. "Besides, the cap Nurse Redheart gave us works fine. I can't even hear you."

Applejack had an unhappy look on her face, *Fine, but the SECOND you start looking shaky out there you're going straight back to bed. Sound fine to you?*

"Eee-yup" Big Mac stated.

Applejack then gave her brother back his board and chalk, turned and went out towards the group of waiting ponies. The shed door shutting behind her with a slam from a gust of wind. Big Mac cringed at the pain in his ears, it had sounded so quiet but it still hurt very badly whenever a noise loud enough made it through the cap. A thought danced through his mind that he may never hear his sister again, the stray mental picture struck his heart harder than he thought it would and he felt tears well up in his eyes. *No*, he thought to himself, *even if I go deaf I can't let them all down*. He wiped the tear from his eye, hitched himself to the seed cart. Pulling it outside, another gust of wind slammed the door behind him. He cringed again, but concentrated on pulling the cart through ever increasing headache and nausea.

Applejack stood on top of a box of seed as she addressed the crowd. "Those of you that are not goin' to pull plows, are gonna' split up into teams of two to plant seed behind the ponies that are pullin' plows. And to those of you that are plantin' seed, PLEASE, remember to not step anywhere that the seeds are already planted. Now, one line of plow pullers and one line of seed teams, the ground won't stay soft from that last rain all day!" Applejack got off the box, and started hooking up ponies to plows while telling the teams which seeds to plant where. She then looked off towards the entrance to their farm, after she heard a buzz on the wind. Over a hill road Scootalo appeared, with Applejack's younger sister and Sweetie Bell, racing along the road with her scooter drawn cart. Not long after Rarity appeared behind them, then she saw a truly astonishing site.

A huge, brown, bearded pony came over the hill. She trotted down to the gate to talk with Rarity. "Hi Applejack!" The three fillies said as they stopped their cart at the gate. "Hey you think we got our cutie marks!" They all quickly checked their flanks to find them blank. They each wore a rather sour expression, then Apple Bloom spoke up, "Well being a bodyguard was tiring anyway."

"Yeah, I don't think I could scoot anymore today." Scootalo said, splaying out on the ground. Sweetie Bell simply chuckled as she did so.

Rarity then made it to the gate, "Rarity, can I have a word with you?"

"Of course Applejack. I take it that you wish to talk about Mr. Big over there." Rarity gestured behind her as the large Pony began walking over the last hill behind them.

"Well I guess the name fits the pony."

"Oh that's not his name." Stated Apple Bloom.

"What? You mean you led a pony to the farm without even knowin' his name?" Applejack said with a stern tone to her sister.

"Well he wasn't mean at all sis, in fact he's rather friendly in that Big Mac quiet sort of way. Besides he's only here to help out with the farm."

"Look, you're missing the point. You don't just do this much for a perfect stranger, how do you know he wouldn't have tried anything on the way over. It's not safe to do that!"

"He really isn't that bad Applejack," Rarity Interrupted, "He put up with the girls' shenanigans over cutie marks without even showing anything but a smile at their playfulness. I for one think he's a good patient worker; no shallow bandit pony would wear such attire into town. Or keep himself so well kept." Rarity said with an approving raised chin. At that time the big brown pony stopped behind them and looked to their faces.

Applejack eyed the big pony from top to bottom, in its flannel shirt and denim work stops on his haunches. "Well you certainly arrive prepared sir, but I am afraid I can't let you work for us unless you're willing to answer some questions. An' no funny business of shaking your head yes and no. I want real answers, and the first one is. What-is-your-name?"

*Ah crud*, Andur thought to himself. He had tried to think up a name on the way over. Hearing the stories from Rarity and the fillies, he thought he would have thought one up by now. *Think, think, think*, he thought frantically, as the orange mare in the cowboy hat began furrowing her eyes at him. Obviously not amused with his silence. Then a name flew out of the back of his mind, without thinking he blurted it out. "Mud Mouth." Almost every pony that heard it raised an eyebrow, *oh great, I probably just said some horribly vulgar curse word.*

Applejack was taken aback by the name, but what she could hardly believe was the pony's accent. It was so heavy. The big brown pony looked down and scratched at the dirt, before starting to turn around. "Wait a minute. Your names fine 'n' all but I am not done asking questions yet. Now I know you're not from Ponyville, therefore you're probably not just here to volunteer; so why are you here?"

Mud Mouth relaxed a bit and spoke again, "eye wood like tuu wurk four yew."

Applejack had to take a minute to pick apart his sentence, *I-would-like-to-work-for-you, hay seed that ponies accent is thicker than an apple tree. But why does it sound so familiar?* "Well we can't just hire you on as a worker, not right away anyway. But I can let you help out with the replanting, we'll see how it all goes from there; OK?"

Mud Mouth then nodded his head in a yes motion.

"Right then, now head on over to the group over yonder and tell 'em you're here to plow. Then just listen to what Ma 'n' Pa tell ya' to do."

Mud Mouth trotted off towards the group, while the three fillies followed him. Rarity then spoke up to Applejack. "Oh yes, Applejack I got you those casting braces and bandages you asked for. It's too bad about Granny Smith's poor hip." As Rarity began pointing things out in her knapsack, Applejack noticed Mud Mouth had stopped a second and had his ears listening in on them. He then returned to his pace towards the group, astonishing ponies as he walked past them. The fillies walked over to Applejack's mother and started giving out seed bags to ponies.

"Rarity, did you notice anything strange about him on the way over?"

"Oh not much darling, he just kept stopping every now and then to look at that book he had strapped to his waist. Must be a good read, besides that he just never let the fillies near that bag he has around his neck. That was the only time I ever saw Mud Mouth give them a stern look."

Applejack looked over to Mud Mouth to see him stuffing his flannel shirt into the bag around his neck, even though the bag appeared too small, the shirt almost fell into it. As he was hitched to a plow Applejack said to Rarity, "I don't know much about him, but that Mud Mouth has a secret or two. And I wanna' know what he's hidin' from us."

"Oh just let it go Applejack, didn't you lecture me once about not worrying about the little things. To instead, focus on the big picture."

"Well I guess my apple-buckin' should get done, need to save the few apples that made it." Applejack resolved, but she still couldn't shake off all the questions and distrust she had for Mud Mouth.

"Well go on then, I'll be at your house helping your Grandmother."

So off she went to get a few buckets and a cart to haul apples from her bucking, casting an eye towards Big Macintosh. Slowly but surely pulling the seed cart around the fields helping refill bags that had emptied. *Just be safe now*, and then Applejack went into the apple acres to salvage what she could.



Andur had been at work for a few hours, the sun had just begun to reach its apex in the sky. He realized a while before that keeping his "work stops" on was a good idea, the plow harness would of abrasively chaffed his flanks if he hadn't of kept them on. As he stopped to turn the plow down into a new row, he noticed the same large burgundy pony he had seen earlier with the black cap on his head. Slowly marching down the dirt road between fields, barely pulling the near empty seed cart with any speed. He looked at his seed planting partners, Dodge and Streaks, as they liked to be called. Andur did his best to talk slowly and without his accent, "Would-you-mind-if-I-take-a-break."

The two young stallions looked up to him, "Sure Mud Mouth, we're still about an entire row behind you. Take a breather."

the other spoke up, "I don't think I've ever seen anypony plow fields like he does. Not even Big Macintosh!"

Streaks quickly unharnessed Andur and set the plow so it wouldn't go anywhere. Andur then trotted up to a fence separating the field from the dirt roads and easily cleared it with a hop. Landing in front of the black capped pony. Who stopped and stared at him, not sure what to expect. Andur walked up to the pony, laying down in front of him so they could see each other eye to eye. "Are you alright?" he said bluntly to him. The stallion just stared blankly, before holding out a chalkboard to him. Andur grasped it in his mouth and set it in front of him, he was then hoofed a piece of chalk. *I still need to figure out how they do that with one hoof*, he thought to himself. He did his best to grab it with only his teeth, receiving a strange look from the stallion. He did his best to scrawl *OK?*, onto the board before pinching it between his hooves and holding it up so that the stallion could see it.

"Ooh," stated the draft pony, "I'll be fine sir, I was just hurt pretty bad durin' that disaster a few days back. Nearly shattered ma' ear-drums, long as I keep this here cap on I'll be right as rain." The shaky explanation from the stallion ended with a weak smile, painful twitches upon his face.

*Another hurt soul from that disaster they keep talking about*, Andur had asked Dodge and Streaks about it before. They only said that three days ago, a really loud wave of thunder had smacked into Ponyville and the



surrounding area. Tearing apart windows, blowing doors off hinges, and removing rooftops in a few cases. Dodge's mom had apparently been doing dishes and the kitchen window embedded some of itself in her skull. She was doing well, from what he said. But this stallion in front of him, Andur had seen something like this before. If he kept up like this, and he quite possibly was, he would be lucky to even be able to hear thunder. He looked towards Dodge and Streaks; they were busy planting seeds in the opposite direction. Andur checked behind the seed cart and in other directions, no one was within eyesight or was otherwise too busy. Andur looked into the eyes of the stallion; even without looking at his face he could see the pain in them. A pain deeper than the physical stress of his ears, it was emotional, worry... no, fear. Fear for someone close to him.

Andur closed his eyes, he made up his mind. Clearing his head he offered up a prayer to his god, *Pelor in your mercy we are humbled, with your judgment you aid the weak. Give this poor young soul reprieve from his misery, it was not of his fault that he now suffers. Even in this state he seeks something, I see it in him, and he fights his condition for one he loves deeply. Give him your blessing.* Andur felt the warmth of his power flow through him, and then dim. With his prayer done he opened his eyes to see the young stallion with his mouth half open in amazement.

"Wha- What did you?" Before the stallion could finish Mud Mouth took a hoof and began sliding the black cap off his head, Big Mac quickly threw up one of his own to stop him. Sternly replying to the move, "DON'T do..." His eyes opened wide, *my voice*, Big Mac was stunned, *it doesn't hurt to hear it!* He only looked at the big brown stallion that gazed into his eyes; once again his own eyes welled up slightly.

"What can I call you?" Mud Mouth asked easily to him.

"Big Macintosh is my name, but just call me Big Mac." Big Mac stated as he wiped away the wetness around his eyes.

"Well Big Mac, would you mind keeping what happened just now a secret?"

"Eee-yup."

"Thanks."

Big Mac watched as Mud Mouth got up, trotted around a corner and hopped a fence back to his plow. When Big Mac had seen him from a distance, he knew he was supposedly large. *But, that pony was huge! And what did he do with that medallion around his neck.* Big Mac pondered the thought of what just happened as he slid the cap back on, not as tightly as before though, he still wanted to hear. *What did he do with that strange light?* Big Mac took one of his hooves and stomped it against the ground a few times, just listening to it clop against the dirt road. *I almost don't believe it. Nurse Redheart told us that there was no magic, no medicine, in all of Equestria that could speed my healin'.*

Big Mac looked back at Mud Mouth, who was joyously walking along with his plow. Now a thorough two rows in front of his seed planters, who seemed to be frantically attempting to catch up while still being careful. *Who is that pony? Big Mac thought, and why did he sound like uncle McScotty?*



Andur lay on top of the bed within the small two story cottage the Apple Family had set up for traveling workers who stayed on through the harvest season, he was still surprised he was able to fit in the bed; he guessed the family had done something when he wasn't looking. Seeing as how he managed to plow not one but two fields that day, and was also the only pony who had stayed once the work was done, he was hired on as a farmer with the family. Given lodge and a pay of about thirty bits a day, Andur was happy with what he was able to carve out for himself.

He looked back to the messenger book in front of him; it laid splayed open, pages blank. *Why won't either of them ANSWER!* Andur fumed. Earlier in the day he had gotten a report in blue here and a report in green there, each representing the color of either Cartanis' book or Ted's book he assumed. But for about the last hour, no one was messaging. The last message from Cartanis read, *I did it Andur, I can pick up stuff with one hoof. Words on paper are no good for teaching this skill, oh just wait till I tell you how it works!* Which was followed by various images and squiggles, Andur guessed the wizard forgot to clear his mind when sending the message. The last message from Ted did not make things any clearer; it was just a large splotch of ink.

Andur quickly shut the book when he heard a knock at the door to the cottage. He opened the top half of the door and saw Big Mac standing there, "The Apple Family officially invites you to dinner in the household. That is unless you have something else planned?"

Andur was quickly distracted at the thought of food; the last thing he had to eat had been the bread ration he brought with him. Which he had devoured hours ago as a lunchtime snack, his stomach let loose a growl of hunger. "I'd be delighted" Andur responded to Big Mac's question.

"Good then, it'll be ready soon, you'll hear the dinner bell. See you there." As Andur turned to walk back to the bed Big Mac noticed something, "Say Mud Mouth, could you do something for me?"

"What?"

"Well I see you don't have your cutie mark yet, now I don't mean to impose, and I don't need to know why or what long story you have about it. But, please wear somethin' over your flanks, my little sister and her friends are kind of going through an... extreme phase about it right now."

Andur gave an approving nod as the stallion shut the door and began walking off into the distance. *YOUR cutie mark? YET?* Andur contemplated, *so they must not be birth marks, definitely not tattoos either.* Andur fished the flannel shirt and work stops out of his bag of holding, seeing as how it was all he had besides his armor to wear.

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Applejack went to the bell outside of the house and began ringing it aloud, "SOUPS ON EVERYPONY!" She looked across the acres of plowed land, all seeded and ready for the next rain. She could hardly believe that they had managed to do it in one day. Then one of the cottage doors opened across from the house, a cleaned and clothed Mud Mouth slowly trotting through the dirt roads towards the barn-house. *Maybe he wasn't such a bad pony after all, he did go to all that trouble to plow two whole fields.*

Applejack wandered inside the house and helped her mother set the table for all the guests they would be having tonight, the regular seating plus a few others. As the fillies, Apple Family, and Rarity began seating themselves Mud Mouth wandered through the large stall doors from the

outside. He smiled gently and was shown to a place at the table where he could lay down, that way he could be eye level with all the other ponies who were sitting around it. Rarity spoke up, "Oh darling is that all you have to wear?"

Andur absently nodded his head yes at the sudden question.

"Oh then you must come over to my boutique tomorrow, I've always wanted to try to make a rugged extra large sized functional work ensemble. Could be the first to get my hoof in the door on that one, oh the stars I could attract with a line of clothing like that." Rarity began day dreaming wildly about her idea.

"That sounds like a nice idea." Andur stated as he bit into a biscuit on his plate.

Applejack rubbed at her chin, she could remember that accent from somewhere. But where, "Say Mud Mouth, where are you from?"

Andur stopped chewing for a moment, *think quick part two*, he thought to himself.

"Wait a minute let me guess," Pa, Applejack's father, stated. *Let's see. Full beard and mustache, that slurring accent of words. He is a little big but he has the build of one from there, YES, he had to be from there.* Pa creased a smile across his face, "Clydesdale!" he said a full grin now apparent on his face. Mud Mouth resumed chewing and just politely nodded to the answer. "I told you all he sounded just like my brother McScotty. It has been so long since I heard that accent, I nearly thought I forgot it, but when you come from there," Pa cleared his throat, "eet nevar coompletly leav's yew!"

*That was why it was so familiar, I haven't heard from Uncle McScotty in years.* Applejack thought to herself.

Rarity spoke up, "Well it has been lovely with you all, but I think I'm going to take a plate up to old Granny Smith, change her bandages, then head home."

"Thanks for letting me spend the night sis." Sweetie Bell said.

"Of course dear, Scootalo was already and I figure a farm is a better place for you fillies to be than in town with all that construction going on."

As Rarity disappeared up a flight of stairs with a plate floating in front of her and her knapsacks on her back, small concussive sound waves could be heard at the dinner table. Everyone immediately stopped enjoying themselves and got very quiet, Applejack trotted over to a window, opened it and stuck her head out. Over the town of Ponyville she could see lights, below a streak of light from the ground shot into the air, before ballooning into a star shape of many colors. Then another sound wave met her ears, "It's OK everypony, just some fireworks over at town. Not sure why though, maybe Pinkie Pie is up to somethin'." She had been over a little earlier all excited over some new unicorn in town, Applejack mentioned Mud Mouth and all it did was make her giddier, break into song, and go on about a block party for the two new ponies.

All the ponies relaxed a bit and went back to their dinner. Mud Mouth spoke up, "I was wondering something that I wanted to ask you."

Pa looked up from his plate, "Yeah, about what?"

"I have some friends in town, two to be exact. We split up this morning to try and find lodging. I've been trying to get in contact with them, but if I do. Would it be alright if they bunked in my cottage with me, I'll take a pay dock if it's necessary."

"Well, I'm not sure there is room in there for two more ponies from Clydesdale. Especially if they are your size." Pa chuckled.

"Actually my friends are just a unicorn and a zebra, they shouldn't take up too much space. We travel a lot, pack light and all that."

"Oh wow, a zebra. I thought Zecora was the only Zebra I would've heard about in these parts." Pa then looked over to Ma for a joint approval to Mud Mouth's question. She simply smiled and gestured for Pa to go on. "Well you have Ma's approval, so you have mine. Hope your friends are as good-natured as you."

Andur simply smiled to himself, *Well that is one problem in the bag, now to find them.* It was at that time which a strong gust blew in through the open window, lifting Big Macintosh's loosened black cap off his head and landing

it solidly in some mashed potatoes. Everyone at the table immediately froze; Big Mac looked around eyes wide.

Then Rarity came galloping down from the flight of stairs, hooves echoing against the wood floor. "YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BELI-!" But she was cut off from the venomous glares of the parents and Applejack. She noticed Big Mac and quickly put her hooves to her mouth, looking very sorry.

When Big Mac didn't even flinch to the ruckus, Applejack became confused, gaining some courage to speak. "Big Mac? Are you all right."

"Eee-yup"

Applejack didn't get it, if he wasn't deaf then how did he not curl up in pain. Nurse Redheart said it would take Months for him to be fully recovered. Applejack looked to Mud Mouth, who looked a little worried. "What did you DO!" Applejack galloped across the room to Mud Mouth's side and started shouting, "I saw that weird magic bag of yours, you're not an earth pony. What kind of fancy spell did you use, huh? Is Big Mac your slave now too?"

"Applejack." Pa said

"Did you force all those other ponies home, so we would have to pick you!" Applejack said, poking an accusatory hoof into the side of Mud Mouth.

"APPLEJACK SMITH!" Pa shouted, slamming a hoof onto the table.

Applejack stopped.

"Now I am sure, we are all a little flabbergasted. But I am sure-"

Andur cut Pa off, "Actually sir your daughter is partially correct." eyes began wandering towards the large pony. Then his book began to vibrate and buzz slightly, he quickly pinched it and opened it. In blue writing a short message read, *Ted got himself in a spot, I need you at the town hall in the square. NOW!* Andur realized how many eyes must have been watching him for a reaction. He got up from the table, "I am truly sorry, I do owe you an explanation for everything. If I do come back I promise you shall get it, but my friend is in danger and I have to go. If I don't come back just know that your son, and quite possibly your grandmother, have no strings attached to what I have done. You good ponies have nothing to fear from

me, I swear on my faith. Now I must go." Andur quickly trotted out the door before breaking into a full gallop past the entrance of the farm towards town.

"Your just gonna' let him go?" Applejack asked with a confused look.

"Just calm down sis, he gave us-" Big Mac started

"Gave us a bunch of hooey that's what. How do we know he isn't just goin' to split the second he gets his friends together? Now I'm finding out what he's being all secretive about, today not tomorrow." Applejack galloped out of the house after Mud Mouth.

"Oh sometimes she can be such a stubborn old mule!" Rarity said, chasing after Applejack. A mix of concern and frustration on her face.

As the drama cooled down in the house, Pa looked over to Big Mac. "Did he really heal you somehow son?"

"Eee-yup."

"Well I still want his explanation, but I think we can give him some time."

"Eee-yup"

"Too bad Applejack is so stubborn, but then again she's always been that way hasn't she?" Ma interjected.

"Eee-yup" The father and son said together.

*He's just some big lying brown snake! I'll get an answer out of him and help Big Mac, there is no way some earth pony who uses magic can do things like that without strings attached.* Applejack saw an image in her head, of Big Mac unconscious in the fields, seeing her mother cry. The fear on her father's face, hearing Apple Bloom asking constantly if he was going to be OK. *Never again... NEVER AGAIN!* She galloped as hard as she could after him.

# Chapter 3

Cartanis stood at the edge of the forest next to Ted, both out of view, as they watched Andur trotting into town.

"I still don't like his plan." Ted said to Cartanis.

"He made valid points Ted, and I don't see you bravely facing the unknown."

Ted backed down a bit.

Cartanis looked back to see Andur stop in front of the first house at the edge of town, something must have happened as Andur simply stopped and stared at something for a minute.

"What's he doing!" Ted snapped.

"Just hold on, he's already moving again. Probably just a close call."

Andur moved deeper into the town, if he wasn't such an eyesore in comparison to everything else, they may have already lost him to distance. They saw him approach a stall, but they couldn't see the transaction in process. When Andur finally stepped away from it he sat in the middle of the square, then Ted and Cartanis' books began humming and glowing slightly.

Opening his book Cartanis Read the note from Andur, *As we suspected, our money is no good here. I'm going to try to find some work around town, they seem to need help anyway. They were rather stunned by me but don't seem to mind much beyond awkward stares. If you have to talk, I think we should use the word Pony to describe them or call attention, not Horse. Also, the men are referred to as stallions and the women as mares. Cartanis, one of the vendors managed to pick up an item using only ONE HOOOF. "WHAT!"* The following note only confounded Cartanis more, *it wasn't a unicorn it was a blasted regular pony, figure out how they do it!*



The implications set Cartanis' mind ablaze with questions and theories, but his concentration was broken by Ted. Who sighed, "Well, time to break cover I guess." before leaping into the treetops. As Cartanis listened to the ever quieting sound of the zebra leaping from tree to tree, he guessed he was heading to a patch of trees that was closest to the town.

Cartanis returned to the sanctuary of his mind, *now the first thing I need to know is the anatomy of these horses, so what I have to do is find my way to a library. I do hope that this village has one.* It was at that finished thought he was pulled from his mind by a noise, it sounded like something was cutting through the air. *Wha-* before his thought was finished the sound ended in a loud clang against metal. It came from the direction Ted had headed off in. As Cartanis searched the open area between the forest and the town, he saw a silver helmet rolling across the dirt, not long after a small blue Pegasus crashed to the ground in a rainbow streak. Where was Ted? As Cartanis looked about wondering what happened to his friend, he heard a shout from where the Pegasus fell.

When he looked back, a small crème colored and pink mane Pegasus stood over the collapsed blue one. Ted was standing a few feet from both of them, a shining blade extended from his outstretched hoof. *WHAT ARE YOU DOING!* Cartanis thought. The crème Pegasus seemed to be staring Ted down. As Ted lowered his hidden weapon, the situation seemed diffused. He and the mare piggybacked the blue one towards town.

*Well I hope that's all the drama I get to witness today,* Ted thought to himself. Resolving to simply walk into town as Andur had done earlier, double checking to make sure his robes covered his flank. Trotting down the cobblestone road taking much the same path Andur did. He stopped where Andur did to see a white stallion on the roof of his home, patting a tile into position on the rooftop.

A young stallion emerged from the household, "OK Dad, I am off to help at the farm."

"Alright Dodge, stay safe and be back before nightfall."

As Cartanis watched Dodge walk past him, he worked up courage to ask a question. "Excuse me, Dodge is it?" The young stallion stopped and affirmed Cartanis' question with a nod, "Do you happen to know of where I might find a library around here."

Dodge took a second and thought, "Sorry, I know we have a library, but I haven't really ever been there. Maybe some other pony would know?"

Cartanis thanked the young stallion, before heading off deeper into town. *He barely even flinched at my scars. Maybe these ponies are more accepting than originally thought.* As he walked through town, a few other ponies did stare at him. But in a more pitiful way than he would have initially expected, *perhaps many were hurt in whatever befell this place, I must look like someone who recently recovered.* As he pondered what to do about finding the library, he decided to try and ask for directions again. Looking around the village square there were many a pony, unicorn, and pegasus at work. But one was standing in front of what appeared to be a bakery, happily smiling and giving out some food to ponies here and there. Cartanis was rather hungry, he hadn't done much more than picked at the burnt stew that was given to him that morning a scant hour ago.

Cartanis approached the booth that was set up, a rather cheery pink pony said in an ecstatic voice, "Hi! Welcome to Sugarcube corner, you here for your free cupcake?"

*Directions can wait, these look delicious.* Cartanis thought to himself, "I would love a free cupcake."

The vendor cheerily smiled as she grabbed a cupcake and set it on a plate in front of him. Cartanis, with probably the least amount of manners he ever used, ate the whole thing in one bite. Chewing it and enjoying the flavor of blueberry before swallowing. He felt something stuck in his throat; he coughed a little at first, and then hawked uncontrollably as his body forced the object out of his throat. Out of his mouth flew a small pink object, which landed back on the plate. The vendor gasped loudly, "You got the pink ticket! You know what that means!"

Catching his breath from what just happened Cartanis responded, "umm... no, I don't."

"Well then looks like I'll just have to explain it to you." The vendor disappeared behind the booth; Cartanis heard a soft click of a switch. Then the vendor appeared from behind the booth and asked, "Are you ready?" with a large smile on her face again.

"Maybe?" Cartanis began.

The vendor then leaped high into the air, Cartanis was astonished and let his mouth drape open. Not believing the sight of a pony leaping a few stories into the air. His amazement, however, was cut short by the sound of an explosion. Suddenly Cartanis found himself horrified as he was once again unable to breathe, his lungs began frantically pulling for air while at the same time attempting to force out something that was stuck in his throat. He attempted to ask for help, "Huuurgss... Ferrrr..." and various other noises were all he was able to make. The pink mare was dancing and singing for a moment before she realized what happened.

"Oh no," She zipped off the booth and down to Cartanis as he fell over, wheezing and gasping. "Please don't be mad, it only had a five percent chance of extreme misfire. I didn't think that would happen, it was supposed to be so cool!"

Cartanis could feel himself start changing colors.

"Pinkie Pie, What's going on?" A new voice said.

"Oh Twilight, please help he's choking on a cupcake."

"OK quick, the heimhoof maneuver. Stand him up."

Cartanis was hoisted up by the pink one, as he was held in a braced stance that had him hanging like a scarecrow out in front of Pinkie Pie. His vision was starting to go, stars clouded his vision. But he could make out the backside of a purple pony, one leg reared for a buck. Then he felt a collision right below his chest cavity, the ballistic junk food flew out of his mouth with the force of pressure exerted on his lungs. Cartanis took a deep strained breath as he coughed up more bits and pieces of the item from his throat. As he was let go he barely managed to catch himself, seeing the offending strangler cupcake on the ground. Slowly regaining his breath, Cartanis found his footing again, "Thanks..." he cringed a little. A spot right beneath his chest cavity stung whenever he breathed too deeply, "Oh, that's going to hurt bad later."

"Sir? Are you OK?"

Cartanis turned to look at a purple unicorn staring with concern on her face; she cringed a little when she got a good look at him. "Oh, I'll be fine. Just think you bruised me a bit."

Twilight could tell the scared blue unicorn was putting on a brave face. "Would you please allow us to at least escort you to the clinic? I don't think a pony of your age should take a hit like that and just try to walk it off."

The blue unicorn's eyes dodged around, like he was trying to think of something. "Well, that would be a fine idea. But I really must make my way to the library."

Twilight smiled, "Oh well I happen to be the librarian of this town, so I can take you there AFTER we go to the clinic."

The blue unicorn smiled, "Well I suppose I don't have an excuse now do I."

Pinkie Pie spoke up, "I'm really sorry sir, next time I got to remember to have more cannon and less cupcake in my cupcake cannon. Or maybe less cannon and more cupcake" She then turned to Twilight, "I'll catch up, I got to clean up my half destroyed cupcake booth first."

"OK Pinkie Pie."

Twilight helped the blue unicorn steady himself for a moment before they began to walk along the road, taking turns at intersections as Twilight pointed them out. Eventually Cartanis spoke up, "Excuse me miss Twilight, but may I ask you a question?"

"Sure... mister?" Twilight said leaning on the last word to imply a question.

"Just call me Professor."

"OK shoot Professor."

"What happened to your quaint little hamlet here, I mean, on a good day I am sure it is beautiful. But it looks like something came along and tried to blow all your houses down. So to speak."

Twilight's face became sullen, "Well three days ago, we were all just having a lovely day. I was in the library with my friend Rainbow Dash, when it hit. It was like HUGE thunderclap had happened right next to the town. Almost every window was destroyed, rooftops were thrown off of the tops of houses, and even doors came off hinges. If that wasn't bad enough, ponies that were outside all suffered some form of trauma to either their soft tissue

or ears. Although I hear the town got the short end of the stick, apparently Apple Acre's was hit harder than us. I still have machines contemplating all the data, but if I had to guess, it probably originated somewhere out in the Everfree Forest."

Professor seemed to slow to a halt at the mentioning of the forest, "Which direction would this forest be?"

"Over there to the West."

Twilight noticed that Professor seemed to pale slightly and his eyes dilate slightly, *Dear lord, that... that is a lot of energy for an explosion to do that.* "Well what of the forest in that direction?" he pointed towards the east.

"Oh, that's Whitetail Wood. Not much ever happens there, well not at least in comparison to the Everfree. Kind of funny to, they actually meet up at a point to the south."

Cartanis muddled over an idea in his head, contemplating the journey they had taken. *If the Everfree is the dangerous one, then it is probably where we started. As we never encountered much after we broke line from the swampy areas and made our way into the more tree filled area. So we had advanced through Everfree and headed into town from Whitetail wood.*

Twilight waved a hoof in front of his face, breaking his concentration, "You OK Professor?"

"Oh um yes, it's just that-"

"-he failed his perception checks and forgot his hat!" Interrupted Pinkie Pie, who was standing behind Professor.

"Yes, yes that's it. Thank you very much Miss Pie." He said, glad to shake off the bothersome question.

"Please just call me Pinkie." Pinkie Pie said, as she outstretched the hat towards Professor.

Professor looked at the hat for a moment, a little worry on his face. He swiped at the brim, cleanly whooshing past as the hat remained in the hoof of Pinkie Pie.

"Come on Professor, don't tell me you junked your dexterity just to get an extra core ability score." Pinkie Pie said in a sarcastic tone.

He tried again, then again a little faster and with a furrowed brow. "Stupid foundational law, REVEAL YOURSELF TO ME!" He shouted, a small shock of electricity sparking off his busted horn. But to no avail, he was still unable to grab the hat. Cartanis realized he was creating a scene, and backed off a little. He had seen Unicorns use some form of telepathy to move objects before, so he copped out. "Hat. Heel." The top hat floated from Pinkie's hoof and to the wizards head, smoothly settling and descending the monocle to float in front of his right eye. "Shall we move on?"

"Wait, Professor. Why were you unable to grab your hat from Pinkie's hoof?"

Professor turned and looked at her with his old eyes, "That may be a story for another day, but for now let's get this clinic business over with." he continued past the duo and waited at the corner, not sure what way to go.

"Hey Pinkie."

"Yeah Twilight."

"You ever wonder what happened to him to make him look so..." She scratched at her chin thinking of a word, "traveled."

"I'm not sure what you mean Twilight."

"Well for starters, he has all those doodads and doohickeys around his waist."

"Maybe he likes to collect things."

"What about those robes, I haven't even seen Rarity make stuff like that. Runes and things glowing at intervals and when he does certain things. Then there is his face, I mean it isn't like it makes him bad or anything. But there is no way those scars are only a few days old."

"Well maybe he got them when he was fighting a dragon!"

"What?"

"Yeah, yeah like in a dungeon full of monsters. At the end he fought the dragon and scored that sweet top hat with the floating monocle."

Twilight laughed a bit, "Sure Pinkie Pie, sure. Well if he won't talk about it now I won't force it. But I have my eye on him."

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Twilight was in the waiting room reading a magazine, Pinkie Pie sitting patiently next to her with a book writing down party ideas. It had been nearly an hour, she expected Professor to be nearly done. "Twilight Sparkle, is there a Twilight Sparkle here." the receptionist said.

Twilight approached the desk, "Yes?"

"Nurse Tenderheart will be out in a moment with Professor's results." the receptionist stated.

Soon after Twilight thanked the Receptionist for the information, Nurse Tenderheart rounded the corner, clipboard hanging around her neck. "Hello Miss Sparkle, Professor will be out in a minute he's still collecting his things. But I wanted to talk to you about a few discoveries."

"Discoveries?"

"Well you see, First let me tell you he shall be fine. It seems when you administered the Heimhoof maneuver, the kick was a little harder than it should've been. He is just bruised below the chest cavity, slight discoloration nothing major. But, what is really something is how healthy he is."

"Really?"

"He told us he was in his mid fifties, and sure on the outside he certainly looks it with that salt and pepper mane and such. But on the inside from our tests, his heart beats regularly and strong. No sign of any significant Arrhythmia. His lungs work well, the spine is rather straight for one so old, he was also rather spry and alert for one his age as well. Although there was one problem."

"Is it bad?"

"It depends on how you look at it. He seemed unable to grasp things with only one hoof. It seemed to vex him, all his other motor functions checked out though. I wondered if it had something to do with his horn being broken like it is, maybe latent trauma had produced some form of paralysis. But he was perfectly capable of lifting the magic practice weight a few feet off the ground, as well as move all the joints in his front and back legs."

"Well I guess that really is strange."

"What is actually quite strange, Is that Professor doesn't have his cutie mark either. He was rather shy when told to remove his robes and such, but I guess he's just a little sensitive about being so old and not having found his calling yet."

All this information just piqued more of Twilight's curiosity,

"Awww... I don't know what I'd do if I didn't know how much fun parties were to plan and have." Pinkie Pie frowned.

At that point Professor rounded the corner from the examination room, fully dressed with a light smile on his face. "Told you I would be fine Miss Twilight. Now let's see about that Library."

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Spike was getting tired of all this book carrying. Professor had taken up a spot on a balcony at the top of a flight of stairs, every couple of minutes or so Spike would get called up there and he would want a new book. One time Spike got him the biggest book he had seen in a while, he hoped it would've kept him busy longer. But he barely made it down to the bottom of the flight of stairs before he got called up there again, wanting another obscure textbook from across the library.

Twilight walked through the front door, followed by Pinkie Pie. "Thanks for helping with the shop cleanup Twilight." She said.

"No problem Pinkie Pie, I'm sure Mister and Misses Cake feel the same way."

Spike walked over to them, "Hey Twilight."

"Hi Spike, how is Professor doing with his reading?" Twilight asked.

"Well he has gone through a lot of books, I'm not sure if I'm not finding him the right book or if he's just skimming through them."

"What makes you say that?"

"At first I thought maybe I was getting him the wrong book, but every once in a while he just mentions what a good read it was and spouts some nonsensical gobbity gook about magic and foundational laws. One time when I went up there he was gone, his hat was just sitting alone on the reading desk. So I set the book down and go looking for him downstairs just to hear him shout for another book from the top."

This Professor character better not be up to something. Twilight thought to herself. "Well either way Spike, it looks like we'll be having more than just us four at lunch today, Ditzzy Doo is coming over."

Spike's interest was piqued, "Is she going to bring her special muffins." Spike just adored Ditzzy's cinnamon muffins.

"You bet" Twilight said with a smile.

"Hey Spike where is Professor right now, I forgot to give him his prize for finding the pink ticket." Pinkie Pie pointed to the platter she was balancing on her back.

"Oh he's up those stairs leading to the outside private reading balcony."

"Thanks Spike." Pinkie pie began hopping over to the stairs.

"I better go with you," Spike said, "At the rate he goes through books he probably wants one again already, and it's been longer than usual"

"Well I'll be setting up the lunch table, Ditzzy Doo should be here any minute." Twilight's horn began to glow as she moved around chairs and tables making a seating arrangement for lunchtime.

Pinkie Pie and Spike continued towards the stairs and began walking up them.



I may have finally cracked it, Cartanis thought to himself. He opened his messenger book and began a message. I believe that I may have finally figured out the reason why Andur and I are still able to make use of our powers, although the implications are rather grand. I think it could simply be inferred that somehow we still have connections to our home dimension, I've looked through countless books at their library that speak of a unicorn's magic. This had revealed how the unicorns make use of magic in their world. There seem to be two ways unicorns use magic, either a direct link to the ley lines of their world. Using the magic as a torrent that courses through them with feeling, they seem to usually exhibit remarkable self control so that they don't accidentally let loose power in a fit of emotion. Much like a Sorcerer would do. The other kind are less powerful, but only in the summoning of that power aspect. In fact they might be considered more dangerous by some, they trade raw power for exemplary control over the forces of magic. Capable of remarkable feats of not force but new spells, capable of new things never thought possible before. I believe we can refer to them as Wizards, much like me.

Now Ander. Cartanis thought, continuing his message. You might ask how this tells me we still draw power from our home dimension, at first I thought I had simply been in tuned with these ley-lines and was using magic as they do. Two things disprove this, the first being is that whenever I use my magic, my horn fails to ignite and glow as theirs do. Also, after looking into their beliefs and gods I found they had very few if any religions, the general consensus of the population is the belief in their truly god-like ruler Princess Celestia. She holds power over the sun, making it rise in the dawn and set at night. At first glance to this I thought, HAHA a pony version of Pelor theory correct. Then I read into Celestia a little more. Apparently she holds no power of miraculous healing, and is not apt to smite beings of evil with golden rays of light. Although she did banish her evil sister for a thousand years, before she was reformed and turned into a functional member of society somehow. Even with all of this information, I cannot explain HOW we are drawing power from our home dimension, but simply from the evidence that you still draw favor from your god we ARE somehow able to

still do so. Just as simple as that, there is still too much uncertainty to know the exact reason.

As Cartanis let the report sink into the paper, he felt his magic tripwire go off. He then heard someone shouting, "Oh Professor, I got your prize for the pink ticket here. Where are you hiding?"

Oh Great, its Pinkie Pie. She's far more curious than that baby dragon. She'll surely stumble upon me. Cartanis quickly thought of a plan.

[M/M/M/M]

Once again Professor had somehow managed to disappear without going down the stairs. Spike just sighed, "Well I guess he's not here."

"Oh don't be silly of course he's here. He just wants to play some hide and seek!" Pinkie Pie began hoping about the balcony, looking over the edge seeing if he was hanging off the side, "Not here." She looked about more of the balcony, checking waste baskets and even looking through the branches that covered the balcony like a rooftop, which provided privacy from prying eyes. As she approached the top hat, both heard a voice from the stairway.

"Excuse me, could someone please help me with these books. They are quite heavy." Both realized it sounded like the Professor.

"Hey Professor, you forgot your hat again!" Pinkie Pie said reaching for it on the floor.

"FORGET THE HAT!" Both jumped at the anger in the voice of Professor, "just help me with these books."

"Fine, sheesh, you old grump." Spike stated as they both headed for the staircase.

As they walked down the stairs they met Twilight about halfway down, "Hey Twilight, where's Professor it isn't nice to leave him hanging onto all those books." Pinkie Pie stated.

"What? But I heard him up there, I thought he was on the balcony asking for help."

They all looked at each other with puzzled expressions. "Oh my, what kind of roadblock do we have going on here?" Surprising them all was Professor, standing a few stairs above the trio in the stairway. A book floating next to his head.

"Wow, you're really good at hide and seek Professor." Pinkie Pie said.

"Why yes, I do believe I am." Professor said with a smile on his face.

"Wait a minute." Spike spoke up, "You weren't hiding up there, all there is on that balcony is a waste basket, some desks, and a whole lot of empty space. There is no way you were up there."

The blue unicorn just smiled, "Well did you check behind the desk?" before he trotted his way triumphantly past them.

"Then why did we hear your voice from the stairway?"

"Oh were you sure it wasn't just a ghost of some sort? I didn't hear anything when I was behind the desk."

Spike just sighed and followed, not wanting to waste any more breath on the strange old unicorn.

Twilight just patted her hoof against her chin as she watched Professor walk by. *He might be crafty, but I'll find a way to see through your ruses.* She then heard a knock on the door, "Oh that must be Ditzzy Doo."



The party of five laughed at jokes and talked about their day at the lunch table, all except for Ditzzy Doo and Professor. One was lost in thought, absent from the conversation and staring at his food. The other, a small grey Pegasus with a yellow mane and crossed eyes, looked at Professor with her sad eyes. She thought that he looked so depressed. She took her pen and paper, wrote something on it and passed it to him.

Cartanis was drawn from thought when the Pegasus known as Ditzzy Doo gave him a note, he opened it *Are you OK? You look so alone, even when you're surrounded by all your friends.* Cartanis looked up from the note; the Pegasus had been giving notes to them since she arrived. "That is very

sweet of you to care for me, Ditzzy. I'm just a little distracted, I found out so much stuff today. Only to find myself with a few unanswered questions, it seems this library is missing a book or two I need."

Another note was given to him, *What book are you missing?*

"Have you heard of a series called Subjects: for Derpies written by a pony by the name of Derpy Hooves?"

Ditzzy gave a wide grin; *I might know a thing or two about it. Why?*

"Well they are missing a book from the collection, Anatomy of the Equestrian brain: for Medical Derps. I was so close to figuring out why my hooves won't work correctly."

Cartanis was nudged by the Pegasus; he looked up to see her with a book in her mouth. He took it from her using his telekinesis spell. On the cover it read, *Anatomy of the Equestrian brain: for Medical Derps*. Cartanis looked up to see Ditzzy grinning with pride, her eyes crossed. *Where have I seen that before?* Cartanis thought. Then he looked down to the author name on the cover of the book he was just given. The O's in Derpy Hooves were two crossed amber eyes. Cartanis looked back over to Ditzzy, he asked for a piece of paper. He quickly jotted down a note and gave it back to her.

Shock read on Ditzzy's face, *how did he find out*. Her mind was frantic from being discovered, one part of her wanted to scream, even though she couldn't thanks to her paralyzed vocal cords. She quickly wrote back to him, *Please don't tell anypony. If it gets out that Derpy Hooves was me, my books might not sell anymore.*

Professor wrote back, *Don't trouble yourself Ditzzy Doo, I have more secrets than you could ever hope to amount. Although I must say your series is one of the easiest to understand and best researched information guides I have ever had the pleasure of reading.*

Ditzzy Doo smiled at the note and she replied, *You are a gentlecolt and a scholar, my friend.*

Professor grinned at the last bit, "Well if lunch has concluded I must return to my studies." as he got up from the table.

"Wait!" Pinkie Pie said. The room was quieted by the suddenness of the command. "You forgot your prize from earlier today." Pinkie Pie picked the platter off the floor next to her and set it on the table. Lifting the lid off the platter revealed a large cake, "A free Mister Cake's famous carrot cake."

Cartanis figured he could have one slice before he went back to his study.



Twilight watched as Professor walked back up the stairs to the private balcony. Pinkie Pie said goodbye to everyone and went off too apparently see Applejack about something, Ditzzy Doo left as well. This was Twilight's chance to see what the Professor was up to on the balcony. She told Spike to wait as she went to check on the Professor. She approached the stairway as quietly as possible, looking up it to the outside she could make out the silhouette of Professor as he just reached the top. Seizing the chance, she quickly made her way after him, using as much stealth as possible.

Once at the top she managed to catch a glimpse of the Professor, as he sat down in front of a desk. Floating the book down from above him, he set it upon the desk. It was then opened to the front page.

"Oh-ho-ho, silly me." the Professor stated to himself. He then cast a hoof out towards the stairwell, she froze thinking she had been seen. Instead Twilight felt a wave of energy appear behind her, before it seemed to fade away till she could barely detect it without trying very hard.

That was close, she thought, for a second I thought the stairwell wasn't as dark as it looked. But his eyes must be keyed to the outdoor light and not the indoor dark of the stairwell. What Twilight saw next made her jaw drop.

With a commanding voice, Cartanis said, "Hat. Read." The monocle in front of his right eye hummed to life. Cartanis' eyes slowly taking on a green hue, then the monocle sent out tethers of energy along the book. Grasping and manipulating the paper, it flipped a page and the title ran through Cartanis' mind *Anatomy of the Equestrian Brain: for Medical Derps*. Then the next page, and page after that one, so on and so forth the energy tendrils flew around the book. Each page they skimmed over appeared into Cartanis' mind, *motor control, basics, no not there, need to go deeper*. The energy was fluctuating into his mind definitions and symptoms, causes and

effects. *Where would you put information on a nearly involuntary function?* Then he realized, *infancy! Of course. Something learned early on as an essential skill.*

The book's pages flipped wildly as he looked for it, freezing in place as the chapter was found. Key words then flew into Cartanis' mind, *Infancy, Parietal lobe development. Limb dexterity in relation to age in months, by the first year all younglings should be able to use their slight magic to lock objects onto their hoofs. Damage or failure to properly learn the technique of grasping objects with one hoof can lead to poor motor skills later in life. In some cases, older ponies with head trauma can lose the ability to grasp things in one hoof and if not treated correctly they may never learn the technique again, proper care and rehabilitation must be performed in order to re-learn this important technique.* Cartanis' allowed the book to flow into his mind, taking in everything he may have missed. Once the book was done being read, the energy coalesced and receded into the monocle which then dimmed. In the back of his mind Cartanis heard a familiar voice *information recorded, personal copy made and awaits you in the library.*

Cartanis mulled over the book in his mind, he coalesced a ball of fire and ice over the top of his hoof, manipulating it with his power. *All ponies have some level of magic in them?* He summoned a few other simple spells he knew, a lightning sphere, and some silvery magic missiles danced around him. He always thought a little clearer when he had to focus his power like this. *Maybe Heratio can cross reference some of the other bo-* He felt his tripwire go off, but it had sent the warning to two beings within its radius. Alert to danger his spells ignited with power, the fire snaked around him defensively, jagged pillars of ice coiling through it. The orb increased in size and the lightning within began to boom with power. The missiles multiplied three-fold to create a swarm ready for attack. Cartanis was ready for anything and looked towards the staircase. *Someone downstairs may have set off my tripwire, but only a few things can infiltrate my intricate spell designs. Gods help this world if it's what I think it is,* Cartanis began to cast mental blocks and countermeasures. *How great is this one's power if it survived the void?*

Twilight was dumbstruck at the display of magical power. No pony she knew of, not even the teachers in Canterlot had a spell or skill to do what he just did. Then she felt a sudden shock of danger at the back of her mind,

the surprise of the feeling made her squeal. Then she was blinded by a light which appeared a few inches from her face.

"Twilight." she heard Professor say in a dissatisfied tone.

Twilight turned to run down the stairs, if he had spells like those who knows what he really was. But as she turned her back feet tripped over each other, sending her tumbling down the stairway. The first hit against the stairs struck her on the chin, knocking her unconscious. Before she spun through the air for a moment and fell again on her back this time, continuing on her fatal fall.

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Cartanis walked as fast as he could down the stairs, he hoped he had been fast enough. Spike waited at the bottom, "What happened Professor!"  
Worry apparent on his face.

Cartanis responded, "I think she saw a little more than she would've liked to."

"What?"

"Don't worry about that, where did she go."

"Oh, umm she slid across the floor and-" but Spike didn't need to finish, Cartanis saw her at the opposite wall.

He trotted over and checked the slumped unicorn; a heartbeat answered his touch to her throat. "Phew, still alive. Looks like I still got it." he saw a welt under her chin. *That must have knocked her out*, he thought. Giving a few other cursory glances about the unconscious mare he only noticed the cut on her back from where he believed she fell the second time.

"Is she going to be OK Professor?"

"She should be fine; I think I managed to use my magic in time. Nothing felt broken, a few bandages and she won't even have to worry about scarring." Cartanis wondered if he should just leave right then, Twilight had obviously been scared from what she had seen. A part of Cartanis was sad, *I hoped you could be one I would find a common goal with, you had that drive in*



*you for knowledge like me.* He turned to leave the Library, "Spike, I think I better go. She might not want me around when she gets up."

Then Twilight began to rouse herself, the first thing she saw was Spike.

"Twilight your OK!" the baby dragon then hugged her around the head.

Twilight remembered what she saw, "Where is Professor, I don't think he's a regular unicorn!" She looked around and saw Professor standing beside her; she let loose a yelp as she backed away.

"Look Twilight let me-"

"No, you don't do anything." Twilight readied her magic, binding Professor in a consortium of telekinetic power. Hovering him a few feet off the ground.

Unable to move, Cartanis simply looked toward Twilight. "Why must we do it this way?"

"Because I want answers, and I don't want to deal with any of your funny business."

"Fine then ask away."

"Where are you from!"

"Canterlot." Cartanis stated blankly.

"You're lying, I'm from Canterlot and I never heard of you before. Now tell me."

"You wouldn't believe me." Cartanis felt the wards strengthen around him.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because there is nothing in your world that defines what we traversed to get here. There was hardly an explanation for it in my world."

"What do you mean WE?"

"Are they really that important? I'm the one in front of you." Cartanis' messenger book began to hum and glow. It floated off his belt and towards

Twilight. It hovered a few inches from her face; she opened it once before it slammed shut in front of her. She opened it again, straining against the force that willed the book to shut. She peered inside and saw the language she couldn't understand.

"This language isn't from anywhere in Equestria."

"Do you believe me now?"

"Maybe." Twilight thought of one last question. "How did you get those scars?"

"Please don't make me answer that."

"Why not? Did you get it from the last pony that confronted you about this stuff?" She was straining to keep the book open.

"No I just would like to leave that part buried where it belongs."

"You're not in a position to order me around, so don't beat around the bush."

"There are some things that you don't need to know about me, if you want to know where I hail from. It's a nice little city called Belli-" but he was cut off from the pressure of the wards against him.

"What did I just say about beating around the bush, how did you get your scars!"

Cartanis couldn't breathe, and the lack of an answer was only making Twilight constrict him harder.

"Uh Twilight, maybe you should back off a little." Spike said noticing Twilights horn was glowing unusually bright.

"No, he tried to kill, He's dangerous." Twilight seemed to be making less sense as she continued rambling.

Cartanis realized he might very well have to dig up his past, but he couldn't when he was dead from asphyxiation. *Just enough to weaken the wards*, he thought to himself. He called upon the magic within himself and

began making an arcane barrier extend out beyond himself, lessening the push of the wards from Twilight.

"Get back Spike, he's trying something."

Once he could get a breath, Cartanis spoke up, "I got them from the one I Loved."

"Well if she loved you why would she try to hurt you that badly?"

"She didn't mean to hurt me." Cartanis could feel the wards press against his barrier harder than before.

"But you just said she gave them to you!"

"Twilight, please, this is getting dangerous, you're going to overexert your control. You don't have an infinite power supply!"

"She never loved you, somepony who loves another doesn't hurt them!"

Cartanis snapped, without thinking it through he reacted to her accusation; with force. Lighting erupted from his person, shattering the wards around him and a few nearby bookshelves. Landing on his feet he glared at Twilight, "How dare you call what we had anything but that!" Cartanis was stopped when he saw a look of pain on Twilight's face. *That isn't possible, I didn't hit her I destroyed her wards.*

"Stop, don't come any closer, dangerous, evil!"

*I thought she was a wizardly one, but if she hurts when her spells are broken then that means.* Cartanis noticed that Twilight's eyes had begun glowing intensely white. He felt the magic of the land rushing towards her, defending her. "Twilight you've got to calm down." But fear remained evident on Twilight's face; Cartanis doubted she even heard him.

"What's going on Professor?" Spike shouted to him.

"Spike get away from me, NOW!" Cartanis shouted to the scared baby dragon.

"Stay away from spike, I WON'T LET YOU HURT HIM!" Twilight shouted in an ethereal voice that went from concern to pure anger as she faced Cartanis.

Cartanis mustered all the power he had left and created a barrier around him while the baby dragon hid under a table half a room away. The rage on Twilight's face was apparent as Cartanis felt the surge of power from the ley lines of the world explode through her. Knocking books from shelves, and breaking tables. "Why is she doing that?" Spike asked.

"She isn't herself anymore, she's operating on pure emotion. And right now it's about to focus in on me." Cartanis braced himself, Twilight's horn lit into a magnificence of light as her mane erupted into golden flame. The Unicorn unleashed a torrent of fire upon Cartanis; it streaked and sparked against his barrier.

Cartanis ran through the possible outcomes in his mind. *I either hold out until she gets consumed by her own power. Or I let her hit me with everything she's got and hope she regains her senses before she kills me.* Both options seemed to end in bad ways, and he was quite sure he wouldn't be able to hold off against the force of a world bearing down on him.

*May I make a suggestion sir?* Cartanis heard the voice of his hat Heratio in his mind.

*What?*

*Prove to her you are no threat.*

*How would I do that, she can't hear me!*

*I could initiate a mind link ritual between you and her, you show her the memory of you casting Feather Fall upon her when she was falling.*

*That wouldn't work, we need stronger emotions to pierce her mind. My concern for a pony I barely know won't shake her out of it.*

*Then show her what happened to Viranda.*

The idea struck to Cartanis' heart. *But I would have to do a cold transmission for the emotions to register properly, and how do we know she would respond to seeing the world with humans.*

*I never stated it would be an easy plan, and I have adsorbed more than enough information to alter the experience to fit her mind effortlessly.*

Cartanis knew he had no choice, he had resolved that. But nothing could prepare him for reliving that day without the knowledge of how it would end. He could feel the barrier losing its battle against the hurricane of energy outside it; his control was waning under the pressure. *Activate it Heratio!*

Lights erupted from the monocle, drawing symbols and glyphs across the floor around him. More glyphs appeared between Cartanis and Twilight. Siphoning power from the surrounding charged atmosphere, the runes glowed and Cartanis soon found himself fired into the history of his mind. His memory of the past few minutes were flying from his mind peeling back the layer of time in his life, then days, weeks ,years, decades. Eventually slamming home to that fateful day.



Cartanis Awoke with a shout, he looked about the room, slowly calming as he was back in reality. *What a dream, dragons and dungeons. What did I eat to think up that?* He heard a knock at his door, "Come in" he shouted. Through the door an orange unicorn mare with fiery red hair and deep crimson eyes walked in. "Viranda, my love what are you doing here?"

"Don't you know what time it is Cartanis?"

"Why what-?" he looked to the clock at his desk to see it was four 'o' clock, "the demonstration is in fifteen MINUTES!" He rushed over to the mirror next to his clock. The young blue unicorn quickly checked over his mane, rich and black it was short to his head. His face unmarked, young, and full of life "How's my mane?"

"Its fine my dear, but we best hurry if we wish to make it in time."

"Good point."

"Well maybe, you should wear a hat."

"Oh please dear, a wizard in a hat? Don't you know how cliché that is? We want to make an impression not a joke." Cartanis turned to see she had a box floating in front of his face, a small grin on her face. He took it and opened it, inside was a small ring.

"Happy twenty-eighth birthday, I got you a wife."

"Oh Viranda, how did you know?" he said sarcastically a smile graced his lips.

"Well we have been seeing each other for a few years now, and I know how you like to procrastinate. SO... I felt I might have to take the leap of faith on this one."

"Of course you do, and of course I will take you as my wife." They nuzzled each other; Cartanis slipped the ring into his jacket pocket before they galloped off towards the University of Belliron.

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"Are they still here?" Cartanis asked an assistant as they entered through a back door to the labs.

"Yes but we're almost run them to their wits end here, they want to see the new teleportation spell." the unicorn said in an annoyed tone.

"Well Cartanis and Viranda are here now aren't we? So let's get started!"

They walked through the doors to the show room, dignitaries from interested schools of magic sat amongst the bleachers out in front of the stage. "Excuse us for the delay, there was a wait on supplies. But now we can get started."

Cartanis took his place in the design upon the ground, within the circle meant for controller. His soon to be wife Viranda stood across from him, within a square meant for the source. He turned towards the crowd, "What is it about teleportation that we take for granted?"

Cartanis waited simply for effect before continuing, "That it is safe. When in fact this can't be farther from the truth. But we here have discovered a new means to traverse the planes and the realms of mortals. No longer will we

fear being thrown off course because of some meddling outside force, or from the failings of a novice. With our new design of teleportation ritual, anyone with magical power will be able to traverse the infinite gaps between spaces and find themselves safely at their destination. Maybe even one day to places never before thought possible." He turned back to the center of the ritual ground, "Begin!"

Assistants mingled about in the background, finishing connections in the ritual drawing and bringing forth a container with seals and barriers placed around it. They set it down in the center between the two of them. Cartanis looked towards Viranda, and said the same thing they had said to each other the first time they met, "Think you can control your power Sorceress?"

"Only if you don't explode from my raw might, Wizard." she said with a grin.

"Release the Paradox agent." a spark of magic was thrown into the container, unsealing it. Opening to give a dark stone to the light. Upon being bathed in atmosphere it began reacting, *here we go* Cartanis thought to himself. He sent some of his magic into the ritual ground, signaling for Viranda to begin channeling the arcana of the world. After the circuit was complete, the glyphs and runes etched into the floor ignited brightly, Cartanis felt his soul leave his form as he joined in consciousness with Viranda.

There we go, by the book. Now let's contain this shall we? Using the almost infinite power being produced from the sorceress, he formed a barrier around the unstable piece of matter, constantly shifting it to deal with the new forces as they appeared. Preventing it from reacting with anything else. The Anti-matter like substance was therefore unable to complete its reaction, yet it still attempted to react with the magical forces around it. A light shone at the core of the sphere, growing slowly, and only as fast as Cartanis allowed. *Just got to wait for it to hit the sweet spot.* Shortly afterwards a small dark hole appeared in the center of the basketball sized sphere of light. Assistants could be heard cheering around them.

Good work dear, He heard within his mind.

But something at his body pulled him to take a moment to look through his eyes once more. He noticed one of the full lab geared assistants began walking close to the ritual, *what's he doing?* The assistant took a vial from

his coat and slammed it against the ritual on the floor. Cartanis felt something change in the reaction at the center. The offending assistant removed the mask to reveal a face which was sleek like a chameleons, cats eyes staring bitterly at the crowd behind Cartanis.

"FOR THE TEIFLING THEOCRACY!" it shouted, drawing a dagger from under its coat and galloping into the crowd, others like him appeared from shadows and dark corners of the room. Cartanis could hear the sounds of the struggle, but his attention was drawn back to the ritual.

What did he do! He heard a panicked voice of Viranda in his mind.

The ritual was spiraling out of control, the small energy sphere they had made, was attempting to grow and consume more. *He broke the ritual, I can't keep the containment field up. The void is going to spillover to our side!*

Is there anything you can do?

Cartanis ran through options in his mind, *can you cut off your connection, break the power supply!*

I tried, I'm stuck in an inverse loop I can't halt power because it keeps running back into me. Can you teleport us out of range, maybe take it away from here. Let it detonate somewhere it won't hurt anyone?

Cartanis tried to activate the summoning to move them, but he found only silence to his call. *I can't, whatever that tiefling did, it erased parts of the ritual and changed them to work differently. We are stuck here. I can't think of anything else. If this thing goes off Viranda the whole city may as well go with it.*

He felt Viranda beginning to become sad. *There is still one thing that can be done.*

Cartanis knew of what she was thinking, *NO, if you do that... your soul!*

What else would you have us do?

We've studied the void for years Viranda, we can navigate it. We can make it back.

Would you punish all those other souls to nothingness just for us?

You know I don't want that, but I also don't want to lose you.

I know you don't my love, but we can't discuss this. It must simply be done.

Cartanis frantically thought. *There has to be a way out of this. A way that doesn't involve losing you!*

He felt her beginning to summon more power from the world, the air became charged with silvery arcana.

Please don't leave me, don't leave me to this world.

Don't make this harder than it is love. He could feel her beginning to become elemental, her spirit disappearing against the background noise of the arcane storm coursing through her. *Promise me you won't destroy this life I am giving you.*

I won't, I promise.

You are the only stallion I shall ever love, with all my heart. She said in a caring and loving tone.

And you are the only mare I ever wish to be with forever. Cartanis replied with a steady voice

Cartanis could feel his connection to her slipping; he tried to hold onto her. Even though it was futile. Viranda's spirit shone like a glowing star amidst the storm, glowing brighter and brighter. Until eventually her physical form collapsed to dust from the energies it could not hold. An earth shattering explosion erupted from where she had stood. Cartanis blacked out from the sudden loss of stability and was slammed into his own body once more, whisked away by the energy of it all. With Viranda's spirit no longer tethered to a body, it was scattered amongst the storm. Joining the energies of the world, Viranda was for all intents and purposes; no more



Cartanis roused from his unconscious slumber, he was lying in rubble of the university. Then he remembered what just happened. He tried to stand,

but was greeted by a sharp pain from his right front hoof, as well as the intense burning pain on his face. But he cared not, with three legs he hobbled his way over rubble, trying to get his bearings. *Where is the epicenter*, Cartanis looked about. But it was hard to see with only one good eye. Eventually he made out the shape of the blast and hobbled towards its center. He was not thrown far from it, the arcane storm had destroyed most of the university but the city seemed to be intact.

Cartanis raced to the disaster's center as fast as he could when he spotted it. *There has to be something of you left, anything, I can get you revived. I can get you back.* He wanted to believe his sweet lies, oh how he wanted to. He cleared away rubble next to the epicenter, and under a pile he found something. It was her gauntlet, like an armored sleeve, untouched by the destruction. The various rubies within still simmered with fire. He clutched it with one arm to his chest. Silently weeping whilst sitting alone amidst the destruction. *I won't forget you, ever.*

Cartanis felt a hoof against his shoulder, he pushed it off. Then he raised his head. *Who could be here?* He turned to see an unscathed purple unicorn standing behind him, looking sad with tears welled up in her eyes. "Who are you?" he said with a strange feeling that he had seen her before.

Then he was thrust forward, into the future. Memories flooding back into his mind. Thirty years had passed in but a few seconds. He was lying on the wooden floor of a library, in another world, slightly burned. A very concerned looking unicorn was galloping across the room to his side. *So tired, so... tired.*



Twilight raced to Cartanis' side, the old unicorn had blacked out. "Oh no, oh no, oh no."

"Twilight, are you OK now?" Spike said as he crawled out from under a table.

"I'm fine Spike, but I don't know about Cartanis." Twilight put a hoof to his neck to see that he was still alive from the heartbeat she felt, but it wasn't too strong.

"Who?"

"Its Professor's name, or his real name, I don't know. He did something, showed me who he was, what happened that gave him his scars." She tried to think, maybe he left her something to use in the memory. How did he leave the crater, he reached at something on his waist belt after he found Viranda's gauntlet and then. *Of course*. Twilight rolled the unicorn on his back, and looked for the vial around his belt. She found it right where it was in the memory. She quickly popped the quark out of the vial and poured it down his throat.

For a few anxious seconds nothing happened, and then the burns on the unicorn's body melted away into his flesh. He groaned and stirred, suddenly he was sat upright, "Viranda!" he called out, eyes constricted and shaking. Eventually his breathing slowed, he put a hoof to his face, "Right, ancient history and magic and all that." he stood up, giving himself a good shake. "Well seeing as how I'm still a unicorn I must not be dead." He turned to Twilight, "Well I hope I didn't scare you too much."

Twilight scratched at the floor, "Sorry I jumped to so many conclusions, nearly disintegrated you, and... stuff."

Cartanis looked around, even if it had been a few hours in their minds. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds in the present. He saw where he blocked Twilight's attack; a small charcoal ring was evident of that. Other than a few broken pieces of furniture, nothing was really damaged. "Even when you go crazy, you have some control to it."

"So I guess what you said was true, you really are from... someplace else?"

"Yep" Cartanis returned his gaze to Twilight.

"Can I ask you about something that happened that day?"

"Please Twilight, I just re-experienced my lover's death. You were there for most of it, I don't think you need to ask an old thing like me to go digging that up again."

"It isn't about your wife, I was kind of wondering why your scars didn't heal when you drank the potion."

Cartanis sighed as he felt his face, "The injuries on my face and to my eye were caused by an arcane hell storm, I'm spell-scarred because of it, and

nothing can remove them. As a side effect, my powers had been all but nullified, it took me a long time to get myself back up to speed."

"OK that was all I wanted to know."

Cartanis, remembered what he was going to ask her for before this all began, "Now I know it might sound out of place, but I would like to know if you have something that could be used to read brain activity."

"I think I might have something in my lab."

[M/M/M/M]

Cartanis looked down at the handkerchief in front of him on the table. "Am I all hooked up Twilight?"

Twilight was trotting between various gizmos and doodads around her lab making sure it was running smoothly. "Just let me hook this into the helmet, and you'll be ready to go." Twilight inserted a power coupling into the bulb covered helmet on Cartanis' head, causing them to light up and create a small sustained hum.

Cartanis took out a hoof, gently placed it upon the handkerchief, and lifted his hoof. "Anything?"

Twilight looked over readouts and papers as they were printed. "Well you seem to be using your brain right, it's just that you're not activating a specific region. Maybe you're forgetting something."

It isn't a question of forgetting, it's a question of learning. But how? Cartanis scratched at his chin while he thought of what he could do.

"How did you pick up stuff before you were a pony?"

"I had fingers, you might know them as phalanges. But now that I don't have them, I can't quite make out how you ponies use your strange new perception to pick stuff up." Cartanis swiped at the handkerchief again.

"Well maybe you never lost your fingers."

Cartanis' face wrinkled in confusion, "What?"

"The shock from discovering your new form could've changed what you believe, so to speak. You said that a "human" and us ponies used the same region of our brain to pick things up. Maybe you just don't pick stuff up because without the fingers that you've had your whole life, you don't believe that you can."

Cartanis mulled it over in his mind, "You know Twilight that is actually a rather good theory you have there. Let's test it out shall we." Cartanis put a hoof down on the handkerchief again; he concentrated on making his phantom fingers move. Anything would be better than nothing he thought. At receiving strange old information, Cartanis could feel his brain tickle as it attempted to move a limb it no longer had. *Just something, give me anything!* Cartanis' mind was straining from what it attempted to do. Cartanis thought he felt something, had he grabbed the handkerchief? Quickly he raised his hoof, but the rag remained on the table.

"I guess it's just another busted theory." Twilight said with a sigh.

"No, we are on to something. That time I actually felt something, I need to try it again."

Cartanis closed his eyes, *OK now to put my hoof- no, I mean my hand on the handkerchief.* In his mind's eye he placed his hand on top of the rag, feeling it beneath his hand. *Now just open your hand, relax your fist.* At first not much happened, Cartanis tried to remember the feeling of his hand. A motion so simple that he knew he had to have it somewhere in him, involuntarily waiting for a command. *I can't have forgotten something so easy, not in three days.* Slowly, but surely, he could feel his hand opening, the muscles feeling atrophied from disuse. Now Cartanis had an open hand on the cloth, *just close it into your hand.* Once again his muscles ached; they were so strained as he slowly enveloped the cloth into his hand. But he was making progress, eventually he felt the cloth balled up in his grasp. *Now just,* Cartanis lifted his hand and opened his eyes. He was staring at a blue hoof, with a handkerchief balled up vertically next to it. "YES!"

"Good job!" Twilight had a grin on her face, happy for her friend.

Cartanis let the cloth fall from his hoof, and picked it up again, each time with less effort. He did so again a few times with his other hoof as well. Cartanis grasped his messenger book with one hoof, and opened it with his

other, a smile beaming across his face. He recorded a message, *I did it Andur, I can pick up stuff with one hoof. Words on paper are no good for teaching this skill, oh just wait till I tell you how it works!* He let the message recede into the paper, before closing it. "I feel like celebrating, why don't we go see Pinkie Pie, I kind of want another cupcake before I go off to find my friends."

"Oh, so you're leaving now." Twilight absently scratched at the ground. She still had so many questions.

"Did I say I, well I am pretty sure I meant WE, right Twilight?" Twilight looked up a little surprised. "Besides I think I might still get lost in your quaint little hamlet here."

They proceeded upstairs and outside, off to Sugarcube corner.



As they wandered through the town square on the way to Sugarcube corner, Cartanis took note of how late it was getting. The sun had just started to set, "So you see, when we arrived you could imagine how flabbergasted we were."

"Oh I'm sure if I wound up in your world somehow I would be flabbergasted as well." Twilight thought about something for a moment. "Say Cartanis, when did you happen to arrive in our world?"

Cartanis just sighed and halted, "I know what you're thinking Twilight, and I have been contemplating it as well. There is a correlation between the disaster a few days ago and our timely arrival, I knew something had to of happened when we breached but. I didn't think we would cause all of this misfortune upon your town, when the old team and I experimented with the void we never recalled anything larger than a mouse. Even then the shockwave it produced was significant, but I believe the more complex the creature, the more exponentially powerful the resulting explosion. And there were three of us at the same time."

"That can be an explanation I guess, I know you didn't mean to do that. Now exactly what did your friends turn into?"

"Well my good friend Andur, he turned into a Clydesdale."

"Oh you mean like that pony over there." Twilight motioned to a strong draft pony pulling a cart.

"Oh no he's far larger than that little thing, I would say he's almost the size of your Princess Celestia."

"Whoa, he really would stand out then huh, I must have missed him earlier today."

"As for Ted, he's a zebra, or a zebragus, not really sure what to call him. You didn't have much besides some folklore on Zebras at the library."

"Maybe I can ask Zecora later about them, she might know something."

The two were interrupted from their conversation by a clatter of hooves and the sound of a rickety wagon pulling into town. They looked over to see a team of horses pulling a fancy looking carriage into town. "Oh great." Twilight said putting a hoof to her face.

"Oh great wha-?" Cartanis was stopped mid sentence as the cart screeched to a stop in front of them.

The carriage clicked and opened into a large stage like one would've seen on Broadway, a blue unicorn mare posed in the middle. "The Great and Powerful Trixie," fireworks shot out of the stage and into the air, exploding into fanciful colors. "has RETURNED citizens of Ponyville! Having journeyed from far off lands, the Great and Powerful Trixie," More fireworks shot off into the air, "has returned with new tales of her greatness and mastery of all powerful magic."

A small crowd was drawn by the spectacle, although, very few if anypony looked amused. Most looked rather displeased with the blue unicorn mare. "Um who is she?" Cartanis asked to Twilight.

"WHO asks WHO the Great and Powerful Trixie is!" another volley of fireworks shot off into the night sky. Trixie looked at Cartanis.

"I don't know who you are miss, but I don't think you are that great based on the reception of the crowd here."

"You must be shown Trixie's Greatness, oh lovely assistant!" Trixie clopped her hooves together to summon a griffon from behind the curtains.

"Yeah?" the griffon said in a gruff tone.

"Fetch Trixie that unicorn's top hat would you, Gilda?"

"Whatever." Gilda walked off the stage and towards Cartanis.

He was then face to face with the rather large griffon, "I'm sorry but I can't allow you to take my hat."

"Look dude, it's just a stupid hat, you'll get it back."

Far more sternly, "Excuse me but no, means NO little missy."

Gilda didn't care what he said; she reached for the hat anyway. Only to be stopped by a rush of power, her claw being thrown back by the unicorn's magic, *so you want to play it that way?* "Fine keep your stupid hat."

Cartanis turned to leave with Twilight, only to get the wind knocked out of him. *Gah, I just got that bruise healed too.* Cartanis was slumped against the ground; he could feel that his hat was no longer with him. Looking back towards the stage he could see the griffon give the hat to Trixie. He tried speaking, but he still couldn't catch his breath. He was so disoriented he couldn't find his center to summon magic either.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie," paused to let the fireworks go, "shall send this stallion's hat to the stars, and bring it back. With her own magic."

A large single firework was brought to the middle of the stage; Cartanis' hat was strapped on top of the rocket. *Well if that's all she's going to do, wait.* Horror struck upon his face, *I forgot to close the doorway, if that thing goes off in the wrong place.* Now having a purpose, Cartanis struggled against his dizziness. He had to get to the stage.

The rockets fuse was lit.

Cartanis began to stand.

The fuse approached the rockets base

He was now galloping towards the stage, leaped aboard it, diving for his hat.

Too late, the rocket spewed fire, erupting with force it rocketed upwards; and disappeared into the hat. The hat then fell through the air and plopped brim-down against the stage. The crowd was speechless at what they just saw. Cartanis was frightened to a standstill in front of it. Eventually a loud boom was heard from deep within the top hat, causing it to jump and roll over on its side. Smoke began to pour out of it.

"No no no no no," Cartanis continued as he quickly grabbed his top hat by the brim, turned it upside down and slammed it against the stage. It flattened against the impact, and then Cartanis stuck his hooves inside the brim of the hat and pulled it apart. Widening the brim to a good four or five times its original size, he then disappeared within to the sounds of his clopping hoofs echoing and quieting against the night.

Twilight almost didn't believe her eyes at the site, smoke was pouring out the hat hole on the stage. Eventually the stunned silence was broken by a loud shout from the hat, "MY BOOKS!" Twilight recognized the sound of Cartanis' voice. Soon after the smoke dissipated, and everyone could once again hear the sounds of hooves echoing up from the hat. A very unhappy Unicorn head popped out of the hole

"You!" Cartanis pointed to Trixie, "Need to learn to respect others opinions of you, not everyone has to think you're great." Cartanis summoned an old spell he knew, a spark of electricity jumped from his outstretched hoof to Trixie's nose. The crowd burst into laughter.

"What did he do, what did he do to Trixie!" Trixie shouted in fear. She then felt the electricity running through her mane and tail; she grabbed a mirror and was horrified. Horrified to see how she looked like some overgrown poodle thanks to her hair that was poofed out straight from her body. "The Great and Powerful Trixie," another sudden volley of fireworks "is not a lap dog!" She ran off crying behind the curtain.

Gilda was laughing uncontrollably at Trixie's misfortune. "And **YOU!**" Gilda turned to see an angry Unicorn staring back at her from the hat hole.

"Learn to respect others, **PERIOD!**" Gilda was then hit by a cloud of dust Cartanis threw at her; she coughed and sneezed a bit before stopping.

"What's the big idea?" Gilda shouted at him, but the unicorn was only smiling. As the crowd laughed harder than they had before.

Oh that never gets old, Cartanis thought to himself.

The griffon began spouting more nonsense, "(what are you all laughing at!) The popcorn taste delivers to sky butter!" She then attempted to roar ferociously just to make them stop, but all that came out was the sound of a mewling kitten.

Oh derpy dust, you never fail me, do you? Cartanis simply smiled as the Griffon took off behind the curtain as well. He then hopped out of the hat and onto the stage, "Hat. Heel." the hat shrunk, returned to its normal shape, righted itself, and hopped onto Cartanis' head. He then jumped slightly at the sound of a stampede, he looked to the crowd to see them all standing in place stomping their front feet against the ground, cheering. *That must be how they give applause.* Cartanis gave them his best pony bow, and hopped off the stage.

He went over to Twilight who was standing next to Pinkie Pie, "I heard fireworks and thought there was a party, but instead I find one of the best magic acts EVER!" the pink pony jumped up and down excitedly.

"It's probably too late for the bakery to be open anyway," Pinkie Pie nodded an affirmative, "Well we might as well go back to the Library, I have some things I need to do. Damage control and what not"

All of a sudden a rainbow streak flew out of the sky and landed in front of them. "Twilight there you are, I need your help." the rainbow mane pegasus mare was frantically breathing, as she dropped an unconscious brown Pegasus next to her. Cartanis thought the blue Pegasus looked familiar.

"Rainbow Dash, what's the problem? Who is that?"

Cartanis noticed the green bag around her neck; it had the symbols of Ted's name in Elven on it. "Where did you get that?" Cartanis interjected.

"It doesn't matter your friend's in danger, the Thunderheads have got him."

A second Pegasus landed behind the first, this was the same crème one from that morning. "Rainbow Dash don't fly off like that I can't keep up

when you do things like that, well... unless you wanted to... I mean... umm." She looked over to Cartanis, letting loose a weak meep at the site of him.

Twilight spoke up, "Calm down Fluttershy, this is Cartanis. He's an old friend."

Fluttershy seemed to stop cowering so much and let out a weak "Hi." to him.

As much as Cartanis liked meeting new faces, the matter of Ted's bag remained. "Does this friend happen to be a Zebra?"

"Well Ted's more of a "Zebragus"," Rainbow Dash stated, "But yeah he saved me and all, I just got to figure out where they took him. This guy was with the Thunderheads, I thought maybe you could do something with him."

All eyes turned to the out cold Pegasus, "Cartanis, do you think you could read his mind, kind of like what you did with me but in reverse."

Cartanis sighed, "Well thanks to the Great and Powerful Trixie," he jumped at the sound of the stage shooting off more fireworks, "anyway, thanks to her, my hat is in too much disrepair to do much or aid me in such a dangerous ritual. But I might still be able to rouse him, that leaves the problem of getting him to talk." Cartanis knew one person or should he say pony who could. He whipped out his messenger book, *Ted got himself in a spot, I need you at the town square in front of town hall. NOW!* "OK let's take this little troublemaker to the town hall, there are probably less eyes over that way anyway. Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, I need to know what Ted has been up to"

The large group headed off for the town hall, prisoner in tow.

Chapter 4

Rainbow Dash gently flew alongside Fluttershy. "Thanks again Rainbow Dash, I don't think I would have been able to escort all those poor baby animals back to their homes alone."

"Yeah well, doing supply runs for the town was tiring me out. I kind of needed a break. Besides that baby turtle was kind of cute." Rainbow Dash said with a blush.

"Too bad we couldn't find all of their homes," Fluttershy frowned as a baby blue jay chirped around in the basket over her back.

"It's OK Fluttershy, you're great with animals, and I'm sure you'll raise that bird right and let it free back into Whitetail wood in no time."

At that time a sudden gust of wind caused Fluttershy to tip and roll, the basket tied to her back flipped over spilling out the baby Blue jay. Fluttershy gasped at what just occurred, "Oh no, he doesn't know how to fly yet."

"I can get him Fluttershy!" Rainbow Dash dived after the falling bird. She could barely see the little blue dot, but she knew she could catch up to it. Beating her wings fiercely in defiance of the wind which tried to slow her advance, the small blue dot began to appear as a ball. Faster still she mustered strength to continue pushing the limits of her speed. The baby bird was only a few feet of free fall from her now, but the forest below was fast approaching. "Got you!" as the bird was safely tucked against her chest, Rainbow Dash quickly attempted to pull up. Narrowly skimming across the ground, her speed causing the grass to sway from her passing. She aimed to continue flying through a pair of trees, when all of a sudden a grey streak darted in front of her.



Something slammed into the side of Ted's face, his helmet took the brunt of the impact but the wallop still sent him reeling through the air. As he tumbled he remembered an old memory very vividly, of his young adulthood, when he was cornered. *No, not again.* Ted righted himself in the

air, tumbled when he hit the ground. Leaping slightly when his feet met the ground, so he could land upright flicking out a hoof, he revealed a hidden blade under a compartment of his gauntlet which sat above his hoof like an armored bracelet. He stared in the direction of his would be attacker, a small rainbow mane Pegasus lay unconscious on the ground. A small bird tweeting in her limbs. Ted didn't know what to do, his memory slip caused him to relive that moment of his life so vividly it set him off. Now that he saw the defenseless thing, he was shaken up a little at what he thought he was about to do.

Out of the blue another one landed, this one was conscious. The crème Pegasus mare was frantic at the site of the blue one, "Dash?" the mare said, nudging her nose against the comatose pony. The pink mane Pegasus looked to Ted, still standing ready for anything that might happen. "What did you do!" The mare took a protective stance over the blue one; her eyes open wide in an angry glare.

Ted met the glare, only to find himself being drawn into her eyes. It was like his mind was being pierced, he saw all the wrongs he had done in his life. Every life he had ended, all the people who counted on him that he let down. *I must repent*, it was the only thought that ran through his mind. He felt his arm lowering, the blade returned to its compartment. He was hanging onto any word that she would speak, ready to do as she asked.

The one on the ground stirred a little, "Fluttershy?" the one with the pink mane one snapped out of the stare down with Ted and looked back to Dash.

Once the gaze was broken, Ted felt his self control return. He gasped at the sudden return to his senses; he didn't know what just happened. But he was prepared to avoid that ever happening again, Ted galloped over to the dented helmet he had worn which was on the ground, and quickly mouthed it into his bag of holding.

"Dash are you OK?" Concern evident in her voice.

"Caught the birdie, heheh." Dash let the bird out from her grip, which happily hopped on top of Fluttershy's head. Then Dash fell unconscious again.

Fluttershy got worried, *oh no, it can't be anything good if she won't wake up.* She looked over to the strange Zebra in the full body green cloak. He was scratching at the ground with a stray hoof, his back to her. "Sir, please could you help me." The zebra's ears twitched back and forth, seemingly unable to make up its mind. Then he turned around, Grey eyes not making contact with Fluttershy's. "We are going to have to do a two-pony piggyback to get her to the clinic, just get her front half over the top of you and on your back. Can you do that?" Ted stood next to Fluttershy, still not making eye contact. *Even if he won't say anything, I can tell he means well. At least now he does, before he was so scary.*

After some Maneuvering, the two managed to get Rainbow Dash onto their backs as they carefully trotted into town.



Within the clinic, Fluttershy looked over to the strange Zebra. He had his strange green cloak hiding all of his body from view. In the middle of the clinic's lobby, he was sticking out like something that didn't belong. *Why did he stay?* Fluttershy asked herself.

Nurse Redheart walked out into the lobby. "Hello Miss Fluttershy, we have Miss Dash stable. She should be fine, but we want to keep her over for observation, she still isn't that aware of her surroundings."

"Oh, well, as long as she will be alright. Is it OK if we go see her?"

Ted's attention was caught, *We? Why we?*

"That should be fine, it might do her some good to see a familiar face."

Fluttershy walked up to the zebra, "Sir, umm, would you like to go say hi too, I didn't mean to impose. I just think it would be good... that is if you don't have anything else planned... to maybe-"

Ted got up from the floor. *I've done enough running in this world, for once I want to make something right.* "That will be fine." The shy little Pegasus gave him a weak but cute smile, so down the hall they went.

They were told to go to room 127A; many of the nurses were busy treating other injured ponies from the disaster three days ago. So they were

allowed to go about unescorted, as they approached room 127A Ted noticed a small cart just inside the room. There was a clipboard tied to it, which read *Patient Rainbow Dash has a bad concussion and headaches associated, we are very low on medications still from the disaster. All we can manage is to make her comfortable, giving her herbal supplements until we can get our hooves on some better medication. Without proper care she might not make it through the night.* Ted felt a pang of guilt, it had all been chance what had happened, but still he felt like he could do something.

He noticed a small bottle filled with liquid of a rather red hue, Ted looked at Fluttershy to see her just looking at Rainbow Dash in the gurney. There was no one out in the hallway; he quickly swept the bottle into his bag. He then stuck his head in and grabbed for a health potion, he always kept extras. Then put it on the cart, before walking over to Fluttershy's side. He noticed the considerable welt on Rainbow Dash's forehead.

Fluttershy was the first to speak up, "Hey Dash, are you alright?"

The blue Pegasus lazily lifted her eyes open. "Oh, hey Fluttershy." She looked over to the Zebra, "Who's your friend?"

"He isn't my friend... well that's not to say he isn't nice... But he did help me get you here."

Ted spoke up, "It was really no trouble miss, Dash was it? I simply wanted to make up for what I may have done, whether or not it was an accident."

"Accident? Oh you mean you were that thing I ran into? What the hay were you doing jumping around through – ow." Dash flinched from the pain of her brow furrowing.

"I guess I could ask the same thing of a Pegasus flying so low to the ground."

"Look, I had a good reason!"

"So did I, you're just going to need to learn about chance. That's all this was. Now like I said, I just want to make up for what I've done. So I think I'm going to help you get better."

A nurse walked into the room, "Is everything OK in here?"

Dash kind of looked grumpy towards the Zebra, "Yeah, I guess. Do you guys have anything for pain? My forehead's kind of getting touchy again."

"Oh I'm sorry dear, we are really short of that kind of stuff. Saving it in case of an emergency, but we do have some old herbal remedies still laying around. It won't be as good, but I'm sure it'll make you feel a little better." The nurse pushed over the cart and poured out the bottles contents, into a cup, of what she believed was herbal tea.

Dash drank the liquid quickly, "Blegh, doesn't taste any better then medicine."

Fluttershy and the nurse stared blankly in amazement at Dash, Ted simply smiled.

Dash looked startled, "What? Did I have an allergic reaction or something?"

"Umm, Dash... do you feel OK?" Fluttershy said.

Dash thought for a minute, "Hey my ears stopped ringing!" she stopped for a second, patting a hoof against her head gingerly.

Looks like my work here is done. Ted walked towards the hallway.

The nurse double checked the bottle on the cart, "Wait a minute this wasn't the same bottle that was here a moment ago." Ted felt as though eyes in the room were drawn to him.

For once can't one of my plans go correctly? Ted thought to himself. He shut the door to the hallway, "Can I count on you three to listen to me?" They all still stared at him bluntly.

Dash was the first to ask a question, "What did you just give me?"

"Nothing more than a restorative drought, I said I wished to make amends and there you go."

"Excuse me, but do you have any more of this stuff. We could make good use of it here." The nurse chimed in.

"I'm sorry, but to create that takes a long time. I'm fresh out of ingredients and I don't feel safe in my line of work without one or two on me at any given time. In fact, I don't even know if you can make them with stuff from around here."

Ted waited around, expecting a few more questions but receiving none, "Well with that concluded, please keep this to yourselves. If anyone asks, Miss Dash was just misdiagnosed. I don't need to get mobbed being asked for this stuff now." Ted walked out the door, and out of the clinic.

Now where to? Ted remembered his dented helmet, *Do they even have blacksmith's in this world?* Before he could enact anything else he heard the flap of wings behind him. Turning he saw Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy landing behind him, "Can't you two tell when someone enjoys flying solo?"

"Look Zebra guy, that stuff you gave me could really help out Ponyville. How do you even know we don't have the ingredients, you're not even from here."

"I've been traveling through the woods for the last three days, if you had the ingredients around here I am sure I would've found them by now."

"Wait you were out in the woods?" Dash asked

"Yes and I must say the swampy atmosphere didn't do much for me, I prefer the lovely maples and pines you have over there instead."

"How are you still alive?"

"Well there was a rather close call with some big nasty plant, but other than that it wasn't too hard."

"No, no, no. my friend Twilight told me the shock wave that hit Ponyville probably originated out in the Everfree forest. The 'swampy' one, how are you not dead?"

Oh great a logic trap, Ted got an idea. "Don't know."

"What? How do you not know something like that?"

Ted looked them in the eyes, "Simple, Amnesia!"

Fluttershy gasped, "Oh you poor dear, I'm so sorry I yelled at you earlier today."

Dash rolled her eyes, "Come on Fluttershy, you can't believe that."

"Well how else would you explain it, because I honestly don't know how I survived. I woke up in a cave and after a few days of traveling, here I am." *That's at least half true*, Ted thought to himself.

Dash simply groaned and put a hoof to her face, "Fine whatever, but you still helped me out. You can't do something like that and run off."

Fluttershy spoke up, "Don't you have any place to stay?"

Ted responded, "Nope. Are you offering?"

Dash pulled Fluttershy aside and talked quietly to her, "Are you nuts Fluttershy, we don't know anything about this Zebra. I was thinking of just buying him some food and calling it even."

"Well, he did help you out, twice in fact. He could've just left you with me out in that field, but he helped me carry you all the way to the clinic. Then he gave you that drink that made you all better, he can't be all bad." Fluttershy scratched at the ground.

"If you're set on this, I am not leaving you alone with him. He still seems kind of shifty to me." Dash looked back to the zebra, who was just waiting patiently in his green body cloak. "I guess she is offering."

"Splendid, don't worry I pack light."

"Wait!" Dash interrupted, "I don't care whether you have Amnesia or not, but I am not going to be calling you, well, you and Zebra all day."

Ted thought for a moment, he had heard names of ponies all day, usually some kind of noun-verb hybrid. But one time he heard somepony ask "Is that zebra Zecora's brother?", *Maybe I can get away with my real name*. "Just call me Te'denithas Zavyard," he added, "Amnesiac Zebra Extraordinaire!" with a triumphant gesture with his hoof.

Dash just furrowed her brow at the overly complex name, "Whatever, I'm just calling you Ted."

Ted then scoffed a little, "Oh come now, can't you just call me by my full name?" *Why is it no one ever does, it can't be that hard to roll off the tongue!*

Dash just looked at Ted, scrunched up her nose and imitated his voice, "Nope."

"Fine, but can one of you answer a question for me? I need to know if you have anything around here for ponies in need of some good horseshoes."

Fluttershy spoke up, "There's the Boe Family Blacksmith workshop not far from my cottage."

Rainbow Dash looked at Fluttershy, "How do you know about a blacksmith?"

"Oh, they helped me repair my cottage after the disaster. They were really nice."

Ted was happy just to hear they had a smith nearby. He pinched his messenger book off his belt, awkwardly opened it and recorded a message. *I may have found myself some lodging, at least for the day. Going to go see exactly how advanced these ponies are in the ways of metallurgy, and maybe I'll even learn how to fly.* As Ted closed the book he noticed Rainbow Dash over his shoulder.

"What was that?" She asked

"Why it is my private journal, and I would thank you not to read it!" Ted knew she was probably talking about the words on the page, as he had taken the precaution of recording it in Elven beforehand.

Rainbow Dash just rolled her eyes at the sarcastic answer.

And so, off the group went, out of town towards Fluttershy's cottage.



The trio had just walked over the bridge leading west out of Ponyville, the road through the hilly countryside rose and fell with the land around it. Accenting the natural beauty of the fields. As they walked through a part of the road which dipped behind a hill, Ted heard a familiar noise. He stopped and tried to listen for it again.

"What's wrong Ted?" Rainbow Dash asked.

Ted shushed her, *I know I have heard that before*. He concentrated on picking apart the sounds around him, something stood out, against the background noise. It was whisking through the air, cutting a path. *It's getting closer, but these hills are bouncing the background noise everywhere*. "Do you two hear anything?"

Fluttershy and Dash got quiet and looked around, turning ears this way and that. They both shook their heads no.

Well it seems my Elven perceptions are still with me fully, but that still leaves a question unanswered. The sound was becoming clearer; its direction was starting to become known, *above me?* Ted looked up but couldn't make anything out; the sun was too high in the sky and was blinding him. It was getting so close, his body shouted at him of danger, but he couldn't make out from where. He readied himself to move, the sound was right above him, *almo-*.

But his concentration was broken by Rainbow Dash, "Look we don't got all day t-" **THWACK**, "Oh my gosh!" the pegasus exclaimed.

Ted looked over his shoulder to Rainbow Dash, to see an arrow cleanly sticking out of the cloak on his back. *I knew I heard that noise before!*

"Are you OK Ted?" Fluttershy asked in a worried meek tone.

"Oh how rude! What imbecile sets up an archery range facing a road!"

Both of the pegasi were stunned to watch Ted trot off in a huff around the hill, ignoring the projectile lodged in his spine.

Oh they'll get a piece of my mind, As Ted rounded the hill he could make out the same sound he heard earlier, **TWANG**, *I always did hate the noise*

of a poorly made bow. Ted could make out the sound of voices as well, after the arrow missed its mark and thwacked against the hill.

"Oh come on you silly colt, you want to join the Thunderheads! You got to hit a target, while you're flying." a gruff voice said with disapproval.

Ted finally rounded the hill, to see a small colt pegasus fluttering with some difficulty holding a bow and quiver as three other pegasi were laying around heckling and yelling at the poor thing. *Well what kind of hazing do we have going on here?* Ted decided to break up the little insult contest, "HEY! Which one of you wise guys decided to set up a range facing the road!"

The three Pegasi looked over towards Ted eyes growing wide, the colt looked rather afraid, as they noticed a displeased Zebra marching towards them. One of the Pegasi got a grin on his face, "Oh look Archie, you managed to actually hit something after all!" pointing a hoof towards the arrow sticking out of Ted's back and laughing with the others.

The colt Pegasus, who Ted assumed was 'Archie', fluttered to the ground. Leaving his bow behind and raced over to Ted, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to, I'm just tryi-"

Ted cut the colt off, "Did I ask who accidentally shot me? Even the best is bound to miss sometimes. What I asked is what, stupid, inconsiderate, adult went around telling this colt it was OK to shoot at something that could've had ponies behind it." As he rounded Archie, putting himself between the colt and the pegasi.

The three pegasi got up off the ground, "Oh you calling out the Thunderheads you silly zebra." a brown one with a gruff voice proclaimed.

"Oh please tell me that you are thinking of starting something. I've been all wound up since I got here, and I really need to test out some ideas that have been floating around in my head." Ted excitedly trotted in place, warming himself up for a fight.

"Hey look pal, you don't mess with a Thunderhead you hear? We got protection rackets from Manehattan to Trottingham, you mess with one of us and you're gonna' mess with all of us."

Ted only seemed to get more excited, "A bunch of loudmouth, sick, degenerate scum TOO! This can't get any more perfect, and I have a totally legitimate reason to fight you as well, oh happy day!"

"Umm Boulderdash, I don't think-" but the blue pegasus was cut off by Ted.

"-we really want to mess with a zebra who is acting all silly with an arrow sticking out of his back. I mean who knows what kind of crazy chemical stimulants he could be on." Ted said imitating the blue one's voice.

The brown leader, who Ted guessed was Boulderdash, fumed, "Alright Mr. Comedian, you want to mess with us, let's get him boys."

The brown, blue, and black pegasi jumped at Ted, who simply stood still for a moment.

As the blue closed, he ducked to the side, allowing it to fly over him. Before it could react, he kicked with a back leg, slamming it into the blue one's chin. Which then careened off course and crashed into the dirt, unconscious. "NEXT!" Ted taunted.

The brown one answered the call, having seen what happened to the last one, he grounded and charged on foot towards him. Ted also began charging at the brown, as the distance closed, Ted broke into a sideways slide. This knocked the brown off his feet and sent him into a front-flip; Ted answered by sweeping his front leg out low, which solidly cracked against the side of the brown's head. Boulderdash rolled and tumbled across the ground, clutching at his face in pain.

The only one left was the black, Ted looked over to see the black gone from view. He heard flapping in the sky above him, he quickly dodged to the side. But the black seemed to have anticipated that, for as he landed his back legs were reared for a buck. Ted saw this, and planted himself firmly as the legs made contact with his body. A loud CLANG rang out over the range, the black one groaned in pain, and hobbled off away from Ted. "You actually hit me, remind me to give you a gold star!"

The brown had finished nursing his face, "Alright, enough-"

"-horsing around?" Ted interjected with a wide smile on his face.

The brown just groaned, "Bruisa, get down here and squash this bug already!" the brown shouted up towards a floating cloud.

Ted could make out a small brown silhouette peak off the side of it. Before it came barreling downwards and landed with a sufficient thud against the ground. A large pegasus about the size of a draft pony stood in front of him.

Ted simply checked his hooves for some dirt. "Well I will admit saving your best for last is rather nice of you, but I think I've sweat more from the heat of smelting furnaces."

The large Pegasus reared at Ted, apparently readying for a stomp. "Bad move." was all Ted had to say, before he bolted under the large one and rolled past its back feet. Causing the unsteady large Pegasus to fall forward from his own weight, slamming headfirst into the dirt. Just to add insult to injury, Ted hopped over the top of Bruisa and landed on the back of his head, gently sinking it deeper into the earth. Ted then heard the sound of arrows knocked against the shafts of bows. "Oh really? You want to play serious now do you?"

Ted saw two of the three Pegasi with bows ready, standing with their wings out for balance. The brown was waiting to give the order to shoot. "Alright Zebra, you're going to stand down now. Or I tell my boys here to let loose on you."

"Let me just appeal to the better nature of your com-padres for a minute here." Each pegasi raised an eyebrow. "You're leader there is about to order you to shoot at me, when I very well can dodge you from this distance. Bruisa here on the other hand is an awfully big target, and I know compassion and understanding might not take sanctuary in your minds all the time. But what kind of leader tells his soldiers to shoot on his own? Now I can tell you are all not a bunch of fanatics fighting for a purpose, we are all just a little hot headed here over a disagreement on proper archery range safety. I wonder if he would do the same for you, or if he happened to be in Bruisa's spot, order you to do the same?"

Ted saw the resolve of the two archers weaken, "If you still want to go through with it however," Ted flicked a hidden blade out from one his gauntlets, "I've been going easy on you, because in all fairness, you had no idea what you were getting yourselves into." Ted crouched down low and closed his eyes for a moment to concentrate and let the magic of the fey

flow through him. Opening to show them his eyes of solid grey, "But if you still want to get serious. I'd be happy to fulfill your death wish." he said with all the playfulness gone from his voice.

"We aren't afraid of some Zebra who can talk fancy and make some funny eye effects. Show him what the Thunderheads are made of!"

The black and blue just looked to each other than to the angry face of the brown. "You know what Boulderdash, take your stupid gang and stuff it." They threw down their bows and angrily stared at the brown.

Boulderdash looked surprised to hear this, but only became angrier, "You better watch your flank zebra, I play for keeps and this isn't over yet!" The angry brown Pegasus took off into the sky and out above a patch of clouds.

"No doubt to go whine to somepony higher up on the food chain, I'm sure." Ted walked over to the other Pegasi, "You know you might want to dig up your friend over there, I'm not sure if he can breathe beneath all that dirt."

The blue and black grew some concern on their face and rushed over to Bruisa and started digging around his face. Once they had him out of the ground they grabbed their things and went on their way towards town.

Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy then showed themselves from behind the hill, the small Pegasus colt Archie also revealed himself from his hiding spot. And landed next to Ted, "Wow that was awesome Ted!" Dash said, "I was going to help you out, but after you took out that first one, I was left kind of dazed in amazement."

Fluttershy was just smiling, "Well I'm glad you're OK and that you didn't have to seriously hurt anypony. But, umm are you sure that arrow doesn't hurt."

Ted realized he still had the arrow stuck in his back, most of the shaft was broken off from when he rolled. "Oh don't worry about the arrow, it didn't even pierce the top layer of armor." the group of pegasi looked confused at what they heard. "In short, I'll be fine. As for you good sir Archie, I hope you learned a lesson today. But what possessed you to try a stunt as silly as joining a bunch of hooligans."

"I was just outside my dad's shop, and they came by telling me that they were going to hurt my family, unless I went with them. Then they asked if I could shoot a bow and arrow, and they started picking on me."

"It's very noble of you to try and help your family, but what do you think would've happened after they had taken you to where they were going. Surely nothing good would've come of it. You've got a spark of good in you Archie, don't smother it by hanging out with a bunch of ruffians like that." Archie smiled at Ted's little speech. "Now get on home, I'm sure your father is very worried"

Archie seemed to jump a little "I was supposed to be home ten minutes ago, I'm so grounded." He took off down the road, occasionally breaking into little glides with his underage wings.

"Now would one of you mind getting this arrow out of my back, it's starting to get annoying."

Dash went over and gingerly pulled at the arrow.

"Look, it didn't break the skin, it's probably just stuck on something. So give it a little more oomph."

Dash tugged harder, the arrow didn't budge. She tried again, this time putting her wings into it, lifting Ted a few inches off the ground.

"Too much oomph, too much oomph!"

Dash set him back on the ground

"Alright well I guess it did get stuck in under the armor layer." Ted attempted to slide the cloak off, but found it stuck to him thanks to the arrow. *Great and I still haven't figured out how to do that one hoof thing Andur mentioned.* Ted just started fumbling with the buttons at his neckline, "Excuse me but could one of you lovely mares, give me a helping hoof."

Fluttershy walked over, "Sure, I sometimes get stuck with buttons myself." She looked at the hole the arrow had made in the cloak, "make sure to not get that machine stitched or else it's just going to ruin the continuity of the surrounding fabric." Everyone looked at Fluttershy for a moment, "Well... you know... if you wanted my advice."

After Fluttershy unbuttoned the cloak, she carefully lifted it over Ted's head and the arrow so she didn't damage the cloak further. Ted's silvery scale armor glinted in the sunlight, "Now try not to be too amaz-" Ted realized he forgot to mention he had wings, let alone figure out if zebras could have any. He looked over to see two rather stupefied pegasi. *Just play it off*, "What? Have you never seen a Zebragus before?"

"No, not really." Dash tried to stop herself from looking at Ted's wings.

"We are rather rare, I guess." Ted breathed a sigh of relief, *saved it*. "We only descend from pegasus and zebra couples."

"Hey do you know any really cool aerial moves! Kind of like what you did to those bullies, I would be a shoe in for the Wonderbolts with moves like that in the air."

"Don't know, amnesia remember?" Ted smiled her way.

"Sheesh is there anything your sudden spouts of 'amnesia' didn't prevent you from forgetting at opportune times."

"If you want to be so rude as to insist I am lying, I can surely tell you that not all of my amnesia is great for explaining away everything. I can't even get myself to pick stuff up anymore, paralysis of some kind I'm sure." Ted turned his head about and managed to get the arrow out from under the set of scales it was stuck in. He spat it out upon the ground, "There we go, not even any blood, I told you it never hurt me."

"You're paralyzed TOO! Oh my, you poor poor Zebragus." Fluttershy smiled when she got an idea, "I deal with injured animals all the time, I can probably help you learn to use your hooves again."

"Well aren't you the sweetest pony in... umm... this country in which we currently reside."

"Equestria, amnesia brains." Dash interjected.

"Just relax and let me see what I can do." Fluttershy motioned for Ted to lie down on the ground next to her. She picked up one of his hooves, and removed the small gauntlet like object on it. Then started pressing on it at certain points. "Feel anything?"

"No not really."

"What about this." Fluttershy then began pressing at certain places on his wrist, on one point in particular Ted felt a shock of lightning move up his arm. It was painful but not horribly so, it kind of felt like all the muscles in his arm twitched.

"Something that time."

Fluttershy poked in a few more places, Ted could feel the lightning time and again. But it was less intense each time as she worked her way from the wrist towards his hoof again. He could feel something at his hoof but wasn't sure what. "Now can you remember where I sent those feelings?"

"Yes I believe I can."

"OK just try to move along that path I took down your arm."

Ted concentrated and attempted to feel his way down that path she drew in his thoughts. His mind finding its way through the muscles as it attempted to call out to the hoof to just grab at the grass. But nothing was happening. He sighed.

"Don't give up, come on just one more time." As Fluttershy tried poking him again to redraw the map, Ted got an idea.

Maybe if I can just pretend for a minute that it's my old hand, Ted closed his eyes. Imagining his arm was not that of a zebra but once again his own. As Fluttershy sent the messages through his nerves, he could make out his wrist. The lines of lightning running up and down his arm, but this time when she went to his hoof. He felt the lines draw along something else, something familiar. It was like his hand was atrophied, and it was responding to the stimulation. Twitching, he could feel it in his mind.

"Now just try again."

Ted remembered the pathway the feeling had taken. He could feel a force around his hand making it move, relaxing itself open. The stress bleeding away. As though an old limb had reappeared, Ted could once again cause his hand to open and shut. He opened his eyes, took his arm from Fluttershy. Then placed his hoof over to the gauntlet that was set aside,

and closed his ghostlike appendages around it. Slowly lifting it from the ground. A smile ran across his face.

"Way to go." Fluttershy exclaimed in what was little more than a whisper.

Ted looked about the archery range, "I think I am going to practice for a moment, excuse me." Ted got up and moved the target that was set up and placed it so that it was not facing the roadway, just to be safe. He took his bag of holding and removed from it, his bow, one he had made himself with all the skill that he had acquired over his long life. Gems socketed into it hummed to his touch, its soft wooden frame was accented by the powerful metal supports which were filled with the runic language of his people.

Ted had known of the other ancient artifacts that Andur and Cartanis had found in their travels. But Ted sought something more. He wished to recreate the powerful magic used to create such weaponry; it had taken him well over the hundred and forty years of his life to discover the secrets. But what he had in his hand would surpass any other bow in existence, for one very good reason. He had built it as a very extension of himself, *A little Elven grace, with some Eladrin magic for might.*

He stood on two back hooves the way he saw the pegasi do earlier. Balancing himself by outstretching his grey and black feathered wings. With one hoof his arm was put out to full reach, the bow grasped firmly with his new fingers. With his other, he drew the string. As he pulled it back, he felt his weapon pull at the Eladrin fey magic that was within him. It had been so long since the connection was made so fully it sang for release; he felt his eyes glaze over to solid grey. A bolt of pure energy formed in the bow, gaining in measure as the string was pulled back. Its power arcing and loosing itself around him as it longed for a target. He let loose the howling fury of it towards the bull's-eye. When it made contact, the energy was released upon the target. Thundering against the surrounding area. When the dust settled, two charred legs of the target remained.

Ted harnessed the weapon on his back, hoping to never be forced to put away his masterpiece in some stuffy bag again. He walked past the two stunned pegasi, "blah blah Amnesia. Now let's get to that blacksmith." Ted wondered if he should message the others, he quickly took out his messenger book. *It would be hard to explain the how, but I did manage to get a villager to somehow give a type of acupuncture. I believe it stimulated*

my senses and allowed me to figure out their strange hoof grabbing technique. So all I can attest to is that it should be possible for us to all learn, somehow. As he closed his book he heard one of the Pegasi approach him, he turned to see Rainbow Dash.

"Look I know you won't tell us a lot, but you also helped out that colt. So I think Fluttershy and I know you're a good Zebragus and all Ted. You just do so many things that we haven't seen before, so can't you just tell us something?"

Ted put a hoof to his chin, "I am no threat to you, so long as you don't try to hurt me that is. If you can believe that, we will get along fine." Ted picked up his cloak off the ground and quickly put it back on. The two pegasi seemed to accept the answer, and off they went to the Boe Family Blacksmith.



In the middle a large open field stood a house, next to this house was a workshop. Smoke stacks gently letting out the heat of furnaces into the air. The trio knocked upon the door of the workshop.

A voice answered the call, "Sorry, but the Boe Family is full up on jobs from around Ponyville for repairs. We can't take any more orders for today."

Ted spoke up, "What if one of us didn't want to place an order but offer his services."

The sound of tools being laid to rest was echoed by the sounds of heavy horseshoes as the door opened, "I might be willing to hire you, given you got the chops." a large earth pony with soot and ash covering his face answered.

"I got the chops, if you got the furnaces!" Ted retorted

The large earth pony allowed them inside, where the group saw various benches, furnaces, smelters, and anvils. A surprising number of them were unmanned. "We need a few more hooves around here, if you think you're up to the task zebra."

"Just call me Ted."

"Fine Ted, just call me Cross Boe, owner and proprietor of this fine establishment. Now take station five, get your orders from over here at the desk and just keep working. We got a lot of orders to fill."

"Oh yes silly me," Ted removed his cloak, much to the curious eye of Cross. "I forgot to mention I'm a zebragus and before I start working for you I need to do a little work of my own." Ted undid the various fasteners and belts of his armor to drop them into his bag, and then he took his dented helmet out said bag.

Cross seemed to be about to ask something, but Dash just got his attention and said, "Don't bother asking about the bag, all he'll say is something about Amnesia."

Cross simply stopped and thought for a second, "Where did you get armor like that Ted?" Cross asked.

"Oh all custom done by yours truly, won't find it anywhere else I'm afraid. Now station five you said?" Ted approached his station and removed various tools and safety equipment from his bag, he laughed a little at how it all took the appropriate shape for his new form.

He then set to work, heating the metal of the helmet in order to soften it so he could reshape it to once again fit his head. He heard Rainbow Dash behind him once again, "Hey Ted you think you could do a favor for me?"

"What favor is that Miss Dash?"

"Do you think you could fix something of mine that got broken a few days ago?"

"Do you have it on you perchance, or did I miss the pockets you have on the clothes you don't wear?"

"Look I just need to zip over to my house and get it, then I'll be right back."

"Well I will probably be here most of the day anyway, you might as well."

"Thanks Ted, you're awesome, but I don't think I'll be able to pay you that much."

Ted smirked to himself, "You know, I hear talk you're the best flier in all of Equestria. Teach me to fly and consider the debt repaid."

Rainbow Dash smiled, "You got yourself a deal, now I'll be right back." Out the door she went, off to her house on the other side of Ponyville.

Ted looked back to Fluttershy who was waiting patiently by the door, "You must have more important things to do than wait for little old me, you can come back later if you want."

"Oh I'll be fine, besides Misses Boe might need help taking care of some things." Fluttershy went out the door and towards the quaint house next to the workshop, leaving Ted to his work. She went over to the door and knocked, a pony answered the door. "Hello Ms. Boe, I just stopped by to wonder if you needed anything."

The mare only gently smiled, "No I don't need help with much, that medicine for our dog is working fine."

"Who's at the door mom?" a familiar voice said.

Fluttershy saw the same little Pegasus, Archie, from earlier hover into view. She looked a little surprised at him and then to Misses Boe.

"Oh you didn't meet our son before, Archie this is Fluttershy."

"Hey she was with that zebra I told you about mom." Archie said excitedly.

"Oh come now, not your little story again. Now go wash up for dinner, it'll be ready soon."

"OK..." Archie fluttered off down a hallway.

"Sorry if the fact he's a Pegasus startled you Miss Fluttershy, we at the Boe Family like to adopt."

"It wasn't that, I pretty much thought you adopted him. It's just that he was the same Pegasus my friend Ted saved from a bunch of thugs earlier."

"You mean Archie wasn't just making up stories?"

"No, my zebragus friend Ted, he's working in your shop right now. Helped the poor little colt out of some trouble, a bunch of thugs were apparently going to kidnap him."

"Well the least I can do is have you and your friend over for dinner then." Miss Boe smiled cheerfully at Fluttershy. Letting her in the house to help set up for dinner.



Ted had just returned to work after the lovely dinner he had with the Boe Family, he was rather surprised to see Archie was one of their family members, the little tike grew on him a little. As he was slowly working his way through the second set of Cart axles that needed repair he heard something land at the workshop door, *Must be Rainbow Dash, took her long enough.* He went to the workshop door to see the brown pegasus from earlier standing there with an evil smirk on his face. "Did someone get a promotion for worst fighter ever?" Ted smirked back.

The brown one just got angry, "Look I am not here to mess around, I followed you and saw that bow thing you got. And you're going to bring it out to the Everfree, alone. NO friends, NO armor, and if you try anything funny at the place," The brown gave Ted a rolled up map, "Your friend is going to get it ya hear." The brown then took off into the sky towards the Everfree forest.

Ted hurriedly opened the map, a blue feather tied with a lock of rainbow hair fell out. A note written on the map had a place circled and simply said, *sunset, here.* Ted made a mental note of the landmarks he was supposed to use to find his way to the place. Ted looked to the sky, it was almost sunset already. *I can't bother getting the guys together for this one,* He ran back into the shop and grabbed his bag of holding from his station, and made sure all his stuff was in it. He took his messengers book and latched it around his waist. Then Ted took his bow off the wall where he had it laying and slung it over his back, and out the door he took off towards the Everfree.



Ted had been running through the forest for a while, passing the landmarks as he went. But he was finally upon the clearing with the strange stone

pillar. He paused for a moment, and scanned the area. He couldn't make out much in the tree line, but above there were plenty of clouds, and he remembered that pegasi could potentially be up there. He made a note of a few good possible escape routes in each direction, and then he broke cover. Once he found himself standing out in the middle near the ancient landmark, a silvery unicorn wandered out around a corner. "My, my, so Balderdash wasn't lying after all. Seems there really is some form of pegasus zebra hybrid"

"Where is Rainbow Dash?" Ted said flatly.

"Oh excuse me, I forgot my manners." The silver unicorn signaled and from the blackness of the tree line two pegasi appeared, flanking Rainbow Dash who was gagged and tied with rope around her mid section. Her eyes darted angrily between her captures.

Ted quickly looked about, he could make out silhouettes of ponies and a few Pegasi around the edges of the clearing, most of the escape routes were cut off. But the one directly behind Rainbow Dash was wide open. "Don't worry Dash, I'm not letting them keep you." *I hope I can still do this.*

"Now would you be so kind, my good Zebragus to just hand ove-" The silver unicorn stopped when he saw Ted's eyes turn into orbs of grey.

Ted let the power of the fey embrace every part of his body, it encompassed him and the area around him ever so slightly. He could feel the barriers of the world around him weakening, his form going over to another place. The world's color dimmed and grayed, he felt his physical form melt into the ether of this new place. Time was slowed, but he didn't have much to begin with. Quickly he moved himself through this ethereal world.

"Boss, what just happened?"

The silver unicorn looked about, he could still feel that blasted things presence, but it was all over the place. Then he heard a noise behind him.

Ted reappeared behind the larger of the two pegasi, solidly slamming his hoof into a nerve joint under its shoulder. It collapsed from the pain, Rainbow Dash took the initiative and slammed her weight into the other

that flanked her, knocking him over as he was unprepared. "Quick this way!" Ted shouted to her.

They broke into a gallop back into the forest where Rainbow Dash was escorted from. Ted could hear the sound of a small stampede and a flock of wings behind them. As they ran through the forest dodging branches and underbrush, Ted heard a small flurry of bows let loose their cargo. "Take cover!" Ted shouted. Rainbow Dash shot for a bush underneath a tree, Ted followed but was just a tad too far away. He felt himself get peppered by arrows, the pain streaking through him. As he skidded across the ground into the bush.

"You stupid FOALS!" Ted heard the silver unicorn shout, "I want that zebragus ALIVE!"

Ted looked over himself, he was hit four times, twice in one of his haunches, once on his back right behind one of his wings, and another was stuck into his messenger bag. He looked over to Dash and un-gagged her, "Oh my gosh, Ted are you alright?"

"I'll be fine I've suffered worse in my time. Now let's get you out of that harness shall we." Ted took his gauntlet out of his bag, clicked out the hidden blade and cut the ropes off of Dash. When the ropes fell off, Dash winced in pain as one of her wings lazily hung off her side. Ted looked up to her surprised.

"I'll be fine Ted, they broke it when they jumped me. Do you have any of those potion things you used on me?"

"Yes I believe I do." Ted quickly rummaged through the bag; he could hear the search parties getting closer. He pulled out one, and searched for another, but to no avail. He knew what had to be done. "Here take this one, I got another."

Rainbow Dash quickly drank down the potion and winced at the pain of the bones in her wing mending. "OK now you."

"There is no me."

"What, but you said-." Dash realized what he was doing, "No, you're not going to do this you hear. We can make it."

"Look at me Dash!" Ted said in a serious tone, "I got one ruined leg, a wing that's unusable even if I knew how to fly. If I used that potion on me and we ran for it they have too many earth ponies, chances are we are already surrounded. The only way out is to fly."

"What am I supposed to do just leave you behind? Maybe I can carry you out." Dash said with a stomp of her hoof and concern in her voice.

"Dash, I'm hopeless. There is no way I am getting out of here without getting caught, they want me alive anyway you heard that leader of theirs. But I do have one chance." Ted took off his bag and stuffed his gauntlet back inside, and placed it over Dash's neck. "You need to find my friend, the last time I heard from him he said he was at a library in town. He'll know what to do, he's a blue unicorn, kind of messed up face and he'll answer to Cartanis." Ted went to open his messenger book, but his hope of telling them what had happened was dashed when he saw the pages covered in ink, the arrow apparently piercing enough to do some catastrophic damage to it. He stuffed it quickly within the bag as well.

"How will I know where to find you?"

"That's the part I'm not sure about, maybe if you bring my friends here they can track me. We just got to focus on getting you out of here or I might as well be dead meat." Ted looked around above them, a few Pegasi were scanning the area below. "Now I need you to fly as fast as you can, I'll try to cover you but you need to make it out of here."

"You saved my life twice today Ted." Dash was pointed a hoof at him, "If I don't find you alive wherever it is you're going to be, I'm going to beat the snot out of you for making me do this."

"Oh I won't die, you still owe me a flying lesson, and I wouldn't want to miss out on that." Ted checked one more time, an opening appeared in the skies above them, "Now FLY!"

As Rainbow Dash took off into the sky, Ted leaned himself against a tree. Using it to steady himself, for as soon as Dash broke the tree line the Pegasi began attempting to chase. He quickly began firing bolts of energy at them, ignoring the pain in his back each time he drew the bow string. Knocking them out of the sky in clusters with each boom of his arrows hitting their marks. The sky was a thunderous applause of marksmanship

as hails of arrows erupted from the canopy below. Ted had managed to scatter, or at least halt, enough of them that Dash broke through their aerial blockade, he saw at least one Pegasus still chasing her. *She'll have to deal with him on her own.*

Ted felt woozy, his mind was slipping, the use of so much power in such a short time mixed with the blood loss was getting to him. He saw a few rather angry ponies starting to close around him. "You're finest accommodations, no exceptions!" Was the last thing Ted said before he fell forward and blacked out against the ground.



Rainbow Dash flew as fast as she could; the brown Pegasus was keeping up but was having trouble matching her speed. Rainbow Dash got an idea, *He's a Thunderhead isn't he? He'll know where Ted is taken!* A smile ran across her face, *So, How about I see just how good of a flier you are!* Dash then dropped her altitude, and disappeared below the tree line. Whisking her way around trees, the brown behind her was keeping good pace, but only just. Dash then broke away from the trees down a forest clearing.

Boulderdash closed on the fleeing mare, *almost got you!* He stretched out his hooves as far as he could; her tail was almost within reach. *I'll show them Boulderdash isn't some laughing stock!* Then with great agility, Rainbow Dash made an impossibly steep climb back into the sky. But Boulderdash was not so agile, and soon found himself smashing face first into a boulder which jutted out of the ground. Causing him to blackout.

Got him! Dash thought to herself, gracefully landing besides the unconscious brown Pegasus.

"Rainbow Dash? What's going on?" Fluttershy landed next to Dash.

"Fluttershy?" Dash then noticed that she could see Fluttershy's cottage from where they were standing. "Look we don't have a lot of time, Ted is in trouble and this Pegasus knows where he is. I've got to get to Twilight's place." Dash picked the Pegasus up onto her back, she had always been a strong flier. Even if this Pegasus slowed her down she wasn't going to give up on Ted. She took off into the sky, in the direction of Ponyville.

Fluttershy was close behind her, "I'm coming too, I might be able to help."

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Dash landed in front of the library, knocking on the door until it was answered by Spike. "Yeah, what's up Dash?"

"Where's Twilight? I need to find somepony."

"She left a little while ago with Professor, you probably just missed her. They went over to Sugarcube corner to try and get some sweets before it closed."

"Was this Professor a blue unicorn?"

"Umm yeah, how did you know?" Spike noticed the unconscious Pegasus on dash's back, "Uhh-"

"No time to explain Spike, thanks." Dash took back off into the air. Fluttershy still close behind. Night had fallen over Ponyville, and Dash was trying to get her bearings so she could find Sugarcube corner. All of a sudden fireworks exploded in the air over the town square. "Huh?" Dash looked at a stage that was sitting in the middle of the town square. She heard the sound of applause from the crowd gathered around it, standing in the middle of the stage was a blue unicorn in strange robes. "That has got to be Cartanis!"

Dash flew to the ground, and spoke with Twilight who was also there. Upon learning of Ted, Cartanis contacted Andur through his messenger book, and they went off to the town hall to rendezvous with him.

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Ted woke to find himself on the cold floor of some kind of basement. He sat up to notice a collar around his neck, with a chain leading to a large heavy iron ball. What little light that was in the room showed him what his accommodations were like, Surrounded on three sides by old looking brick and mortar the fourth was iron bars like those of a prison. Ted checked his wounds, to find himself bandaged around the mid section and over his haunches. *Guess they want something from me.*

Ted heard the sound of a door open and shut, hooves clopping against the floor as a figure appeared in front of his cell, it was the silver unicorn from earlier. "My, my, don't you heal quickly. I thought you would be out all night."

"Well maybe I would have been if my request for the best room would have been obliged." Ted retorted back.

"Sadly all of our presidential suites are taken, although I hear from other satisfied customers that yours is the best in the cell block. But, I must say, that bow you have is really quite interesting, I was toying with it and I couldn't get it to do what you did to my ponies. But I can feel the power flowing through it, I would be so enthused if you could show me how it works."

"I'm not sure it would respond well to misuse by some nameless hooligan."

"Oh yes silly me, where are my manners tonight. You may simply call me Reginald, anything else is unimportant, well besides the fact that if you try to teleport again that collar will fry your brain. As for the bow not working for me, well, that would just be so sad if all your little fans didn't get to see the great Ted perform his feats of marksmanship for them wouldn't it?"

Ted wasn't sure what Reginald was getting at and shot him a curious look.

"Oh well didn't you know, we got your biggest fan right here!" Reginald then opened the cell door and threw in a small crying pegasus colt, it was Archie. "He must love to see your shows, he followed you all the way into the Everfree. Quite the dedicated fan if you ask me, I think I'll leave him with you for the night. Maybe he can convince you to go out and perform tomorrow." There was a hint of malice in Reginald's last words to Ted as he disappeared back the way he came.

Archie was crying on the floor, "Hey now, just calm down." Ted gently patted the colt on the head, "They didn't hurt you did they?"

Archie stopped sobbing for a moment, "N-no but they said they were if you didn't show them how the bow works by tomorrow."

"Oh I don't think we'll have to worry about that."

"What? But they're going to hurt me Ted." Worry was apparent on his face.

"No they're not, I promise you that. You see Archie I have friends, friends who are as powerful and clever as me. We never left each other behind before, and I know they won't start now. Why I bet they're on their way here right now."

"Really?" Archie said with a slightly cheerier tone.

"Yes, really. We went on all sorts of amazing adventures together, me and all my friends. In fact we were so good, that we helped hundreds of thousands of peo- I mean ponies. They might not know of us here Archie but one day the evil in this land will quake in fear for its deeds when it hears our name."

"What was your name?" Archie said with a curious look on his face.

Ted smiled at the colt's curiosity, "The Dungeon Masters."

Chapter 5

Andur thundered through the night, barreling past concerned looking ponies who were on their way home after a long days work. Concern was spread across his face, *I know these are all good beings that live here, but if Ted got himself in a mess with them... I am not sure if I'll know what to do.* Andur slowed when he reached the town square, he saw a fancy carriage being drawn by a team of ponies out of the town as he surveyed for the large town hall structure which looked like a small tower. Andur approached and was greeted at the door by Cartanis, "What exactly is Ted up to?"

"Apparently he's busy being kidnapped by a gang of cutthroats who have him at a yet to be disclosed location," Cartanis opened the door for Andur, who stepped inside, "Luckily we got our hooves on a member of their gang who should know where he is, that's where you come in." As they rounded a corner from a hallway to the main area of the town hall Andur noticed the four ponies waiting for them.

Andur whispered to Cartanis, "Quick, what's your alias?"

Twilight spoke up, "Wow Cartanis, you were right. Andur is huge, maybe bigger than Celestia, if only by a little."

Andur shot a questioning look to Cartanis, who replied, "They know everything Andur, the two Pegasi are Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy, I think you can figure out who is who based on the names." both waved to Andur, who returned a smile.

"The purple unicorn is Twilight Sparkle, who I must recommend to NOT frighten." Twilight smiled at the small quip and greeted Andur, who reciprocated the greeting.

"And the pink one-"

Pinkie Pie dashed over to Andur, grasping one of his hooves, and then shook it with fervor. "Hi, I'm Pinkie Pie. I thought you were kind of cool before when I heard you were all big and stuff. But now that I know you can

heal ponies, shoot ray beams, and even turn undead into ash just by being near them! You're AWESOME!" Pinkie Pie then tagged Andur, "I call dibs on Andur as my Zompony Apocalypse survival buddy! No take-backsies." Pinkie Pie then hopped back over to where she was before.

Andur shot a curious eye to the others, "Don't worry about Pinkie Pie, she's just excitable like that." Fluttershy replied

"wel' naow tha'ght wi gut tha'ght outta' th'way, whar' is this poneigh whu has infur'mation." Andur looked from face to face to see them bewildered.

Cartanis spoke up, "What Andur said wa-" but was cut off by Andur placing a hoof in front of him.

Andur took a deep breath, calming himself, and then spoke again, "What I said was. Well now that we got that out of the way, where is this pony who has information?" It was a little slower than last time, and his accent was still there. But he was obviously speaking common this time.

"I didn't think you had it in you Andur." Cartanis said rather proudly.

"Lots of practice, just don't get me excited and I can stay concentrated enough to speak normally. Now let's go to this informant of yours." Andur followed Cartanis to a tied up brown Pegasus that was out cold, in a small corner of the large room.

"He was knocked out thanks to some quick thinking by Rainbow Dash, but I cast a sleep spell on him, when I deactivate it he should come to his senses."

"Then wake him." Andur commanded.

Cartanis put his hoof to the forehead of the Pegasus, in a scant moment it groaned and stirred. Opening his eyes in a rush, he struggled against the ropes around its midsection and hooves. "Oh come on, I can't be this unlucky!" Boulderdash looked about and saw Andur, his mouth half fell open, "Of course, of course. First that zebragus hands my haunch to me, then I fall for the oldest trick in the flier's hoofbook, and now I get to be interrogated. BEST-DAY-EVER!" Boulderdash shouted with sarcasm in his voice.

Andur laid down in front of Boulderdash, "Alright pegasus-"

"Boulderdash, you going to interrogate me? At least use my name!"

"Fine, Boulderdash. I'm going to start this off easy. Where is Ted, the zebragus?"

"Or what? You ask me more and more sternly until you get all 'out of control' and start beating me up? Please, I got what you want, I know the rules. Now what are you going to give me in return?"

"I am giving you a break Boulderdash, I have no idea what my powers will do to you. This is your chance to leave here as you came, a villainous scumbag who holds up good ponies who are too nice and well meaning to try and stop you."

"Oh, no! The big bad brownie has powers! What are they? Confusing accent and anger management?"

Andur sighed, "Let's just hope you don't disintegrate." Andur stood himself up, and closed his eyes.

"What do you mean 'disintegrate'?" concern flashing across his face for a split second.

Andur opened his eyes, the pupils glowed with the color of a sun. "Your lies shall be like hot coals on your soul, the darkness and shrouds you use to hide the truth from yourself will be swept aside." Andur then gazed into Boulderdash's eyes, he felt the link to his soul connect. He could make out the stallions life before him, he picked a recent memory. "The pegasus colt, Archie. You were the one who captured him."

"Yeah so? That Ted zebragus beat the snot out of me and he got away."

"Not at the archery range, in the forest."

Boulderdash flinched a little, "I wasn't there, I flew after that blue Pegasus. It must have happened after..."

"LIES!" Andur said, his voice booming against the quiet of the town hall. Boulderdash felt a sting over his body, but it did little more than make him

twitch. "You tailed Ted into the Everfree, and you watched the colt follow. When the chance arrived you captured him, and passed him on to your compatriots. You had the opportunity to simply tell him to leave. Why didn't you?"

"That foal was going to get himself into trouble anyway! He was miles into that forest, besides, if I hadn't the boss would've had my hooves on a platter."

Andur could feel the concern Boulderdash had, *I must look deeper into his past, there is good in this one*. Andur searched deeply into the soul of Boulderdash, going back a few years. *Not too far, the older the sin, the greater the repercussion*. "Back a few years, the day nightmare moon was freed upon the land. You saw to the ransacking of a business. WHY!"

"They owed protection money, boss wanted it early on account of a possible apocalypse."

"What else?"

"There is no what else! Why are you even asking me-" Boulderdash was cut off by a burning pain through his body.

"Something happened that night in the store, you found the owners. What did you do with them!"

"I didn't do anything!"

"WHY!"

"The boss sent some veterans with me, real nasty ponies, and we didn't find hardly any bits in the register. So we went looking for them, I found them in a supply closet. They were huddled in there, all scared, so I took their bits before the vets got curious."

"Do not test my PATIENCE!" Andur did not wish to harm Boulderdash, but the powers within him screamed for the sinner to repent or be damned. A wave of power coursed through the pegasus, causing him to curl and twist in pain. "You never took any bits, why didn't you rat them out?"

"IF I DID THEY WOULD'VE BEEN KILLED!" Boulderdash was getting emotional, tears welled up in his eyes, "I can't just let good ponies like that get killed for no reason, besides they could still make money for the boss and pay him later."

Andur could feel he was getting closer, to the event that started him down this path. *He is so close, the next one will either save him or his body shall be an empty shell.* Andur dug through more memories of Boulderdash, almost a decade ago, when Boulderdash had just passed initiation with the Thunderheads. "What happened to Lily?"

"How do you even know this!"

"What happened to her?" He repeated calmly

"She was killed." Boulderdash wouldn't meet Andur's gaze.

"Who killed her?"

Boulderdash was sullen and still not meeting Andur's stare.

"WHO!"

"I did," Boulderdash grew quiet, "She wouldn't give in, she just wouldn't let the gang take over her store; so... so I gave her the whole nine yards. Sent her off to pasture, whatever, can we just stop this! It has nothing to do with Ted!" Boulderdash finally met Andur's eyes. His open defiance screamed heresy into Andur's soul, his power swelled and screamed for vengeance.

Andur had to make use of all his will to stop his power from flooding over into the Pegasus, "What happened that day?"

Boulderdash's defiant gaze ceased as he once again drew into sadness, "It was my first gig after being made official. We were going to move out into Manehattan, I was sent into some saddle bag makers place with some other Thunderheads. That old mare Lily was there, the owner, so we laid into her a bit. Tried to scare her at first, all she did was get angry with us. So we took her someplace quiet, started to beat her up, make her scared for her life. I don't think I've ever seen somepony that strong in the face of danger, it was like she believed in something, and she wasn't going to let us win."

Boulderdash was starting to weep a little, "I hadn't done much, I was just supposed to watch out for ponies. But I just kept looking at that battered old face, bruised and scarred but defiant. Why wouldn't she just give in, make it stop!" he was crying a little harder, "So I thought, maybe if I scared her a bit, really laid into her. She would just give in and let us stop. So I grabbed a mallet, and I... I broke her kneecaps." Boulderdash met Andur's look again, "And you know what, her old heart couldn't take it. She passed out, dead, on the floor of a basement out in the middle of nowhere."

Andur's power was fighting for a chance to end him, but he allowed him to continue. "It was an accident, I mean, I know I did it on purpose. But I just wanted that poor old mare to live, to stop getting hurt, I didn't want her to die. It sounded like a good reason for doing it, we could just get it over with and leave. I'm sorry, I can't make it right, it was wrong, just take my apology and get on with it!"

Andur could feel the genuine guilt within Boulderdash, he had come to terms with the truth. Accepting the knowledge of his wrongdoings, but still sought to make things right, he had saved that family and possibly Archie from certain doom. His power waned and receded into the deep well within himself, *he has repented*. Andur looked at the curled up weeping Pegasus, "You can't make what you did that night right, but that doesn't mean you have to keep going along doing bad things. You're not a bad pony, you have still helped others."

Boulderdash looked up from his curled up position, noticing Andur's eyes had ceased glowing.

"My friend is in danger, and knowing your organization, they will probably use Archie against my friend to get what they want. You can still save him, you can save them both. Tell us where they have them."

Boulderdash casually looked about, and rested his head on the ground, "The old depot out at the Bucking Bronco station." Boulderdash felt the ropes at his mid-section and legs become unraveled, he looked around curiously.

"Now go, and steer clear of the dark path of sin." Andur walked back over to the group of some rather stunned ponies. Boulderdash stood, looked at the entrance, and was on his way to a better life.

"What did he just do Cartanis?" Twilight asked.

"He's better at explaining it than me."

Andur met the curious gaze of the ponies, "I usually don't have names for what I perform, they are mostly miracles and acts of my god; Pelor. They most often take on similar forms, healings and 'ray beams' as put so nicely earlier. That one in particular though, is a type of soul link, all of its types are dangerous. The one I used is called Repentance, I can glean information from the one whom I link to. But the power has a mind of its own, the purpose of it is to make the target repent for what he has done... or die." Some of the ponies grew concerned or gasped, "It isn't one I use lightly, you can never really shake it from you when a person... or a pony, is smitten by such power, simply because they won't come to terms with what they have done." Andur looked out a window to make out the silhouette of Boulderdash in the sky, "But there are those times when they don't let you down."

Cartanis spoke up, "Anyway, would anypony happen to know where this supply depot is?"

Twilight answered, "It's an old supply stop for trains moving around Equestria, it isn't in use anymore thanks to some more efficient railroad route designs which made it obsolete in supply routes. It's just a few miles north of Ponyville."

"We better ge-" but Andur was cut off when he saw a rather unhappy orange pony in a cowboy hat at the door of the town hall, "-sigh-, Applejack I thought we had an understanding about what was going on."

"What's goin' on here is a bunch of hog-wash, and I want to know what's at the bottom of this cider barrel sooner rather than later." Applejack stomped a hoof in protest, then a new voice joined the party.

"Applejack what are you doing?" Rarity appeared next to Applejack giving protest to her friends action, she then noticed everyone else. "Oh, why hello girls. What are you all doing here?"

"We're all here trying to help our friends, help out another friend who is in trouble. Is there something amiss between you and Andur?" Twilight asked with a hoof pointed at Andur.

"So you're not even really called Mud Mouth are ya? That's one strike mister and I ain't about to start just handing those out willy-nilly."

Cartanis coughed a little to call attention to himself, "I am sorry but, Applejack was it? We don't have the time to have a petty squabble, how about you just get whatever is in your system out of your syste-" But Cartanis was cut off when he noticed that Rarity was eying him strangely.

"Oh, darling, whoever made your ensemble!" Rarity galloped over to Cartanis

"Wha-"

"Just look at the fabric, even the color matches your coat tone perfectly. And those strange markings on the undercoat of the robe, they make you look so mysterious, oh you must show me how they did this!"

"Uh Rarity?" Dash spoke up.

"Yes Rainbow Dash, what is it?"

"We're kind of in the middle of something here."

"Oh yes of course." Rarity took a step away from Cartanis and settled down, but he was still a little uneasy because Rarity looked like she was trying to draw a blueprint of his suit in her mind.

Applejack looked back over to Andur, "Alright then, no drama, I want that answer you promised me and the family. What powers do you have, you're no earth pony, but you're also not a unicorn."

"I'm not a pony at all." Andur replied.

Applejack's eyes grew wide for a second, before her steely look returned, "Well than what are you?"

"In my world I was known as a human, I had a different body there as well, the details are not important. Now... you wish to know of my power?" Applejack nodded, "Then give me your hoof." Applejack shot a suspicious eye towards him and his outstretched hoof.

"Please Applejack just take a leap of faith, one part of you knows he is a good pony." Rarity interjected.

Applejack sighed, and put her hoof on Andur's, "Just no funny business ya hear?"

Andur closed his eyes, and called to the power hidden deep within the well of his soul. He heard its answer as it swept through him, its light both comforting and strengthening. He reached out with it and felt the soul of Applejack, a dim star amidst the blackness around him, he sent his power out and connected to her. "Now just close your eyes Applejack."

As Applejack closed her eyes, the familiar blackness was replaced with a small light she could see in front of herself.

"That is me, my soul. And this-" the light that she saw then began to glow intensely, waves of it extended outwards in all directions. Applejack could make out the walls of the town hall, but that was not the amazing part. As the wave of light passed over her friends, their souls could be seen flickering in the distance, each singing with waves of light and varying intensities of glow. She could feel the air around her hum with life, even outside the hall she could make out the feeling of other ponies walking about the town minding their own business. "-is my power. With it I can channel the will of my god, his miracles and powers allow me to make use of my own gift to help those around me."

All of the information flowing to her mind was getting to her, so Applejack let go of Andur's hoof. With the connection lost, the world was once again a quiet village in the middle of the night. She was left speechless at what she just saw.

"With that power I aided your family in their time of need. I understand a fear of an alien force, don't be surprised you're easier to read than you expect. You are very loving and protect your family with all your heart, but you must be careful. If you let that protective side of you take too much control, it will fester and turn into suspicion, and from there you will be a good friend to no one."

Applejack scratched at the ground, "I just wanted to know my family was safe, we've been together for a long time... and with the disaster and all... Well shoot, guess I owe somepony an apology don't I?"

"Accepted, now please we must get moving." Andur looked back to the group of ponies behind him, "seeing as how Cartanis and I don't know the way, I'll assume one of you wants to show us the way. The others will protest that they may be of help and come along anyway, in protest to the danger and my concern." Andur chuckled a little at the ponies bewildered or shy faces, "I can read people, and ponies, much easier than you all think. And yes it is fine, you're with The Dungeon Masters now, and we can deal with any foe."

Off the large group went, out of the town and northward towards the Bucking Bronco supply depot.



"Hey boss, Ted wants to speak with you." a large earth pony said to a groggy Reginald.

"This soon? I thought he was going to be the holdout till the last minute type." Reginald pulled himself out of bed and went downstairs to the main lobby of the old train station, out the windows he could see his ponies shifting around various bits of cargo to and from Thunderhead trains that used it as an out of the way illegal market. The small depot had a few other places to store things in, and made a convenient place to set up as a half-way house for Thunderhead operations into southern Equestria.

Satisfied with the efficiency of his workers, Reginald went over to the cellar door within the room, opened it and walked down the stairs. He continued past the various cells with other captives, until he came upon the one reserved for Ted and Archie. "I hear you want to talk to me?"

"Yes," Ted replied, "I was wondering, are you a gambling pony?"

Reginald chuckled a little, "I have been known to, what was on your mind?"

"I set the stakes, you select the game."

"Hmm, well it is rather boring around here. Let's hear about those stakes."

"If I win, Archie here goes back to his family a-

Reginald began laughing uncontrollably, "oh please, please, stop you can't be serious. Why on Equestria's soil would I ever relinquish a potential asset that would net me a business and your bow technique?"

"Maybe if you remembered your manners, and didn't interrupt me you would know. You have been slipping up an awful lot tonight, did you get your beauty sleep?"

"Oh I am sorry, I was in the middle of it when you wanted to make this silly wager. But oh please go on."

"If I win, Archie here goes free, back to his family. AND," Ted quickly stated to cut off the snickering of Reginald, "I show you how the bow works."

"Well my fine hero, that is a little more acceptable. But what would I get if I won. The bow demonstration anyway? I'm not going to risk something like that, when I can get it the hard way without losing anything."

"If you win, I'll MAKE you more bows."

"Come again?" Reginald had just gotten interested.

"I made that bow you are so curious of, if you win, I'll make you more bows. Who knows, you might actually learn something from my craftsmanship." Ted held his head up high with pride

Reginald let out a hearty chuckle, "The kinds of ripples I could make in the underground if I had that kind of producible power. Mercenaries, kingpins, even countries would pay through the nose for that kind of thing. Oh I have not been an iron monger in a long time. But, this is rather interesting, I wonder if the griffons are still attempting to expand?"

Reginald realized how much he was trailing on and stopped himself, "Fine then Ted, you do like to make things interesting don't you? You'll be escorted upstairs in a few minutes, I'll be ready for you with my little game. Now excuse me if I leave you in the dark as to what, but with potential gains like this I prefer to... stack the deck a little."

Ted retorted, "Just don't stack it too much, or the scales are liable to break."

Reginald trotted back off up the stairs snickering.



Upon a rocky cliff away from the station. Andur concentrated and placed his hoof on a stone, he felt the ghostlike appendages and lifted the stone. "Why I'll be, that's just so simple it's devious."

Cartanis smiled, "I know I thought something similar when I figured it out," Cartanis looked back to the Bucking Bronco station, "Hey, we got movement in the station house again." Cartanis drew a circle in the air in front of himself with a feed from his magic. He snapped some power into the circle he drew and the air condensed and warped into a makeshift magnifying glass, which was large enough for the group to see through. "Someone's coming out the front door."

A silver unicorn trotted out the front door and down the train line, ponies seemingly giving salutes or formal greetings as he passed them. Twilight gasped, "That's Reginald Silvermane, one of the Thunderhead's top under-bosses." Reginald disappeared within a shack that was being used for storage.

Andur turned to Twilight, "Do you know what he could be up to?"

"Well he's like one their top lieutenants, you don't just send them to a-" realization struck on Twilight's face, "Their making a move on Ponyville, it's one of the few places where they don't operate normally. They've been slowly making their way south, and Ponyville is the last natural stop between them and the colonies to the south and west. If they can get it under their hooves, the Thunderheads will have a free pass to the colonies!"

Reginald reappeared thereafter with two heavy saddlebags as he walked back into the station house.

Cartanis drew concern on his face, "I didn't like the looks of those bags Andur."

"Whatever they have planned for Ted they must be getting ready to start," Andur stomped a hoof in frustration, "I was hoping we could wait until that train left with some of their grunts, but they're nowhere near done

unloading that thing." Andur sighed and resolved to what they would have to do. He began taking his armor out of his bag of holding, and putting his clothes into it. His armor's metal slabs and emblems shimmering in the moonlight.

As he began fitting it to himself, he spoke up to Cartanis, "Cartanis, I know you don't like it but you're going to go in first, I'm far too large to do much without attracting attention. Once I go in, all hell is going to break loose. You just need to get into position on top of something, that way you can concentrate on casting. I'm going to go in the front, make a scene, attract attention. Whatever I can do to keep them guessing where you are if they can even find you."

Cartanis sighed, "I always did hate skulking, but if I can get somewhere relatively safe and in range I should be able to do some damage," his makeshift magnifying glass darted around the depot as Cartanis looked for places to go "Well good luck Andur."

Dash spoke up, "What are we supposed to do?"

Andur looked back at the six ponies who came with them, "I was honestly hoping you would stay out of this one."

"Oh come on," Dash protested, "there's got to be like... fifty of those ponies out there, and there's only two of you! Can't we help like AT ALL?"

"I know you all want to help, especially you Dash," Andur looked back to the station, "but these are not standard circumstances. If I could think of a plan that involved you, any of you, I would definitely make use of your talents. I can feel the potential within each of you, but you all also have almost no real combat experience. Cartanis and I on the other hand have been through dungeons, the elemental planes, and even war." Andur looked back to see Dash was saddened.

Andur Continued. "I can tell that you want to save Ted, Dash, but you've got to realize that you may have already. You have done everything that was required of you today, admirably. You were the one who thought up how to capture Boulderdash, you were strong enough to trust in Ted's plan." Andur put a hoof on her shoulder, "Now it's up to us, and we can do this, he's as good as saved. Trust me."

Dash sighed and looked to Andur, "OK you got a point there," she then poked Andur's chest plate, "But if Ted doesn't make it-"

"Oh he'll make it." Cartanis interrupted.

"How do you know?"

"You do remember that fight he had at the range don't you?"

"Yeah, of course I do."

Cartanis interjected, "It's a good thing those Pegasi listened to reason. I know Ted, and if he really saw you as a threat, you would be picking up pieces of yourself off the floor when he was through with you." Cartanis remembered a few times the elf surprised him with his skill, "The Ted I know from the war, is much like the Ted that cleared those skies for you. He managed that even when severely wounded, for all we know he could be in that station house mopping up the floor with their faces." Cartanis noticed Dash cheer up a little. "So Andur, Standard rules of non-war engagement?"

"Non-lethal until they try to get lethal first." Andur said as he walked toward the road that lead into the depot.

"If you really want to still help, bring whatever passes for law enforcement here. To help clean-up, one way or the other." Cartanis then galloped off into the hills toward the depot.

Twilight took a note out of her saddlebag, "Dash, do you think you could fly this to Spike? I really should've done this before we left, but it should explain enough to Celestia so she'll send some of the Equestrian guard this way."

"I can do that," Dash grabbed the note out of the air, "in ten seconds flat!" Off she shot into the sky, back towards Ponyville.

[M/M/M/M]

Scamper sighed to himself, *I hate shipment days*. He picked at some loose dirt at the ground in front of himself, *its either stand around in one spot for a few hours duty, or lift a bunch of heavy crates and organize them properly*

duty. Scamper looked down the road, *why do I even bother, I've been doing this grunt work for years, and for what? A good handful of bits here and there?* Scamper then noticed a silhouette in the distance. He was slightly surprised just to see movement this far from anything, the shape became clearer as it neared. *A pony this far from...* Scamper's thoughts were brought to a standstill when he saw a very large, armor clad, earth pony marching down the street towards him.

"Hey get up you lazy colt," Scamper bumped his watch partner who had fallen asleep. His partner awoke with a snort, looked around a bit and saw Andur marching up the road.

"Whoa" was all he said before they witnessed what happened next.

Andur waited patiently before the two guards, waiting for Cartanis to give him the signal. Then he heard it, a voice whispered next to his face, "Go have some fun." Andur searched deep within himself for his power, he summoned it from its slumber and let it flow into his being. His pupils began to glow, an aura seemed to surround him, and his armor reacted to his gift; the sun embellishments igniting and blazing in their glory.

Scamper only stood mouth agape, *What the-who-huh?* "I ain't being paid enough to deal with some sort of envoy of Celestia!" So Scamper, scampered off into the night, soon followed by his partner.

Andur raised a questioning eye, *so they think me some envoy of their ruler? Just makes things easier for me then.* Andur continued on into the station, rounding a corner he could see the main bay they were using to unload the train. As he continued more and more Thunderheads began to hear his approach.

One draft pony in particular approached him rather calmly, "Look buddy, I don't care who you are, what fancy designer you pegged to make you that silly armor, or if you even actually serve Celestia. But, you are not just wandering around in here unless you're expected."

Andur met the gaze of the pony, "I'm here to save a friend, you leave and go about your lives, or you stay and become... an obstacle."

"Oh a troublemaker ah? Thunderheads! Let's show what we do to troublemakers around here!" As the draft pony backed away, Andur could

see a handful of Pegasi in the air with bows ready, other earth ponies with various implements he guessed were weapons. He also thought he saw the glow of unicorns among them but wasn't sure.

"Make your move Thunderheads!" Andur taunted to them.

So they did, first a few earth ponies charged at Andur haphazardly, attacking only from the front. As they closed Andur half turned and readied himself, as each closed he whipped one of his powerful hind legs at them. He cleanly hit one, then another with a second swipe, knocking them both unconscious and away from himself. The third jumped upon Andur, and attempted stabbing him with a dagger. It did manage to slip between the metal plates and break his skin, but Andur retaliated with his power. He rushed it to every fiber of his being and sent it out in a shock-wave, letting loose a small nova of light, as it touched the soul of beings around him his power sensed their evil intent and did smite them. Earth ponies near Andur recoiled in pain as for a split second as if their souls were on fire. The first wave had fallen, and Andur saw the second was going to be a lot more serious.

Cartanis waited atop a warehouse for his opportunity to help out before he could be discovered. As Andur just dispatched the first wave, Cartanis knew from his display of power the Thunderheads would step up their attack. The first thing they did was have their Pegasi launch a volley of arrows, Cartanis prepared a spell, *let's see how you like a good Thunderball*. As the arrows approached Andur, a wave of light appeared overhead and seemed to cause the arrows to cease their flight as they passed through it. Cartanis tossed the orb of compressed air that boomed with the power of thunder, as it flew into the center of the Pegasi flock it detonated. A concussive force knocked many out of the air; the few that remained seemed more concerned with their own lives now than listening to orders.

Cartanis took the moment of panic and fired dozens of arcane missiles down into the crowd of ponies, a few found their marks, exploding into arcane shrapnel that tore at the surrounding area of impact. But many more were deflected or detonated early by barriers of force, *BAH! Unicorns, even if they can't use my magic they can still disrupt it*. He sent a message to Andur once again with an old spell, ghost sound.

"Andur! I won't be much help until those unicorns are out of the picture."
Andur heard his message from Cartanis.

Then let's break some concentration, Andur charged headlong towards the remaining Thunderheads. He saw the glow of a Unicorn's horn and raced towards it, as he began to make out the terrified face of one it shouted.

"It's after me you foals! Protect me or that other one is going to start raining death on us again!" A group of Earth ponies then surrounded the unicorn.

Oh please do group up so nicely for me, As Andur closed the distance he drew his morningstar off his back. Quickly righting himself to stand on two hooves, he arced the weapon like a golf club, with a flow of his power he concentrated it into a blast of righteous thunder which scattered the tight group of ponies. Even with his best effort Andur lost his balance momentarily and found himself back on all fours, loosely holding onto Morellia like a walking cane. *I still don't have the hang of fighting in this new form.* Andur then felt a force around him, attempting to make him move. He looked around to see a unicorn concentrating, its horn aglow. *I've got to stop him,* as Andur attempted to move the force slowed his advance. As the distance closed, the power almost doubled, now Andur had to resist just to not be thrown about. He saw a second Unicorn backing up the first. Then Andur began to levitate into the air, for a third unicorn had joined in. As he was taken into the air, his weapon floated from him. It weaved around in the air, before it began to wind up for a strike.

There must be something I can do! Andur once again welled up his power around himself, concentrating it into a spear of righteous fury. Lightning sparked around him, but to no avail as it streaked across an unseen force. *Cartanis must be trying something.* Andur looked to the three unicorns, he could feel their souls and their intent, his power burned to smite them. So he let it free, the bolt he had formed shot off and squarely hit one of them. As the unicorn fell over screaming in agony at the pain to his form, Andur could see the strain on the other two as they picked up the slack. Andur was still floating, and his weapon was still getting ready to swing, "Now or never Cartanis!" Lightning once again arced through the air, hitting the remaining unicorns, as they convulsed from the electricity they passed out onto the ground. Andur managed to land upright and then yanked his weapon out of the ground where it fell and left a divot.

Cartanis hopped down off the roof of the warehouse, "The rest are scattering off into the hills, I think we redefined what "hazard pay" means to them."

Andur looked to the train house, "Just one left then, you think he's ready for us?"

"He might be ready for some pony, but he isn't ready for us." Cartanis looked to Andur, "So how will we be making our entrance?"

"Front door, we already wasted enough time playing footsie with these louts"

"Right behind you then."

Andur charged with all his might at the door into the station house, as he collided with it the force of impact shattered the old door and most of the surrounding frame. Cartanis leaped through the hole that was made, spells of various types swirling through the air around them. He then joined Andur in his shocked gaping stare at what they saw.

[M/M/M/M]

Ted shouted at Reginald, "Cummon you bigs baby! Down that cuu *hic* cube!"

Reginald was sitting across from Ted at a long table, a stack of small white cubes in between them, "Na-na-no, you win, please jus *burp* please just no more, no more." Reginald said shaking his head slowly and listlessly.

"You shaid we were going at thisss, until one of ush was out cold!" Ted quickly grabbed another three cubes and downed them, "There look, I downed another three *hic*, so you can down that one shilly cube. Now come on, come on you big baby you!" Ted shouted as he stomped his hooves on the table.

Reginald looked over to the door, to see Andur and Cartanis stunned, "Pleesh *hic*, get this un-cultured Zebragoose away from me!" he said as he fell over from where he was sitting and started crying on the floor.

"Un-cultured? I'm un-cultured! You're the one crying on the floor in frunna two perfectly good strangersh." Ted realized he was staring at Andur and Cartanis, "Oh, hi guy-sh, you stoppin' by to... to... umm, wait why are you heresh?" Ted asked as his ears lazily flopped around on his head.

"Cartanis, what is all this?" Andur asked.

"Hmm," Cartanis walked over to the table, picked up a cube, smelled it, and then liked it. "Salt? Surely it has to be spiked with something. Maybe Twilight will know what." Cartanis sent out a ghost sound out to where the others were waiting, which stated that it was all clear and to meet them at the station house. "Now Ted would you mind explaining all this?"

"Ha-hang onto that thought for a minute." Ted wobbly stood up and attempted to move to the other side of the table, but was stopped by the collar at his throat as it tugged against the iron ball. "Umm, could you please, Cartanish?" Cartanis walked over and undid the lock around the collar with a few quick applications of kinetic force in the proper places. As the collar clanked to the ground Ted hobbled over to Reginald, "Where's my bow?"

"Crate, right over there." the crying unicorn stated as he pointed towards a crate in the corner of the room.

Ted hobbled over to the crate and unpacked his bow, "Oh honey, don't ever run offsh without daddy again OK?" Ted then hobbled over to a cellar door, "OK kiddiesh, let's go free some scared little ponie-sh'all we?" Ted said in a slur.

Andur walked over to Ted and stopped him falling over as he stood on two hooves, "Maybe you should sit this one out, you've been through a lot."

Ted weakly smiled, "Ishn't that always like you Andur, being so nische to me even though I call you names. I'm really sorry about thoshe, I'm just pokin' fun because you gotta lighten up a little buddy." Ted's eyes then dilated immensely, "Whoa, when Thoshe things hit ya, it's like a ton of briiiiiii-" Ted trailed off as he fell over unconscious.

Andur quickly checked on Ted, he was still breathing and alive, so he didn't think too much of it. "So what do you think was down there?"

"I suppose we should find out," As Cartanis walked over to the cellar door, five ponies galloped up to the hole in the wall. "But first we need to figure out what's wrong with Ted." Cartanis walked over to the entrance, "Its fine, building is still stable. Twilight, would you mind helping us with Ted? He seems to have ingested a rather curious product."

"Oh no." Twilight said as she walked through the wreckage over to the unconscious zebragus, "Is there anything left of what they forced on him?"

"Well they didn't really force it on him, I don't think. But here is a cube of it." Cartanis handed her a cube from the table.

Inspecting it Twilight gave it a curious lick, "Well he should be fine, it's just salt, although it's usually diluted with some sugar in the cube to stop well... this."

"Excuse me Twilight but I'm not sure what salt does to ponies here, in our world it's little more than a seasoning." Andur asked.

"Oh, umm, it basically causes a lack of inhibition in the brain and the user to get kind of goofy."

"I think I get it," Cartanis said with realization on his face, as Andur turned a questioning eye, "It's like alcohol. Ted is just drunk."

Andur also sported a small grin as he realized it, "Well nothing I can do about that, he'll just have to sleep it off then I guess. Now let's see to these bandages-" but Andur was interrupted by Rainbow Dash soaring through the hole in the wall.

"I got back as soon as-" She saw Ted on the floor, "What's wrong with Ted?" Worry on her face.

"I was about to remedy that situation Miss Dash," Andur said as he closed his eyes and prayed to his god for deliverance.

Light bathed over Ted, after the light passed Dash went over and lightly tapped at Ted, "Hey Ted you OK?"

Ted lazily opened an eye, "oh hey Dashhh, glad to shee you're alright. I'm kind of tired though, so I think I'll jushhhht-" and just like that Ted was back out cold.

"Hey, HEY! Don't you quit on me you hear!"

Andur stopped Dash from shaking Teds head around, "He'll be fine, he's just drunk, or salt-licked, whatever you call it."

"Well, as long as he'll be alright."

"Now let's figure out the mystery of the basement shall we?" Cartanis walked over and opened the cellar door, Twilight went down with him. Cartanis cast his light spell and saw the row of cell doors, a few stray ponies in each. "Apparently they weren't just trafficking ill gotten goods."

"Hey I recognize some of these ponies." Twilight looked through some of the cells, "We've got missing posters of them up at the town hall newsstand. They must have nabbed them after the disaster and planned to ransom them."

Cartanis went about sabotaging the locks on the cell doors, and letting out the captives, they thanked them as they walked off upstairs. When Cartanis got to the last one, only a single pegasus colt was let out. "Hey are you one of Ted's friends!" he asked excitedly.

"Why yes, yes I am." Cartanis stated.

"He said you were going to save us, thanks!" the colt buzzed around and eventually walked with the others upstairs.

"Well I guess we better get back to Ponyville."

"Twilight, do you think you could come up here for a moment dear?" Rarity could be heard shouting down into the cellar.

As both the ponies left the cellar they noticed what all the fuss was about. pegasi clad in silver armor were descending upon the old station depot, "Looks like the Princess got my letter, say hello to the Equestrian guard." Twilight said.

One of the guard-ponies landed near the group, "We were told to expect resistance but it looks," the Pegasus continued as he looked about at the various unconscious or wounded Thunderheads, "like you've already dealt with that yourselves."

"I trust we can expect you sirs to deal with the clean up?"

"Yes ma'am." the Pegasus gave a salute.

"One more thing though," Andur dragged a nearly conscious Reginald out to the guard, "I believe you know who this is?"

"Why if it isn't Reginald Silvermane, you've been rather crafty before. But I think we got you pegged for this one."

"Whatever, just take me away. Today's been just a little too much for me" Reginald groaned.

As the other captive ponies were led out of the building the guard Pegasus spoke back up, "We'll have our hooves full locking up these criminals and taking account of the goods, would you mind helping us out a bit and escort these ponies back to their homes?"

"Doesn't seem like too much trouble, so we might as well." Andur responded

Andur had the others put Ted on his back, since he was unconscious. Then the guard Pegasus thanked them for their assistance in the matter, and asked them to be safer in the future and not be so brazen. So off The Dungeon Masters and company went back to Ponyville.

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Cartanis approached Andur after he had set down Ted in the top floor bed, "You do realize what all this means don't you?"

Andur sighed, "We've gone through stuff like this before, and these ponies are just like any other alien or unknown civilization we have encountered before. The circumstances are just a little... different." Andur stated as he looked at his hooves.

"I realize what it means to be here, what I mean is the ripples we are sending out Andur. One doesn't just take down a crime lord and have nothing happen. Our names may be spreading across Equestria at this very moment, even if we did ask nicely to try and stay anonymous to all those grateful families, gratitude is something that doesn't stay quiet for long."

"We'll deal with those bridges once we get there. For now, I would just like to enjoy what is left of the night in bed, if I can manage to even fall asleep."

"That message Twilight got from Celestia is eating at you too?"

"I'll admit, being visited by a form of deity is a little intimidating, but I can't help but think. Are we the only things that made it through the void? If anything else made it out here Cartanis, those ponies have to rely on a far off military force just for protection from a band of hooligans."

Cartanis rubbed his temples, "I know, the chances are astronomical, but with that much matter directed this way... it might only be a matter of time."

Andur looked back to the sleeping Zebragus, "At least we got Ted back, hopefully we can figure something out tomorrow after the meeting. I still owe the Apple Family that explanation."

"I think you mean 'we' at this point."

Andur gently smiled, "I guess I do." Andur walked down the stairs and to the large bed that waited for him, quickly removing his arms and armor he crawled into bed.

Cartanis trotted over to a couch set up in the room, *let's just hope we have more time than I think we do.*



"Is everypony here?" Applejack asked to the small crowd gathered within her family's home, it was a few hours after dawn. All of her friends had come over to hear from The Dungeon Masters, as well as her family, they even expected Princess Celestia to arrive at any minute.

"All we are waiting for is Cartanis and his friends, are they up yet?" Twilight asked.

Applejack looked out the window towards the worker's cottage, she saw the door open and three figures leave, "Oh, here they come now." Cartanis seemed to be speaking with them as they walked over, concern on Andur's face and a weary frown on Ted's

The trio entered the Apple Family residence, they exchanged greetings with everyone and took places around a table that was set up. Ted spoke up as he rubbed his temples, "Please tell me there is a treatment for salt infused hangovers in this world."

Ma Smith got up from the table, went over to a faucet and poured a glass of water "Water can help, dear."

Ted took the glass and sipped some, "You're an angel, Ma Smith was it?" Ma just nodded her head and went back to her seat.

Cartanis spoke up, "Well with that out of the way, are we all set over here?"

"I just need some dice and I'll be all set," Interrupted Pinkie Pie, who garnered some awkward stares.

"We are all just waiting for Princess Celestia to arrive." Twilight said.

With that a chariot descended out of the sky being pulled by a team of Pegasi in gold armor. Slowing to a stop next to the Apple Family abode. A tall and slender pegasus unicorn in royal attire stepped off the chariot and was followed to the house's door by her team of gold armored praetorian guards. When she entered the house, her guards stayed outside and manned the entrances against intrusion. Everypony in the house then stood and gave a quick bow, Cartanis and Andur imitated this gesture, but Ted did not as he was too busy being physically ill.

"By the rather formal treatment I take it you are the famous Princess Celestia?" Andur asked, who was rather surprised to see a pony he could meet eye to eye when he stood. Celestia seemed equally so.

"My, my, what strange visitors we have indeed." Celestia stated, "You must be Andur, if I am to be correct, I was honestly expecting somepony as large

as Applejack's brother." She looked around the table, "You are the scarred one, so you must be Cartanis." Cartanis tipped his hat to her, "And this curious creation of Zebra and Pegasus must be Ted."

Ted looked up from between his front legs as he tried to hide from the light, "Hello your majesty, I would say something clever... but I got nothin'." He then tucked his head back between limbs on the table.

"If we would all have a seat, we," Cartanis gestured to himself and company, "can get started on answering questions." As they all had a seat around the table Celestia was the first to speak up.

"I am rather curious as to what your 'home world' was like, and how you managed to get here?"

Cartanis answered, "Well our home world is a place of danger and adventure, the vary elements themselves have places they call home, and all manner of bipedal sentient beings stalk the world of mortals. There are also glorious cities, made with the toil of great nations, or even greater wizards. I myself herald from a town called Belliron, a rather large city with a prominent school of the arcane, which I had a hand in destroying and then rebuilding."

He gestured to Andur, "Andur here hails from a little out of the way place in the hills of the highlands, Manderton I believe was its name. He was driven from there by forces not of his control and raised an army from almost scratch to combat the evils of that force."

Cartanis then pointed to Ted, "Our dear little Zebragus here hales from a place even he won't tell us. But we met him at a port town and hired him as a guide, he sticks with us even though the contract ran dry years ago, he thinks we are fun apparently. He is also a half-elf, half-eladrin, who-"

Ted spoke up, "prefers to be known as an elf, because the Eladrin are all a bunch of stuffed shirts who don't know how to have a good time! With the exception of my father, but that's beside the point."

"Yes well, in our world we were fighting a war with a terrible nation known as the TIEFLING Theocracy. They lived by a doctrine of racial superiority, their 'theology' was that this superior race could bring about the glory of all the others through ruling them. However if you asked one of their recruiters



I doubt they would be so bluntly honest and add some slant and propaganda into the mix. At one of the more important battles, our forces collided over a fortress city that could decide the fate of the war. Andur, Ted, two others, and I successfully breached the defenses of the enemy's main camp. After a fight with a horrid beast of unholy construction, I believe we created the necessary reaction to breach the world veil. The thing that separates a world from the void and vice versa. When we barely managed to traverse this great bleakness we found ourselves here, pony-fied, so to speak."

"Do you think you can get home?" Fluttershy asked.

"That's just it, I am not sure if we can at the moment. I could reopen a portal to the void, but that is just dangerous and silly to do without the proper reasons. Unless I want to endanger the safety of this dimension we might be better off just stuck here for a while."

"Hey you said you had two other friends, where are they?" Dash spoke up.

The trio seemed to become slightly depressed at the question, Cartanis was the first to speak up. "Don't know, we got split up when the void sucked us out of our world. They might still be floating around out there, time travels differently in the void, not necessarily in all directions as it has a constant of forward; but at different speeds. I am more concerned with other beings from our world making it here. If my math was right, then the size of the inverse portal created by the unstable veil break was about twenty miles in diameter. That is far enough to pierce the underdark of our world, where there are plenty of nasty things that don't like being woken up. Not to mention if any of the pieces of land mass survive and fall like a meteor into your planet... let's just not go into detail."

Andur spoke up, "That was something we wished to ask of you Princess Celestia, if anything from our world makes it over to this side the results can be catastrophic. When we three fell through the veil of your world, the resulting snap from the veil sealing itself caused all the devastation in Ponyville. Besides the devastation of another tare, I've noticed there is not much of local law enforcement or some form of protection for civilians outside of the Equestrian Guard who can be far from a disaster like that; let alone if a creature from our world starts running rampant. If there is any way you could step up possible measures against such things."

Princess Celestia sighed, "I can see the wisdom in your words Andur, but there isn't much I can do. My land has known peace for centuries, while it did have a scare when my sister returned, she was vanquished before it got out of control. All of the forces at my disposal at this time are mostly volunteer. I'll try to set up more outposts for the guard around my country, but it is simply a very large task for a force that is already stretched thin."

"I would like to ask you a question Celestia," Cartanis received her attention, "You are well over a thousand years old, have there ever been occurrences like this in the past?"

"No, when I heard of the disaster at Ponyville I was concerned because there had never been anything like it before. The notion that such an event could occur again is worrisome at best."

Ted spoke up, "Is there any word of us around Equestria yet? I would really prefer to know if they are getting the stories right and that my image is secure."

"I'm afraid news of your deeds is already starting to spread, I've heard whispers of you amongst my court and Cantorlot. Although the details are rather sketchy at best, I doubt you're going to stay a local legend for long."

"Well I think that's all the questions we have, anypony else have a question?" Cartanis stated.

"So what are you going to do now? Seeing as how trying to play it incognito doesn't seem to be too viable anymore." Rarity asked.

"I was planning on staying in Ponyville for a while, the library you have is a treasure trove of information that I still need to sift through." Cartanis stated.

"If the farm will still have me I would prefer to do some work, I'm still formulating what we should do next." Andur asked

Pa spoke up, "That would be fine Andur, there are always a few things that need doin' around here."

Ted took a long drink of water, "I would really like to call out the greatest flier in Equestria on that flying lesson she owes me."

"I owe YOU! I practically saved your life." Rainbow Dash shouted.

"Yes you have miss Dash, but last time I checked the score is about two to one."

"Well fine if you want to play it that way, let's see what you got hot shot." Rainbow Dash trotted out the front door.

Ted soon followed, "Oh she is just too much fun to not play with, I love it when people... ponies whatever, have buttons to just push until they go nuts."

Cartanis looked about, "Well I think we just adjourned our meeting, it was lovely meeting you Princess Celestia."

"The same can be said of you, if you need anything don't hesitate to contact me through Twilight."

"Twilight if you wouldn't mind having an old fool over at your library again, I would be honored." Cartanis stated with a grin.

"As long as the old fool doesn't trip me down a flight of stairs again, I would be honored." Twilight got up from the table and trotted off with Cartanis.

Everyone began saying goodbyes and started to leave, Andur stated something to the group, "There is one thing I wanted to mention, Cartanis spoke to us this morning about the possibility of another breach event. While time does move differently out in that place, the void, a new event could be around the corner. So if you see anything that looks like a wrinkle just floating out in the middle of nowhere, get away and contact one of us."

"Will do Andur." Applejack stated.

Celestia then got up from the table and let herself out of the house, soon enough she was off in her chariot back to Cantorlot. As the other ponies left the farm to go about their day.

So out the door Andur went as well, to work in the fields and tend to seedlings amongst other farm related chores. He took note of the lovely day, *finest day I've seen since I got here, but I can't shake this feeling of something familiar. It's like something is in the air, fouling and*

*permeating.* Andur drew the thought from his mind when he was called over by Big Mac to help with a cart full of apples. *For now I can at least be of help to them.*

# Chapter 6

*Now where did she get to?* Cartanis thought to himself. He wandered about the library looking for Twilight, he eventually found her in the lab downstairs. "There you are Twilight, I need to ask a favor of you."

Twilight looked up from her workstation, "Already? You haven't been here for more than an hour, you already finished all the library's books?"

"Well you see I remembered after I collected a few necessary books that I still need to repair Heratio, and some books, thanks to the events of last night." Cartanis' nose curled at the thought of that silly third person pony, "And I could really use your talents, if you wouldn't mind."

Twilight smiled at his proposal, "Of course I'll help, I've been a little curious about what the inside of your hat is like."

"Thank you my dear," Cartanis said with a smile, "Now please join me upstairs, it's far too stuffy down here in this dreary lab."

"It isn't stuffy, it's just, not well looked after is all."

"Whatever puts your mind at rest."

So Twilight followed Cartanis upstairs, where he had set up his hat flattened upon the floor.

"Now if you would," Cartanis stated as he widened the brim of the upturned hat once again, "follow me." Cartanis hopped down inside the hat. "Oh yes before I forget," he said as he caught himself on the brim, his head out of the hole. "Spike, if you should need us, just shout in here, sound carries quite well in the hall." he stated before disappearing back into the hole.

Twilight looked into the brim of the hat, all she could see was darkness, "So how far is the fall?"

"Oh it's really not that bad, it's just a little dark in here, you're eyes will adjust." Cartanis laughed a bit, "Just be prepared for a little gravitational shift."

Twilight raised a curious eyebrow to the last statement, *Well, let's get this over with.* Twilight then jumped into the hat, all four hooves falling through first as she went in parallel to the floor. As the rest of her followed, something happened. Instead of continuing to fall down, she began to fall... forward. *Huh?* Was all she could think before she began to quickly gain speed in the new direction. She almost began to scream, but before she committed to the idea she had stopped. Floating in the air a few inches from a wall.

"You were never in any danger you know."

Twilight looked along the wall to see Cartanis standing against it

"Just right yourself and the magic will set you down." He said as he made a circling gesture with his hoof.

Twilight twisted and turned in the air until she was parallel with Cartanis; she felt herself ease to the ground and heard her hooves clop to the new floor. She looked around the rather large space "So um-"

"A small contained dimension within the confines of the Hat, technically we are in another world but it is directly connected to the hat, and exists because the hat does. So for all intents and purposes we are inside a world which lies inside the hat." Cartanis pointed to a bright hole in the wall a few yards above them, "No matter what direction the hat is in, that hole will always be there and the gravity of this place remains the same. So to prevent what happened the first time I found myself in here, I engraved some feather fall spells into the surrounding area for just such occurrences."

"How do you get out?"

Cartanis simply moved Twilight aside, took her place, and gently hopped. Even though he obviously put in very little force to his movement, he jetted up a few yards almost immediately and was floating in front of the bright hole. After he did nothing for a few moments, he quickly fell before gently slowing as he neared the floor.

"Guess that answers the question. But what about the damage you spoke of? There doesn't seem to be anything wrong here." Twilight noted as she looked about the cube-like room of stone they were within.

"I realize it may look rather unimpressive, I thought so too the first time I was here, but when you get trapped you are rather bound to figure another way out." He gently tapped a wall, "Oh he doesn't look like much from the outside, we are only at the gates." Cartanis journeyed over to a far wall, "Just take a stone here," Cartanis removed a stone from the wall, "Put it over this one." As Cartanis continued removing stones and placing them over others, Twilight could make out a symbol that was forming as Cartanis moved around more stones on the far wall.

"This, my young Twilight, is what I found," Cartanis put in the last stone, a large ornate H read across the wall. It flashed brightly for a moment, then stones began moving, twisting, and turning in upon themselves. Revealing an archway that lead into a much larger room. "Welcome to the Halls of Heratio." Cartanis stated as he gave a grand gesture with his hoof around the large room. "Before we get started on the tour I must attend to a small matter."

Cartanis walked over into the center of the large circular room, and approached a small dimly lit crystal that floated in the middle of a gap in a circular table. "You've been asleep a while Heratio, but I think you're ready for a jump start." He outstretched a hoof and from it an aura of brilliant light cascaded into the crystal. As it contacted the crystal, its shattered surface began making snapping sounds as cracks began to heal. Eventually it was once again an immaculate surface, Cartanis cut the flow of power, as he did so the crystal gently floated a little higher into the room and began to glow ever brighter. Bringing light to the relative darkness of the circular room.

Twilight noticed that various pieces of shattered glass from across the room began to float and assemble in front of Cartanis, slowly making the shape of a large circle. As the final piece fell into place, a slight golden hue emanated from its edges, "Hello sir." it stated in a rather monotone voice.

"Glad to hear from you again Heratio, I'll admit I thought when that careless rocket flew through here you might be gone."

"Next time, please make sure to close the doorway." The floating monocle hovered a few feet into the air, "I detect that the library may have lost approximately thirty percent of the collection to fire."

"Yes I know Heratio, that's why I am here."

"I shall prepare the library for you." Heratio hovered off into an archway that had the symbol of a book upon it.

Twilight spoke up, "If that's Heratio, your hat, then why didn't you just fix him last night?"

"The damage he suffered was much worse than some surface scratches when you saw him. He had to shut himself down and slowly repair, if I had attempted to jump start him then I probably wouldn't have been able to do anything else for a week." Cartanis pointed towards the library archway, "The rocket slammed into the gemstone that held his consciousness and flew into the library before exploding, lost a good amount of the collection to the resulting fire."

"So what is Heratio?"

Cartanis thought for a moment, "In my world he is known as a 'living relic' something of great or ancient power that is truly monumental. Heratio himself was a great wizard who wished to keepsake knowledge from across the lands and continue that gathering, so he created this sanctuary within the confines of the hat. After he was satisfied with the result he transferred everything of himself that he could into that gem floating there."

"Well he seems to act rather strange for something that's supposed to be alive."

"That's just it, he isn't truly alive. The consciousness of the relic is more like an automaton, it takes a set of rules created by Heratio combined with what the relic has of his memories and makes a kind of... sentience." Cartanis chuckled a bit, "There were a few times I could've sworn the relic was the real Heratio, but there is always something off about it. It doesn't like to think on its own, mostly contacting its current master to various occurrences and taking orders."

"Current master? You're not the first?"



"Not by a long shot, I only know what I do thanks to a journal Heratio left behind in the library. Basically as I satisfy codes of conduct set forth by Heratio when he made this thing, the relic grants me access to more of the Hall's rooms. Each time it's been rather extraordinary, I have access to an alchemy lab, a forge, ritual chamber, various storage rooms, and the library." Cartanis looked back to Twilight, "Now I loved this tour as much as you did but let us get on with the reason I brought you with me, shall we?"

"OK, don't blame me for being curious." Twilight followed Cartanis towards the library, taking note of the light sources that had recently activated. As they passed through the archway, Twilight was in awe of the vast vault of knowledge that she beheld, "Cartanis this is amazing! Why would you even need to use my library if you've already got all of this?" Books stood upon shelves that extended for as far as the eye could see, moving up among floors of other bookcases.

"Oh well I haven't had the pleasure of reading all of them, when I use Heratio's ability to 'book copy' I only know the ones I myself have copied. I am nowhere near done with these." Cartanis approached a series of lines and glyphs written upon the floor, "Now the reason why I brought you here Twilight is that I need to ask for some of that power you are able to muster."

Twilight frowned upon the idea. "Are you sure that's wise? Last time that happened I nearly killed you."

"Last time, you were running on adrenaline and fear. This time, we will be using a very safe, control and source ritual. You are the source, I am the control." Cartanis gestured to piles of dust around them, "If you decline, I will be able to restore these books myself, but it would take years. This happens to be a very convenient set of circumstances that I want to... exploit if possible."

Twilight sighed, "Cartanis, I know you are very experienced in the ways of magic in your world. But are you SURE you know what can happen if you attempt magic from your world on the magic of my world?"

The old pony looked insulted. "Don't take me for some newly trained wizard who wants to break the barriers of known arcane study. There is a process for this, the ritual I have here is designed to not ask for any more power than what is needed to restore a page. Something you would be capable of doing easily if you knew the spell, this is more of an experiment to see if I

can harness the power of unicorn magic. Now if you would please Miss Sparkle?" Cartanis said as he gestured towards the square design on the floor.

"Fine," Twilight walked over to the square.

Cartanis was pleased and walked over to the circle on the floor. "First to establish a communication link." he flicked a hoof outward, and a spark of arcane energy snaked through the designs on the floor. As it made its way to the square, it fizzled out, Cartanis stood puzzled, "That shouldn't happen." another spark made its way across the floor and fizzled out at the same spot as before. "I can feel it, I know the power is there. Why won't it answer my call?"

"Well have you ever tried using your own unicorn magic? All I ever see you do is your worlds 'arcane' magic."

Cartanis thought for a moment, "No I guess I haven't. Well until I can chances are this ritual isn't going to get done." He then looked over to Twilight, "You wouldn't mind showing an old pony a new trick would you?"

"I would be honored to Cartanis, but first we need to get back to the library. That's where all the 'young' unicorns in training books are."

"Oh I think I've already read them."

"Whether or not you have Cartanis, I would really like to get out of this dank sanctuary of yours."

"Dank?" Cartanis sounded flabbergasted "It isn't dank... it's just... properly aged is all."

Twilight laughed at Cartanis' insecurity "Whatever puts your mind at rest." she retorted and made her way to the exit with him.



A small paperweight floated a few feet into the air.

"No, no, no. Cartanis that isn't how you do it." Twilight scolded.

"Well what's the difference, I made the paperweight float didn't I?" Cartanis set down the weight with his power.

"There is a difference. Here let me show you." Twilight concentrated upon the core of magic she had within. As she did so her horn began to glow, as did the paperweight as the magic found its target. The weight then floated a few feet in the air, "Now what's different between your levitation and mine?"

Cartanis scratched at his chin for a moment, "I do notice the aura, but I fail to see-"

"The difference... is that your levitation spell does not make use of your unicorn magic, it makes use of your arcane power. If it used your unicorn magic we would see an aura not only around your horn, or what's left of it, but also the object of your attention."

Cartanis lost himself deep in thought, *Why is it I can always sense her power whenever she uses it? In fact I can sense any unicorn that uses their magic, my own power can even interact with it. But it never heeds my call.* "It is most strange Twilight, I can feel the world hearing your call and responding, but when I call to it or shout even, it just lies around dull and lifeless as if I am not even really here." Cartanis had an idea, "Would you be willing to try and use my magic?"

"I doubt it will work, but nothing ventured nothing gained."

"Now keep in mind I am a wizard not a sorcerer, but I should be able to have you perform something that's fundamentally similar." Cartanis stuck out a hoof, and a small plume of fire formed on top of it. "This is the simple act of calling forth fire from its primordial home in the plane of fire. As a wizard I use my ability to call to the fire and summon it forth, but as a sorcerer one would access the power of fire that resides within oneself. Contorting the arcane energy within into the fire."

"So I did this before, when I lost control?"

"No that was unicorn magic, you made natural fire appear, you essentially told the air around me to combust. But the world was fueling your own power like a sorceress would, you were not summoning it forth, at least not consciously." Cartanis let the fire wither and die in his hoof, "Now you try."

Twilight held a hoof out the way she saw Cartanis do, she searched within her for the power that he talked about within her. She could easily make out her unicorn magic, but she had trouble even telling if any other power resided within her. "I'm not sure if I can even do this, we are from different worlds Cartanis. Maybe we are just different."

"Well I can't blame you for not having my power, but I am a unicorn, I should be able to do something." Cartanis was lost in thought again, rubbing his temples.

"Maybe we should take a break from this, I know a good place to have lunch if you want to go with me."

Cartanis sighed, "Well I would prefer to take a breather, I need some time to mull over the details anyway."

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"Alright Ted, you ready for this." Dash said to Ted excitedly.

"Just watch out for crosswinds and compensate for updrafts, I learn quickly Miss Dash. You don't pick up on as many things as I have in one hundred and forty years and don't learn when to listen." Ted prepared to leap over the cliff.

"Alright, the Ponyville circuit-"

"-something even the best can screw up!" Ted interjected

"That was an accide-"

"-3-2-1-go!" and Ted was off over the cliff.

"HEY!" Dash soon jumped after him.

They both plummeted towards the ground, gaining speed, whatever distance Ted had was soon caught up by Rainbow Dash. As they neared the valley floor, they both spread their wings, arcing back and pulling themselves into the sky. As they neared the outskirts of Ponyville, once again they dived. Dash was definitely a faster flier than Ted, the one area that Ted had which aided him in the race was his ability to corner and

suddenly shift direction with minimal speed loss. Even with this it was a close match. Flying through the streets, they darted around alleyways, circled around the town square and out the main road to the Whitetail Wood.

As they once again raced into the sky Ted could make out the cloud Rainbow Dash pointed out earlier, first to reach it after completing the circuit would be the winner. He had gained somewhat of a lead in the tight corners of the town, but Rainbow Dash was quickly making up for that in this headlong race towards the cloud. He put everything he had into forward momentum, eagerly trying to keep the lead, but Rainbow Dash was still gaining. Ted could hear the sound of her cutting through the air behind him, he was desperately trying to gain speed, to no avail.

Rainbow Dash blurred past him just as they reached the clouds edge, skidding across the surface with a triumphant yes. "I'll admit you had me for a minute there Ted, that was probably some of the most fun I've ever-" As she turned expecting to see Ted behind her on the cloud, she was surprised to see she was alone on top of it. "Ted?"

Then Ted appeared from over the side of the cloud, "I thought you said I would land on it like it was any other piece of land?"

"What?"

"Just watch," Ted fluttered over the cloud in front of her, and then snapped his wings shut. He then fell straight through the cloud, not leaving much of a disturbance, simply fading straight through it.

"Well, maybe half-pegasi can't cloud-walk." Dash stated

"Maybe, I just feel like I should be able to." Ted sighed, "I was so curious what it would be like." Ted looked about over the wood, "Well I should get back to ground, I am getting ti-" but he froze as he looked over the wood.

Rainbow Dash looked puzzled at the fear on Ted's face, "What's wrong?" Rainbow Dash looked over the Whitetail Wood, she then saw something funny looking over the woods in the distance. "Ted, what is that?"

"We need to get out of the sky. We need to get everyone out of the sky NOW!"

Dash was scared at the serious tone the otherwise aloof Ted had taken.

[M/M/M/M/M]

Andur galloped to the apple cellar, Applejack approached him, "Is that everyone?"

Applejack made a quick recounting in her head, "Yeah, we should be fine down here. What are you going to do?"

"Cartanis messaged that he didn't know how bad it was going to be, so I'll bunker down with you until it passes. Then I'm going to go into town and meet up with the others." Andur then looked her in the eye, "And no, you will not be joining me. If it's the wrong kind of thing from our world you won't even see it rend you in twain."

Applejack followed Andur into the cellar, he had always been kind of serious, but this was like another side of him. Like he was afraid of something repeating itself.

[M/M/M/M/M]

Cartanis escorted the last of a family into their house, "Now you stay in there until you get an all clear alright?"

The stallion of the house responded, "Alright, thanks again for saving my filly."

"I know, please just stay safe." Cartanis then galloped away, he looked around at the dead quiet streets. Houses repaired with their thicket rooftops creaked in the silence. He made his way to the library, as he ran inside he met the faces of more than a few worried looking pony of every type. He waded his way through the crowd, looking for Twilight, he spotted her and closed the distance, "Twilight, is there anywhere we can get these ponies that is deeper underground?"

Twilight thought for a moment, "There's the old book repository, past my lab."

"Get as many as you can down there, I'll be up in the study"

"Up? But we need to get away from this thing."

"I need to watch the tear, if anything drops out of it I need to be able to see where it lands." He looked over to her, "Now I'll send for Ted when it is finished. Don't worry about me, this has to be done." Cartanis made his way up stairs as Twilight funneled ponies down into the repository.

Cartanis burst through the glass doorway used for separating the indoor study from the outside balcony. Seeing clearly over the tops of the houses of Ponyville Cartanis could make out the distortion over the eastern skyline. Its wrinkled form twisting and distorting the area around itself. *It's increasing in size, slower now than before. That's both good and bad.* The distortion had taken to the size of a carriage and was still slowly turning and twisting.

Cartanis watched with his makeshift magic telescope, cracks began to form along the edges of the distortion. *It's breaching!* Cartanis made out an orb of light slip through the distortion, a wave of contorted air speeding towards the town. He raised a barrier of arcane force around himself, *I must be able to see where that thing lands.* He watched the glowing orb of force plummet through the sky, unable to make out what was inside it. As the wave of force finally crashed into the library, Cartanis was relieved when it was little more than a boom that had shaken him a little, *Twilight told me when we breached it had knocked them unconscious and they had been inside, that was little more than a rough wagon ride.*

Cartanis' mind was not put at ease however, as the distortion remained in the sky. Cartanis knew that it meant more was coming, *well at least it won't be simultaneous.* Sure enough another glob of light broke through, with it another shock-wave. The same as before, but still the distortion remained. More and more began to fall through the tare. *eight, nine.* Cartanis continued to do his best to keep track. Each glob of light brought a different level of shock-wave; he had taken to lying down as he was on more than one occasion shaken from his feet.

Then Cartanis made out a faint glob of light, much smaller than the others beforehand. As it passed through the distortion, it finally slammed shut, Cartanis could feel the wind rushing towards him, and he knew this was going to be the big one. He made a quick mental note of the area he believed the intruding forces had fallen, and then prepared himself for the

shock-wave. As he watched it rampage down the streets he noticed the buildings groan and sway from the wave of force, it then passed over the library. Cartanis' ears ringing in pain as the loudness of it hit him, he felt the balcony below him creak and move. The world felt tipped on its side as he lost his balance and fell.

As the force finally dissipated Cartanis could feel his hearing return.

He went inside to find that many things had been shaken from their places, but no major damage had occurred. Windows were slightly cracked if not touched at all, *at least I can rule out most advanced life.* Cartanis made his way to the basement, Twilight met him halfway down.

"Is it over Cartanis?"

"Yes for now, where is Ted? Oh there you are." Cartanis noticed Ted had followed Twilight up the flight of stairs.

"Ready for action." Ted was covered in head to hoof in his armor, bow slung over his back. "Is my messenger book repaired?"

"No and mine won't work for you, but you need to head out east over the forest. Whatever breached can't be more than a few miles out, I lost count at-

"Lost count! But that's why you were up there." Ted said with some anger.

"I had at least thirteen events recorded, each of varying intensity, but after the shocks started knocking me from my feet it was getting hard to keep track. So somewhere between thirteen and nineteen."

Ted grew slightly grim, "That's a lot of stuff to fall through in a minute or so."

"Just remember Ted, we have no idea what these things could be. They can't be too high on the level of life we are though, except for the last one none of them had the same kick we did. So I can assume that we are dealing with some form of animal at best, even that being said, it's still dangerous to go alone. The second you figure out what they are, you get straight back here and we devise a plan of action."

"Wait you said the last one had some kick to it?"



"Yes I did," Cartanis looked into the concern on Ted's face, "I don't know if it was Leria or Rash, and don't let that cloud your judgment when you're out there."

Ted had anger written on his face, "I understand Cartanis, but I wouldn't have them give up on me. So I won't hold my breath until I am there myself." Ted raced past Cartanis up and out into the world before taking off into the air.

Cartanis looked back to Twilight, "We best send out the all clear, or at least let the town know the first step has been crossed." Cartanis advanced up the stairs, "Now the real challenge begins."



Ted didn't like what he was seeing, he had been flying over the Whitetail wood for a while now. He looked at the concentration of torn up land below him, for about fifty feet there was tilled soil, cratered and pockmarked with devastation. But no other sign of trouble, he had landed in a tree or two to better scout out the edge of the scarred area. But to no avail, for amongst the trees the forest looked immaculate except for the area of devastation. He could make out no footprints or anything, he had wondered if it was something that could fly, but that didn't add up either.

*Looks like I'll have to provoke this situation a bit.* Ted flew down to a tree. He drew his bow and fired a curious bolt into the center. As it hit the ground its concussive detonation drew little attention. *Was it all just dirt?* Ted carefully made his way to the bottom of the tree and hopped to the ground. He patrolled the outside area of the devastation, taking note of the toppled trees within. They didn't look like they had been hit by whatever fell, or even blown over by the waves of force.

He wandered a few steps into the area, the ground was soft and it smelled as though someone had just plowed the fields for a new planting. He then made out something on the ground, *claw marks?* Ted had found a few loose piles of dirt alongside the markings. Something in the back of Ted's mind was eating at him, he knew he had seen these before. But it had been so long, *what would tear down a few trees, plow up the ground, and then disappear?*

Ted felt the ground beneath his feet move, immediately his flight response took over and he leaped into the air. But was too late, he felt something clamp down on his outstretched wing, swinging him around in its jaws. Ted couldn't get his sense of direction as he was being tossed and turned as the thing shook him about. Eventually he felt the feathers in his wings give to the forces, and he was flung out towards the trees. He barely manage to catch himself and land on his feet, he turned and drew his bow, only to see a screen of dirt and dust flying into the air as whatever just hit him returned underground.

Ted didn't like his chances of another surprise attack, he made for the tree line, as he moved he once again felt earth moving about him. This time in front of him something burst from the ground, whatever it was it was going high for his face, so Ted quickly rolled under it. Leaping back to his feet he met with a tree, he could hear something behind him, so he scampered as quickly as he could through the branches. Looking back he finally met eyes with one of his attackers.

Its rocky flesh scraped against itself with an earthy tone, it growled and bared rows of serrated teeth, claws scratched at the bark of the tree in a futile attempt to lift its great weight upon it. Small beady black eyes gave one last look up at Ted before it let out a defeated snort, turning around and once again going underground, tearing at the dirt with its powerful front feet, pushing itself through the earth easily with its smoothed arrow head and hind feet.

*A BULETTE!* Ted was still feeling the pain in his wing, he checked to see a sickly looking appendage without the feathers that used to adorn it. *Well at least it's just a Bulette, they are solitary anyway, but what else was there. Cartanis said he had about thirteen or more other things that fell with it, did it kill them all for me?*

Ted saw the earth move once again, this time it entered from outside the area of devastation. *More than one? But then that means.* Ted watched as the Bulette that burst from the ground, shaking the dirt from itself, and then wandered into the torn up earth and began stomping eagerly at the earth. Several other heads popped out of the ground as it began to chatter and bark at them. The others seemed to get interested and followed the newcomer as it headed west. Each of them breaking ground as they neared the tree line.

*That wasn't an adult that hit me, these are juveniles. Have I really shrunk that much in this world?* Ted then noticed a larger one the size of Andur burst out of the ground, *yep definitely shrunk on my end.* Ted could make out other bulges in the ground as well, *it was spring in our world, they must have made a joint nest to help take care of each other and raise the juveniles. That's the only time they group up like this.* Ted realized how serious this could get, he had gotten lucky finding them in the forest, the roots would slow them down. But Ponyville was built upon an open hilly plain, *I need to move now.*

Ted began making his way through the trees, gaining ground on the Bulettes who were slowed by the constant need to surface to get around thick tree roots. *Let's just hope I can give them enough warning to make a difference.*

[/]/[/]/[/]/[/]/

Andur and Cartanis stood out past the edge of Ponyville, near where they had first entered, looking off into the nearby Whitetail Wood. "How long has he been gone Cartanis?"

Cartanis checked the clock tower of the town, "I would say about twenty minutes, I saw him land about ten minutes ago from the library when you arrived."

"He gets another five before we go in after him." Andur double checked the fasteners of his armor, "Cartanis there is something I have been meaning to ask you."

"That is?"

"How did we even tear the veil of our world in the first place, you mentioned something about creating paradoxes for it to occur."

Cartanis thought back to that day, "Well, if we are to believe Ulanon. That abomination we destroyed was undead in some manner, and made from highly unstable material that would not react positively to being killed or destroyed. So when we did kill it, it was going to release the pent up energy it had used to keep itself alive and stable." Cartanis looked over to Andur, "But, I believe you may have accidentally caused a paradox."

Andur's face contorted with confusion, "How would I do that?" Andur realized what Cartanis had just insinuated, "How would a phylactery cause something like that?"

"That thing we killed was pure un-death, an abomination unto life if there ever was one. While it lay dying you threw, into its energy release, something made of life. Liches may epitomize the power of one who seeks immortality through un-death, but they require their soul to still exist in the plane of mortals in order to be alive and retain who they are. That one concentrated orb of life you tossed into the sphere that day, mixed with the reaction somehow. Which caused a paradox for the resulting veil tear."

Andur looked back towards the town, taking note of the citizens of Ponyville that milled about the streets, all happily conducting business. "So it shall fall to one who has the power of my office to conduct himself in a manner befitting the role of a Peloric messenger. To guard the peoples from mortal suffering and prepare for the inevitable fights against evil as it gathers in the darkness."

"You're not about to go about quoting scripture again are you?" Cartanis scoffed as Andur chuckled a bit.

"Just reminding myself why I fight is all." He looked over to Cartanis, "Would you be prepared to give these ponies your life Cartanis? If that was called of you."

Cartanis sighed at the question, "You know me Andur, I don't want to see anyone else go through what I did thirty years ago. There are some lovely families here that make me think about what could have been, I won't let whatever followed us here do the same to some other being."

Ted then suddenly broke from the tree line, galloping across the fields towards them, "Its bad guys, really, really BAD!"

Andur noticed he was missing a wing, "What is it you excitable little Zebragus?"

Ted closed the distance to his friends, "We got Bulettes, a colony, they must have joined together when winter started to survive the ground frosting over. Now it's spring, they have their juveniles, and they haven't fed yet."

Ground at the edges of the Whitetail wood began turning and sifting, as though some invisible plow was moving about the hills.

"Gah! I thought I had a better lead." Ted readied his bow, trained on the disturbance as it moved across the ground.

"We keep them out of the town, no exceptions." Andur said as he brandished his morning star with a hoof.

"I got an idea." Cartanis leaped atop a boulder that was just outside of town, *now where are you my old friend?* Cartanis searched his mind for the appropriate power sources, his call eventually found it. The air in front of him coalesced into a ball of soft blue light, hissing at the sudden extreme change in temperature. Cartanis willed the energy into a tight beam, as it raced to its target, the air around it crackled and ground beneath it frosted over. On contact with the disruption of earth the beam bathed over it, the ground froze into a solid mass of ice, a fine mist over the top of it.

A Bulette burst out of the ground roaring in pain as its rocky hide was frozen solid and made brittle from the extreme cold.

Ted took the shot he was granted, his bolt of energy finding its mark. With a thunderous explosion the Bulette lay broken upon the ground, cold brittle pieces of its hide scattered around itself.

"How many more are there Ted?" Andur asked.

"Cartanis may have overestimated, I saw about nine more juveniles and three adults."

"Wait... MORE juveniles, that thing was a youngling?"

Before his question could be answered more tunneling Bulettes broke from the tree line.

"Cartanis!" Andur shouted.

"I'm not made of magic you know, you're going to have to deal with some of them by yourself." Cartanis shouted back as he fired off two more concentrated rays of frost.

Ted had managed to hit one of the Bulettes as it exposed itself to escape the cold, but Cartanis' other ray had missed.

Andur slung his weapon onto his back and charged out into the fields, his hooves thundered against the ground and attracted their attention. One burst forth from the ground early, the juvenile met a swift end as Andur gave it a quick slam from his weapon as he drew it. *Nothing showy, keep your balance, quick short strikes.* Andur wobbly stood upon two hooves attempting to maintain an equilibrium.

The remaining two scattered off in separate directions, one burst forth at Andur before he could react to it, the dirt momentarily blinding him and giving the creature its chance. It sank its teeth into a plate upon Andur's shoulder, thrashing about wildly it brought him down upon his back, the second took its chance and charged out of the ground towards his face.

Andur summoned forth holy fire to burn at the soul of the hostile creature, as it rolled and smoldered in its own flesh, Andur got to his feet and bucked the other juvenile off. While it still sought to right itself, Andur brandished his weapon and, with the spiked pommel, drove his weapon through the Bulette's skull ending another one. He looked about for the one he had burned, it had apparently retreated underground again.

Andur slowed himself for a moment and allowed himself to concentrate on everything around him. *Where is that animal's soul?* As Andur allowed his reach to extend he felt as though he was being pressured by an outside force, as he attempted to go forth he felt as though he was being suffocated, *What is this, it muddles my power.* Andur quickly stopped attempting to reach out with his power and found the feeling to drift away, *that never happened before, my range is far greater than that.*

The Bullete then burst from the ground far from where he was, Ted was now in close combat with the beast. He quickly managed to roll past a swipe from the creature, it lightly scraped along his scale-mail, and Ted answered with a quick flick of his wrist and jutting the blade into one of the beast's plate intersections. Cleanly gashing open an artery, the beast hobbled off before collapsing and dying.

Andur looked over to Ted, "That all of them?"

"Me and Cartanis pegged a few that went around you, should only be the adults left now."

Andur looked inside him while there was still peace on the fields, he could still feel the well of power within, but it had waned. *What does this mean?* Andur could not be allowed another moment respite however, as three large disturbances raced through the ground across the hills. "Here they come!"

Much to their surprise, instead of racing straight towards them the Bulette adults broke off around them. Racing towards the town.

"Looks like someone is hungrier than they are paternal." Ted said with a sneer.

[M/M/M/M]

"Later dad, I'm off to hang out with Streaks!" Dodge shouted to his father as he left the house.

"Just be back for some dinner, mother is going to be making her dandie-loaf tonight!" Dodge heard his father shout back.

Dodge was in a good mood, his mother was finally able to do without the bandages and could help out around the house again. As he left the house he looked out to the Whitetail Wood, it was always a pretty sight to see once some of the leaves grow back in the spring. Instead of the usual sight of the tree line, he saw two ponies and a zebra galloping towards the town. *Hey is that Mud Mouth? I heard he saved Streaks little sister, oh man I got to get him to come over with me.* "Hey Mud Mouth that you! What's all the rush about?" He shouted to them.

He heard an echo of a reply.

"What!" Dodge shouted louder.

Once again he heard an echo, a little clearer.

"What does, "fawn" mean?"

Then Dodge saw the ground just down the road start to tear up from under itself, he watched in slight horror as it raced in his direction. He felt his legs screaming at him, *RUN*, and so he did.

The young stallion blazed through the streets, the earth behind him tore up as he went. Other worried citizens of Ponyville either ran into their houses or took off down other streets to the display. Dodge could still hear the torrent of earth behind him, grinding and sifting at incredible speed. Then he saw another disturbance, this one closing in front. Something huge fired out of the ground above him, he managed to shift to the side before it got close to him but he lost his footing in the process.

He tumbled and rolled to a stop on the ground; before he could reorient himself he felt the ground rise beneath him. For a split second he was airborne, before he felt pain sink into his haunches and his shoulders, something was digging into him. He wanted to scream but the pain was so intense he could hardly think. The world was a blur around him, then he heard a crack of thunder, as he flew through the air and skidded across the rough roads.

*At least it dropped Dodge*, Andur charged at the adult Bullete as it recoiled from Cartanis' thunder-ball. He tackled it with all his might, the two equally large creatures tumbled down the street, Andur was the first to his feet and quickly began hammering it with his weapon. Each hit cracking its rocky hide, the beast slightly recoiled with each blow but was soon back on its feet as well. Andur met the beast's beady gaze as it watched him for movement. *I don't have time for this!* Andur made the first move, a wild overhead swing in an attempt to smash open its skull. The beast deftly dodged the blow. As Andur's morningstar sank with a crack into the road the beast quickly grabbed Andur in its teeth, as they sank into his armor it whipped its head and tossed him like a rag doll across the street. Crashing him into a stall next to Dodge.

As Andur quickly got himself back up, he looked into the terrified eyes of the young pony. He firmly planted himself between Dodge and the beast. Andur could make out Ted and Cartanis handling the other adult they had managed to find, but he had to focus on the one in front of him. The Bulette let loose a horrendous roar in a bid to intimidate Andur, but all it did was make him ready himself for the next inevitable step. As the Bulette began to charge Andur concentrated upon his power, he felt the righteous



indignation against this creature's needless destruction. His fury rose in tandem with his power, he could feel it blaze through his being, once again however he felt the suffocation as though he was running out of some valuable resource. *No I must do this*, he ignored the call his body wished him to heed, *for all this destruction, for all this suffering, to end this heedless rampage*. An image of Dodge flashed through his mind as well.

Andur's voice boomed with power, "HIS LIFE," he felt his soul rush through him and into his weapon, "IS NOT YOURS TO TAKE!"

As the Bulette roared through the air, Andur's weapon burst into a corona of magnificent glory. It screamed through the air as his power flowed into it as a deadly force of reckoning, it connected to the Bulette to unleash a terrible force upon it. Thunder boomed and echoed as the light cut through the beast, bone and tissue fell from the might unleashed in the concentrated arc, before detonating into a tremendous force which knocked back the body that tried to dare ignore Andur's decree.

As the forces subsided, Andur felt his power once again wane. He weakly sheathed his weapon, and got back onto all fours. *So tired*, more so than he should be. Andur walked over to Dodge and laid down next to him, *he won't last long*. The young stallion had lost a lot of his own blood, diamond shaped gashes across his shoulders and haunches from the Bulettes bite, his face had started to grow pale. Andur reached for the power within him, he felt something screaming for him to cease, but he had to push past it. *Please Pelor, give him what I can*. Andur's power flowed through him once more. It drifted through the space between them, mending its way through Dodge, reconnecting tissue and strengthening the bond within the soul and body.

Dodge's complexion normalized and he looked at Andur, "What are you?"

Andur smiled at Dodge, "Just a good Samaritan." Andur got to his feet, he knew that there had to be one Bulette left. As he walked past Dodge and towards the square where he had last seen his compatriots, he fell to his knees once again. Andur looked down to see his front leg was torn up pretty bad, "Guess that's all I got for today."

Dodge trotted over to Mud Mouth as he passed out down the street, "Mud Mouth, are you OK?"

Dodge's father rushed down the street, "Dodge, is everything alright, what happened?"

"Dad go get help, he needs to get to the clinic." But as Dodge looked around, they didn't need to get help. A good portion of the ponies who lived on the street had left their houses to do so already.

[M/M/M/M/M]

Ted let out a hoot of victory, "That is how you take down a Bulette, quick and clean." He stowed his bow and looked over to Cartanis. "Very nice use of ice, I must say it was rather inspired."

Cartanis let out a weak laugh, "Well it wasn't too effective on the outside so I just made him-"

"-take a chill pill?" Ted cut off his friend.

"Why must you always do that?"

"It's just too much fun to push buttons." Ted looked about, "Now where is lucky contestant number three." he saw in the distance a merchants booth lurch and fall, "I think we have a volunteer, down in front, good sir Cartanis give him his consolation prize." Ted whimsically stated as he gestured to Cartanis.

Cartanis rolled his eyes at his friend's aloofness in the middle of a battle. *OK... it's across the way, adjust for depth a-a-and.* Cartanis let out the power he coalesced, booming a thunder-ball at a depth below themselves. The Bulette snapped to the sound of the bait, it raced headlong across the square, tearing up the earth as it went. It burst from the ground sending pieces of cobblestone in every direction. Cartanis was stunned at the site of it. "Ted, that isn't an adult."

Ted already had his bow ready, "I was hoping the dire ones didn't stay with the family, guess it was too much to hope for."

The large menacing brute roared, its rock hide complemented by small stalagmite structures that ran over the course of its plates. Its already menacing figure was bulkier than those of its adult counterparts.

"Think you can freeze the insides on this beast?" Ted asked.

"No, it was hard enough to do on that last one, we need to think of something else."

The Dire quickly burrowed again, racing through the square faster than the others had by far.

"We are going to need to stop it from doing that." Cartanis said with concern on his face.

Teds eyes flashed with an idea, "working on it." he quickly stashed his bow and drew a hidden blade, "Come on big bessie I got a plan for you!" Ted stomped at the ground as he chased after it.

The Dire quickly changed direction towards Ted, as it began to breach, Ted let the fey magic within flow through himself. He felt that strange world once again call for his presence, his eyes glazing over. The Dire was in the air almost upon Ted, with his moment at hand he thrust himself over to the new world, the colors had dulled and things seemed to slow just enough. Ted leaped onto the back of the Dire and found his way to its ankles, *Let's see how well you swim, land-shark, when your fins don't have any tendons.*

As Ted returned, he used his hidden blade to furiously stab at the heels of the Dire Bulette's back legs. The beast screamed with pain as it roughly landed, and sufficiently kicked Ted off its leg. Ted rolled and tumbled until he found his footing, he felt a small gash across his midsection, but nothing he hadn't dealt with before. "Alright it shouldn't be able to burrow without the use of both its back legs."

Cartanis took a moment to once again ready a ray of frost, the air hissed at the ray's presence as it lanced through the air. Skimming across the surface of the beast, it left behind a small forest of icy stalagmites. The dire barely reacted to it and shook the layer of ice from its hide, "I don't think the regular strategy is going to work Ted."

Still rather agile upon three legs, the dire began to swiftly close the distance between them. *Let's see how you like being tossed around!* Cartanis once again called out to the planes, the rush of arcane power that answered was astounding, the air around him was alive with its power. He used his mastery of it to form a shape from the energy, slowly a hand appeared, a

gauntlet of ice the size of Cartanis formed from it. With a wave of his hoof he sent it out after the dire, slamming into its maw, the gauntlet grasped its upper jaw. Lifting the beast into the air, its icy hold burning its mouth, the gauntlet slammed it across the street, grinding it into the earth.

The Dire responded by quickly biting down on the gauntlet, its forceful jaw cracking the form of the spell.

Cartanis strained under the pressure of trying to keep the gauntlet held together, "Ted would you mind doing something?"

Ted quickly drew his bow, he fired off a bolt into its maw, shattering a portion of its frozen teeth. The beast let out a groan of pain, as Ted fired more bolts into its hide, each thunderous crack leaving a dent in its skin. The Dire eventually grew tired of it, and taking the block of half formed ice in its mouth, whipped it at Ted. It careened with speed, even with Ted's superior agility it managed to slam into him, he felt something in him break. As he landed he felt the pressure on his chest, his breaths shortened and painful. He felt the world slipping from him as he passed out.

Cartanis quickly put himself between Ted and the Dire, as it slowly marched its way over. *This thing wants food, it won't matter what I do its going to go for Ted.* Never before in his life had Cartanis wished he was strong enough to lift someone. He then got an idea, quickly he set his hat upon the ground, opened wide, the hat brim easily accepted Ted's body as it fell like a feather to the floor of the sanctuary. *OK, now it's just you and me big guy,* Cartanis thought to himself as he donned his hat once again.

Cartanis mulled over his possibilities as he evaded the approaching beast, *I won't be able to hurt it severely enough with a casual spell, I'll need to hit it with something bigger. But I can't concentrate well enough on the move to call to the necessary power sources.* Cartanis let loose a few magic missiles in a bid to slow the beast; they exploded in a flash of brilliance against its hide and simply drew an angry roar from it.

"Cartanis!"

*What's she doing here?* Cartanis turned towards the familiar voice to see Twilight marching towards him, "I told you to stay safe Twilight!"

"I'm tired of you and your buddy's incessant needs to go about selflessly trying to get yourselves killed, now I'm helping you and that's final." Twilight said as she stomped her hoof to the ground.

Cartanis looked back at the Dire Bulette, it showed no sign of giving up, *I won't be able to freeze it, but maybe it's time for something new.* "Alright Twilight if you want to help just try and keep that thing busy for a moment."

Twilight nodded in confirmation as she trotted off towards the danger.

Cartanis began formulating the proper incantation in his mind to call upon what he needed to make a new spell. *First a force orb*, Air in front of him coalesced and distorted as it tightly began to pack together into the size of a softball.

Twilight narrowly dodged swipes and bites by the beast, occasionally teleporting around in a flash of light, escaping the enraged strikes of the Dire as they tore up the ground.

*Now for a little fire*, inside the force orb a spark ignited, heat bristling against Cartanis as he made it burn hotter. He packed as much energy as he could into his new spell, then he gave an order, "Twilight I need you to get that things mouth open!"

The unicorn quickly teleported between Cartanis and the beast, as it turned to face Twilight, she reached out for her own power. Answering her call, the horn upon her head burst into light, an aura encasing the maw of the Dire Bulette. It began fighting back against a force that willed its mouth open, as it resisted, Twilight's horn grew brighter in the contest of strength. In a split second the Dire lost the fight, its mouth forced open as it strained against the force.

Cartanis seized the opportunity, he reared upon two legs and with his force fired the orb towards the gaping maw. Its shape distorting as it flew through the air with extreme speed. It penetrated the maw of the Dire Bulette, "GET BACK!" Twilight heeded his warning and cut the flow of her power from telekinesis to teleportation as she winked out of view.

The Dire Bulette coughed and wheezed at the thing that went down its throat, a great force rushed through it, a back-draft of flame erupted from its mouth. It shouted and screeched in pain as its insides burned intensely,

throwing itself about it eventually ran out of steam as its charred lungs coughed and sputtered. It fell over amidst its own destruction, finally succumbing to the wounds of battle, smoke billowing from its once intimidating maw.

Cartanis looked about to see that Twilight had gone behind a pile of torn up ground not far from him, "I must say Miss Sparkle you really are quite handy in a fight."

She approached him concern still on her face, "Where's Ted?"

Cartanis pointed to his hat, "Safely within the confines of the sanctuary, now I must really chase down Andur-"

"That's just it Cartanis, I went out to find you after Andur passed out in the streets."

"What?" Cartanis had worry in his tone, "Ted will need a doctor then, Andur was probably taken to the clinic anyway correct?"

"Yes, this way."

Cartanis Followed Twilight amidst all the destruction, luckily they had managed to stop the creatures far from anyplace significant, but the outskirts of town had definitely seen better days. Booths lay strewn across the street, roads torn up and almost unusable, even a house or two was listing this way and that. *Looks like laying low is too much to hope for now, the whole town will want answers.*

[M/M/M/M/M]

Cartanis helped the nurses wheel Ted into a room with Andur; he still chuckled at the memory of the looks on their faces when he had Twilight lift Ted out of his hat. As they put Ted into a bed, Cartanis took a look at Andur, besides the bandaging around his right arm and the fact he was still unconscious nothing was truly wrong with him. "So the families on that street carted Andur over here?"

"Yes, they were rather grateful for all the help you guys gave in saving everypony." Twilight responded.

*Well at least we can count on the good will of these ponies,* "Your people, Miss Sparkle, are truly a good bunch of beings." Cartanis sighed, "Where we hail from, strangers are usually treated with far greater suspicion."

Twilight walked over to Cartanis, "Hey now, you got to stop treating yourselves like outcasts. Everypony in the town knows what you did for them with the Thunderheads, I doubt some mild destruction in the act of saving them from those monsters will deter their gratitude."

Cartanis walked over to Andur's equipment that was lain out amongst the room, and began sorting it into Andur's bag of holding. "That is very nice to know, but I still have some other things to do before I can relax." He slung the bag over himself, "I'm brewing a few potions in my alchemy lab, with what left I have in the stores, do you know anyone... or 'anypony' that is good with herbs and such in this world?"

"Well there is Zecora, our resident Zebra who lives out in the Everfree, she's still OK after the disaster. I think she's expected in the town someday soon for one of her supply runs."

"That should be a good as a place as any to try and find out if I can find some allegories to what exists in our world." Cartanis noticed that Ted started to stir a bit in his bed. "He always did have a way of coping with bodily harm."

"You know, it isn't always nice to wake up with a few broken ribs." Ted opened his eyes and looked over to see Twilight, then to Andur in the bed next to him, "It isn't like Andur to pass out from so few injuries."

"I know." Cartanis responded.

"The powers of the Fey that run through me don't like what they see either," Ted's eyes flashed into orbs of grey for a second before reverting, "The only other time I've seen his life that drained, was in the siege of Grimdig. That was when he had participated in the defense for an entire day, giving out all sorts of miracles and powers." Ted looked over to Cartanis, "What could this mean?"

"If you can't land on clouds as pegasi should, and I can't cast unicorn magic..." Cartanis drew sullen, "But, earth ponies like Andur don't have some special talent that he hasn't grasped. So it must be related to his

power." Cartanis struck upon an idea, "Maybe he doesn't have access to Pelor anymore."

Ted dawned a confused look, "What do you mean?"

"Well it isn't to say he can't perform those feats we always see him do, it's more along the lines of a lack of source. Divine empowerment is an interesting theory, basically the god you worship entitles you to some of their power, and this is used to perform the miracles and such we see Andur do. If he's been somehow cut off from Pelor, then he's been running on reserves, he's been running off of stored power and eventually he was burning away his own soul to fuel his power."

"Wait that doesn't mean I'm going to die because I shot off a few too many arrows does it?"

"No, no, no, our power is external, we DRAW it from someplace else, even if the Fey power resides within you Ted you are drawing it from the Fey. If I had been a sorcerer I may have had similar side effects to Andur here, with nothing to fuel my power, I would've burned myself out. The connection to our old world is weak, but we build it up over time, so as long as we don't overexert ourselves we are fine. Andur here was using an internal power, something that set him aside from other mortals, Pelor recognized his gift and supplemented it so he didn't do this in our world." Cartanis looked sullenly over to Andur, "But without a means to recharge himself, once Andur recovers..."

Ted interjected, "I'm not the one who's going to tell him he can't help out anything in danger anymore."

"He won't take this well at all."

Ted looked about a little, he tried to change the subject, "So has my number one wizard buddy been concocting some brews or not?"

"It'll be another couple of hours, enjoy the downtime." Cartanis walked towards the door, "If you need me, I'll be helping out how I can. When the potions are done I shall return."

Twilight walked over to Ted, "What did he mean when he recovers?" Ted looked at her with his aged eyes.



"Our little hero over there who always put himself out in front of danger to protect the innocent. Won't be so miraculously heroic anymore, if he tries to use his power again he'll probably die." Ted laughed a little, "Quite a way to be excommunicated from the Peloric Clergy." he found himself unable to really enjoy his own joke. "One of the best Cleric's I'd seen in years, and now he gets to live out his days as some larger than average pony on a farm." Ted sighed, "He made a great leader, he's not going to be happy, but I think he of all people will take it better than most. Andur always believed there was some grand scheme to everything, so who knows, maybe we can find a way..."

Twilight absently scratched at the floor, "Can I get you anything?"

"Some water would be nice."

Twilight left the room to go get some water for Ted, as he lay there he thought to himself. *You always bared that burden with such ease, you knew you had to stop evil in its tracks and you did so admirably.* Ted wondered if Andur would be better off in a coma for the rest of his days, *no, no, don't think like that. Andur has done far too much good for this to be the end of him, even if he has to walk around with just a cane and shout evil away, he will. He isn't dead yet.*

Ted let himself drift off back into sleep, into the nebulous dream so that he could forget the troubles of the world for just a little while longer.

# Chapter 7

Fluttershy peeked around a corner into the room that had Ted and Andur within; she had heard what happened yesterday from Cartanis when he was walking past her cottage with Zecora. So she wanted to check up on them, for the clinic was on the way to Rarity's anyway. Ted was laid up in a bed with bandages around his midsection, while Andur was out cold on another bed in the room. *Well they don't look too bad*, Fluttershy thought to herself. She resided to leave the small care package she had with the nurses so she wouldn't disturb them.

She felt someone tap her on the shoulder, she was so surprised by it she let out a squeak of fear, only to turn around and see Pinkie Pie behind her. "Hi Fluttershy, why are you trying to be so sneaky in the clinic?"

"Oh, I just wanted to make sure they were OK. I brought them a gift basket to thank them for helping everypony," she gestured to a small basket she had in her saddlebag "but they are asleep so I think I'm just going to leave it with the nurses so they can have it later. Why are you here?"

"I'm just here to give the Dungeon Masters a surprise, surely to brighten up their dreary day!" Pinkie pie said rather loudly.

A voice from the room echoed out to the hall, "I do hope this surprise can make up for the fact one of us was having a lovely dream, which just got interrupted." Fluttershy and Pinkie looked within the room to see Ted had woken up and was staring at them rather unkindly.

"Well I was going to wait for Cartanis to show up, I can't give out such a neat little tidbit of information without the whole crew together now can I?" Pinkie Pie said as she hopped her way into the room.

"I suppose you can't," he then drew his attention to Fluttershy, "but you wouldn't mind if I had some of those lovely snacks I can smell now would you?" Ted stated to Fluttershy.

She entered the room as well and set down her basket on a small table that was next to the bed. She looked over to Andur, who was still unconscious,

"Excuse me Ted," Ted looked up from a muffin he was digging into, "What's wrong with Andur? He doesn't seem to just be asleep."

Ted stopped eating for a moment and his eyes flashed over into grey for a moment, "He is definitely doing better than yesterday, but what he is suffering from is something far worse than physical trauma." He absently attempted to shift his weight in the bed and cringed in pain as he grasped at his chest, "He would probably be doing better if that lying Wizard was here hours ago with those potions."

"Oh I hate it when I don't see through a bluff attempt!" Pinkie Pie stated.

"Well I like it better when I succeed at mine, although I have never been able to alter reality with one... yet." Ted stated back.

Fluttershy just stared at the two ponies who seemed to be smiling at each other like they were in on some inside joke.

Cartanis then entered the room, followed closely by Applejack, "Look here Cartanis, I still don't get how in the world Andur can run out of steam and yet you and Ted Can't."

Cartanis sighed, "Think of it this way, our power comes from another place, we call out to it and it answers our call. Andur never was calling out to a source of power, he was using his own, and it was not getting supplemented or aided along by his benefactor anymore. So he eventually-" Cartanis looked about to see all of the other ponies in the room, "ran out of said steam."

Ted looked at Cartanis rather frustrated, "I thought you said it would be a few hours, I had to spend a night like this." Ted gestured to the harnesses on the bed that stopped him from putting pressure on his chest.

Cartanis gently laughed, "Well I got an opportunity to find out if I could make more, and Zecora is quite well versed in both herbalism and rhymes. Besides, it couldn't have been that bad to take a break for a night."

"Oh yes it's just so lovely to be deprived of movement and feel pain whenever I want to breath regularly." Ted said with a sneer, "But if it means we can expect more potions in the future, fine by me."

"Wait," Applejack Interrupted, "You mean to tell me, you were with Zecora for most of the day yesterday before you helped us clean up the town. How did you even understand her?"

"Oh she's not that bad Applejack." Pinkie Pie said.

"Pinkie is correct," Cartanis stated to them, "Of all the cryptic riddle rhyming beings we have met in our travels, she is about the eighth most perplexing." Cartanis chuckled a bit, "I think Ted here remembers the worst of them all."

Ted started to chuckle as well, "Please Cartanis have mercy, a potion before all this, I'll hurt myself if I start laughing too hard."

Cartanis held out his top hat, "Hat! Potion!" a small clink was made as he grabbed the potion that hovered out of the hat and gave it to Ted, as he was drinking it Cartanis said out loud,

"Life is your butter

I shall be the margarine

Beware heart disease."

Ted almost spit up the potion he had chugged, he forced it down, sputtering a bit, "I said mercy Cartanis!" with a smile on his face.

All the ponies in the room looked curiously at Cartanis for an explanation.

"Don't ever say I don't have a sense of humor Ted," Cartanis turned to the ponies, "The worst riddler we had to deal with was a golem mastermind, which had a funny habit of spitting out prophetic haiku that made no sense to the situation as it tried to kill us."

Ted winced as he felt his ribs mending themselves from the burst of restorative energy, "I can handle flesh mending, but bones," he shuddered "they just never want to go back together smoothly." As Ted began removing himself from the various pieces of medical equipment, Cartanis went over to Andur, as he began taking another potion out of his hat Ted interjected, "You know maybe I should see what I can do around tow-"

"I know its sappy Ted, but we have got to be here for him. At least for now." Ted knew Cartanis was right.

"Maybe you girls should go, don't take this the wrong way, but this is something between long-time friends." Ted said to the group of ponies that had gathered.

"I understand," stated Pinkie Pie, "But you just need to come see me when you guys are done with all your drama."

As they left, Fluttershy asked Applejack, "You were talking to Cartanis about this... I think. What's so wrong with Andur that we should leave?"

Applejack sighed as she turned to speak with her friend, "Imagine for a second Fluttershy, that whatever is wrong with Andur, would be like you having to go'n'tell Rainbow Dash that she would never be able to fly again."

Fluttershy gasped, "Oh my, that's horrible."

"I know it is, sugar-cube, I know."



Andur woke to the familiar aftertaste of a health potion, and then opened his eyes to see the sterile white of the clinic room. *Well if I am not outside anymore*, he looked to see he was still a pony, *then we must have won somehow*. He looked around the room a bit more, noticing a rather stern looking Cartanis undressing the bandages around his arm, Ted was off by a wall trying to look busy with some food. "Just one question, how many got hurt?"

Cartanis finished undressing his bandage and spoke, "Luckily we managed to track all the Bulettes down in time, only a few got hurt in the panic but nothing serious, thanks in no small part to you."

Andur moved his limbs a bit; the muscles ached from disuse and welcomed the stimulation. He then got up off the bed, dwarfing his companions with his stature.

"You have been recovering for about a day now, which makes it about late morning of our fifth day here, I believe." Cartanis said as he scratched at his chin in thought.

Andur noticed his bag of holding looped around Cartanis, *well at least I know who has my stuff*. He looked over to Ted, "Just what are you so nervous about; you're not one to pick at your food."

Ted looked over to Cartanis, "I'm just here for support, and I told you I am not breaking it to him."

Andur looked back to Cartanis, who seemed to be getting ready to say something, "Andur, I'm not one to pretty up the tough stuff." He took a deep breath, "If you try to use your powers again, it will probably kill you, assuming you can still use them."

Andur chuckled slightly, "I wondered if that was the case."

"You knew?" said a slightly baffled Cartanis.

"I wasn't able to say for certain, but I had clues here and there that something was off." Andur remembered a few, "the strange suffocation feeling, that power I felt when my very soul seemed to become one with my weapon, Morellia." He drew a little sullen, "My inability to get an answer from Pelor." He looked about to the faces of his friends.

"You seem to take this better than I expected," Cartanis Admitted.

"What did you expect?" Andur said indignantly, "A temper tantrum, a cry against cruel fate, I am not a drama queen." Andur calmed himself before addressing them further, "I know that the skewed idea of fairness is something that many abide by, even then it is usually something that has not been earned that makes them believe things are fair. But I have faced trials like this my whole life, I know of life's inequality. To give in and stop trying, or to beg for it to stop, is to be like that pile of worthless trash that is Dra'nahb!" He took a moment to calm himself again.

"Sure, the good guy gets thrown around a bit, he gets reduced to something less than he was. But I'll be damned before I let that stop me, for there are more ways to help the innocent than simply smiting evil." A smile graced his face, "I am not happy with this; I will admit that, but..." Andur

remembered that he had saved Dodge "I don't think I could of asked for a better way to make use of the last of my power, there is no cause more noble than that."

Ted looked up from his food, "That's the Andur I know, good to see you don't take all of this like some overly emotional child."

Cartanis handed Andur his bag of holding, "Nice to confirm that our leader is still himself."

As Andur slung the bag over his head, "Now let's see about checking out of here shall we?"

The trio walked out into the hallway, Cartanis showed them the way to the reception area. As they walked past the desk a clerk sat there mouth agape at seeing two heavily traumatized patients trotting past him.

As he prepared to say something Ted interjected, "Don't worry about us, we heal fast."

"How-"

"Trade secret, can't tell you, would get sued for everything we own."

Cartanis just rolled his eyes, "Shall we move along then?" Ted waved a goodbye to the befuddled clerk and they marched out the front doors.

Outside they found Pinkie Pie patiently waiting for them, alongside her other friends. "There you are, you didn't take that long, are you sure there was going to be drama?"

Ted sighed dramatically, putting a hoof to his forehead "For our hero did weep soft tears of remorse, recounting his deeds of heroism and goodness did he cry out in defiance to his cruel lot in life." He stood upon two hooves making a grand gesture, "The telling of such an epic opera would cause many to swoon and shed tears of-" But he was cut off by an unhappy look from his comrades. "Bah, both of you are no fun."

Cartanis looked back over to Pinkie Pie, "You wanted to speak with us?"

"Oh yeah, well since you guys were new in town, I wanted to throw you a party. But I never got a chance to thanks to all this interference from the Thunderheads and those weird monsters." Pinkie Pie began smiling brightly, "Then the mayor put me in charge of the Eastavis celebration, it's something we ponies do every spring to welcome it back after winter wrap up. So I got to thinking if I could somehow make the two happen at the same time, so I asked the mayor if I could, and she said it would be a great idea to have you three as the guests of honor for all the help you've been doing for the town!" Pinkie Pie was jumping around giddily, "Isn't that just spectacular!"

The trio stood, Cartanis had blanched, Andur was smiling, and Ted was ecstatic.

"I think the Dungeon Masters would be honored to be... well... honored in such a fashion Pinkie Pie." Andur responded.

"Great!" Pinkie Pie shouted, "Oh but I got so much stuff to plan still," an idea struck her, "Hey Ted you want to help."

"Do I!" Ted galloped over to Pinkie Pie, "Does an elf have an inexplicable ability to improve the perceptions of his comrades?"

"YEAH! ... wait what's an elf?"

Ted frowned, "Oh please you catch every other joke I make and that's the one you don't understand? I am disappointed Miss Pie."

Pinkie Pie smiled, "Hehe I'm just bluffin' with you Ted."

Surprise read on Ted's face, "You sly little pony you, give me some hoof!" Ted outstretched his hoof, which received a loud clop as Pinkie Pie returned the gesture in kind. "Miss Sparkle would you be so kind as to assist us in this matter?"

"What?" Twilight twitched at the sudden call for her assistance, "I don't know, I mean I've got some stuff I should clean up back at the library."

"Please Twilight, "Pinkie Pie walked over to her friend, "You're really good at organizing stuff, and we could really use your help."



Twilight looked at the sad expression on her face, "Fine..." she said rather sullenly

"This way." Pinkie Pie happily hopping down the street followed by Ted and Twilight.

Cartanis had calmed down a bit and advanced upon the party of four other ponies who stood, "Well with the joyful bunch done being in the way for now, I would like to request the skills of you, Applejack, and you, Miss Dash."

"For what?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Let's just say I want to... set up a burglar alarm. It'll make more sense once I can show you it properly. But I'll need your flying skills and Applejack's knowledge of the land. So I would prefer it very much if you both accepted."

"If it'll keep out whatever you consider to be a burglar, I'm in." Applejack stated.

Rainbow Dash just shrugged and followed the duo as they began walking to the outskirts of town.

Andur was now standing out in front of the clinic with Rarity and Fluttershy, "So... anything happening on your end?"

Rarity seemed to light up with an idea, "Say Andur, do you happen to have anything more dashing than that simple work ensemble you had on a few days ago?"

Andur shook his head no.

"Then may I re-extend that offer I made you not so long ago and have you over at my boutique for a suit making? You can't be the guest of honor at Eastavis and look like some simple work pony."

"I don't see why not," Andur responded, "when I left the farm they said they would be fine without me for a while."

As Andur began following Rarity he looked back to the rather quiet Fluttershy

"Don't you have anything to do today?" Andur asked

Fluttershy just seemed to stare at Andur, he was slightly worried by her gaze, she was looking so pitifully at him.

Rarity spoke up, "If you want Fluttershy, Opal has been rather fussy lately, you could help me deal with her while I get Andur all dressed up for the celebration."

"That would be nice." Fluttershy stated with a weak smile.

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As Applejack lead Cartanis to the place that he had described, she had to ask a question, "Cartanis, I've been thinkin' about somethin' that just doesn't add up for a while now," Cartanis gave her his full attention, "You said back at my place that you and your buddies were something different back where you came from, before you had become ponies, but these monsters I hear about don't seem to be any different from what you told me about 'em."

"Well Applejack, you see that is quite the conundrum. From what I have gathered there are two... no three, possible explanations for their lack of any significant transformation." Cartanis took a moment to formulate his words.

"The first," Cartanis began, "possibility is that at least one of the Bulette's physical forms survived the trip through the void, using this information, your world simply reconstructed them as they were for it would be the path of least resistance. Less resistance than attempting to convert them or make something new, and may have had a part in the fact that the veil tear shocks were so belittled."

"The second could be that your world actually does have Bulettes elsewhere in it, or they could be some long extinct animal. I have looked through some fauna books at the library, Manticores, Cockatrices, Hydras, even Phoenixes; your world has some other allegories to our world as well. As possible as it is, evidence has pointed more towards the first."

"That leaves the final possibility, while strictly theory, it has no real impact on the matter unless I can gather more evidence as to whether it is actually possible."

Rainbow Dash raised a curious eyebrow, "So what is this theory, it's not like we don't have the time to listen to you."

Cartanis sighed, "Let's just say that the implications of the third would mean neither of you would need to worry about much anymore, for soon there would be absolutely nothing to worry over." He took the looks the two ponies shot him and continued, "If what the third possibility says is true, there would be nothing any of us could do, and everything here would be better off in blissful ignorance of the inevitable." Cartanis stopped at a rather large rock they had just started to pass, "Ah yes this should do quite nicely."

Applejack looked at the rock, "So this rock is going to be some magic watchdog or somethin'?"

"Just sit back and enjoy the show." Cartanis let loose arcane energies into the ground in front of the rock. The ground seemed slightly alive with electric snaps and faint purple light as symbols began to appear around where Cartanis had placed his hoof on the ground. As the large circular shape was filled with all manner of unfamiliar arcane runes, Cartanis cut off his power and let the shape hum with its own power. "One down, about seven more to go."

Rainbow Dash spoke up, "That was kind of cool, but why do you need me?"

"Your part to play will become apparent when I have finished with the other seven," Cartanis turned back to Applejack "now Applejack could you take me to a place that is a little northeast of Ponyville, preferably another place with a nice landmark such as this." he gestured towards the rather large boulder.

"I think I know a place, just follow me ya hear?" Cartanis nodded to Applejack's command and let her lead once more.

So the trio walked about the outskirts of Ponyville, Cartanis stopping whenever he found a landmark that caught his eye, performing the same

feat as before. The trend continued until he had finished with the eighth. "Now Miss Dash, you will get to know your part." Cartanis removed a parchment of paper from his waist belt, and gently slapped it against Rainbow Dash's forehead.

"Umm, what's this for?" Rainbow dash asked.

"First I shall do this," Cartanis used his arcane power to write runes and etchings upon the ritual paper on her forehead, "which will allow me to scry... or 'see' from your point of view. This," Cartanis drew more markings on the paper, "will allow you to hear me through the use of an advanced ghost sound spell. So that you may know what you have to do as you fly high above overhead" he stated as he pointed to the sky, "I really need a better view to accomplish this."

"Well what was the point with all this strange thingy-ma-jiggie drawin' for?" Applejack interjected.

"To be more specific, my little 'burglar alarm' is a simpler spell that alerts me to intrusion. I have modified it in two ways, the first is that it should be able to distinguish between residents of this world and our world; it should also help me detect breaches as well. The second is the rather grand scale of it," Cartanis gestured "the landmarks I've had you lead me to will help me inscribe the magic properly, while also letting me have a better idea of where intruders will have entered. It'd really help us out and the town in general, against another incursion."

Rainbow dash hovered a few feet into the air, "So how high do I need to go?"

"High enough so that I may see the loose circle I have been drawing around Ponyville, so probably a few thousand feet. The ritual paper and various runes I have inscribed will enhance your vision to see the world as I see it. To help give you an idea of what you need to see for me."

So off Rainbow Dash flew, high off into the air, wings flapping furiously as she began to soar past the clouds when she heard a voice.

"Take a minute and look down would you? You may be high enough already."

Rainbow Dash was a little thrown off at hearing Cartanis' voice but otherwise did as he commanded. She could see the entirety of Ponyville from where she hovered, "Is this good enough Cartanis?" *Can he even hear me?*

"Yes that should be perfect, just keep your eyes over the northwestern area and follow the light as you see it." he responded.

Answers that question, Dash thought to herself. She then noticed a bright purple light explode, from where she had taken off over by Cartanis, "Are you nuts! That's going to freak out everypony in town!"

"Calm yourself, I told you the spell would augment your vision didn't I? That light is something only you and I can see, and said light is me calling upon arcane power to begin drawing the perimeter. So do please keep your eyes on it."

Rainbow Dash tracked the light as it began jumping from point to point towards the north.

"There's that first landmark!"

The light then connected with the first rune that was drawn earlier in the day, as it connected a brilliant flash of light appeared, a loose curve of energy linked between the northwestern and northern points before it slowly faded.

"Alright, first connection is done. The rest should be a bit easier"

Rainbow Dash continued to keep track of the light as it raced between each compass direction around Ponyville. With each point on the compass it met, the light would grow brightly and a perimeter line which showed the path it had taken could be seen before fading. Once it approached the final point, back where it began, the light grew bright once again.

This time, however, the line which appeared had arced between all of the points. Glowing intensely to mark the completion of the event, before fading away until even Rainbow Dash was unsure if anything was there.

"Thank you for your assistance Rainbow Dash, now all I have to do is..." Rainbow Dash heard Cartanis' voice trail off as ashen residue seemed to drift off her forehead.

Cartanis looked around with his own eyes again to see Applejack patiently waiting for him to finish.

"Thank you for your assistance as well Applejack."

"Oh, it wasn't too hard to just find you some landmarks." She humbly responded

Cartanis checked at the suns position, it was starting to get late into the afternoon, "Say, when does this Eastavis business begin anyway?"

"That doesn't really get started until tomorrow, a few hours after mornin', and tends to go until sunset or a little later."

Cartanis realized he was going to have a lot of time to kill. Rainbow Dash then returned from her hiatus up in the clouds, "So what now Cartanis?" she said as she landed.

He looked about absently as he spoke, "Well... I don't really have much planned. This was the biggest project of the day, now I don't have anything else." he shifted his weight around a bit, realizing how he had nothing at hand to really keep himself busy, besides tedious book repair work.

"I could show ya around the farm. You are practically livin' there now." Applejack interjected.

"Doesn't sound like too bad of an idea, I barely got to know your family before I had to run off anyway." Cartanis looked over to Rainbow Dash, "Are you up to anything special today?"

"Not really, the other weather patrollers have got the entire forecast covered for now. So I don't-" she struck upon an idea, "Hey Cartanis, you wouldn't happen to know any cool tricks you could perform to make an aerial show cooler would you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, like, creating a giant ring of fire. Or-or creating a bunch of fog to help make a grand entrance onto an air field!"

Cartanis raised a curious eyebrow, Applejack whispered to him, "She really wants to join the Wonderbolts, it's her dream, think of them like Equestria's best stunt fliers."

Realization dawned on his face, "While I will admit following your dream is admirable Miss Dash. My power is something I really wish to try and only use when necessary at this point." He then took on a slightly sarcastic tone, "Besides, you wouldn't want to get into the Wonderbolts because of your awesome special effects. I think you want to get in based on your own skill more so."

"Well, I guess you're right." She frowned slightly as if she was in thought. "I know I don't want them asking for me to join because I didn't earn it with my own skill. Same reason why we don't talk about the Ele-" but she cut herself off short and looked rather flabbergasted.

"Ele- what?" Cartanis asked curiously. He then felt Applejack prodding him into moving.

"Oh, look at the time. If you want to see the whole Apple Family Farm we better get movin' before, uhhh, the chickens get tired!" She continued to try and get him to move.

"Please Miss Applejack," he pushed her away, "I may be fifty-seven years old, but I am not senile, I can figure out something is a secret when I hear one." he dusted off his robes, "Now I don't know exactly what she was about to say, but if it's so important you won't let me know, I'll understand."

Applejack and Rainbow Dash looked around rather ashamed, Applejack then spoke up, "Sorry about that, it's just when Celestia herself tells you to keep somethin' on the down low. You tend to heed the request."

Cartanis raised an eyebrow, "Well I can't very well ask you to betray the trust of a being like that." he sighed, "Just tell me it isn't anything dangerous."

"Oh they aren't a mite dangerous on their own." Applejack slapped a hoof against her mouth.

"Perhaps you should quit while you're ahead, which way to your farm?" Cartanis trailed off down a road Applejack pointed out.

Rainbow Dash whispered to Applejack, "I can't believe you almost blew it."

"I did?" she said with a tinge of anger back to Rainbow Dash, "You remember what Celestia said after she reunited with Luna, the Elements of Harmony are very, very, powerful magic. If the wrong pony gets a hold of 'em, or tries to make us use them wrongly, we could put all of Equestria in danger. I for one believe her, because we six simple ponies took down an all powerful alacorn. That's why none of the books talk about us, and that's why I am not lettin' Cartanis know. Because he may be a good pony, but knowledge of power like that could corrupt the nicest of us all."

"Alright fine, you made your point." Rainbow Dash followed Applejack as she caught up to Cartanis, "but I am not letting you blow our cover."

Applejack rolled her eyes as they finally closed the distance Cartanis had given them.



Andur took note of the various ponies that seemed to be either surprised or grateful looking to see him walking down the streets on the way to Rarity's store. As they approached her store, Andur realized he may not fit through the front door to easily. "Umm, do you happen to have a larger port of entry?"

Rarity looked confused at the question, and then she realized what he was on about, "I'm sorry dear, I forgot about your stature. Maybe I can manage to do something with you outside."

Andur had a moment of inspiration, "Actually I might be able to do something about this." Andur set his bag of holding on the ground, widening the opening as far as it would go, and hopped inside. His feet hit the floor; he could feel some of his stuff brushing against him but nothing serious, all the while his head managed to still stick out of the top of the bag, "I believe this shall suffice until we get inside."

Rarity seemed partially stunned at what she saw, "I knew you had some kind of magic bag Andur, but that is just perplexing to see with one's own eyes."

"Just imagine it's some kind of mobile magical storage locker." Andur heard the sound of something slightly shouting and then a faint plop of it smacking against the ground. He looked around to see a pink pony fainted on the ground.

"Fluttershy you best take Andur inside before we make too much more of a scene."

Fluttershy grabbed the strap of the bag and whisked herself away inside the shop as Rarity was busy getting the flustered mare back on her feet.

When they got inside, Andur managed to pull himself out of the bag, despite being slightly disoriented from swaying back and forth while in transit. He looked about the shop, seeing various pony mannequins wearing differing kinds of suits and dresses.

Rarity then trotted inside, "That situation has been properly dealt with, onto the main event. Please stand over there by the mirrors Andur."

Andur stood upon a small raised platform that was flanked by mirrors on most of its sides, and then he noticed various pieces of fabric floating around him.

"Just get comfortable, this could take a while."

Andur was standing for a time as Rarity trotted around the shop looking for fabrics to compare against his coat, talking about mane contrast and form fitting angles. Eventually it all seemed to dull into an indecipherable explosion of words and gasps as she was inspired.

In time Andur noticed that it was almost noon, and he realized how tight the collar was on his neck. He looked down to see he had some sort of tie on, "You really think it should be that tight?"

"I'm sorry Andur; I just can't seem to figure out what will go well with your suit. I have the light brown to accent your mane and beard, it's not too showy because you are rather simple yourself. But I can't just seem to get

any accessories down right. Usually I can tell by cutie marks what would go well with a pony but well..."

Andur looked towards his bare flanks, "I might have something in my bag that could help, if you would please." Rarity floated over his bag to him, watching curiously as he sifted through the contents. He pulled out a small sun medallion.

"Oh my, Andur, this is lovely. Where did you get this? Is it something from your world?" Rarity asked as she gawked over the artifact.

"Just consider it a family heirloom. It was..." Andur sighed at what he said, "IS, the symbol of my office."

"Could I see it for a moment," Rarity lifted the medallion from his hoof, looking over the intricately designed six pointed sun emblem; she noticed some writing on the edges. "What does this say here?"

"It's an old tongue from Manderton. *'For they shall guard the peoples from mortal suffering and evil, until the day one shall arise above the rest and fulfill the charge that was given.'* It's essentially the oath one takes in the Clergy of Pelor before they are deemed a Champion."

"Would you mind if I took this with me for a moment, I might have something in the back that could... ooh yes, that would go together quite nicely. I'll just be a moment dear, take a rest while you wait." Rarity trotted off to some stairs, bringing the medallion along with her magic.

She went up a flight of stairs, up into her part workshop part home that was the second story of the shop. Wandering around the halls she found Fluttershy playing with Opal, Rarity remembered something, "Oh Fluttershy I almost forgot to ask you about what I wanted you to bring today. Do you have it?"

Fluttershy looked about nervously, "Well I did bring it Rarity... but I still don't think it's a good idea."

"Oh don't be so worried Fluttershy, they have never done anything peculiar unless we had all of them together. Besides, it'll help you look fabulous during Eastavis."

Fluttershy continued to look unsure in the matter.

"Just come see what I've done with mine, I know you'll think it's just divine." Rarity went into her workshop with Fluttershy close behind. She gestured to a mannequin that was covered in a half finished dress.

Fluttershy looked surprised by it, "Rarity, did you copy Cartanis?"

Rarity was flustered at the accusation, "No, of course not. I just did a little... note taking." she began to point at various areas of the dress, "First of all mine is white, with some blue trim to bring out my mane and eyes. Yes, I have the robe-like cape that covers the dress, but I have not a vest or a suit-like under-layer, something far more feminine and chic." She looked a little perplexed at her incomplete dress, "Besides, I can't seem to replicate what Cartanis had with all those marking on his. Must be something only he knows how to do with his magic."

Fluttershy noticed the necklace of the dress was glowing slightly; a look of fear was upon her face. Quickly she located her knapsack that she had set down in the room and took out her own, it too was slightly glowing, "Rarity I told you this was a bad idea."

Rarity was perplexed, "What do you me-" she then noticed what Fluttershy was holding up.

"I should have never brought my Element of Harmony out of hiding, this isn't even a possible emergency, this is just vanity." Fluttershy quickly stuffed it back into her saddlebag and wandered out into the hall.

Rarity went after her, setting down Andur's amulet on a table in the workshop. "OK you were right Fluttershy, just don't make a scene, you're all flustered and Andur is not the type to just let you slip past all anxious like this."

Fluttershy stopped in the hallway, "I know but," she fished the Element out of her saddlebag again, it had stopped glimmering. "We just need to keep them separated unless it's an emergency Rarity, I don't really need a new dress anyway."

Rarity looked slightly ashamed with herself.

"You just want to do the best you can with what you got Rarity... I can respect that but... this is dangerous, I don't want to have a hoof in it if it'll hurt somepony." Fluttershy said rather meekly.

Rarity sighed, "Maybe winning the Eastavis fashion show was getting to me a bit more than it should have. It would mean a lot for my business, not to mention my reputation."

"You're set on doing this?" Fluttershy questioned.

Rarity simply confirmed with a nod, "Business has been rather slow lately, and I need all the help I can get. Without my Element of Harmony, the ensemble just... doesn't feel right."

"Then promise me something," Rarity looked over at Fluttershy to see her sporting a rather serious face, "If anything funny starts to happen, anything at all, you excuse yourself from the pageant and get your Element somewhere safe."

Rarity had never seen Fluttershy seem so serious before, "I promise." Rarity meant it with everything she could, "Now I still have to pick out something for Andur's suit, if you would excuse me."

As Rarity went back into her workshop, Fluttershy calmed herself and went downstairs. As she walked through the store towards the exit, she noticed Andur laying down on the platform; he looked over to acknowledge her presence. Before he looked back at the floor and seemed to drift off into thought again.

What Applejack had said to her earlier was still eating at her, *What could Andur have lost that was so close to him?* Fluttershy couldn't stand to see something else looking so sad. She tried to build up the courage to speak, "Hey, A-Andur, umm..." but her resolve faded.

Andur looked up from his thoughts, "Yes? Is something amiss?"

Fluttershy tried again to speak, "I just... I talked to Applejack and she said something about you not being... or having something that you had before... and I'm sorry, I was just curious, and-"

"And you want to settle your mind as to what is wrong with me?" Andur helped her finish.

Fluttershy nodded, "If it's not too hard, maybe talking about it would help."

Andur chuckled a bit, "You are quite the caring little pony aren't you?" Fluttershy blushed a little, "Did Applejack ever tell you about what I did for her family?"

"Yes."

"Imagine Fluttershy, having that power, the ability to help others in a way no one else can." Andur seemed to get lost in thought, "Evil would cower at hearing your name, and the weak would gain hope just knowing you were around." Andur smiled a bit, "That is the side of me I mourn, don't think I am beaten, not by a long shot. But that doesn't mean it won't hurt to realize reality."

Fluttershy could tell he liked to embolden himself with confidence, "Wow Andur, how are you so brave all the time?"

"Brave? This isn't bravery... it's more like, acceptance. Bravery is something else entirely." Andur's eyes seemed to glow as he remembered something else, "There are brave things one can do. I may have attained the right to be called that a few times, but I have yet to do something as Brave as my father did."

"He must have been a very great pony... or person, if you call him brave."

Andur looked about, he realized that it was still rather early in the afternoon, "Does Rarity usually take a while trying to figure out her ensembles?"

Fluttershy giggled a little, "She might be up there the rest of the day."

"Then would you like to hear a story?"

"Sure."

Andur took a moment then began.

"In the far off reaches of the mountains, there was a village, much like Ponyville. In which lived a group of people, the Mandertonian, who carved out a living amongst the most cold and barren land as you would ever see. From the very ground had they worked for their livelihoods, taking everything that life could throw at them. Even though they never came away unscathed, they also ever gave in to it. They had earned the right to the land as a people, following in the word of Pelor, and created a beacon of hope amongst a land of darkness."

"With the teaching of Pelor, they continued to prosper ever more, from the land with their own hands had they created a means to support themselves and generations after them. But there were some in the world, who sought to correct what they saw as an imbalance. Seeing the small utopia, did jealousy and greed well up in their souls." "

"Why should they be so lucky, how DARE they be more fortunate than me, I could do ten times what they do with their own wealth and resources. These dark thoughts drove them to attack Manderton, almost razing it to the ground."

"Had it not been for the work of the towns own Peloric Order, a group of pious warriors who sought to smite the wicked. Thanks to them, the lives of many townspeople were saved, and the invading forces driven back. But, the victory was left hallow by a fact that they had discovered that day. That fact was that their home was no longer safe, they had to abandon what was left, and find a new place to call their own. One amongst them however, thought of a different way, he voluntarily accepted a task in order to root out the cause of all the hatred towards his people. He left with everything he held dear to him, even his young son of twenty years, who refused to allow him to go it alone."

"What about your mother Andur?" Fluttershy interjected.

Andur was slightly surprised she caught on so quickly. "Well I had no mother." he realized how strange that would sound, "That is to say I was not raised with one, I was essentially adopted. Let me turn back the clock on my story a little."

"When Manderton had just started to truly blossom, and the Peloric Order was in its infantile stages, the town was seen as a hapless and fattened calf to be used. One night, a haphazard raid was attempted on the town,

while it was not a resounding success the invaders managed to make off with many of the townsfolk. What was the Peloric Order of that day gathered their forces and went after them. Luckily the invaders were not as familiar with the land as The Order was, and were quickly tracked down. But not before they had enacted some part of their foul plan."

"The Order was tested that night, slaying countless undead abominations, as they fought their way to save what was left of the kidnapped. Many had been turned that night, but many also made it out alive thanks to the heroism of the Order and its Champion. Amongst the survivors there was a child, whilst his parents had been turned and subsequently laid to rest, he had survived the process. Many of the Order saw it as a sign of corruption and evil within the babe, but their Champion Kroodur, spoke of the child's gift that he saw. *'Evil sought to destroy this life, it has failed, do not seek to accomplish what evil could not!'* with his words the order recognized their truth. So the Champion adopted the boy, and trained him in the teachings of Pelor. When he was old enough to decide for himself, the boy was allowed to leave if he so sought to, with no knowledge of his past or his ability; the boy stayed."

"So you never got to know your own parents?" Fluttershy asked.

"It wasn't until after I was sixteen winters had I even known Kroodur was not my birth-father. I eventually came to grips with the fact that... maybe birth doesn't determine your parents all the time, sometimes it's whoever will step up to the challenge of rearing a child." Andur retorted, "Anyway back to where I was... oh yes."

"The Champion of the Order left his people, along with his son; he sought out the cause of all the hatred towards his people. What force would seek the destruction of a peaceful village, the greed driven invaders had been far too organized to be a haphazard raid of barbarians. For five years the duo tracked down clues, finding out about nefarious secrets of some great power that sought to end what it perceived to be a threat to itself. This power, The Tiefling Theocracy, saw the town as a beacon that exposed their lies of betterment through ruling with a powerful few. It showed the truth, that mortals could drive a path in life their own way, free from tyranny and oppression any could have a good life; given that they tried hard enough."

"Even beneath that great power, the duo discovered one person in particular, who had possibly set all the events into motion centuries ago. Who had possibly built up the Theocracy from nothing, who wanted to use it for his own ends. They only had a feared name to go by, *The Void Caller*; even asking about him was dangerous. For eventually they found themselves dodging assassins at every turn, abominations hunting them through the wilds. But with every encounter, they learned more about this feared man. Eventually they tracked him to his lair."

"Once within, the duo was split up by forces not of their control. The son was apparently the target of The Void Caller the entire time, ever since the attack on his village when he was a baby. The son tried to find the father, but every turn he took seemed to lead him deeper into the lair's maze, eventually he was face to face with The Void Caller himself. Locked in combat with no way of retreat, the son was easily bested, but the Voice Caller stopped short of killing him."

" '*These things must be done carefully*' he said, and then the son was impaled with a foul dagger which injected something into his very soul. He felt it tearing at him, destroying him, for what felt a lifetime it scratched and ebbed at his very life. Eventually the father fought his way through the maze, and with his might scattered the lich, forcing it to return to stasis for months to come before it would be a threat again. But The Void Caller was not bested yet."

Andur began recalling the memory much more vividly, as he spoke of it to Fluttershy.



"No, NO, **NO**. You're not ready for something like this!" Kroodur shouted to Andur, as he kneeled next to him.

Andur wanted to respond but the thing within his soul had taken that from him.

Kroodur seemed to draw into himself, resolve clear on his face, "You can beat this Andur; you're just not ready... But I can help you." Andur felt his father calling out to his soul; the thing that tore at his own life was nipping and biting at his father's power as he reached out to him. When his father

finally connected, he felt a surge of energy, like a spark had just ignited a blaze.

Andur felt the beast that had been devouring him recoil and menace in pain, its form blasted from his being, his soul seemed to return along with his power. The world seemed to return much clearer than it was before, he felt himself able to move, and his father helped him to his feet. Andur looked down at the dagger which he had been impaled with; it lay broken on the floor, shattered into countless pieces.

Kroodur smiled, "I knew you could do it." he snapped around however to the sound of countless beasts roaring down the tunnels towards the lich's throne room. "Even scattered that blasted lich can still manage to call his horde." Kroodur looked about, "There Andur, take that exit, it leads straight outside."

"What about you father?"

"I'm not long for this world."

"What?" Andur used his power to search for his father; he saw the beast that had been attacking his soul was now attached to his father's own.

"Don't try anything Andur; all you'll do is contract it again."

"But can't you-"

"No Andur I can't," Kroodur looked back towards his son, "You are so much more than you realize, so much more than I could ever be. I saw it the day I saved you twenty-five years ago, and I saw it again just now. Dra'nahb wanted to end you, because he sees you as a threat to his plans, but I," Kroodur drew his sword and shield, "I know that there is more to all this than some Lich who's hell bent on destroying everything in some vain attempt at easing the suffering of mortals."

"What am I? Why can't you just-"

"There is no time. Just know that Dra'nahb may fear you, but there is a force greater than him, greater than that accursed Theocracy, out there that is terrified of you. Not just you, but what you shall accomplish with others." Kroodur laid down his weapon for a moment before removing his

medallion, "I won't need this anymore, and the title of Champion WILL belong to you one day." Andur took the sun medallion that his father handed to him.

"I won't let them win, I'll find a way."

"I know you will," the sounds of the beasts were becoming much more clear against the echoes of the room, "Now get going, you can't fight evil when you're dead now can ya?" Kroodur picked up his sword, pain obvious on his face from the infection. "I'll hold 'em off; Dra'nahb can't possibly keep control of them for long after a recent scattering."

Andur knew his father, there would be no turning back, he was always leaping into help others regardless of the danger to himself. He began running down the exit that was pointed out earlier. As he left the room he shouted back one of his father's favorite lines of scripture, "Bear his light as though a torch!"

"And Pelor shall light your path through the darkness!" Andur heard his father retort as the sound of battle began behind him.

As Andur made his way through the ruins of the old caves, he used his power to keep track of his father. Each time he felt him use his power; the infection seemed to grow more over the light that was his soul, slowly eating away at everything that was Kroodur. As Andur made it to the fresh air of the outside world, he finally witnessed his father's death. A great burst of light signaled his last attempt to hold back the onslaught, what Andur sensed then horrified him.

He had been in the village for years, used his power to help ease the suffering of dying souls. They had always seemed to drift away, as though they simply were being taken to another place to be put at rest. But this, this was not rest, it was recoiling pain that lead to emptiness; as though something had come along and snuffed out a brilliant candle. The silence of it was like a hollow pit in the world around him. Andur knew that whatever happened, his father was not resting in peace, for there was no piece left of him whatsoever.

He continued to run through the wilds, on his way back to civilization. *I won't let evil win, I won't allow any more to suffer.* Life just attempted to

throw a curve ball at Andur, he had taken the hit, but he wasn't going to let it stop him. Not for a single moment.



"Wow, so your father did all that? Just to save you?" Fluttershy stated.

"Sometimes it's hard for me to believe he saved me as well, seven years ago." he chuckled, "Sometimes it felt insurmountable, but we're still here, and even without my power. I won't let them win, and I won't let life try to stop me, we'll find a way back. Even if we don't, there is plenty I can still do here to aid any who need it."

Rarity then appeared on the other side of the room by the stairs, "I think I finally got it." she stated excitedly. A pair of sun themed glasses floated onto Andur's face.

"Really?" Andur stated.

"What you don't like them?" Rarity asked.

"Rarity, maybe you're just over-designing it. I enjoy simple things; the suit by itself is rather impressive. I'm still rather surprised at how well it fits me, maybe you can take a hint from my lack of a 'cutie mark', and realize that maybe I don't need accessories."

"Hmmm," Rarity looked Andur over once more in his suit, "Maybe you're right, I haven't done a simple design in a while."

Fluttershy spoke up, "A strong foundation always leads to a sturdy house."

"Well I think that about sums it up Andur, I'll have your suit ready by tomorrow." the various pieces of the suit Andur had on floated off his person and onto a number of mannequins in the room. Andur took his medallion as it floated back to him, wearing it as it was supposed to be.

"I'm going to go see what Ted is up to, sometimes he likes to get himself in trouble and it has been a while." Andur started to open up his bag of holding so he could be carried out.

"Oh don't worry about that, I should've thought about it earlier, but we have an emergency fire escape window here on the first floor. I can open it from the inside." Rarity opened three latches on a window by the front door; it easily slid out of its frame and was more than large enough for Andur to simply hop through.

Fluttershy followed Andur outside, "I need to go see Pinkie Pie anyway, and they are all probably still at Sugarcube Corner."

Andur took note of the almost setting sun as he followed her to the bakery.



"What about to the left of the stage?" Pinkie Pie asked Twilight.

Twilight looked over the floor plan of the Eastavis celebration. It was going to be held out in the fields by Whitetail Wood, and they still had to make arrangements for the fashion pageant amongst all the other things. "I don't think the food court would make much sense there, maybe if it was somewhere that the crowd could get at it without having to push through everypony to get at it." she drew an x, where she believed it would be best, "Out here by the other vendors would be better, besides it helps to have the place where you spend all your bits in one area."

"That is why Miss Pie, she is the organizer," Ted smiled a bit, "but I still think she's a stick in the mud."

"She's not like that all the time." Pinkie Pie said back.

"Well most of your townsfolk are, we save them and I hardly get more than a few thankful glances."

"That's because you're a hero not a celebrity, they have gratitude for you, not unhealthy misplaced affection." Twilight retorted.

"You make a fair point Tiddly Glitter." Ted jested.

Twilight didn't really understand Ted, *he's been aloof all day, always making jokes, checking in his bag, or looking over his bow. A guy this silly is a wizened veteran of a war?* "Well that about sums up all the planning, you should be able to take this to the mayor now."

"OK." Pinkie Pie rolled up the plans and walked to the stairs that lead to the bakery so she could leave, "I'll be right back, Fluttershy is coming by and I don't want her leaving just to go look for me. So if she shows up just tell her to wait."

Twilight noticed the early afternoon sun, and looked over to Ted, who was once again fumbling with something in his bag. "What's so interesting about that bag of yours?"

Ted looked up, obviously pulled from his train of thought, "Just some things that need to get done, and I was hoping to get around to fixing it."

"Fixing what?"

"This," Ted exclaimed as he pulled out a suit of armor, its layer of scales glinting in the light. "As you may notice I didn't get the chance to repair it." Ted pointed out a large gash in the scaling and under-layer of padded armor across the mid section.

Twilight looked at the strange markings across the armor; it was built to cover Ted entirely from the base of his neck down to each of his hooves almost. The only places that lacked the silvery scaling were the joint sections; even then the padding seemed more than capable of stopping even the most stubborn attacker. "Who made you this?"

"Oh it's all custom made by me, well maybe not anymore since your world reconstructed it. But its close enough for little old me." he saw Twilight reach for one of the gauntlets, "You might not want to touch that."

Twilight stopped, "Why not?"

Ted carefully picked up the gauntlet and slipped it onto his wrist, it sat just above his hoof on his front leg, looking more like some form of armored bracelet disconnected from the rest of the greave which normally was a part of it.

"Because they're a little touchy," he flicked out his wrist and caused one of his blades to extend from its hidden compartment. "Took me ages to figure out how to smelt together the proper metals and engineer the mechanisms in this thing." he twisted his wrist slightly to one side, causing the blade to extend a little farther. Then in the other direction, causing it to retract until it

went back into the compartment. "Only a few forges I knew of that could allow me to make the necessary metals, luckily one exists here, in Cartanis' hat." he took off the gauntlet and set it back down amongst the set.

She noticed a rather distinct looking emblem on the chest piece of the suit, "What does that represent."

"Hmm?" Ted looked over to where she was pointing, "Oh that's just the emblem of my pirate crew."

"You were a pirate?"

"Yes and a terrible one indeed, we went around in my land-sub and stalked around looking for aquifers in the ground so we could hunt the illusive snipe. Worth a ton on the market I can tell you stories-."

Twilight just glared at him, "I know you're from a different world, but that sounds a little far-fetched even to me."

Ted laughed a little, "Learn to laugh at a tall tale, Miss Sparkle, you shall find I am full of them. You didn't think I would tell an acquaintance of a friend my origin, when I haven't told them of it for good reason did you?"

Want to play it this way then huh? "Well I know that Eladrin are apparently all stuffed shirts according to you. Your half and half breed also suggests something to me, as well as the respect you have for your Eladrin father."

"So you WERE listening at the meeting, and here I thought you were just milling about in the background noise."

"You also thought your buddies were a lot of fun, staying with them past a work contract. So from that I can infer you enjoy adventure, or at least danger, but you don't act seriously at all. So I can guess that if you thought the same of your father, he too was like you in a way."

"Oh the old man and I used to toss the old ball around the back yard, fighting off dragons with sticks and stones as we did so." Ted was making fake throwing gestures. "We both enjoyed a good quip every now and then, I will admit that."

"I might not know much about symbolism in your world, but that crest on your armor looks like a coat of arms, you don't just engrave two wolves overlooking a wellspring for nothing. If this is custom made by you, and you dislike your origins, why would you pay homage to them in some way? It could possibly be something from your mother's side, but you haven't said anything about her."

Ted seemed to quiet down a little, he just sat there, patiently listening to her continue. Almost as if he was waiting for something.

"So the crest must be some family thing from your father, who must have had a love for his own culture. But not enough to stay with them, as he sired a family with someone not of his own race. He must have had enough love for you, and your mother to show you his old lands, but it soured you to them somehow." Twilight set down a hoof on the table, "You respect your father for the ideals he set forth to accomplish, but his people did not agree. In some form of conflict with an opposing force, quite possibly Eladrin, you lost your mother. So with respect you don't talk about her memory as not to stain it."

Twilight was almost surprised by Ted's silence; he seemed to have all the silliness drained from his face. A rather stern, much older looking, Ted seemed to be staring back at her now. "I will commend you on your keen powers of intuition Twilight Sparkle."

That's the first time he said my whole name without lampooning it! "Oh... well... thanks."

"But I can't have you going around gossiping something you think is true." Ted smirked a bit, but retained his serious demeanor, "Maybe I can confide something to you, and let you decide if it's necessary for others to know."

"Ted are you OK?" Twilight was rather thrown off by how serious he was sounding, expecting him to throw out a joke any second to catch her off guard.

"I thought you were listening at the meeting, do you not remember my age? I am about a hundred and forty; don't think that I am incapable of having a serious conversation."

"You never had your age mentioned." Twilight stated.

"I didn't? Well then I must not have been listening too well, remind me to never get involved in a salt-cube contest again would you?" Ted chuckled a bit, "Now as for my past, I would like you to listen and listen well."

"I never lost my mother to some war with my own people, she's doing fine alongside my father, who was a rather swashbuckler type fellow as myself. He is the lord of house Zavyard, among the Eladrin it's considered a rather powerful house that one should heed."

"Well what is so special about that? Are you royalty?" Twilight interrupted.

"Technically, I don't hold any sway over major decisions, and I am not guaranteed to ascend to the throne." he smiled gently, "But I make a lovely hostage."

"So what's the big deal, why don't you just tell your friends that?"

"It's all about politics really, that's all it's ever about with the Eladrin. They just go through so much protocol to do anything. Let me explain from where it would make sense."

"For the Eladrin enjoy working carefully, they don't want to disturb things too hastily and possibly upset some idea of a perfect future they have. A long time ago, before I was born, and my father was about sixty I want to say; give or take. Since they usually live to around three-hundred, sixty is rather young for an Eladrin. He was but another soldier of the house, in a war in the shadows against a young nation that was on the rise to power, it was known as the Theocracy. It had yet to gain any momentum in the world, and was little more than an idea traveling about the land at the time."

"But the Eladrin knew of its creator, one who they feared, his true name was Dra'nahb: The Void Caller. Who was destined to destroy everything he came across, unless something was done about it at the right time. This was the point of the war in the shadows, but as hard as they tried, the Eladrin alone were unable to halt their rise to power. So they enlisted the help of their old kin, the Elves."

"At first, it was working; they began to win engagements with the Theocracy much more often. But soon, old hatred loomed within our own ranks. The house's aristocracy saw themselves as cultured and superior to the elves, and ignored the Elves who asked for more help on difficult assignments."

While the Elves began to see the Eladrin once again as the foolish ones who abandoned the world to hide in the fey, usually attempting things without the Eladrin's consultation, causing breaks in the chain of command."

"Combined with the infighting, the alliance was once again ineffective, allowing the Theocracy to take root much easier. Eventually becoming too strong for even the alliance to deal with, so the Elves retreated back to the wilds to prepare, and the Eladrin went back to the fey in order to wait for an appropriate time to strike. All the while, the Theocracy gathered its own forces, subjugating the people of the lands. It had yet to become an international power, but it was quickly on the way to being more than a trouble for the southern lands."

"Um, hi, pony who has no idea what the Fey is right here." Twilight said with a smile.

"Oh, imagine it's like some form of mirror world to the one you reside in now. Different beings reside there and such, if you had the means you could live there and travel between it at will." Ted quickly let his eyes flash solid grey, "I have this power thanks to my Eladrin heritage, and the world I cross over into here is less... lively than the fey. But it seems to accomplish the same things. Now back to my story."

"My father, however, stood against the orders of his house. He accepted banishment, and went off into the world to find a way to slow the advance of the Theocracy, to give the realm of mortals more time to prepare. He believed that if you simply tried, you would have no need for prophecy to tell you the right thing to do, for all the planning in the world would not save it from destiny."

"In his travels he tried to reason with the various tribes of Elves, but they wished to be just as foolish as the Eladrin, they stayed in their colonies away from the growing empire and spent their time in a bid to strike when they were most vulnerable. During one visit to a town, of no real significance, just some port town that had a bar with some good ale. He met an elf, another who had been unable to understand why her people did not wish to at least attempt to save those who were currently suffering under the reign of the Theocracy."

"Oh and your parents just fell in love at first sight." Twilight rolled her eyes, the story was fanciful so far, but this was just silly.

Ted laughed a bit.

"Suffice to say, my father tried to join in her employ, but she would have none of it. He was far too aloof for her to take seriously, so they split ways that day. It wasn't until my father was on the trail of a speaker of the Theocracy, one who spreads the message of it to new places. Once he had this speaker tracked down, he listened to him for a few moments, for he had fought them for decades now. But this was the first time the sermon he was giving was different, instead of the original indoctrination through fairness for all, it spoke of a race of enlightened rulers who would see through the lies of others and rule justly against the unjust."

"As the crowds cheered towards his message of deliverance, my father realized that if he killed the man now it would only martyr him. Resolved that he had solved nothing in attempting to glean information he prepared to journey from the town, but instead he waited when the familiar elf from before stood before the speaker. She encroached on his authority; she spoke of the things she had seen amongst the man's "glorious" empire, the lies of their salvation. How he was preaching hate, how he was speaking lies, and why the people just stood there and simply listened to them. Almost begging for the Theocracy to take from them their freedom."

"Her words rang with truth that day, and as the crowd began to recoil at the man's idea, the speaker declared them heretics and damned to being an enemy with the parasites who reject their ideas. The force that had been the speakers guard descended upon the crowd, with that final act, the elf unleashed her power amongst the enemy. But she was outnumbered, and being the Eladrin my father was, he went in after her. Suffice to say that day, the theocracy was slowed, my mother took my father much more seriously, and a few years later I was born."

"The houses and tribes had been slow to listen to their words; it was not popular to be in relation with each other at this time. So the couple set about the world on their own, doing their best to keep the Theocracy in check, all the while I was growing up with them."

"Why are they so stubborn? That doesn't make any sense. If this thing was such a threat why didn't they do something about it? Especially if they

found this new way to stop people from joining into the lie. By confronting the lies in public instead of fighting in the shadows." Twilight retorted

"The long lived races are known for being... patient, to say the least. I never had much love for them, the few times I was taken to the Feywilds; everyone there simply treated me like an outcast anyway. A few didn't, the first to really not mind me was a blacksmith, and oh how I hurt myself the first time I tried to smith something." Ted's eyes seemed to be gleaming with pride, "But how I loved it the first time I managed to make my own weapon."

Twilight raised a curious eyebrow, "Wait you learned how to be a blacksmith in a day?"

"No, no, no Twilight. I was there for a while; we would plead and wait for years sometimes in a bid to earn support for our task. I never really liked it, if you ever asked them to do anything, it was always about favors this for favors that. It was like every Eladrin there was trying to play some political mind game with you. Eventually I couldn't take it anymore, I simply wished to take leave from my parents, and I was well into my nineties. It's not like us to stay with our families for that long anyway. But my father was a hard man to dislike, and my mother loved me very much."

"My parents allowed me to go, they wanted me to see some of the world, and maybe they thought it would help drive me to know what we were fighting for. All I knew is that I was bored, so I left to find out about blacksmithing from the other races. Each little adventure taught me a bit more, although I had to spend a few years in each place to understand it all properly. I eventually found myself in the same port town my parents had been in when they first met, my father and mother would always go on about the great ale they had there so I went to partake."

Ted laughed a little, "But instead when I got there, I had found it had a lovely little theocracy banner. The Tieflings had apparently taken it upon themselves to believe they were the enlightened race to rule over the others, and hijacked the movement into overdrive. I never realized how fast time moved until I sat at that bar, a hundred and thirty five years old. Looking at the old bar where my parents had met so long ago."

"So I was just enjoying myself, the ale was good, but not great. When in through the tavern door smashed a Tiefling officer with the theocracy, a

rather angry looking top hat wearing wizard soon behind him, who was followed by a calmer looking bearded man. Suffice to say the Tiefling began spilling his guts about various locations of the army and other such military intelligence. They needed a guide and I felt like joining them, for a modest fee."

"Just like that? You just FELT like joining them? Two strangers bust something through a wall and you have an uncontrollable urge to go with them?" Twilight objected.

"You've met Andur haven't you Twilight?"

"Yes, I don't really know him. But I have met him."

"Then you must know what he is like, there is something about him. You can't put your hoof on it, but he just seems to be a natural leader. If you ever saw him fight you would know of what I speak, he never shows fear, evil simply drives him to fight you harder than he was before."

Ted laughed, "I was surprised when I found out he was a Cleric of Pelor, the orders had broken down so much since the Tiefling Theocracy had taken over, and the religious sects were little more than something used to personalize your home. The Tiefling Theocracy had control of everything, you had a better chance of a mortal fighting a god than you did a civilian standing up to their oppression. That day, in the middle of all that dull servitude, those two dared to cross a line no one had in years. If I had ever seen something that was going to be ground breaking it would be that. I knew I wanted to be in on it, I knew I could help them out somehow."

Ted eased a bit, "If they don't know much about me, and the fact that my father had risen to lord of the house. Fine by me, because being treated like royalty gets old FAST."

"Your friends wouldn't treat you any differently if they knew about your past."

"That may be the case Twilight, but I keep my identity hidden because the houses of Eladrin are... or were, not entirely willing to aid us in the war. All my father needed me to do was to prove to them that this army Andur was creating could stand up to the Theocracy. If the houses knew I was a part of it, they would've seen us as another fluke of my father's blundering and

go back into their hiding." he sighed a bit, "We would have their support right now if that blasted thing-a-ma-bob didn't decide to get all apocalyptic when it died." he then stuffed his armor back into his bag, "Although I believe the army will still receive the support, the Eladrin were getting desperate, and that was still assuredly a victory."

"Well maybe you should tell them about your past then, it doesn't help to have secrets like that."

Ted laughed a bit, "But then I lose all that mysterious, mysteriousness, I've been building up for years with them."

Twilight just rolled her eyes at the once again aloof Ted, "If you do tell them, I'm sure they won't think any less of you."

"I would love to see the look on their faces if I told them I was royalty." Ted smiled.

Then, Pinkie Pie returned up the stairs, "Ted, Andur wants to see you downstairs in the shop."

"He actually figured out how to fit through the door? Well looks like my bet with Cartanis just netted me some free enchantments." As he went down the flight of stairs he only saw Fluttershy standing with her back to him in the bakery, "Why Fluttershy, hello there, have you seen An-" but he stopped when she turned and he saw what she was holding.

Andur saw the look on Ted's face, "Alright funny guy, get it out of your system."

Ted began laughing furiously, occasionally snorting as he fell to ground. Tears were in his eyes as he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Oh good lord, it hurts. Ha-ha-ha, please Andur, ha-ha, tell me that you at least tried to use the doors the normal wa-way." was all he could muster to say before guffawing incoherently.

Andur looked around a little confused, "Well, the doors in the clinic were rather large and so were the ones at Applejack's farm. These normal ones in town only seem to be big enough for regular ponies."

Ted managed to stand back up, slightly giggling every once in a while as he walked over to the door, "I made a bet with Cartanis that you would figure out how to fit through the doors of a normal house here, the thing is, I know more about these doors than he did. I was hoping you wouldn't do what you did, but you did anyway, so I'm out some magic paper." he cast an eye back to Andur, "But it's so worth it." Ted opened the door to the bakery, "layer one." He then undid a latch on the frame of the door, allowing the frame to swing loose and join the door on its own hinge, "layer two."

Andur could clearly see it was large enough for him to fit through, "Fluttershy, would you mind." Fluttershy set Andur down and he pulled himself out of his bag of holding. "How did you find out about this?"

"Apparently it's rather common in this world to have removable frames like this, makes it easier to fit in larger furniture items into the house. I found out about them when I was fixing things at the Boe Family Blacksmith." Ted still giggled every now and then, "Please let me tell Cartanis about this!"

"Then how would you win your bet?"

Ted stopped smiling for a second, "I see where this is going, touché Andur, touché."

Fluttershy spoke up, "I'm really sorry Andur I didn't know."

"You're too nice to pull a prank like that on me Fluttershy, but why didn't Rarity-"

"Her shop doesn't have one... I think, she always used that big window for things like that, and my cottage doesn't have a frame door like other houses."

Andur looked back to Ted, "Well I don't know about you but I'm heading back to the farm, it has been a long day for me."

Ted walked out the door, "I shall as well, I need to get a hold of Cartanis anyway, and chances are that's where he is."

"He messaged me, and he is." Andur followed Ted out, thankful for the shred of dignity he was able to retain.

Fluttershy then walked up the stairs to Pinkie Pie's apartment above the store, "Hi Fluttershy." Pinkie Pie said, "Are you ready for the sleepover!"

"Actually Pinkie Pie, I needed to talk to you about that."

Pinkie Pie looked confused, "But, you said you wanted to stay the night this year, so you could make it in time to see the start of the Eastavis celebration."

"Well you see Pinkie Pie I need to go home and-" but she stopped when she saw Twilight in the room, *oh no, she would be furious if she found out about me bringing my Element of Harmony out of hiding.* "I-I-I umm..." Her mind drew a blank as what to say next.

"Is this about what happened last year Fluttershy?" Twilight spoke up.

"Huh?"

"Don't worry, I helped organize it this year and the costume contest and the fashion pageant are going to be as far apart as they can logically get. You can watch the pageant without having to worry about getting scared at some of the costumes those ponies manage to make during the winter." Twilight shuddered a little, "Some of them just look so real it's creepy."

"I didn't mean to scare you with my Zompony costume Fluttershy, honest." Pinkie Pie said to her friend.

Fluttershy didn't want to keep her Element of Harmony out of her hiding spot, but if she kept pushing the issue now, Twilight would get suspicious and definitely find out. *It'll be safe for one night, just keep it in your saddlebag here and take it back after Eastavis.* "Thanks." was all she said.

Pinkie Pie happily jumped around knowing the slumber party was still on; Twilight said her goodbyes and made her way back to the library.



"Say Cartanis, did you know Ted is royalty?" Andur said to Cartanis on their way back to the workers cottage.

"Really? I guess that explains all of his eccentric mannerisms. Did he tell you anything else?" Cartanis asked.

"Not really, he was rather serious with me for once, it was strange. He still cracked a joke here and there, but not the usual amount. He let me know some things about him, but said that he had to keep the rest from us for his own reasons." Andur shuddered, "I've never seen him seem that old and wise before, it just doesn't sit right." Andur noticed Cartanis' hat was missing, "hey where is your-"

"Ted is using the forge to repair his armor; he is set up inside the cottage." Cartanis looked to Andur, "Do you still have your armor in your bag?"

Andur looked into his bag, "Yeah it's here... wait" he shuffled through it all quickly, "my damaged shoulder-plate where the Bulette got me is miss-" He looked up to Cartanis, "How does he do that?"

Cartanis groaned, "Two lost bets in a row, now I have to spend half the night repairing his messenger book right away."

Andur wanted to change the subject from Ted and his strange abilities, "Say Cartanis, what do you think about this Eastavis thing tomorrow."

"Not too worried about it, I'm just not keen to being in the public eye is all."

"You thinking the Thunderheads will try something as well?"

Cartanis looked up, "Oh I forgot to tell you Andur, some good turn of events in that subject."

"Really?"

"It seems there was a lot more evidence at that place than just some illegal items, there was apparently enough to take down well over half the Thunderheads leadership. With a little help Reginald and all those Thunderheads we captured apparently spilled all the beans they had, so to speak." Cartanis smiled, "They've collapsed from a power vacuum and went into infighting over whose turf is what, and I don't think they could retaliate if they wanted to at this point." Cartanis sighed with some relief.

Andur was overjoyed to hear the news, but something was still eating at him, "It just doesn't feel right, I can't place it Cartanis but something just doesn't feel right."

Cartanis raised an eyebrow, "You haven't been trying to use your power have you?"

"No, I know when to pace myself. This is just, familiar, and not the good kind of familiar."

"Maybe it's just your body reacting to the loss of a regularly used sixth sense, you'll get used to it."

Andur just sighed, "You're probably right, but I know this feeling. It's so close in my mind it's just out of reach."

"Maybe you need to rest a bit more, health potions kick start the healing process of the body, the soul is something else entirely."

Andur just nodded and made his way to the workers cottage, off to sleep.

Cartanis gave a heavy sigh, *I know I don't pray that often, but whatever benevolence protects Andur, just give him one night of respite. He drives himself too hard.* Cartanis then worked his way quietly into the cottage, finding his way to the hat that was laid open on the floor, *Time to get started on that book.*

Chapter 8

Cartanis looked about the fairgrounds set up in the fields by the Whitetail Wood; he was still rather amazed how the ponies had managed to set up an entire celebration in just under twenty-four hours.

"Hi Cartanis, are you ready for your big day?"

Cartanis turned to see Twilight, "Pretty much, although I could have done with mor-" but he broke into a yawn halfway through, "Excuse me, I was up half the night repairing a very important piece of equipment."

"Well in that case, let me buy you some tea." Twilight stated.

"Oh you don't have to go and waste-"

Twilight interrupted, "For once Cartanis just let a pony do something nice for you."

Cartanis gently smiled and followed her over to the vendors situated between the stages and amongst the fairgrounds that hosted a few rides. Twilight walked over to a booth, rang the service bell, and a Zebra with a rather large mo-hawk answered, "Why if it isn't our favorite stranger dressed in blue, did you have any luck with all your special brew?"

"I must say you gave me some helpful clues, maybe one day you will be able to make your own magic stews."

Zecora gave a few hearty chuckles, "This one I like."

Twilight grinned at seeing two of her friends getting along, "Can I get the usual for myself, and a cup of wake-up tea for Cartanis?"

Zecora disappeared for a moment before returning with some containers, she filled them both with hot water, and placed a few various powders and herbs within each. Twilight tossed a few bits on the table from her saddlebag, Zecora returned a few more than was necessary, "One can

manage to honor a hero in their own way, for just today Cartanis does not need to pay."

Cartanis thanked Zecora for the kind gift as he gingerly sipped at the piping hot tea. Looking about he noticed Ted at another stall not far from where they were, "Guess he was able to make it in time, I need to have a word with him."

Cartanis made his way over to Ted, excusing himself when he occasionally got in the way of other ponies. When he finally made it to Ted he tapped him on the shoulder, "I would like my hat back Ted."

Ted turned, "I knew I forgot to do something," Ted removed the blue top hat from his head and gave it back to Cartanis, "By the way, our stores of metals from our world are still around. Although we might have to start attempting to make more soon."

"Only if we have to, I don't want to risk summoning something from the plane of earth and causing a veil tear." Cartanis stated as he returned his hat to his own cranium.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but what was Ted doing with your hat?" Twilight asked.

"He was up all night repairing armor and making tweaks to his own, it apparently wasn't fitting just so."

"How is he still awake?"

Ted interjected, "Oh just a few quick meditations and I am right as rain. It is a very nice racial feat, not sure how we developed it though." He said as he scratched his chin in thought.

Rainbow Dash then landed next to them, "Ted you were right, that new ride they have this year is awesome."

Ted laughed a bit, "Nothing quite like being launched into the air and then free-falling for a bit before gliding down the last few hundred feet."

Cartanis spit up some of his tea, "You were on rides while you were wearing my HAT! Are you MAD!"

Ted looked out over the various crowds and made out a familiar shape, "My, my, is that our burly Andur I spy?" he said as he took off into the air to avoid the various threats and accusations Cartanis was making.

Andur was followed by Rarity, who had her chin raised high with pride over her creation. A simple, yet elegant suit that did little to show off much more than Andur's natural size and color. "So when does your beauty pageant start?" he asked Rarity.

"Oh that won't be started for a few more hours, which gives me just enough time to spruce myself up backstage." Rarity said as she pampered her mane.

Andur then noticed Ted soaring through the sky towards them, as he landed he looked over Andur's suit, "Don't you just look like the star of the show," Ted then gave his attention to Rarity, with a pout he said, "Why didn't Cartanis or I get a fancy little get-together, hmm?"

Rarity rolled her eyes, "Ted, you for one should realize how rare and exotic you are. Any attempt to dress you up would actually be a detriment to your style, just don't try to wear that wretched green cloak I've heard that you have. As for Cartanis..." Rarity's eyes seemed to sparkle as she spoke, "I wouldn't dare to top that masterpiece of a design... well I may try to make something better than that overused top hat idea. But that is simply par for the course I would assume."

Cartanis then wandered his way over through the crowds with a container of tea floating alongside himself, he shot a glare at Ted before addressing Rarity, "Hello Miss Rarity, I was rather curious about this dress I hear you are going to be wearing in the pageant. Fluttershy told me I would be most flattered by its design."

Rarity gasped a bit, "She didn't give anything away did she?"

"No, no, I'm just a bit curious is all."

"Well you're going to need to stay curious for a while longer, my dress is going to be hidden in my saddlebags until I am on stage. Now if you can excuse me, I must prepare myself." Rarity then trotted her way over to the pageant stage and disappeared behind its backstage entrance.

As the trio was talking about various things they had done at the fairgrounds, one of them noticed Pinkie Pie and called her over.

"Yeah, what's up?" she said.

"We are all unsure as to when this award ceremony we heard about is going to be getting underway." Cartanis asked.

"Don't worry about that, it'll begin in a few hours. Just enjoy yourselves, today is Eastavis for crying out loud, and when it's time I'm sure somepony will come find you." Pinkie Pie then hopped along, back to her duties of making sure the party was still going strong, and that everypony was happy.

Andur decided to partake in the local souvenir and cultural vendors, too afraid to attempt the rides out of fear he would break them. He met a few grateful families who insisted on thanking him; he even met Dodge and his family who were more than grateful to buy him some snacks. A few curious ponies asked about his powers, he told them the truth which only seemed to make them admire him more. Instead of showcasing power he didn't have, Andur shared stories of the adventures of The Dungeon Masters with any who would listen.

Ted returned to his adrenaline induced binge on the fairgrounds, occasionally taking dares and performing feats of incredible skill at the local mini-games. He also introduced a few lucky ponies to some daredevil aerial moves he thought up, only to be shown up by Rainbow Dash. He also took part in the local spring fly-off; Ted managed to place well considering the amount of participants. Many assumed however that he was just too busy showing off to the crowds to take care in actually winning.

Cartanis did his best to try and stay out of the limelight, he was no stranger to it, but preferred to stay anonymous and enjoy the local fanfare. More than a few young unicorns asked if he could show them how to do his magic, he simply laughed at their wonderful curiosity; and showed them a few parlor tricks. Two young unicorns in particular attempted to get Cartanis to show his might by annoying him, he simply ignored them until they got bored with his 'lack of coolness', then when they had left made a spectacle for all to enjoy. A grand illusion spell recreating a reaction between the elements above the skies of the fairgrounds, novas of light and sound, grand sights few pony had ever seen greeted their eyes.

As everypony was enjoying themselves and their new-found friends, and heroes, something far more sinister began to stir elsewhere.



He awoke frightened, a few panicked breaths as he looked about the dark earthy tomb he was within. As he calmed himself, he took note of the one source of light within his rather confined space. With just enough room to move his limbs, he began brushing with one of his arms against the loosened dirt. He was frustrated with his closed fist, *Bah, stupid regeneration, wouldn't be the first time my hand was paralyzed.*

With force he made his hand open, painful atrophy greeted him, but he cared not. Using the limb he cleared some of the dirt from around himself, trying to widen the small hole that had light shining down from above at an angle. He attempted to shift around his body and look up the canal of light, but to no avail, it was far too bright to the relative darkness for him to make out how far below ground he was. *Well, if I make a scene, might as well.*

He searched for his power over the arcane, and the dark secrets he had learned over the centuries. The air around him crackled at his powers presence, he arced it outwards into the surrounding dirt, as the energy made contact with the earth it seemed to evaporate. The resulting fumes whisked their way out into the atmosphere.

With some additional room, he managed to have enough space to attempt to stand. Falling to his hands, he questioned why he could not stand upright. *How long has it been?* He reached inside his robes that had also regenerated with him every time, taking out an arcane device used to measure time. As he checked the various readouts he took note that it had been about six days since he last checked it. *So I've had another quick regeneration. That explains much, I'm probably lucky enough just to be able to summon my power, let alone have enough of my bones to crawl my way out of here.*

He worked his way up the chute he had carved with his power. *Strange, it doesn't even feel like any of my bones are missing. Why do they move so awkwardly?* Finally making it to the top of the tunnel, he peered through the small hole at the end. This time he was able to make out a sky, and some trees that he felt looked odd. Using another small surge of power, he

blasted the last portion of dirt out of his way. Light surged into the tunnel, causing him to shut his good eye for a moment.

Walking out into the world he finally sated his curiosity and looked down at his arms. He was greeted with the image of two bony horse legs, skin loosely attached in places that was held together with his dimly glowing rune-weave. *Does some greater being jest with me?* He moved his limbs to make sure he was seeing his own body, as he watched them move to his minds commands he wished to know more. He heard the trickle of a stream off in the forest, and decided to venture to it.

He clumsily made his way through all the torn up ground, it looked as though someone had sent a swarm of moles into the forest floor. He noticed in one direction in particular there were holes every few meters by the trees. Making his way past the torn up ground he found the source of the trickle, a rather simple shallow stream was draining downhill, he approached and peered into the smooth surface in attempt to make out his face.

The surface was rippling slightly from the motion of the water moving, so he grabbed some with his power and caused it to smooth in the air in front of himself. With the better surface, he could make out his face. He was staring at a unicorn, one side of the face was covered with a loose layer of skin its milky white eyes mirroring the movements he made. The other was bone, loosely held together with strands of rune-weave that worked their way around the bone like muscles and tendons. His slightly glowing phylactery floated amidst his empty eye socket, mimicking the actions of a pupil. Atop his blanched grey head sat a horn, it seemed slightly misshapen, and almost brittle looking from age. What little hair he had was oily and a sickly green, the same went for his tail. He was rather surprised by the amount of flesh he retained, the rune weave seemed to work its way in and out of it, holding it together.

He frowned slightly, only the skin covered side of his face showing any real emotion, "So now I am Dra'nahb: The Void Unicorn?" he scoffed at his own joke. *Life seeks to make a fool out of me? We shall see how much it finds this transformation funny when I scatter this world of its precious toys.* He turned when he heard a loud noise in the distance, his various robes and hanging charms moving to his form. In the sky in the distance he saw lights, *Looks like I'm going to find a good starting ground.* He contemplated

how he would go about collecting what he needed; as he began trotting off towards the disturbance.



Andur delighted in Cartanis' display of arcane showmanship, as it faded he could hear some applause in the distance where he guessed his friend was. Andur then noticed Applejack approaching him from her stall she had set up, "There ya' are, the mayor is about to announce the start of the contests, you better get your friends together and get on over to the center stage or ya'll will miss out on your big moment."

Andur quickly produced his messenger book and relayed the message to his friends, who in turn messaged back confirmations about receiving the news. He took note of how the sun was in the western part of the sky, just late enough in the afternoon to cast an orange skyline. Andur then made his way to the show stage, which was situated between the beauty pageant and costume contest stages.



Dra'nahb stopped himself, he was at the edge of the tree line, and could easily make out the estranged fairgrounds in the fields in front of him. But something was eating at his senses, he had journeyed through the woods and sensed the strange new magic of the world, this feeling however was familiar. He reached out with his power, feeling and testing the area around himself, as he got closer to the edge of the tree line his power started sending warning signals to him.

He retracted his tendrils of power, slowly advancing on the warning signals, with a fine combing of the area he looked for the source of his unease. He eventually made out a faint hum of power from the ground in front of himself; he bathed the area in arcane energy in order to cause it to reveal itself. *My, my, an old spell, a very old spell.* Dra'nahb poked and prodded it with his power, doing his best not to trip it while he figured out its mechanics.

Senses power from our world, I can feel it bending from my prodding, but it allows the magic of this world to flow through it. The weave of the spell, it also is far too familiar... it can't be. This requires investigation. Dra'nahb used his power to prod the barrier of arcane energy, each time he used

less and less power, until finally he found what he was looking for. *Alright, the threshold is low enough for some scrying, but I'll need a focus.* Dra'nahb laughed a little and slapped a hoof to his face, *I always forget about my old abilities don't I?*

The lich placed a hoof under his left eye, it slowly fell out of its socket, and a small string of a nerve marked its backside. While he grasped it with his strange new perception in his hoof, he sent some of his darker powers into the eye, giving it a mockery of life. He was slightly surprised at how little he had to use in order to achieve his goal. *Far less than I imagined, that just means I'll be able to get a better signal inside.* Using the leftover threshold he gave the floating orb a few markings so he could hear what it should be able to, as well as a few obscuring runes to hide it from casual observance. *Alright, too much more and it won't be able to slip through unnoticed, now go my little creation.*

The floating eye smoothly drifted through the barrier, Dra'nahb picked a place he felt would be a good hiding spot, and then focused on channeling what the eye could see and hear into his mind.



The mayor of Ponyville quickly peeked her head out of the curtain, and took notice of the large crowd that was gathered in front of the stage. She looked back to The Dungeon Masters who were behind the curtain with her, "OK, are all of you ready?"

Each nodded their heads in confirmation.

The mayor signaled to one of the stage-hooves who then began pulling various ropes to cause the curtain to open slightly enough so she could walk out on stage, a light brought attention to her in the outside dusk. As she approached the end of the runway she spoke into the mic attached to her lapel,

"Today is Eastavis, the day which we join together as a community in order to welcome back one another into our lives after having seen very little of each other over the winter months. But this Eastavis has been like no other in our history. Six days ago our town was rocked by disaster. We were shaken to our core as we sought out missing loved ones, all the while we tried to rebuild our lives. At a point it seemed hopeless as more and more

reports of the missing arrived at my door, I couldn't help but feel anguish for the frightened families of my town."

"But on the third night from the disaster, we all awoke in the middle of the night to the sight of an exodus entering our town. The Thunderheads had sought out our village as another stepping stone on their twisted road of profiteering and greed, they had kidnapped our loved ones. In an act of selflessness, and perhaps a little chance, complete strangers had rescued the ones we so dearly missed. Asking only in return that we try to keep our gratitude in check. Now I don't know about you, but I think we may have broken that promise."

The crowd gave a loud cheer, hooves stomping in approval. As they quieted the mayor began again.

"As we reunited with our families we were once again shaken to our cores, we feared that all the hard work we accomplished in the past days would be ground to a halt. Monsters were rampaging amongst our own streets, had it not been for the heroism and self-sacrifice of these unknown ponies, we would've been once more on the brink of disaster. They stopped the monsters and nearly gave their lives defending complete strangers, so tonight Ponyville, I ask you to give something of yourselves to these special ponies. Welcome them... welcome them as if they were long lost family, let them know they are cherished and loved by every single one of us."

She turned to the curtains, "I give you, The Dungeon Masters!"

The crowd erupted into a cacophony of cheering and applause as the curtains pulled back to let Andur, Cartanis, and Ted onto the stage.

Andur and Cartanis made their way to the main body of the stage floor as they had been told to, but Ted hovered a few feet into the air. As he had taken to clasping his hooves over his head, shaking them about as if he had just won some championship.

As the crowd once again settled down, Ted landed in line with his comrades. As a unicorn appeared from behind the curtains floating a case with its magic, the mayor motioned for Ted to step forward and began to speak again.

"For Te'denit- Te'denis-" The mayor was slipping up on his name.

Ted spoke up, "How about Ted?"

"For Ted," the case opened to reveal three medals of differing shape, "In honor of all your work, from helping the Boe Family, to aiding in the rescue of our own families." she picked out a medal that was like a pegasus wing, after placing it over his neck she continued, "I award the Silver Feather." Ted once again hovered a few feet into the air and enticed the crowd into another loud ovation.

Cartanis was the next to be called forward.

"For Cartanis. In thanks for helping us repair the damage around town after the monster attack, and aiding us in our time of need." She pulled out a medal that looked like a heart, and placed it over his neck. "I award the Selfless Soul." Cartanis did his best to bow and wave to the crowd as it cheered for him

Andur was the last to step forward.

"And Andur. For your heroic display of sacrifice, making use of your gift to help those ponies around you, and even when your own life was in danger you put the lives of others first. In accordance with such noble conduct," she took out a gleaming medal that looked like a sun and moon combined "I award the highest honor one of my office is able, the Celestial Star." Andur knelt so she could put the medal over his head.

As the crowd erupted into cheering once more, Andur asked if he could be allowed to speak, the mayor quickly got him a mic so he could speak to the crowd. The crowd quieted as they waited for Andur to speak.

"Citizens of Ponyville," he started, "I know that today is a day of great celebration for you all. But I cannot allow myself to hide from you the truth of this matter." Worried and confused murmuring could be heard, "I know that you are not foolish, many of you believe, rightfully so, that we are not from around Equestria. For we have powers that defy explanation by your world's rules as you know them. In truth, you are right, we hail from a strange place from which we do not know if we can ever return. The path that we took to get here, was a dangerous one. Without your knowledge we found ourselves in your land," Andur took a deep breath, "and in entering your world we caused the disaster that plagued your village six days ago."

The crowd gasped collectively and the murmuring grew louder, "It is also the result of how we traversed this place between worlds, that we indirectly brought those monsters to your village." Andur looked about the crowd, some seemed worried, others a little angry. "So I ask you, are we still the heroes you wish to worship? Shall we leave you now to never return? Does this make our actions mean something different than they did to you a scant few minutes ago? Are we still the selfless warriors who put life and limb on the line for your protection? Or are we guilt ridden vagabonds who wish to make good on a series of unfortunate events?"

Andur looked about the crowd, they seemed to be waiting for him to continue. "I for one shall not care for your answer, my friends and I were certain of our path a long time ago. If you shun us, even if you hate us, we shall continue to do what we feel is right. The dangers that you face have not ended with that attack two days ago, and we will not allow you to lie defenseless in your cribs. So hate us if you must, but it shall not stop us. You are good beings that do not deserve this suffering that was thrust upon you by the schemes of fate, and as long as we are able we shall give our lives to preserve you from the dangers we may have brought with us. For that is all we expect of ourselves, and we shall never expect anything in return from you."

Andur then returned the mic to the stunned mayor, he walked over to his friends, both had an approving if also a little worried expression. Andur had told them of what he planned to do, and both agreed it would be for the best.

As they passed by the unicorn with the case, they each removed their medals, and returned them to their places. Making their way behind the curtains Cartanis spoke up, "So what now?"

Andur chuckled a bit, "We either get ready to run, or we get surprised."

The trio worked their way out a back door, when slowly a chant could be heard. It grew louder each time it was said.

Ted looked perplexed, "Are they chanting our name?"

The chant grew louder still, slowly deafening all the other noises of the world. "Dungeon Masters! Dungeon Masters! **DUNGEON MASTERS!**"

Cartanis did his best to shout over the noise, "I think we have our answer!"

The trio turned towards the noise as it grew louder still, they looked to see a few familiar faces appear from around the show stage. All the ponies who they had helped stood collectively in front of the crowd as they all cheered, each wearing a proud look as they chanted the name of their heroes.



Dra'nahb was furious at what he was seeing and hearing. *Not only am I stuck in the same world with those blasted fools, the 'ponies' just heralded those bringers of suffering as though they were gods!* He ordered his eye to return, as it floated through the air to him he began formulating a plan. He knew from what he thought was a close call that Andur for some reason did not have his powers, or he would've surely discovered his scout. *That makes things a little easier.* He looked out over the town and the festivities.

If I had been in charge of them, they would be subjugated for their foolishness. Now each and every one of those things are going to know why life is not worth living, I will make them each see it with their own eyes as they tear each other apart. He approached the barrier of energy, placed his hoof against it, and located the perimeter focuses of the spell. "Knock, knock." Dra'nahb released a torrent of energy into the barrier, obliterating the focuses of the spell. He felt the warning call go out, but cared not as he brought down the barrier.

First I am going to need some bodies. He marched off towards the festivities, anger written across half his face, and cold indifference on the other.



Cartanis froze in his place, paled with fear, he was stunned.

Rainbow Dash turned to see him and waved a hoof in front of his face, "Hey Cartanis, are you OK? You look kinda'... sick."

Cartanis regained some of his composure, "Oh yes..." he nervously cleared his throat, "excuse me I have to go see Ted about something." he rushed past her.

Something's wrong here and I'm finding out what. She followed as closely as she could.

Cartanis worked his way through crowds, he was making his way to Ted whom he could see by the costume contest stage. He grabbed him and forced him to give attention, "We have a breach."

Ted looked surprised at the expression on his friends face, "Can it wait, we just started getting to the good ones."

"You don't understand Ted, it didn't just trip the wire, it collapsed the entire thing into a self-detonating meltdown. I only know that it was in the southwest that it started, with the spell down I CAN'T TRACK IT." he stressed the last few words

Ted grew serious as well, "What shall we do then?"

Cartanis quickly scribed a message to Andur, "You are going to play scout on this one, get there as fast as you can, keep track of it and I'll see what I can do. We might not be able to count on Andur for this one."

Ted nodded as he excused himself from the festivities and went somewhere private to throw on his equipment.

Cartanis began making his way over to the beauty pageant, Andur had decided to see what all the fuss was about earlier with Rarity's dress. She had yet to appear however, even though her number was already called.

Rainbow Dash had managed to eavesdrop, and was off herself to find Twilight to tell her about it. She knew that Twilight would know what to do.

As Cartanis finally made his way to Andur, they both shot each other a look of worry. "I might not be able to help with this one... but I am going with you regardless." Cartanis just nervously checked his book as he remembered spells he may need in the fight ahead. "How bad could it be Cartanis?"

Cartanis had fear written on his face, "Anything from a rouge elemental that just happened to be made of pure arcane energy or... Illithids."

[M/M/M/M/M]

Ted landed at the southwest marker, a crater designated where the focal point was once drawn, small sparks of energy still dissipating from the reaction. He then set about to looking for tracks, anything that could give him a clue as to if this was even the right place to start. *Strange, no tracks, not even outside the perimeter.*

He took a moment to double check, then he heard movement behind himself. With a quick half-turn he was already on two feet, bow drawn and a bolt ready to fire. Even in the twilight he could make out the silhouette of a pony, it seemed to freeze when it noticed him. "What are you doing so far from the festivities?" Ted shouted to it, bolt still ready.

"Now just calm down Ted! Everypony is just a might worried over your safety, considerin' what happened the last time you soloed this kinda' work."

Ted thought it sounded like Applejack, but he got the warning from Cartanis on the way over, and he didn't feel like taking chances. "You're not going to move a muscle until I say so!" Ted quickly took a sun rod he had prepared out of his bag and struck it against the ground, lighting up a good portion of an area around itself he whipped it in the direction of the creature. As the corona of light sailed through the air, it eventually cleared up the darkness around the pony, and in fact revealed the orange colored Applejack staring down Ted.

"Will that be all?" she said rather sternly.

Ted knew what he was seeing, but one part of him demanded that he not give in, the possibility of an Illithid messing with his senses was gnawing at him. *Has it already pierced my mind?* Ted was unsure with his own vision as he attempted to figure out if he was truly seeing Applejack. "Tell me something Applejack would know."

Applejack looked perplexed, "Why would I need to go 'n' do tha-" but she was cut off as a bolt smashed open the ground a few feet from her.

"The next one won't miss, I don't know if you're even real, I need proof!" Ted threatened as he readied another bolt.

He's dead serious isn't he? Applejack hastily tried to think of something only she would know, and that Ted would also know is true. An idea

flashed through her mind, "You never won that bet with Cartanis, Andur was never able to figure out how to get through doors on his own!"

Ted seemed to relax slightly, the bolt of energy fading away as he released his tension on the bow string. "Next time, try not to sneak up on-" but he heard the sound of something land closely to him, he quickly whipped around a front limb and attempted to smash it across the face. Whatever it was, it managed to duck his strike. Ted quickly gave a powerful flap from his wings and moved back from it, only to sigh and return to four legs at what he saw. "You know Rainbow Dash, sneaking up on a very jumpy Ranger is a good way to get yourself killed."

"Well excuse me Ted, I thought you had calmed down." Rainbow Dash retorted as she stood defiantly.

Ted's ears also picked up a third noise set, "Pinkie Pie, you know I can tell your strange hopping noise apart from everything else don't you?"

Pinkie Pie appeared from behind a bush, "Aw, I thought I had made a good stealth check too." she said with a frown.

"If you are all here, then that definitely means that something is wrong." Ted stated.

"What do you mean?" Applejack asked.

"Besides the destroyed focal point, there is absolutely nothing wrong here, and if there was a creature from our world here. It would've definitely capitalized on our little squabble." Ted placed a hoof to his chin in thought. "Why would it draw us out here then?"

Applejack realized how this seemed familiar and spoke up, "Well one time on the farm, a bunch of foxes had gotten crafty and went after our pigs. It created such a racket that we went to investigate, only to find out later that while we had been busy calmin' down pigs, the foxes had raided the chicken coop."

Ted slapped a hoof to his face, "Dammit Cartanis, how could you be so stupid!" Ted quickly took out his messenger book and sent out a warning to Cartanis. "We need to get back to the fairgrounds now."

Ted took off into the air with Rainbow Dash, mildly surprised at how well the two earth ponies kept up with them; especially Pinkie Pie.



Dra'nahb watched from the edge of the fairgrounds as Ted took off into the air towards the southwest. *I was hoping they would all leave, but that would've just gotten rid of the challenge now wouldn't it.* He then advanced deeper into the fairgrounds, he tried to stay away from the crowds, only walking so the good side of his face would be seen. Then he heard something gasp, he turned to see a mare in a strange dress gawking at him, *I would've hoped to have my first victim be a little less aware, but this will do.*

As he readied his power, the mare spoke, "Whoever did you get to make you that wonderful costume?"

Dra'nahb was a little thrown off, "Excuse me?"

The mare closed the distance, "Pardon me, Hem Rietta one of the top costume designers in this quaint little town of Ponyville. I know every design that is going to be in the costume contest, but I do believe I have never seen one so lifelike before." Hem Rietta reached out a curious hoof to try and touch the bone part of Dra'nahb's face.

He quickly stopped her with his own hoof, "Please Miss Rietta, it took me hours to get my costume on, and a few parts are especially delicate."

"Oh yes, excuse me. So how did you manage to make that getup so real, even those strange marking that give it an ominous green glow; you look like a very nasty zompony indeed."

Dra'nahb gave a few raspy laughs, "I may have used a little magic here and there-

"Oh you used magic? Is it actively involved in the costume or was it only part of the construction?"

Dra'nahb looked confused at the question, "Well I guess you could say I have to use magic actively to just... keep myself together." he had a loose smile on his lips.

"Then I suppose that means you're disqualified from the contest, you can't have magic actively involved in the suit." she said looking rather sadly at him.

"Oh, well it's not that bad. I still enjoy being able to show off my skill every now and then." Dra'nahb then attempted to leave, in order to break the conversation.

"Wait I never got your name, you would make a great designer for my store."

Dra'nahb shot a casual glance her way, "Nunov Urbeeswax" He then continued on into the crowds. *If no one minds my appearance, maybe I can step this up a notch beyond subterfuge.*



Cartanis was sitting next to Andur and tried to enjoy the show, but his mind kept trailing off to the possible dangers. He was pulled from his thoughts when Twilight appeared next to him.

"Cartanis, Andur, can I have a word with you?" she said rather sternly.

They both followed her away from the crowds and to a place out near the vendors for a little more privacy and then gave her their attention.

"What is wrong with you stallions, every time something dangerous is going on; you try to keep us in the dark or prevent us from helping at all." Twilight said with anger in her voice, barely stopping herself from shouting.

Andur sighed, "Twilight, I know you were able to help with the Dire Bulette, Cartanis told me. This is different, Cartanis' -"

Twilight stomped her hoof. "It's not any different, I can understand you wanting to protect us, but don't continue to insult us and deny us when we want to help."

"Well what would you have us do?"

"First you shouldn't send off Ted alone again, he told us what happened last time. So I sent some of my friends to go help him."

"WHAT!" Cartanis shouted with fury as he closed the distance between them and got in Twilight's face, "Do you have any idea the danger you just put your friends in? WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US BEFORE!"

Twilight took Cartanis' stare and unshakably responded, "Because you would of just said it was too danger-"

"We may have been able to agree on the help Miss Sparkle, but I told Ted that he should expect Illithids..." Cartanis paused at her confused look, "Masters of illusion and mind games, they could read thoughts that he was not guarding well and project them as reality. If he gets too jumpy your friends may as well be dead."

Twilight grew slightly pale, "Well... I guess that changes some things doesn't it." she said with a worried smile.

Cartanis quickly grabbed his messenger book, "Now who did you send-" the book began to hum and glow slightly. Cartanis looked sternly over to Twilight, "You better hope this isn't a casualty report."

Inside the book a message read. *First I must convey a message to Twilight-silly-plans and say that Pinkie Pie and co, send greetings from the land of unscathed.*

Cartanis looked up to her, "You got every lucky Miss Sparkle." Twilight eased a little as some of the color returned to her face.

The message continued. *Secondly, Cartanis, you are the biggest fool this side of the universe for having let fear take control of your better judgment. Had you taken just two seconds to remember that the only place that we have had a disturbance is in the Whitetail Wood to the EAST, I might have actually found something. Now you get to deal with whatever made you wet your knickers, while I try to get back there as soon as possible.*

Cartanis slapped a hoof to his face, "Of course, how could I make such a novice grade mistake."

Andur looked confused, "What mistake?"

"It is probably already in the fairgrounds," Cartanis began nervously trotting in circles as he thought, "This could get bad, very-" but he stopped when he

felt his power send a shock of warning to his mind. He looked down at his hooves and could feel the hum of power beneath the earth, he sent out arcane energy in order to make the spell show itself.

Once his sixth sense touched the rune it glowed intensely to show its power, various markings and rings were drawn in a red energy across the ground. Cartanis began to sweat at what he saw.

"What is that?" Twilight said.

"Don't even move." Cartanis ordered as he sent out his own power once again to identify what he was standing over. *Good lord, an Illithid can't pull off something like this!* He tried to key in on the frequency of the runic pattern, as he did so more information was revealed to him. The more he knew about the spell carved into the earth at his feet the less he liked it. "Twilight, Andur, I need you to get together anypony you trust with sensitive information, and SLOWLY evacuate the fairgrounds in small groups."

"Why don't we just evacuate all of them out immediately?" Andur questioned.

"This spell isn't on a timer, its set to go off on command. Whenever whatever drew this is done and reached a safe distance it's going to activate them. I was able to glean some information from it, and there is definitely more than just this one here."

"Can't you just disable it?" Twilight asked worriedly.

"No, if I do that, it'll send out a warning to what made this, then I'd be lucky to find and disable a second one before they were ignited."

"Is there anything you can do?"

"This," Cartanis sent a line of power into the earth, and drew a few lines around the edge of the rune. "The spell is designed to cascade, the first is ignited then it goes down a chain reaction to the others, if I add a timer, it should slow down the devastation as we evacuate whoever is left." Cartanis cursed a little, "I was hoping to add more than a few seconds to it, but too much more modification and it'll let out a warning."

"What does the spell plan to do?" Andur asked.

Cartanis had a worried look as he continued to gaze at the rune, "It's going to summon a piece of the elemental planes here"

"WHAT! But that'll-"

"-not only cause devastation but potentially tear the veil here wide open and devastate everything for miles." Cartanis finished, "I know. For now we just need to hope the veil will hold fast and get everypony back into town."

"We've wasted enough time, Twilight let's move." Andur did his best to not break into a gallop as he made for a nearby group. Twilight did the same, going to where she believed Fluttershy was last.



Rarity paced nervously in the backstage dressing room of the pageant, a knock rattled on the door, "Miss Rarity, you're running out of time."

"Just send out the next contestant I'll contact you when I'm done getting this stubborn dress on." she lied

"Fine, but you don't have many ahead of you." the stage manager shouted back.

Rarity nervously looked back into the mirror, her Element of Harmony was still glowing brightly. She had left her dress in the room to see the award ceremony, only to return once it concluded and have it start glowing after she dawned her dress.

She remembered her promise to Fluttershy. *If it keeps up like this and no one else is left... then I'll excuse myself, but not before.*

Rarity continued to pace about the room, when suddenly she was shaken to the floor.

"Good gracious what was that?" There was then a second explosion, this one was far closer, and was followed by terrified screams. She went over to the door, but as hard as she tried it wouldn't budge. Smoke was billowing up from beneath the door frame.

Rarity wasn't sure what to be more terrified of. The fact that she was stuck in a room and would potentially suffocate; or that her element of harmony was glowing more intensely than it ever had before.



Cartanis cursed under his breath. *I was hoping I would've had more time.* He had only managed to sabotage about several of the numerous runes, and the first two had already gone off. Explosions were rocking the costume contest stage, sending pieces of it everywhere. While a whirlwind of fire tore its way through the pageant area. The only thing that Cartanis was thankful for was that the veil seemed to be holding up, there was no sign of a distortion evident. All it did however was make him question, why?

Cartanis had little time to drift into thought, as lightning and thunder began erupting from the vendors, its charged atmosphere crackling with life. Tearing apart the various booths and scattering anypony that happened to be still near them.

Now I have a few seconds before the next one. Cartanis made his way, using his power to try and clear rubble, tossing it aside with forces. While also attempting to dampen the elemental forces in the area as he escorted all he could out of the devastation. Another portal opening caused the ground beneath his feet to quake as stalagmites shot out of the ground, tearing apart what little remained of the rides in the distance.

Cartanis knew there had to be more out there, but he had to get himself to safety with the ones he had with him at the moment. Carefully he made his way through the maze of runes that he knew had not yet detonated, eventually making his way to the edge of Ponyville. As he let the group retreat into town he turned to see hailstones half the size of himself erupting out of the sky and crashing into various parts of the fairgrounds and stages.

Twilight then appeared in a flash of light, a small group of ponies with her. As they thanked her, she trotted over towards Cartanis. "Have you seen Rarity?"

Cartanis shook his head no.

As they looked back over the devastation, a scream rang out in the night.

Twilight seemed to gain hope, "I'd recognize that exasperated shout anywhere, I think it came from the pageant stage." Twilight concentrated, her horn shined slightly but seemed to fizzle and sputter before she gasped a tired breath. "It's no use, I think I can make her out, but I haven't teleported that many ponies around so many times ever before. I think I'm all used up." Fear was on her face in concern for her friend.

"Can't she teleport to us?" Cartanis worriedly asked.

"No, it's hard enough for me to do multiple times and I have study unicorn magic most of my life. Rarity knows little more than some telekinesis and a gem finding spell."

Cartanis knew what he had to do, the stage wasn't that far from where they were. He grabbed his hat brim and firmly tucked it against his head, "Don't follow me."

Twilight could only cast a questioning glance as he galloped off into the fiery hell-scape that was the pageant area. She watched as he leaped over the line of fire that marked Equestria from where the plane of fire was out of control. Flaming geysers melted the land and gusts of infernos met his shield as he used his mastery of the elements to create a barrier between him and the fire. Lava sparked and hissed at him as he made his way to the runway, even though it was ablaze he could easily make his way across the sections that had not yet disintegrated. He felt a rush of heat against his face, he looked to see the whirlwind of fire had grown into an intimidating tornado, and was slowly making its way to what was left of the stage.

He quickly galloped past the curtains that were but ashen tatters of their former selves. He looked about the smoke filled backstage, using a wall of force to part the smoke from his vision so he could see and breathe. He could not make out anything amongst the rubble, then he heard a scream, the same scream from earlier. It originated behind a pile of fallen beams in front of a door. "RARITY!"

"CARTANIS! What's going on out there!" He heard her shout back.

"Just get away from the door Rarity, I'm going to break it down." Cartanis focused and created a cannonball of force, he could feel the air in the backstage starting to heat up from the approaching tornado of flame. He let

loose a force so strong it broke and shattered pieces of the floor as it slammed into the wall, snapping the wooden beams as though they were twigs, and firing the door across the room from its hinges. He galloped inside, smoke was still pouring out of the room, and a few fires had broken out inside of it as well. He thought he could make out the light of Rarity's horn.

"Cartanis I can't see, the smoke is too thick." she said as she coughed and sputtered.

Cartanis extended his barrier a little as he made his way through the smoke to her, finally making out her face he could see her eyes were bloodshot from all the smoke. He saw something glimmering on her dress' neckline but didn't care, he outstretched his hoof. "Just follow me Rarity, we don't have much time."

As Rarity clasped her hoof to his, he could hear a distinctive low rumbling hum. *I don't have time for this, that tornado is almost here.* He began guiding her out of the room and back into the stage, the hum was getting louder, he could barely hear himself think.

"Cartanis what are you doing?" Rarity said in a fearful tone.

What is she talking about? He turned back to see the glimmering necklace she had on was glowing ever brighter in tandem to the low rumble he could hear clearly in his head. He then realized it wasn't the tornado that he was sensing.

A strange power made its way into his mind, he heard an authoritative voice boom through his head. *Your skills are required.*

"By the Gods." was all he was able to say as reality seemed to brighten into a nova of light, no longer could he see the world as Cartanis felt his spirit drift from his form.



Twilight watched in horror as the huge column of fire slammed into the stage. Tearing apart and disintegrating everything it touched. "No, no, no, no," she continued, watching for any sign of movement from the stage to

signal that they had made it. She desperately called out to her magic, to no avail as it was still dulled and weak from overuse.

She could hear Andur's distinctive thundering gallop, "What are you doing so close, get back!"

But Twilight was stunned as she watched a corona of light build from the backstage, slowly blinding her as she attempted to keep her eyes on it. Eventually it seemed to reach an apex, for a split second it sounded as if the world had gone still, and then a roar of noise concerted alongside a ring of light that exploded outwards from the remnants of the stage. She felt the rush of air and had a feeling of calm as it passed over her.

The light made contact with the tornado and it seemed to twist and bend its shape, slowly fizzling it out into nothingness. The land around the stage simmered and flickered as fires were inexplicably doused.

The lightning racked vendor area calmed and was once again still.

The hail either evaporated into the air or they were smashed to flakes of snow before they hit the ground.

Stalagmites receded into the ground as rides fell over from the force of the earth being healed.

The forces concussing against whatever remained of the costume stage halted their deafening thuds and once again let area return to a relative calm.

Andur stood stunned alongside Twilight, not sure as to what just occurred. He was soon shaken from his thoughts by Ted, who landed with Rainbow Dash and was followed by Twilight's other friends as well. "What happened Andur?" Ted shouted at his friend.

"I'm... not sure. I've never seen Cartanis do something like that before, I've never felt such a strange presence in my time."

Fluttershy looked about the area, it still looked devastated; but even in the night air it had a tranquil sense about it as though it was perfectly normal. "Oh Rarity, what did you do?" she said out loud.

Twilight cast a curious eye over to her, "What do you mean Fluttershy? We can't use their magic, she couldn't have done anything."

"Oh... um... yeah..." she couldn't take the guilt of the secret anymore, not after seeing all this devastation. So she pulled Twilight aside and whispered something into her ear.

"SHE DID WHAT!" Twilight said flabbergasted. Drawing the attention of the gathered ponies. "Nothing, nothing, she did nothing is all." she gave them all a worried smile.

Andur approached her, a rather stern look on his face, "What's going on?"

Twilight was still rather shaky, "Well... you see Andur... Rarity kind of broke a rule we have and um."

Andur knew they didn't have the time to squabble, "I'll care about what happened later, we have more important things to do than try and argue secrets out of each other."

"Andur is right, come on everypony we got survivors to rescue, move'em out." Applejack stated as she galloped off towards what was left fair.

Everyone split off into their own groups, Andur and Twilight made their way to the broken remnants of the pageant stage. As they climbed on top of the ruins, they could make out a faint light peeking out from the collapsed rubble of the backstage area. Twilight attempted to move objects with her magic, but found it still too weak to do much besides sweep away loose nails and glass. Andur picked up the slack and made use of his bulk to either buck or push beams out of the way. As they finally pierced the strange cocoon of force, both gasped at what they saw.

Rarity and Cartanis were gently floating inside a slightly distorted space, wisps of light circling around and through the object as it simply hovered in place. "What's wrong with their eyes?" Andur noted as he saw the gentle white glow emanating from the two hovering ponies eyes. As Andur went to see if he could reach out to them, Twilight stopped him.

"Andur, this could be very dangerous, let me handle this." Andur looked down to Twilight, she no longer seemed flabbergasted and sported a very serious face, one of whom that knew what they were doing.

Andur relented and allowed her to approach the fluctuating orb, her horn had a din of power as she lifted Cartanis' hat off his head. It gently floated through the space and left the bubble around the two, as Twilight placed the hat upside down upon the ground and opened the brim Andur decided to speak up. "I take it this may have something to do with what Rarity 'did'?"

Twilight looked over to Andur, he could tell from the look on her face she meant yes.

"Ted and I will want answers, but for now I'll trust you to do what feels right. I'll meet you at your library later, there are still others out there who could make use of me."

Twilight watched as Andur trotted off the stage and made his way elsewhere. *Maybe Princess Celestia will know what to do.* She carefully tried to use her power to float Cartanis over to the brim, she was surprised at how easy it was. As he began to reach the edge of the disturbance she felt a wave of force, and Rarity began to float in an attempt to keep them rather close together. *This is very strange indeed.* Twilight carefully floated them both down into the hat, the strange amoeba-like disturbance followed them. She took note of Rarity's element of harmony that she had worn around her neck, it was aglow, almost as bright as the eyes of Cartanis and Rarity.

She quickly closed the hat and stuffed it into her saddlebags which she had worn throughout the day. Then she galloped off to her home, to write what could quiet possibly be the most important request she ever made of Celestia.



Dra'nahb made his way about the edges of the devastation, he had no idea how his trap was disarmed in such a grandiose display. *Did I underestimate Cartanis?* He was drawn from his thoughts by sobbing. He followed them to a rather large piece of the costume contest stage, as he rounded the edge he felt his heart sink a little.

Hem Rietta was pinned by her back legs underneath the pile of rubble. She noticed Dra'nahb, "Please Nunov..." she groaned a little in pain, "get help I can't feel my back legs, I think they're broken."

Dra'nahb closed the distance to her, and knelt beside her, "I don't think you'll ever be able to walk again... you'll be lucky if they don't amputate."

Rietta was scared by how he was acting, "Go get help, we'll worry about that later, just go get help." she pleaded

He never did like it when he caused so much suffering. The plan was to end many lives as quickly as possible so he could make do with what was left. Now thanks to the intervention of those fools, all he could think of was the path that the mare was now on; how she would struggle for the rest of her life with her condition.

Rietta didn't like the look Nunov was giving her, "Don't feel sorry for me, I'll be fine. I'm still alive, I can make do with what little I have left. Just go get help, you stubborn mule!"

"You're so brave..." Nunov said to her. "Just like she was."

Rietta recoiled as Nunov pet a hoof against her ear. She was still sobbing in pain, but now it was aided along by fear. She watched as the unicorn only showed emotion on one side of his face.

"You'll still try, no matter what life throws at you." Rietta watched tears form in only one eye of Nunov's; the strange milky one. "And life will keep throwing itself at you, it will laugh at you as you're slowly broken, but you shall keep trying. Leaving your loved one to try and find a way to help you, causing him anguish every time you decline his aid, and he could end it for you so quickly and easily."

"Nunov please you're scaring me, all this nonsense needs to stop." she said through sobs.

He continued with a slight smile on one half of his face, "Every once in a while you will do better, you will rekindle that feeling that made it all worthwhile. Then something else will go wrong, eventually he won't even be able to enjoy himself in your presence." There was anger on his face "Now every time you are well, there is no feeling, there is no hope, there is only that wretched pit of sadness as he awaits the inevitable!" he seemed to calm a bit. "I won't let you suffer that way my dear, not you or anything else. Not ever, for I found the solution."

"What's wrong with you! Just GO GET HEL-!" but she was cut off as Dra'nahb sent a surge of his power into her brain. Scattering her thoughts as it was disintegrated while only leaving a small singed hole where he used his power. With no life within her, Rietta's head slumped to the ground.

Dra'nahb gently stroked her mane, "No more pain, no more fear, just blissful death. Now you are at peace, I know that what I do may seem wrong, and I'll shoulder the weight of my sins when I die for good." He gently smiled, "But I'll be burning in my hell knowing that I saved so many others from what I went through" he looked back to the corpse, "Now let's see if you can't aid me in my little endeavor."

Dra'nahb called to an ancient servant, one who he had with him since he was first blessed with the power of lichdom. He felt her presence amongst himself, he placed a hoof against Hem Rietta, and allowed his servant to use himself as a conduit as it burrowed its way into the body. The corpse began to shift and shudder, and eventually its head rose from the ground. The head stared blankly ahead, as it gave its attention to its master that lay beside it.

"I know it's a new form Abigail, but you'll make the best of it as you always have before." he gently patted Abigail on her head.

She simply stayed still, awaiting a command.

Dra'nahb sifted through the memories he had absorbed from her, "Now I've got to go see about this strange ruin Hem Rietta knew so much about, she was apparently going to help fund an expedition there; a very brave entrepreneur she surely was." he took a vial off his belt, "Take this and await my call, you shall know what to do. We have to start from scratch in this world, but it wouldn't be the first time."

Abigail took the vial loosely in her hooves, and then swallowed it whole, storing it in her bodies stomach for safe keeping.

Dra'nahb stood from the ground, and went around the large slab of what was once a stage. He made a scene, and quickly got a few ponies over to help him lift the stage enough so others could drag out Abigail. They then put her on a stretcher, "Poor dear, she must be in shock." one of the ponies said as they noted her blank expression.

Abigail watched as her master wandered from the scene into the forest, to take the long way around into a place called Everfree.

Wait...Listen...Wait...Listen... her thoughts echoed as she was shuttled to the Clinic.



It was almost halfway through the night before they managed to shuttle everypony that was seriously injured to the clinic from the disaster area. Andur and Ted then made their way to the library, for they wanted their answers.

Once inside they found Twilight with her four other friends. Twilight looked bravely between her friends and then to Ted and Andur, "Looks like it's your turn to ask some questions." she stated to them.

Andur noticed that Cartanis' hat was upturned on a table in the center of the room, "Are they still in that strange coma?"

"I've checked rather frequently, they've been like that for hours now. They don't respond to anything, in fact I'm not sure if anything is capable of causing a response." Twilight said rather sullenly. All her friends seemed to be rather worried as well.

"The night before Eastavis," Ted started, "Cartanis told me how Applejack and Rainbow Dash tried to hide something from him, this wouldn't happen to have anything to do with that would it?" Ted was shooting a glare between each of them.

Applejack spoke up, "Well Ted ya' see. We can't really gab about that all willy nilly."

Twilight looked over to her friend, "I've already sent a letter to Princess Celestia and received word back. She believes they can be trusted with the knowledge of them... and also recommends that they never come into contact with them until she can help us sort this out."

"Them?" Andur said.

"Do you know the legend of Nightmare Moon Andur?"

"Cartanis spoke of it on occasion, she returned after her millennia of imprisonment; and was swiftly vanquished by Celestia as she used artifacts of great power. However she spared her sister and they now rule together once again in harmony."

"That is only half-true."

"Then what is the falsehood, that she was spared?"

"No, the truth is that Celestia had very little to do with the vanquishing to begin with, at least directly. It was me and my five friends who took down Nightmare Moon."

Ted began laughing furiously, "Oh please, I know this is serious. But you can't even manage to sneak up on me, how would you deal with an omnipotent vengeful goddess?"

"We used the Elements of Harmony, artifacts of great power that even Celestia admitted not truly knowing how they work. Only that one of them answered her call a thousand years ago so she could imprison her sister, and it told her how she could still save her sister by making use of us. There are actually six in total, each representing a different aspect of love and friendship. With them we somehow... I don't know how to explain it, it was like we wiped the black slate of hatred that was her soul clean. It was really strange."

Andur took it all in, mulling it over, "If she had very little idea of the artifacts, what makes you so sure she can help?"

"She may have been the first to summon the elements... even if it was only one of them. But she also has all that experience, surely she would be better off dealing with this than me; she has access to a plethora more resources than I would anyway."

"So what are you going to do with Cartanis and Rarity?"

"After this meeting concludes I am sending them off with Rainbow Dash to Cantorlot, so Celestia can examine them more thoroughly. You can go too if-"

"No." Andur stated flatly.

Twilight was kind of thrown off by the answer, "But, Celestia is far better-"

"Not that part. That is actually quite wise, what I reject is the notion that we are going to leave Ponyville at this point in time."

"Oh well... I guess it makes sense for you to stay and help if you want to."

"Have you forgotten about the disaster so soon?" He said with some worry, "Whatever caused it is still out there, and now we have no way of telling if it lays another trap like that. You would be doomed if we left you. It may not strike again tonight, but I am not leaving you to fend for yourselves."

Andur turned to her friends, "The same goes for you as well. Whatever created those spells was a wizard like Cartanis, and it may be some rogue wizard from the Theocracy that survived the trip; or it may be something worse... far worse." Andur was agitated as he said the last few words.

Ted spoke up, "We are going to be taking up patrols around town, looking for suspicious activity... and we could really use the help of any who wouldn't mind."

Pinkie Pie saluted them, "Private eye Pie, reporting for duty!"

Applejack spoke up, "I won't let the nasty critter that did this get away."

Twilight smiled approvingly to mark her support.

Fluttershy still had a worried look on her face, "I don't know I should get back to my animals, I only left them enough extra food for a day or two."

Twilight looked to her frightened friend, "Let it wait until morning Fluttershy, you don't have to help out. It would be safer to go in the daylight anyway."

Fluttershy smiled at her friends kind words, but was obviously worried *I still need to get my element back into hiding.*

Twilight then looked about and received a consensus that the meeting was adjourned. As Andur went about putting the various ponies into teams and assigning sleep duty and active duty. Twilight handed Cartanis' hat to Rainbow Dash, who stuffed it into her saddlebags.

Rainbow Dash sighed, "Why do I always have to go when the cool stuff starts to happen?"

"Just calm down Dash, your job is equally important if not more so to what we are doing." Twilight said to her friend.

"I know you're right, I'm just tired of being on the sidelines all the time. I want to help these guys, it drives me nuts to just sit back and be saved all the time."

"Maybe someday soon that will change, but for now we have to help them how we can."

Ted then appeared behind them, "One thing before you go." he reached into the saddlebag and removed the hat. "Heratio, if you would be so kind." a few potions floated up into the air and he grabbed them as they appeared. "There, that gives us enough for everypony to have one."

Dash returned the hat to her saddlebag and stored one of the potions she was given, then took off into the night, heading in the direction of Cantorlot with her precious cargo.

Chapter 9

Cartanis was in thought, *How long has it been and why does this place feel so familiar?* He continued to try and contemplate how long he and Rarity had been loosely floating within the strange sphere of light as it moved about a strange place.

"Where do you think we're going?" Rarity spoke up, her voice carrying a strange echo as all the noises in this place did.

"I already told you I-DON'T-KNOW!" Cartanis snapped back, he looked over his shoulder to see her giving him a disapproving frown over the tone he had taken. He sighed, "Sorry... I just really, REALLY, don't like not understanding what's happening in front of me."

"I can perfectly understand a little agitation over our predicament, but constantly fretting over it won't help us any."

Cartanis knew that worrying wouldn't help them, but he was just trying to make sense of what happened. He ran it over in his mind one more time, *That strange power surged through me, and then I was floating about the fairgrounds. I felt that power pulling at my arcane control, directing me and using it. The elements didn't just bend to my will, they were submitting to it. After it was water under the bridge, all of a sudden we are here now; floating amongst this strange orb, just me, Rarity, and her necklace.* Cartanis knew that since Rarity's necklace was the only article of "clothing" that had followed them it was more than likely a big part of this, and he had asked her about it, only to have her dodge the question time and again.

Cartanis looked over to Rarity; she was once again eying her necklace as it continued to glow around her neck, worry written across her face. He asked one more time, "I want to know."

Rarity didn't look him in the eye.

"Please Rarity," Cartanis talked as calmly as he could, "I just need to know. I need to know something concrete, because frankly all of this mystery is

driving me insane. I don't know where we are, I don't know why we can't use our powers, I don't know what talked to me back at the fair, and I just..." She still wasn't looking at him, he threw his hooves up in frustration, as he began spinning slowly from the force he caused he grew a little sullen and decided to continue.

"Have you ever wondered that perhaps if you had known something... something important, you would've been able to stop a catastrophe?" He smiled slightly, "Or maybe, if you had focused on something else in your life, realized that it wasn't all about work earlier." he laughed a little, but couldn't keep himself from growing sad, "It still makes me think... It's been thirty years... and I still think about it. I know I can't change what happened, that she loved me with all her heart, and I know I won't let anything like that happen to any other. So Rarity," he looked back to her, determined to get an answer, "help me out here. Whatever set up that trap is still loose in your world, and floating around in this purgatory isn't saving anything from it. Just give me an answer, we might still be able to stop another catastrophe."

Rarity finally looked him in the eye, "I suppose you make a valid argument." she loosely fiddled with her necklace, "You are well read on Equestria's legends are you not?"

Cartanis managed to finally stop his lazy spin and gave her an affirming nod of his head.

"Then you should understand when I tell you." she pointed to her necklace with one of her front hooves, "That this is an Element of Harmony."

Cartanis was flabbergasted. "But... those were only used by your goddess, how in the world would something that powerful fall into the hands, hooves whatever, of some common mortal being."

"Well that's your answer Cartanis, as silly as it may sound, it is reality." she huffed, "and I am not common."

He rubbed his hooves against his temples, "OK fine, then I guess that means you were the one who defeated Nightmare Moon; but how would you do it with just one of the six-" He realized something, "Would it be safe to assume that Rainbow Dash also has one of these, and quite possibly Applejack as well."

Rarity was a little surprised, "Either you are a very snoop pony, or they don't keep secrets well."

Cartanis drew some pride from his inquiry. "A little from column A and a little from column B. Now would you please explain how you acquired such fantastic relics?" He had both his hooves clasped in front of his face as he drifted into thought, listening to her story of the night when they went through the Everfree to the Lunar Castle ruins and the events that took place within.

Rarity concluded with the words Celestia spoke to them, "I was unable to let myself destroy my sister when I had the chance all those centuries ago, after I had shown my love for my sister, one of the elements made itself known to me. For a brief moment it spoke to me, it told me of what my sister had done, the ancient magics she had foolishly used. How I would be unable to save her, but that I still had one hope. Using the power of the element I locked her away within the moon, to await the day you six would arrive in the world, the six who would become the Bearers of Harmony and undo the damage my sister had done to herself."

"Damage? What damage?"

Rarity shrugged. "She never really described it to us. She said that those were the words the element had used, Luna herself didn't seem to remember much about her time as Nightmare Moon. Almost like it was a different pony, poor dear, she was so shaken."

"So if the elements are alive in some respect, not even your goddess knows much about them, and they only appear during times of great danger to the safety of Equestria at large." he clopped his hooves together a few times, "But why would it keep us here? If the danger was passed it should have settled like it did with you and your friends when Nightmare Moon was vanquished. Why does it still make use of me and you?"

A deep resonating hum began to be heard within the confines of the sphere. It grew louder, constantly changing in frequency.

"Oh what now!" Rarity shouted as she noticed her Element was glowing brightly again.

The hum eventually seemed to harmonize with another ringing sound in the air, slowly bringing a calm background noise into the sphere.

"I would like to say, that we have arrived wherever this thing of yours was taking us." Cartanis said.

The bright light of the sphere seemed to fade; a world was hazy amongst them, slowly clearing as though a fog was being lifted.

Cartanis' jaw dropped, he looked down at himself, taking note of his ethereal equine form. "But that can't be, how are we here. How in the name of the gods are we HERE!"



Applejack trotted into the library, it had become a kind of HQ for the patrols they had going about the town. More than a few local ponies had decided to help out, and it let the others catch a few hours of sleep. Applejack insisted on taking one of the first patrols, and was now plenty tired herself. As she went inside she noticed Andur was already up, ready to go if not a little groggy. "Nothing to report out at the farm and the western edge of town."

He looked up from his thoughts, "Oh, well that's good."

Applejack wanted to get back to her room at home, but Andur's constantly worried gaze was eating at her. "What's gotten you all ruffled up? Well, besides the fact of a walkin' apocalypse that could strike the town any minute."

"Just a possibility... something I can't confirm, something I should ignore, but still it eats at me like I missed something."

Applejack just raised an eyebrow at the strange answer, when all of a sudden Ted burst through from the basement door. "How long have I been asleep!" he shouted.

Andur just rolled his eyes, "You do know it's not that big of a deal, right?"

Ted galloped over to his friend, grabbed his face and looked him in the eye, "I asked a question, and I want an answer!"

"Five hours." Andur said as Ted finally let go of his face.

"I overslept!" Ted frantically began pulling his armor out of his bag and was busy equipping it.

Applejack looked confused, "How do you get away with being so bright-eyed on only five hours of sleep?"

"I've already told that joke, and I don't do rehashes."

She just rolled her eyes, *Wish I could get away with five hours and be that ready to go.* "Well if that'll be all, I'm going to go get some sleep myself."

As she was given her goodbyes and had turned to leave, she noticed Fluttershy trotting through the streets over to her. "What's scared you so bad? I thought you were headed home."

"I was going to... but I wanted to check on Applebloom, and well..."

Applejack wanted to lessen her friends worry, "It just looks worse than it is, she just-"

"It isn't about your sister."

"Say what now?"

"It's about your mom."

Concern showed upon her face, "But she wasn't even... how-" the look upon Fluttershy's face told the truth. Applejack didn't even look back to her friend as she galloped off towards the Clinic, she didn't feel so tired anymore.

~~~~~

*Wait... Listen...*

The orderly looked over various charts next to the patient's bed, "My, my, you're a lucky one indeed. That rubble should've crushed your bones to dust, but it looks like you're getting away with some braces for a hairline fracture." the orderly looked over to see Rietta was still staring at the wall, a

blank stare upon her face. *She's been like that since she got here.* The orderly was called from the room to help move around some supplies.

"You think the Dungeon Master's slipped her something?" the orderly asked another.

"What makes you think that?"

"I helped wheel her in here, and her back legs were flattened. We didn't have time to set them right away though, but look at them now, just a few hours later and they practically don't even look bruised. I heard that they have some special-"

Their voices trailed off as they went down the hall to help other victims from the disaster last night.

*Wait...Listen...*

*Hello my sweet,* a voice echoed within Abigail's mind.

Her own thoughts silenced and awaited orders.

*You know what to do, just try to keep them guessing as long as possible, and then rendezvous at my position with whatever is left.*

*Stealth... Efficiency... Damage Control...* Her orders echoed through her mind. She quickly ran through a checklist of her symbiosis with her new body. *Not complete... However it is sufficient...*

A mare nurse wandered into the room, "How are we feeling today?" she took note of how the patient who had been in shock for the whole night finally seemed to be more active.

Abigail looked over the pony, *Body type, eye color... match. Coat tone, mane color... close enough.* "Water would be nice." Abigail imitated the voice of her body, using words that floated around in its memory.

The nurse wandered over to a cart in the room, pushed it closer to the bed and began pouring a cup of water.

As the pitcher was set down Abigail quickly sat up, then wrapped one of her limbs around the nurse's neck to prevent a shout, with her other hoof she placed it against the base of her skull. The nurse attempted to struggle for a few moments, before a sharp pain passed through her, and then she went numb from the neck down. As she slumped to the floor, she was able to make out a strange boney protrusion receding into Abigail's hoof, and the world grew dark as her life left her body.

Abigail quickly made use of some bandaging on the cart to cover the incision she had made on the nurse's spinal column. As she undid the bandaging and rods that kept her legs still, left her bed, and shut the door to her room. She swapped clothes with the nurse, the patients robe she was wearing changed places with the small nurse's vest and hat. The body was placed on her bed, covered as fully as possible by the blanket, and made to look like she was sleeping. Abigail took the charts she had on the bed, and stuffed them into a cabinet in the room. She looked at the tag on the vest, it read Aidwell. Abigail took a minute to look over the biggest identifier, a ponies 'cutie mark', she molded the flesh over her flank to reflect the image she saw on the corpses own. With her disguise more or less finished she returned to her mission.

*Begin... Maintain anonymity... Find targets...*

Abigail left the room and ventured into the halls, trotting along attempting to look busy with other activity whenever she was approached by a worried face asking her which room had whom in it. She went about looking within various rooms, *Not suitable...* was the thought that echoed through her mind for most of them. *Sample sizes too small, must find larger batches.* Each room she had checked looked like it was meant for only a single pony for minor complications, *Efficiency must be maintained... Must begin process in large sizes to avoid suspicion... Fool... Panic...*

"Aidwell there you are."

Abigail was stopped by a white mare.

"I know you're new, but we need you over in intensive care, there are a lot of patients to move."

Abigail followed the pony through the halls, passing many rooms until they had gone past double doors that seemed meant for only medical



personnel. On the other side there was far more activity, various stallions and mares dressed in white attire and wearing red crosses trotted about between rooms. Pushing carts and gurneys with patients to rooms down hallways, and into elevators.

A voice interrupted Abigail's observations, "Nurse Redheart, there you are." both turned to see another orderly trotting through the doors behind them, "The Apple family is here to see Applebloom."

"Oh, let them through, I'll be in room two thirty-five." the orderly nodded as he trotted back through the double doors. "This way Miss Aidwell, sorry but the elevators are needed for more important things." Abigail once again followed her up a flight of stairs, and through the hallways. Eventually entering a room on the second story. "Now I need you to administer some pain reliever, minimal dosage, we don't have much. Then take them each to their own room in the urgent care wing, we need to free up space over here in intensive for the worst cases."

Abigail took note of the six injured ponies in the room, two of each variety, one of each gender. *Test bed found...*

A mare wandered into the room, "There you are," she peeked out of the room, "I told you the orderly said room two thirty-five."

"Hello Pearmina."

"Oh please Redheart, just call me Ma Smith." she said back.

"I'm just finishing a quick briefing with Aidwell here. Applebloom is down the hall with the other foals."

"Is it that bad?" she had worry on her face.

"No, no, we had a mix-up from all this activity and needed to set aside a room for all the fillies and colts. Your daughter has little more than some nasty scratches and a sprained ankle, we'll have her discharged within the hour."

Pa Smith then made his way into the room, he gently nuzzled his wife, "It's not your fault hun, we had no idea what was gonna happen last night."

The couple followed Redheart out of the room, leaving Abigail alone with the unconscious injured ponies. As the door closed Abigail went about readying what she was given last night, the vial within her stomach was vomited upon her hoof with a dry heave. The black substance within remained motionless, she then popped off the quark and swallowed the contents, the substance writhed and reveled within her listening to her beckoning call as though a child. She looked about her subjects, and with an estimation split the substance into twenty pellets within her, ready to be administered how she saw fit.

She molded her bones to be hollow down her front leg, she outstretched a hoof and pressed it to the throat of a pegasus, she felt her makeshift proboscis pierce the throat ever so slightly, and then a pellet was injected through the tube. She did the same to the other four ponies in the room, making use of a slight anesthetic she was provided with earlier. As she made it to the last pony, the second earth variety in the room, she was interrupted by a noise. The pegasus she had injected barely half a minute ago was already convulsing and coughing furiously.

*Unexpected... Too Soon... Inefficient use of resources...*

As the other ponies began having early reactions, the noise was becoming a problem.

*Recalculate ratios... approximately one-hundred thirty-seven injections left with adjusted dose... Finish room... begin large scale...* Abigail turned back to see the last earth pony had woken up from the noise, he was bandaged around the mouth heavily and was wearing a neck brace. Fear was evident on his face as the proboscis extending from her hoof closed on his throat.

"What's going on in here?"

Abigail quickly retracted the proboscis into her hoof, turning she saw a few orderlies and a nurse had entered the room; they seemed unaware of what she had done. As she turned back to the last pony, she morphed her teeth into fangs, and bared them at him. Upon seeing this he began mumbling and thrashing about in his bed frantically, she quickly changed her teeth back and once again imitated a voice she had heard, "They are not stable, somepony help me with this one."

As the orderlies restrained the frightened pony, the nurse approached and took a needle to inject some tranquilizer; he only became more frenzied as he slowly dazed from the effects. Watching as the strange monster snuck out of the room unnoticed. He could barely hear the ponies around him,

"What's wrong with them?"

"I don't know, but it can't be good... Hay seed we're losing them. What happened!"

He tried to say something, but the brace they had him in prevented him from doing so.

"Take them to observation." the rest of the words traveled off into a dull echo as he began to fall unconscious.

[M/M/M/M]

Fluttershy followed Applejack closely, her friend was frantic as they went to the northern edge of the town square where the new clinic was built, for a year ago when the old clinic had become too small for the population of Ponyville a brand new three story one was built to help accommodate the increase in ponies. It sat between a few loosely scattered houses, and as the sun was just starting to dawn it was casting everything in an orange hue.

Applejack went through the front doors to the Clinic, inside various families were about the waiting area hoping for news of loved ones. She went to the reception desk, "Is there a Pearmina checked in anywhere?"

The receptionist flipped through a few books on the desk in front of herself, "We have a pony of that name in... but I'm afraid you can't visit."

"Well why can't I?" she said agitatedly

Before the receptionist could respond, Applejack saw her father wander out of the doors from the intensive care area, followed by her little sister who was carefully wandering around on three hooves trying not to hurt her bad foot.

"I'm not through with this yet, ya hear?" she said to the receptionist as she and Fluttershy walked over to her family.

"Hey Dad its Applejack," Applebloom seemed to brighten a little when she saw her older sister, "howdy sis!" she cringed a little when she put too much weight on her sprained ankle.

"Just cool your britches little missy." Applejack looked to her dad, "What happened to mom?"

Pa Smith took a long breath, "I don't rightly know. She left the room to get some water-"

"I didn't mean to!" Applebloom cried out.

"Shhh, it wasn't your fault." Pa Smith continued to console his daughter as she had tears in her eyes. "Fluttershy, would you keep an eye on her as I bring the cart around. She's been through enough today, and Applejack needs to know." Fluttershy nodded and sat next to Applebloom as she continued to sob every now and then, doing her best to console the filly.

"What happened Pa?"

As they exited the front door they wandered around the street corner to a cart parked nearby, "Like I said, Ma left to get some water, Applebloom was kind of thirsty and they didn't have anythin' in the room at the time. She came back, with Fluttershy, and after she laid the pitcher of water down she wanted to rest for a bit. Then... she just passed out on the floor. Before I knew what happened a few nurses barged into the room and whisked her away. I asked if Fluttershy would go find you, and I tried to get answers out of them, they only said that she was going to be under observation until they could determine somethin'." Pa had worry written over his face, "They looked afraid Applejack, like they hardly knew what they were dealin' with."

Applejack also had worry for her mother, "Maybe Fluttershy knows-" but she stopped when she noticed a familiar figure galloping down the road. It was Andur, and he didn't look too well.

He noticed them, looked between them as if he was looking for something, and then continued on towards the clinic.

"Hold up there," Applejack stepped in front of him, "What happened Andur? By the looks of things you just got into a tussle with a hoard of angry cats."

"We have problems... big problems." Concern was evident on his face that was covered in slashes and scratches, his armor was marked by vain attempts to cut through it.

"Whoa, whoa, hold your horses and start from the get go."

"We don't have the time to stand and talk, you follow and listen or you get out of the way."

She only heard him sound so determined once before, and she knew it must be important, "Then lead on."

He sighed and scorned himself, "Forgive my blunt threats but we really may not have much time, every second is precious."

As Andur marched to the front doors of the clinic, he noticed Fluttershy escorting Applebloom to the cart parked just outside, "Andur? Oh my..."

"Don't worry about me Fluttershy, just get Applebloom home."

"But.. your face..." Fluttershy was ignored as he went through the doors behind her, she looked over to Applejack. "What happened?"

Applejack helped her sister climb up into the empty apple cart that her father was hitched to, "I don't rightfully know, but the way Andur is actin' it can't be good." She looked back towards the clinic, "And my mother is still in there. If Andur is so concerned he can't stop to talk about it, then that means she may be in danger. So I ain't takin' no for an answer."

Fluttershy watched as Applejack trotted into the clinic after Andur, *I suppose I should get around to finally returning my element into hiding.*

"Have a nice day Fluttershy." she heard Pa Smith say as he began to pull the cart away.

Fluttershy looked about a bit unsure of what to do. *I can't put this off anymore, it needs to be somewhere safe and I don't think Ponyville is that*

*safe anymore.* She took off into the air, heading West towards her cottage by the Everfree.



Andur approached the receptionist, "Oh, if you need medical care, It doesn't look too bad, so we can set you up with a room in urgent-" she was interrupted.

"I'm not here to check in, I need information."

The receptionist looked a little confused, "Then if that's the case... who are you here to visit?"

"Who's in charge? Your town is in far more danger than you may realize."

"I'm sorry our staff is rather busy at the moment, we can't just call them off to answer a few questions about proper scar treatment-"

"Mam, please. This isn't about me, I need to see about a very dangerous outbreak. I have a hunch that many others may be unwell, and my best bet is to talk to the one in charge so that I can help you." Andur said with concern in his voice.

The receptionist sighed, then left her desk to walk over to some large double doors nearby. She stuck her head through the doors and mumbled something incoherent to a pony on the other side. After she returned to her desk she spoke to him, "It'll be a minute or two, please have a seat."

Andur wandered his way over to a less populated corner of the room, he noticed Applejack was closing in on him, "I take it you want an explanation?"

Applejack simply nodded.

"I suppose I have the time now, although I wish I didn't have to stop. Let me take a rest over here." Andur took a moment to lie down, he was used to the amount of activity he was regularly performing, but it was nice to take a load off.

"First, if it's so bad why are you here? If it's some monster why not go find its nest or something'?"

"I am after the nest."

Applejack grew confused, "What? How do you know it's the clinic?"

"Ted and I went out to the West end of town, we wanted to check out some of the area by the Everfree. On the way through the hills Ted noticed something, we did our best to sneak up on them, but one of them was just a little more clever than the rest." he gestured to the various gashes and scratches on his face. "In short I got jumped, at first I didn't even know what I was fighting, I just tried to get it off. Once I had it pinned however I got a good look at it." Andur seemed to shudder and have a look of anger on his face, "I recognized its twisted form, even if it was hardly the thing it was, I remembered that orange pegasus for it was the only one that had a wing sheared clean off."

"Wait, how did a pony scratch you up that bad?"

Andur was still angry, "Let's just say it wasn't a pony anymore, it was something far worse. Now I have to get about settling some questions, hopefully Ted is having better luck chasing down the other ones." Andur got up when he noticed a nurse was walking over to them.

"I will trust the word of a hero such as yourself when you say it's important, but please make it brief we are in the middle of an emergency." Nurse Redheart said.

"This emergency wouldn't happen to involve a disease that you have never seen before would it?"

Nurse Redheart gave a curious eyebrow to the question, "It may, what do you know of it?"

"I know that if I don't start getting help around here, that this whole town could be crawling with its own dead. So please allow me to take a look at any suspicious cases you may have." he pleaded.

"I can't allow that Andur, we are trying to maintain a quarantine and it's dangerous enough allowing ponies to sill come and go as they please."

"If it's what I think it is, you don't need to worry about it spreading in the conventional means."

Nurse Redheart looked more confused, "Even if that's the case, how do I know that you know?"

"They are admitted after having fallen unconscious, shortly thereafter they begin to cough furiously. Then they begin to discharge a black filmy substance whenever they cough that smells like bile." Andur furrowed his brow, "Am I getting warmer?"

Nurse Redheart looked around nervously before whispering to him, "Is there anything you can do to help, we've already lost a few."

"I'm afraid there isn't much I can do, but I need to find whatever is spreading this, and I need to have a word with any of them that may still be alive."

"This way then."

Applejack intercepted her as she began to walk with them, "I hate to impose but no pony is giving me a straight answer about my mother."

Nurse Redheart had a sad look across her face, "I'm sorry, but your mother is one of the many affected." Applejack immediately had fear on her face "She's still going strong, so we still have some hope." Applejack took the kind words, but couldn't help as though it felt like false hope.

"We may not have much time, please let's keep moving." Andur interrupted, and off they followed the nurse deeper into the clinic.

**[M/M/M/M/M]**

The pony slowly opened his eyes, the world was covered in a dull haze. He attempted to move about, only to feel the brace on his neck and the casts around his midsection and front legs. *What? Where...* he was still unsure of his surroundings, the room he was in was rather brightly lit, intense beams of light seemed to cast down from the ceiling. As his eyes adjusted he began making out other things in the room, some kind of large window next to a door, some empty gurneys in front of himself, and a profuse smell in the air was all he could make out without moving his head.



Even though he was awake his thoughts were still clouded by the woozy aftereffects of the tranquilizer, slowly but surely he remembered the events of the past night. *Sure hope sis is OK...* As he was still recounting the events of Eastavis he heard a noise behind him, a deep raspy breath followed by a wheezing cough. For some reason the noise set him on edge, his instincts forbade him from even breathing too quickly. He heard the sound of hooves clopping to the floor, followed by a thud of something falling over. It seemed to hiss and sputter as it protested its predicament, he heard a slow and unsteady march as the sound seemed to get closer. He felt his heart racing and beads of sweat on his brow, with no fair reasoning he felt his mind screaming of danger, but still his instincts were telling him to not move a muscle.

As the figure slowly moved into view, he remembered the shape of a pegasus, as it was what seemed to be in front of him. Its coat still seemed yellowish, but was scarred by streaks of black veins which seemed to twist through the skin haphazardly. Its bloodshot eyes looked about, except instead of reddish as one would expect they were almost pitch black as night, and absent of color excluding what little white space remained.

It began to peer around at its surroundings, eventually something caught its attention. It was looking up towards the ceiling, a small smile on its face, it gave a sickening coo that sounded as if something was drowning deep within itself. The wings gently spread out as if it was receiving praise and attention from something not within the room, then it once again became cold to the world, and began making its way over to the door. It stopped, ears springing to attention and searching for an invisible source, it gave a soft hiss as it dived beneath the large window where it wouldn't be easily seen.

A memory flooded into his mind, a recent one. *That's what that monster was DOING!* The face of the beast betrayed no emotion, it was simply watching him, even though it read in no way a threat he couldn't hope but feel like he was prey being measured up by a hunter. He tried to control his breathing, but all his senses screamed danger at the cold intelligence that met his gaze.

He could hear voices outside the room, maybe a mare and a stallion talking back and forth but he wasn't sure. Then the door opened, a white mare walked through, "Yes Andur I am sure these are the first cases..." she

stopped as she looked at the empty gurneys, "Strange, we only ferried four bodies out of here, the last one was still putting up a fight."

The creature absently stared at the earth pony, waiting patiently, unnoticed.

A second earth pony barged into the room, much larger than the first, covered in cuts across his face and armor on his body. "What do you mean ferried?"

"We never got our morgue built in, the project has been pushed back recently. So we've been using the old clinic as a makeshift one until then."

The large brown one looked directly at the frightened pony, as its eyes darted around the room. "Streaks?" He closed the distance between them.

Streaks continued to look between the creature and Andur, it seemed to be slinking away towards the door, trying to stay unnoticed. But then it stopped, once again it looked strangely about as if it was receiving orders from another place. It changed course, slowly slinking its way behind Andur with an unnatural silent grace. Streaks was frantically looking between them as it closed. When it was only a few feet from Andur it stopped and bared its teeth, soft molars slowly changed into razor edged fangs. He began mumbling incoherently and looked between them in a panic trying to get his attention. *Just look behind you! Just TURNAROUND!* His eyes dilated as he watched the beast leap through the air, aiming for Andur's neck.

|||||

Andur was lost in thought as he looked at Streaks, *Well I guess it's good that he's alive, but he doesn't exactly seem mentally stable.* He noted as the pony's eyes were darting about the room, as Streak's eyes dilated Andur turned slightly to ask a question to Redheart. But soon felt a stab of pain across the back of his neck, he reared as he howled in pain. Quickly he knew that he had to get whatever was on him off, he felt it clutching to his back trying to hold on; so he brought himself down upon his back in an attempt to squash the threat. As he landed with a thud against the floor he felt the pain in his neck recede, but he also landed far harder than he thought he should've, and knew it must've gotten away from the danger.

He heard the sound of gurneys beings tossed aside as something fell through them, Andur managed to right himself, ignoring the pain of fresh injury across the back of his neck. He met the gaze of the creature as its blood stained teeth glared back at him. "Foul abomination, know that I shall not stand your existence so long as I draw breath!"

Nurse Redheart shrieked as she finally saw the same beast Andur did.

Having been discovered and failed its first attempt, the beast knew it stood little chance against its target. It broke for the doorway with an unnatural speed, Andur gave pursuit but was unable to keep pace.

Applejack appeared from another observation room within the wing of the hospital that was cleared of staff because of the quarantine, "What's with all the racket?" she watched as some messed up pegasus and Andur were charging down the hall towards the exit.

"Don't let it escape!" Andur shouted to her.

Applejack didn't like the looks of the pegasus, but she knew that it mustn't be good if its mouth was marked with blood. She galloped over to an unused cart full of medical supplies set up in the hallway, and using the strength of her hind legs bucked it into the path of the pegasus.

The beast was far too concentrated on its goal of the doors leading out farther into the world and was soundly slammed with the cart, for a few moments it was thrown from its feet and dazed. Long enough for Andur to close the distance it had gained, with a smooth motion he whipped his weapon from its sheath, the head of the morningstar was slightly aglow with power at the presence of undeath. He brought it down towards the beast, only to have it quickly slide to the side, as the weapon smashed into the floor of the clinic it left cracks in the tile.

The beast took its chance, once again it leaped towards Andur's face, but this time he was not unprepared. He left his weapon stuck in the floor and charged the animal as it was mid-flight, the weight of his body and armor slammed into it. As it clambered at him trying to get a hold he continued his stampede, straight into a solid concrete wall, with a solid thud Andur felt bones within the creature snap and break. But still it continued to struggle against him, unabated by what just occurred, Andur continued to put his weight into the beast in an attempt to keep it pinned.

Struggling against the wall and Andur's shoulder the beast kicked, hissed, and snapped at him. But it couldn't get an angle, it began to try something.

Andur watched as the front hooves of the beast began shifting into sharp blade-like contraptions, *It isn't supposed to be able to mutate this quickly!* Andur knew this was going to go south if he didn't end it soon, *If I let it go then it will definitely get away before I can pry my weapon loose.*

"Andur!" Andur heard Applejack shout to him, giving his attention for a moment he noticed she was prying his weapon out of the floor, even though it was far too large for her she managed to get it unstuck. With the handle clamped in her mouth she spun quickly before tossing it in his direction.

Andur took the chance, as it clanged across the floor he allowed the beast to slump against the wall, the beast took a long hissed breath as its chest cavity began to inflate with air. Without a moment to spare, he took the weapon up in his hooves in a reverse to his usual style. While upon two legs he gave a powerful stride to close the distance, thrusting out the spiked pommel of the weapon like a spear, with a squash it pierced the beast and impaled it to the wall through its midsection.

Morellia began to glow intensely at the contact to the flesh of the horror, with a blinding corona the beast howled and screeched at the pain to its form being driven from the body. As the others shielded their eyes, only Andur took the brunt of it as he watched the creature burst into a golden flame, smoldering away the corruption that was within it. The light slowly dimmed until once more they were within the quiet hallway of the observation wing.

Andur carefully put one of his hooves to the body, removed his weapon from the wall and the corpse, before easing it to the floor. The body lay motionless, almost as if it was at peace. He said a small prayer under his breath as was his custom, and turned to face Applejack. "I suppose you want another explanation?"

"What happened to that pony?" She said with a slight look of horror.

"What I was afraid was happening, you have an outbreak of Ghoul's Bite."

Fear dawned on Applejack's face "Please just tell me Ma doesn't have that." she didn't like the look on his face, "Andur please, you've got to be able to do something. You just used your power, maybe-"

"That wasn't my power, that was the power of Morellia, my weapon." he sheathed his weapon upon his back before returning to all fours, "She only destroys the infection, it wouldn't undo the damage to the body, and doing that won't save her. Now I'm sorry about your mother, but I need to look over the first cases before I can properly help you."

Applejack watched as Andur wandered back over to the room he had come from, a rather stunned Nurse Redheart waiting at the threshold. Applejack looked over to the body, the wound on its side was leaking a strange black substance which seemed to be evaporating into the air which left a strange smell of incense. The eyes were slowly draining from a black murkiness to those of a normal pony, however the mutations seemed to stay behind. *Please not my mother, just please...* Applejack could feel tears welling up in her eyes.

Andur approached the nurse, "Now without any further interruption, you are sure these are the only ones who first showed any symptom?"

She looked back into the room, "Y-yes, we've lost them all except for Streaks there, but he hasn't shown any symptoms." she then looked back to Andur, "Just what are we dealing with?"

"Ghoul's Bite, a horrid weapon concocted by an old nemesis of mine. I've only ever seen him and groups affiliated with him make use of it. It causes death by replacing your blood with the disease, then when you should die it instead forcibly resurrects you, holding onto your memories; which essentially traps your soul within your body." Andur had a furrowed brow as he continued, "It makes use of you, using your memories to figure out how your body works. Then it changes you, tries to make the best weapon out of you as possible. Soon enough you're not even what you were anymore, just another ghoul following the commands of Dra'nahb..." *You won't get away with this you slimy rattlesnake, I'll find you in your den wherever you are.* He looked within the room to Streaks, who seemed to calm down a bit at seeing him still alive. "So what happened to him."

"Oh, Streaks over here was found under some rubble by the rides in the fairgrounds with complex fractures to his jaw, neck, and some of his spine.

We found his sister wrapped up in his arms, she might not have made it if it wasn't for that." she looked sullenly over to him, "but if his recovery doesn't go well he could very well be paralyzed."

"Well if he hasn't turned yet then he won't turn at all. Just how long ago did cases start to occur?"

"Hmm," Nurse Redheart stopped for a moment and thought, "I want to say about an hour ago."

Andur was dumbfounded at what she said, "What?" the look on her face told the truth, "But... it doesn't kill that quickly, let alone turn them so fast. Those ones that jumped Ted and me were farther along than I thought possible." *This doesn't bode well at all.*

Andur was taken from his thought when he heard the large doors of the observation hall open and a small convoy of gurneys barged through it. "Oh no, not more." Nurse Redheart galloped over to the group of orderlies that was pushing the gurneys in, Andur close behind. "Take them to room eight, I think it still has some room."

"Excuse me, but what part of town are these ponies from?" Andur asked.

They looked over Andur cautiously, before he gave them a stern look that he wanted his question answered. "Not sure," one of the orderlies spoke up, "We've just been taking them from their rooms as they fell ill."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, good sir who needs some bandages, that these ponies are here because of last night, and only fell ill a few minutes ago. Now please tell me we aren't breaking quarantine for this pony." the orderly complained to Redheart.

She spoke up, "Andur here knows more about this disease than any of us so give him some respect, now how do we at least stop the spread if we can't-" she looked over to see concern written across his face, "What's the matter."

"It doesn't spread like this..."

"What?"

"You can only contract it by direct infusion, it's far too delicate to survive any other means." Andur went over to the gurneys and pulled back some of the blankets, much to the chagrin of some confused ponies. He looked over the unconscious mare before him, her skin was already starting to darken, a few drops of black substance by her mouth. *Where are you...* he carefully looked around the mare's head, carefully checking the neck; he then found what he was looking for. A small red lump on the neck, easily mistakable for a bug bite. "This is fresh, it's got to be her. He sent Abigail!" Andur quickly grabbed his messenger's book, *Ted I don't care where those ghouls are off to anymore, I need you here at the clinic NOW!*

Before Andur could even put it back a message returned, *Fine then, they lost me when they hit the Everfree anyway. What's got you in such a tizzy anyway? You find out which area of town Dra'nahb might be skulking in?*

Andur didn't have time to play around, *Ted, its Abigail. She's here, somewhere in the clinic infecting them with Ghoul's Bite, I'm not sure why but it seems to take affect far faster on these ponies than it did on anything in our world. I need you back here before she gets too many more.* He looked over to Nurse Redheart, "You need to get some ponies over to that old clinic and burn any bodies that were infected."

"What!" she was flabbergasted.

He realized he was being a little harsh, "I understand it may not seem unorthodox to treat your dead in such a way, but if we don't then there will be dozens of those things running about Ponyville." she seemed a little more sure of his order, "I'm sorry but sometimes life isn't easy."

"Alright, but is there anything you can do for the ones that are still alive?" Andur wouldn't meet her gaze, "You can't be serious, just... please, there must be a way."

"I'm afraid we only have one hope-"

"No!" Nurse Redheart said sternly as she pushed Andur away from the gurneys, "I didn't become head nurse of Ponyville because I gave up on patients that seemed hopeless. There must be something we can do that doesn't involve killing them and mutilating the corpses!"

Andur was impressed by her bravery, "I wouldn't be a servant of Pelor if I acted in such a manner," Nurse Redheart seemed to calm but was perplexed still, "Don't mind what a Pelor is, our hope is to find whatever is spreading this and end it. As for the living..." he looked between the various infected individuals, "all we can do is hope, for they don't seem as far along as I feared. If the first died in the first few minutes then they may have been overdosed, there may be one or two strong enough to fight it. All you can do is keep them comfortable." He then turned and trotted off towards the room which still contained Streaks, "Now if you'll excuse me I need a description."

As he made his way to the room he just left, Applejack met him halfway, "Andur are you sure-"

"I know you're worried Applejack, but I meant what I said..." he grew sullen, "Without my power there is nothing I can do to help them, their fates are now in the hands of something far greater than me." Applejack still looked worried, "Where's your mother, I can at least see how well she's combating it."

Applejack lead Andur to an observation room, the few ponies within occasionally coughing and groaning, and it reeked of vile contagion. He was lead to Ma Smith, Applejack's ears hung low against her head with a frown on her face as she looked at the silent body of her mother.

Andur began an inspection, she looked well off considering the speed the others had taken to the disease. He looked about her neck, checking for the telltale sign of Abigail's tampering, he found nothing. *Strange, she should have some type of wound to indicate the site of infection.* He pulled the blanket off her and noticed something on her flank, "Well that explains how well she's doing."

"What does?" Applejack sounded a little hopeful.

"She didn't get injected in an artery, I think Abigail missed her target, lucky too." He frowned, "Well as lucky as one can get in these situations. I think she got nicked here, less of a dose and in an out of the way place. It'll take far longer for it to proceed-" He stopped as she began coughing up more blackened bile, "She has a slim chance, but she seems to be putting up quite a fight."



Andur looked over to Applejack who was a looking more hopeful, "If anypony can beat this, it'll be mom."

"Now excuse me, but I really must get back to the solution." Andur worked his way out of the room, making his way once again down the hall. He entered the room that still contained Streaks, who seemed to be calmed down a bit considering what he had seen moments before. Andur walked over to the gurney and laid down next to it so he could take a breather while maintaining an easier eye contact with the pony.

Streaks' eyes darted around Andur's face, looking a little worried.

"Don't worry about them Streaks, there is something going on more important than some flesh wounds."

Streaks raised an eyebrow to the statement.

"Concentrate for a moment, do you remember anything from before you were here in observation. Back when you were in another room perhaps."

His eyes darted about, looking a little worried and frightened.

"Shhh, just calm down, I know it isn't easy. But do you think you could remember whatever scared you so badly, Redheart mentioned you shared a room with these infected ponies. Did you see what infected them?"

Streaks looked about, a furrowed brow marked frustration as he tried to mumble something.

"Now Streaks, if you could talk. Would you be able to give me a description? Blink when I say so for yes, close your eyes for about three seconds for no."

Streaks was confused by the question, but quickly blinked when he was commanded to do so.

"Then that settles this dilemma." Andur rose to his feet, reached inside his bag and took out the single potion he had on his person. *This is far more important than just me*, He undid some of the bandages around Streaks' mouth, "The healing is going to hurt, but you'll be fine; I promise. Just don't

clench your teeth." popping the quark from the bottle he carefully emptied the contents into the hurt pony's mouth.

Streaks grimaced at the flavor of it, for a few moments nothing happened besides a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. Then he felt a strange surge of energy course through himself, as it made its way to his broken bones. He groaned at first from feeling them move unnaturally into position, then he was shouting as it felt like they were being stretched and molded back into shape. Eventually it subsided, but he was still in shock from the pain, gradually he returned to his senses. Watching as Andur was undoing straps on the neck brace and untying bandages around his midsection.

"Alright, now just to undo the rest of the jaw." Andur finished his cleanup. Streaks looked about, almost frozen as he seemed unsure what to do. "Just try to say something."

"Thanks... I guess." Streaks was still astonished by it, he had heard the rumors of The Dungeon Masters generosity. Even though they had saved his sister he was still amazed to see how Andur allowed himself to go on injured as he was just in order to help him. "Are you sure you shouldn't have used that thing on yourself?"

Nurse Redheart appeared at the door to the room, looking angry, but she then saw Streaks completely un-bandaged and was speechless.

Andur looked to see the nurse stunned behind him before he looked back to Streaks, "Yes impossibilities and all, now we don't have much time. Can you give me that description."

"She was..." he shuddered, "Emotionless. That monster had some kind of boney... thing, I don't know it looked like a needle pointed right at me."

"I understand what she is capable of, just the physical appearance please." Andur said sternly.

"Oh yes, pale brown like tanned leather. A reddish mane and tail, and those eyes..." Streaks curled up in a fetal position, absently looking about in fear as he was somewhere in his mind. "green... just staring at me... she wouldn't blink. She just kept looking at me."

"Was she wearing anything?" Nurse Redheart spoke up.

"I think so, I remember a nurse's uniform; but I was kind of too terrified to look for a name tag."

Nurse Redheart blanched, "That was nurse Aidwell he just described, but she couldn't be a monster. She was new and all but she was here before the fair. That can't be possible."

"Tell that to her when she tries to eat your face off with her fangs." Streaks retorted. Andur shot a disapproving glance at him, "Look I didn't mean to snap, I just-"

"I know Streaks." Andur looked to nurse Redheart, "It might not seem possible, but sometimes you got to face the ugly truth."

"Alright, I'll get on over to a station and have it broadcast to stop Aidwell from-"

"No." Redheart looked confused at him, "Abigail, the thing taking her place, is a creature that operates on cruel efficiency. The second she finds out her cover is blown, we'll be lucky to find all the bodies she'll infect before they start to turn. We got lucky that she's s trying to stay stealthy and is slowing herself. Me and Ted will handle this, just get all the ponies out of here that you can, now where did that last batch of infected come from."

"Second floor, west wing of intensive care, room two forty eight I think." she still looked guilty of something.

"You had no idea it could have been a monster from my world, don't hold it against yourself, she's a crafty one." Andur then got up and excused himself from the room, he looked back to see Nurse Redheart help the sore Streaks get up from his bed as he cringed at muscles that ached from disuse. *Ted I hope you can get here fast, I can't afford to wait around any longer.*

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"Now remember anything that looks like a shambling corpse is best to be avoided, and if things get bad head into town OK?" Ted said to the Boe family.

"Don't worry Ted, they won't get within a mile of here with my archery skills." the excitable Archie exclaimed as he buzzed about the house.

"Well do make sure to leave some for me, I can't go and get all rusty from lack of practice." He gently ruffled the mane of the colt with his hoof. "If you'll excuse me." Ted spread his wings and took off into the sky, going as quickly as he could towards Ponyville. His messenger book began humming, he took it out and read the message from Andur.

*I've got a description on Abigail, she's apparently posing as a nurse in the clinic. Pale brown, red mane and tail, green eyes.*

Ted messaged back, *You think that when Cartanis comes out of that coma he'll open his book to see all our messages at once?*

*Ted please, I know you try to stay lighthearted but I'm not in the mood for it right now.*

Ted closed the book, *Well I guess it is a little silly of me to act in such a way when he can't help any of those ponies recover.* He grew a little sad at the thought of it all. As he looked about the sky he saw a familiar shape making its way West, *Fluttershy? Why would she be leaving town at a time like this?* Ted quickly closed the gap between them, cutting his way through the air.

Fluttershy noticed Ted from a distance and was surprised to see him.

Ted matched Fluttershy's speed as she flew towards the West, "Well if it isn't the nicest pony in Equestria, what are you doing heading out of town?"

"You know I have animals to take care of Ted, I can't just leave them all alone."

"Your animals are fine, I took the liberty of checking in on them on the way back from my patrol. You really should try to stay in town though, that nasty thing from last night could be out there still. Might try to pull an attack of opportunity on you when you're asleep." He said with a smile.

"I really just want to go home..." she wouldn't look over to Ted.

"Fluttershy, I know it's scary right now. But your home is probably less safe than the town right now." he said with some seriousness.

"What?" she stopped flying and hovered while looking at Ted, "Did something happen?"

"I already said your animals are fine, but I've been hunting some things around the outskirts of town, and they were pretty darn intent on getting out to the Everfree. I know your animals are important to you, but I just can't let you go in good conscience, your cottage is just too close to the den of nasty stuff." Fluttershy continued to look worried, "If it makes you feel any better, your silly rabbit managed to hog tie me in a trap. They'll be fine on their own for a little while longer, that rabbit seemed pretty comfortable handling things on its own."

Fluttershy smiled at hearing about Angel's antics.

"Now please, just give us one more day to try and set this all straight, and I won't ask for a second more." Ted gave a gentle smile to her.

"Alright... just don't get hurt."

"Thank you, now if you'll excuse me," Ted took off towards town and shouted back to her, "I'm off to help Andur the Impatient save the town from the Abominable Abigail."



Ted landed in front of the clinic and made his way inside, he was surprised by the lack of ponies within. The only pony there was the receptionist, who seemed equally surprised to see him, "Sir we are currently under quarantine, did you miss the signs?"

"Well of course you're under quarantine." Ted said with disapproval.

"Excuse me?" she asked with a confused look.

"Didn't you know?" she still looked confused, "Why Princess Celestia is coming to help deal with it, and I've been assigned as the Extremely Redundant Home Makeover Extraordinaire. You're not a hero if you don't know how to look good while being heroic, that's what father used to say."

"Oh you're Ted, look the last one of you we let through caused a lot of ruckus and we don't need any more excitement-" but she stopped when she realized the zebragus wasn't listened to her anymore.

"Now if you'll excuse me I need to make sure everything is spic 'n' span for one's eyes." As he carefully seemed to inspect the various things about the room, a familiar sound graced his ears and set him on edge. *Oh he wouldn't be that foolish would he?*

The sound once again became painfully obvious to him amongst the other background noises he was sure only he was able to pick out, *Its Andur, of course he would be that foolish.* He began walking over to the receptionist. "How would I get to the second floor?"

"Sorry, but unless you are here to visit somepony in urgent care, we are not to allow anypony beyond the reception area."

"So you don't have a second floor?" Ted asked with some concern.

"What?"

"Does 'what' mean we only have one floor? Do you even have a second floor? I could swear I saw at least three when I landed outside, but I suppose being a hundred and forty can wear on one's eyes."

"Yes we have a second floor." the receptionist looked annoyed at his questions.

"How would one of sound mind make the quickest path to his expected objective of reaching the second floor with most haste?"

"Sir, please-"

"I am not sir, who is sir? Now I need to get along to the second floor, this reception area is simply deadly to ones inner muse of home design so the rest can't be any better, or would you have Celestia send this whole place to the moon because it wasn't the color of her constantly flowing mane?"

She raised an eyebrow in concern, before speaking as though she expected him to forget her orders before she finished. "OK sir, just head through those doors over there and some of our clinics best carpenters will

help you along." *Why do I always get the crazy ones, just once I would like to meet a nice stallion who isn't insane or mortally wounded.*

As he passed through the doors he heard the receptionist click a switch under her desk. *Oh so we do this the hard way? No problem, no one ever suspects little ol' me of anything.*

A few orderlies appeared beyond the doorway, attempting to stop his advance, "Sir please vacate the premises or we will be forced to act."

Ted looked about disgusted with everything, mouth hanging half open in shock. "What were you thinking!"

"We don't need crazy ponies, or zebrasi, scaring the patients."

"No, no, not your silly health concerns. I mean just look at this place. Oh I could just puke rainbows all over the place and have done better."

The large orderlies looked confused.

"Sterile white with linoleum tile? Are you TRYING to make my eyes vomit?" Ted scoffed as he looked them over. "Don't get me started on your choice of uniforms, they are so drab, I mean I could have made more colorful metals to use in chainmail for crying out loud!" As the orderlies still looked dumbfounded at the criticism's Ted took a chance. "Is that an elevator? Oh please, why in the world would you place it there. We don't need function in here, we need eye appeal, I mean just look at it." Ted wandered over to it and clicked the call button.

"I mean really, why would you make the focal point of this great space an eye sore." He began to speak in a high pitched tone, "Oh look at me, I'm an elevator. My doors open and close while I provide needed vertical transportation between floors." He scoffed loudly, "Absolutely no entertainment value."

The elevator dinged and the doors opened as Ted walked inside. "Now when I get back I want to see this thing removed and placed somewhere else. Like in an out of the way corner, and get some dance floors set up here. Ponies want to party and listen to sweet remixes of their favorite folk songs when they are trying to get better, not look around at boring

monotone environments!" As the doors closed on the flabbergasted orderlies Ted mentally patted himself on the back, *Oh you still got it.*

As Ted waited for the elevator to move up, he could once again hear the sounds of battle from the second floor. This time it was followed by the terrified screams of innocence.

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Andur made his way up the stairs to the second story, too afraid to make use of the elevators mainly because of fear his weight combined with his armor would somehow break it. Andur was pulled from his thoughts when he heard a second set of hooves clapping against the stairs behind him, looking back he saw Applejack following him.

"Don't gab at me about danger, I'm done pointlessly worryin' about my mother, and I'm ready to do somethin' a little more constructive with my time." she said with firm resolve.

"You wouldn't happen to have that potion we gave you?" Andur said as he absently scratched at the bandages all over his face, many of the nurses had insisted he cease walking around so torn up looking and had quickly bandaged him up.

"Yeah I still got it," Applejack's eyes widened when she realized something, "in my saddlebags," she slapped a hoof to her face, "back at the library where I left'em"

"If that's the case, then I don't want you helping me if things get dangerous... but in a situation like this I can't turn down another pair of eyes." he continued his trot up the stairs with Applejack close behind. As they walked through the door to the second story, Andur couldn't help but immediately become paranoid to every mare that he could see. "You remember the description don't you?" he stated to Applejack.

"I know enough" she looked about at each of the mares in the room.

Andur made his own way out into the crowded hallway, he let Applejack take her own path since he was drawing too much attention simply from his size not to mention the fact he was covered in armor. He made his way past rooms, at first he was not too agitated, but as the number grew closer



to forty on the doorways he felt that same paranoid awareness that came with experience in such matters. The further he was from the elevators the fewer ponies seemed to be around, his senses knew that like the assassins of his world, this would only aid Abigail more than hinder her.

*Two forty-five, two forty-six, two forty-seven.* Andur continued to count off room numbers as he saw them. Eventually taking time to look within rooms that had open doors, each one was empty, devoid of any patient. Eventually he heard a commotion from a room just down the hall, it was two fifty-one that was being ransacked by nurses and orderlies as they began frantically pushing gurneys out of the room and down the hall past Andur, taking little heed to his presence as they raced by with sick patients.

*She must be close.* Andur took a second to listen intently for anything out of place, besides the sound of the occasional pony trotting past him, nothing was standing out to him. *She must have already moved on.* Andur picked up his pace as he neared a corner to another hallway, but was stopped when he noticed an open door, for he could hear something moving about inside. Carefully he approached the edge of the doorway, making sure to not allow himself to make any noise. He peered inside, and saw her.



*sixty-eighth dose applied... room finished... leave to maintain anonymity...*

Abigail turned to the door leading out of the room, she paused at hearing a loud cllop of hooves.

*Investigate...*

Abigail cautiously approached the door, gingerly stuck her neck out through the door to get a better look. Down the hallway in both directions, nothing was happening, there was no clue as to the source of her noise.

*Clear... maintain awareness...*

Abigail moved out into the hallway, as she was moving towards the next room, a pony stood out in her vision. An orange earth pony wearing a cowboy hat was watching her, a mix of anger and fear in her eyes.

*Possibly compromised... Confirm...*

Abigail picked up her pace down the hall, moving at a trot she passed the pony of her attention paying her no heed. She seemed to be holding herself back from trying something as Abigail passed. Abigail then heard the pony giving chase, but at a distance. *Confirmed... Determine how far... Abigail looked to other faces in the hallway, none seemed to mind her at all. May be able to salvage... eliminate threat to anonymity...*

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Applejack followed Abigail as she was going down the hall, *You don't look so tough.* She tailed the creature as it went inside another room, before she entered the room a hoof stopped her advance.

"I said eyes only Applejack," she turned to the familiar whisper of Andur, not sure how he managed to sneak up on her.

"She doesn't look like much, all it looks like she could do is ruffle my feathers a bit." she protested.

"How far would you be willing to go?"

"What?" She said back confused.

"You saw me fighting that pegasus ghoul, just imagine for a second you were fighting that, because I for one know that she will be worse than it hoped to ever be." he gave her a stern look, "We are not here to ruff her up and make her go away, this is life or death. Not just because she WILL kill you if she gets the chance, but for the simple reason that she will not stop on her mission until she is called off or completes it." He looked towards the room where Abigail entered, "She is a heartless abomination that must be dealt with or she will eat away at everything like a cancer, and I'm sorry but I can't let you help me deal with her. She is in a league all on her own, even if she isn't fully at one with her new body."

Applejack noticed that Andur had a real expression of fear under the calm demeanor he was trying to present. "Andur are you sure you should do this alone? Maybe you should wait for Ted."

Before Andur could answer, Abigail wandered out of the room, when she noticed Andur her emotionless face twitched slightly to show a split second of emotion.

"Run Applejack." Andur said flatly.

"Bu-" she was cut off as Abigail began hissing, her teeth bared and changing into fangs, the calm of the hallway was pierced by a shriek of unholy rage.

"RUN!" Andur charged the creature, deftly drawing his weapon in an attempt to hit her, swinging high for her face. But she dodged it easily with unnatural speed, as Andur's weapon slammed into the wall Abigail quickly stabbed him in the neck with a modified hoof. He felt her inject something into him, it was tearing at his insides. *I won't go down that easily!* He took the chance presented when she was having trouble recovering her instrument of death, tackling her to the ground. He felt her stab him again, but he had her pinned and took his chance. Morellia screamed for vengeance as he slammed it into the side of her face, he was only able to make use of one arm with his strike and found Abigail to be too well fortified to do more than scrape some of the flesh from her face; revealing her true form under the mask.

Quills erupted from her midsection and peppered Andur across the face, he howled in pain as the poison tipped projectiles robbed him of his sight in one eye. She readied another volley and forced Andur to move off of her in order to dodge them, they pegged against a wall dripping with a black substance. *I can't keep fighting her in this cramped hallway, she has too much of an advantage.*

Abigail took the opportunity provided and raced along Andur's blind side, solidly planting a hoof between his plates of armor and injecting more foul poison into him. He howled in pain once again, he retaliated by first giving a powerful kick with his hind leg which knocked her off of him and set up his swing. It solidly connected to her torso, sending her off down the hallway.

A pony wandered around the corner, a confused look on his face turned to horror as he saw the strange thing toppled in front of him. Half of the face was missing, on the other a pony skull was staring at him, the jaw was fused into a plate, the fangs in the mouth were slowly turning into a solid shield to reinforce the skull. The eye socket was like an abyss covered by a series of rib-like protrusions acting like a screen against attack. More interconnecting bony plates lead down to the hole torn in the torso, to show not ribs and organs but a solid mass of bone that moved about slowly, a

strange black substance moving about underneath as it did anywhere the bones were not directly connected.

"Get out of here!" Andur shouted to the stunned stallion. As he began to retreat with a scream of terror Abigail started to give chase. *This one is not yours beast!* For a split second Andur felt his power surge through him, he arced it outwards into a jet of fire and light, the golden forces slammed into Abigail. Disintegrating the portion that was hit by it. Removing what little remained of her flesh on one side of her body, a layer of bone was ashen and flaky as it withstood the attack against its very essence.

Abigail ceased her pursuit and looked back to Andur, he was sprawled out on the floor, taking deep breaths as he was out of energy. *Threat reassessment...* she watched as he began to cough up a black substance. *Illogical regain of power... Current threat still minimal... Take no chances...* She closed the distance, morphing one of her front legs into a razor-blade.

*Please... just give me a chance, I know I can still call to you Pelor. Don't let this stand.* But to no avail, what little power he could feel remaining within him was burning itself out trying to fight off the infection of Ghoul's Bite. He grasped Morellia firmly in his hoof, *I can't rely on you forever my lord...* He directed his thoughts to his weapon. *Free the spirit of vengeance, course through me with the righteous indignation of his wrath.*

He felt his thoughts fusing with his weapon as his voice began to crescendo.

"For the crimes of evils past shall be laid bare upon their vessels. This body shall bring unto them ruin, and scatter the ashes amongst the dirt of the land." Andur was no longer the only being inhabiting his body, he felt the knowledge and power of Morellia coursing through him. Willing his shattered body into service, he was standing to face Abigail as she closed. With quick strikes she attempted to stab and slash at exposed surfaces, but all Andur had to do was move ever so slightly so it would harmlessly scratch against the nigh impregnable plate-mail.

The tempo of battle had changed, with a cry of fury Andur smashed one of his powerful back legs into her, once again toppling the lighter creature. The spirit within him willed his body into faster movements, reacting to her own attempts to catch herself. Morellia was drawn and igniting in golden

brilliance in accordance with the bright orbs that were once Andur's own eyes. No longer did Andur see Abigail as a creature to be feared, she was now an abomination to be scattered amongst the nothingness that spawned it.

As Abigail recoiled from the feeling of something piercing her solid ribcage, she was soon being belted with power from a source that made her quake in pain. She managed to free herself from the force, looking over to see a gaping crack in her protective layer of bone plates. Her sinewy black form undulating and twisting in pain from being attacked. *Threat evaluation high... not sufficient to deal with this... retreat...*

Abigail retreated down the halls, making her way to the nearest exit she could think of as she heard the thunderous hooves of Andur behind. As she rounded a corner towards the main body of the second floor, a bolt of energy ripped through a section of wall and slammed into her, she was barely able to continue moving through the halls.

"Next time, do please be louder. I might be able to hit you through something thicker than a few inches of drywall."

*Voice pattern recognized as Ted... Threat evaluation in tandem with Andur is very high... find a new path...*

Abigail quickly darted down a new hallway, making for a window. She heard another bolt of energy ripping through the air behind her, she dived when she had the distance to do so. Smashing through the window she heard something slam into the wall behind her as she fell two stories to the street below, the bones in her feet smashing into pieces as she attempted to land. *Will not be able to follow... make use... recover...* A crowd was starting to gather around her, some looked curious, others horrified at what they saw.

Ted looked out the window, "Get away from it you idiots!" he shouted to them. A few curiously looked up to the window.

But it was too late, quills formed on Abigail's boney surfaces and fired into them. They screamed and retreated from her, a few falling unconscious as they had been infected.

"Blasted window!" Ted tried to fit through but his armor combined with his own size was not slender enough to fit, he couldn't even get an angle to shoot at Abigail. He turned to see Andur charging down the hall, "Nice of you to wait-" he stopped when he noticed the golden orbs that were his eyes. "Oh that's just brilliant!"

"Take us to the exit, that creature shall not be allowed to escape." a voice boomed from Andur's body.

Ted also noticed the black substance leaking from Andur's mouth, "You stupid fool!" he pulled at his mane in frustration, "Why in the nine hells couldn't you have just WAITED, for two minutes. Now between that stupid possession and the infection your power is going to-"

"There is no time for this, the creature must be-"

Ted had enough, "Fine, you want to burn yourself out? Snuff out your master's life Morellia? Then let's give him the best curtain call we can." Ted led them to the stairs and they began to quickly descend them.

[M/M/M/M]

Applejack was hiding behind a cart parked outside the clinic, when Andur told her to run she figured she should get as many ponies as she could out of there. Now she was stuck behind this cart as that creature kept pegging quills into it. Once more the volley ceased, she took a chance and peeked around the cart. She saw the creature known as Abigail standing up, its shattered legs already reformed. *What the hay is that thing?* She knew from Andur that it was dangerous but this thing seemed unstoppable.

Applejack jumped when she felt something tap her on the back, she turned to see Pinkie Pie, "What're you doin' here?"

"I called dibs on Andur during the Zompony apocalypse remember!" she said excitedly.

"How do you even know where he is?"

"Well duh, everypony knows that zombies are naturally drawn to medical facilities, and so are the ponies that fight them."

"Hold on, just hold on one minute. What do you mean zombies? I've only seen one, well maybe two all day."

"Oh the old clinic is crawling with them, I watched a few leave town." Pinkie Pie made a shambling motion as she imitated them.

The sound of activity broke their conversation. From the clinic Ted appeared, ready and firing off greenish bolts towards Abigail. She broke from her stillness and galloped away into town, dodging the bolts with catlike grace each time they seemed about to hit. Ted looked back into the clinic, motioning towards another figure. As the two began to gallop after them Andur fell to the street, unable to move. Ted turned and galloped over to the body, he pushed at him a few times, he seemed to shout some form of expletive before he took off into the air after Abigail, occasionally hovering for a moment before firing a bolt off down the street.

"Oh great, what now!" Applejack stated as they galloped over to Andur. She approached and took note that he was out cold, and was bleeding from a few new wounds. Applejack looked to Pinkie Pie and noticed she had her saddlebags on, "Pinkie Pie, do you have that potion they gave you?"

She produced it from her bag, "Yep"

Applejack took the potion and carefully poured the contents down Andur's throat. Even though the wounds on his neck seemed to recede he remained motionless upon the ground, "Oh for Pete's sake Andur, what'd you go 'n' do this time?"

Andur coughed and sputtered, a small black puddle stained the street around his mouth. His eyes opened, slightly glimmering with light. "The spirit is willing but the body is frail, he must rest if he is to have a chance."

"What do you mean?" Andur then passed out again, "Hey! Don't go spouting riddles at me." Andur remained unconscious, Applejack sighed with a tinge of anger on her face. "Fine mess of trouble we got ourselves into. Pinkie Pie, keep an eye on him, I need to go find some help." Applejack got up and trotted inside the clinic.

Pinkie Pie looked over Andur, every once in a while he would cough up more of the strange black stuff, "Come on Andur, just hang in there."



Ted fired another bolt at Abigail as she whisked her way between terrified crowds of ponies, once again she dodged it without paying it any heed. *Drat, she's getting faster. This isn't good at all, she must be getting closer to full symbiosis by now.* He took a moment to figure out where she was taking him, they had already had a fire fight through the market, and soon they would be done with the square. *Where are you headed? This is South not West to the Everfree...* It dawned on him what she was doing, *The old clinic! She's going to rally what's left of the stragglers she has infected and move them out.* He remembered what Andur had messaged him about the situation. *Even if they are not as infected as that first batch, they'll be under her direct command, and she is one old battle hardened general I don't need to see in action.*

Ted was drawn from his thoughts when he saw Abigail suddenly change direction, *What?* He looked ahead of her and noticed what she was aiming for. "No." he said aloud, Ted began to beat his wings furiously in an attempt to gain speed, Abigail was closing the distance faster. "Just MOVE!" closer still Abigail was gaining. "FLUTTERSHY!"

Fluttershy stood like a deer in headlights as the horror was getting closer, its cold gaze seemed to paralyze her into not moving, and what little remained of the ponies face only scared her more. She wanted to move, but something about the creature had her frozen in place, like an outside force had infiltrated her muscles and commanded them to cease their function. She could make out the intersections in the bones on the face of the beast as it closed the final distance, quills forming across its surface. All of a sudden she felt herself get tackled, and the world went into a flash of bright light.

Ted had to immediately perform a barrel roll to the side from his headlong dive in order to dodge the flurry of quills sent towards him. Unable to pull up he prepared for a rough landing, tumbling and rolling until he found his footing and leaped behind a cart that was forgotten in the panic. Quills began to land around him, *no more Ghoul's Bite then?* He noted as the barbed quills were only a bony white. As the volley subsided, he rose from cover and fired out a series of bolts, the first to cause Abigail to dodge, and a second aimed at where he believed she would go. The bolt managed to



hit, successfully landing solidly into her center mass and unleashing its energy.

Ted gave himself a small pat of the back, but was left half fulfilled as Abigail shook off what little remained of her old flesh, and simply began firing more quills at him as if nothing had happened. He took cover again, *why now of all times do my reserves have to be low... well I do suppose making all those pointless shots earlier has something to do with it, but if I just had a better call to the fey she wouldn't be in such a good mood now.* Ted was drawn from his thoughts when a flash of light erupted next to him, he readied a blade and already had it at the creature's throat, but he stopped himself, "Twilight?"

"Maybe next time I'll try to warn you first." she said nervously as she pushed the blade away from her person. "Now come on, we got to get out of here." her horn lit up as they disappeared

Ted was flabbergasted as they seemed to be traveling along a river of light, for a moment he could sense everything around himself, the buildings, ponies, and even Abigail stood out against the background noise. Before he was wrenched from the place in a corona of light as they slipped through a veil.

"I heard you could teleport Miss Sparkle, but that was something else." Ted noticed they seemed to be on top of one of the few flat roofed buildings in Ponyville, not far from where he once was, Abigail was still firing spines at where she thought they still were in the opposite direction. *I wonder if I can pull this off.* He began to reach into his bag of holding but was pulled from his thoughts when he was squeezed tightly around the throat.

"Oh Ted I was so worried." Fluttershy said as she hugged the life out of him.

Ted frantically pushed her off, taking a deep breath of relief, "You were worried? I would've never guessed." he noticed one of her saddlebags was glowing like it had a lantern stuck inside.

Fluttershy noticed what he was staring at, and quickly changed the subject, "So where's Andur, I thought you said he needed your help."

Ted immediately remembered his friend laying unconscious in front of the clinic, "Yes good point, do you still have the potion we gave you?"

Fluttershy nodded.

"Alright go over to the clinic, Andur is in some trouble and he'll need all the help he can get." Ted watched as Fluttershy immediately took off in the direction of the clinic.

"Alright Ted what's the plan?" Twilight spoke up.

"So you really want to help then?"

"I didn't gallop across half the town at the sound of commotion to just partake as an audience member." she said with a little annoyance.

"Right then, very brave of you and all that praise. Now take these, don't drop them." Ted began giving Twilight a series of four bottles out of his bag filled with a strange green liquid covered in labels that seemed to portend to something dangerous and horrifying.

"What exactly, am I holding onto here." she said as she carefully hovered each one telekinetically in the air with her magic.

"Let's just say that to engrave things into armor that is as hard as diamonds you need something with a little extra kick." he casually grabbed one out of the air, "Now please don't drop them, this house would be lucky if it stopped at its foundation. Just watch me and wait for your time to hit her with a few of them."

"What do you mean-" but Ted had already leaped off the side of the building and was aimed to land by the perplexed Abigail.

A second before he hit the ground he let his wings slow his descent, Abigail immediately turned to face him, quills beginning to form across her body.

"Where are your manners!" Ted exclaimed as he slammed the bottle against the side of her face. The liquid sloshed against Abigail's plates, hissing and spitting as fumes rose from her bone armor. Cracks formed amidst the interlocking sections, and the quills melted before they could finish forming, "Now when I ask someone to dance politely, they dance, so

let's see how well you can tango." Ted flicked both of his wrists, doing his best to stay balanced on two legs as he assumed a stance for fighting, his wrist blades ready for action.

Abigail answered by molding the lower part of her front legs into two curved blades, the bones elsewhere in her body bending and shifting to better accommodate bipedal movement.

"Someone must get an excellent source of calcium in their diet."

Abigail did not care for banter, only going immediately low at the zebragus' poor stance. But it was a feint, he easily hopped over her lazy swing, and with his true agility went in close with a blade which stabbed into her weakened plates. A howl was heard from deep within the beast as it slashed quickly at him to force him off.

"I just detest the undead, they have absolutely no sense of showmanship, or even an appreciation for it."

Once again they began their dance of dodges and parry's. Ted went in with a series of quick jabs, each one dodged by Abigail as she was on guard now. With her own speed she attempted more swings, these ones far faster than the previous, Ted managed to easily slide them across his blades or allow them to glance against his armor.

Twilight watched in amazement as the two fighters seemed to move with blinding speed in a death match of who would be the first to slip up. She wasn't sure how Ted managed to keep up, but he just smiled and kept at it. Abigail then seemed to take a few steps back, quills once again growing from her plates.

"Now would be a very good time!" Ted seemed to shout to no one in particular.

A bottle soared through the air and cleanly broke against Abigail's back, once more a deep howl emanating from somewhere within the beast. Its solid skull looked about in an attempt to find the new attacker.

Ted attempted to close, only to have Abigail kick out with one of her legs, it quickly shifted into a spear-like protrusion as it found a mark in Ted's padded joint sections. Ted took the opportunity, he reached low, grabbing

her by the ankle of the leg that had him impaled slightly and whisked her onto her back. With her leg still in his hoof, he took one of his back legs and solidly smashed it into her knee joint, he felt it break under the force. Taking the now loose spear he jammed it into her weakened chest plates. "Not so easy when you're not fighting someone with a handicap **IS IT!**" Ted angrily taunted as she stared back with cold indignation.

Abigail twisted unnaturally and used her good leg to kick Ted off of her, the bones melting into her and reforming once again. Her blades turned into claws as she began climbing up the side of the building.

*This isn't good, she's getting faster at that.* Ted watched as Twilight tossed a bottle at her in panic, "NO!" but it was too late. Twilight played into Abigail's ploy, she gingerly caught the bottle, then whipped it with intense speed at Ted. He had to take off into the air to avoid the caustic spatter, only to feel one of his wings get lassoed by a boney whip that looked like an elongated spine. He was pulled down through the air next to Abigail as she landed, before he could react he felt something shear its way through his flesh, pain erupted across his back. He defensively pulled himself over to the fey of this world, gained some distance from her and reappeared, to see her holding a wing lassoed in her whip arm with a blood covered pair of razor sharp bone scissors in the other.

Ted knew that from that last jump he was out of reserve, he was still able to fight, but he knew it would be a while before he could attempt anything related to his power. "It's OK Abigail, I had two of them for a reason." Ted watched as Abigail closed the distance, tossing aside his wing. She once again began a fight with him, their speeds were still matched, but this time Abigail was constantly shifting her weapons to adjust. Ted would parry a blade, only to have a bludgeon try to smash through his defenses the next second. Ted bided his time, making use of anything he could to hold her off for a few moments longer.

Then Ted finally heard the call of the fey again, with what little strength he had left he forced her into the defensive, cutting and jabbing at her as she gave ground. When the moment arose he clicked his wrists together, allowing the fey magic to course through them, green sparks of electricity flying off the faces of the blades as he began to cut apart bone that tried to impede his advance. He removed one of her arms, and tossed it aside before going for her throat in an attempt to sever her head. Abigail quickly

ducked the second swipe, shifted her arm into a spear, and stabbed towards Ted. He had to parry it or get impaled once again, as he did so quills launched off her bony face-plates that had healed and peppered him across what little of his face was exposed.

Ted did his best to retreat while fighting back against the pain and Abigail. She allowed him to, and he noticed some of her denser bones seem to shallow out as her arm grew back. *I'm losing this fight, no doubt about it. Something has got to happen and it has to happen now.*

A twinkle of light flashed for a moment behind Abigail, before a purple unicorn appeared, a bottle floating next to her head. Abigail was too focused on Ted, so Twilight took the chance and plunged the last bottle into a gap in her plating. As it smashed across the strange black surface, Abigail flailed about and screeched as the corrosive material ate away at her already weakened form from the quick regeneration. She quickly swiped at Twilight to make her back off, and then returned to a more equine form before taking off once again towards the direction of the old clinic.

Ted finally let his guard down as he watched her gallop off into the distance, he returned to all fours, and began pulling quills out of his face. "Very quick thinking, I must admit. If not a little foolish, but that's just a matter of perspective I suppose." He cringed as a particularly stubborn quill finally gave as he pulled it out.

Twilight wandered over with a health potion floating over to Ted from her saddlebags, "I don't suppose you have your own left?"

"Sadly no, Andur and I got jumped this morning and I was forced to use it then on myself." He grabbed the potion out of the air, he gave himself a moment of mental preparation and then downed the drink. He cringed and groaned as he felt the bones mending themselves into a new wing. "Try and never lose a limb Twilight, they never forget to let you hear about it later." He looked back at the new appendage, the base form of the wing had regenerated but there were far too few feathers for it to look like more than a malnourished chicken bone. "Well they don't heal all the damage all the time." He looked back to Twilight, "Are you ready for round two?"

"As ready as I can be, I guess." she said with a shrug.

Off they went after the strange creature, hoping to stop it before it could do any more harm to Ponyville and its residents.



Cartanis was still stunned at what he was seeing, *But... We can't be here, the astronomical amount of power required to do such a thing!*

Rarity looked about, "This place is just dreadful, what are they even wearing, it looks like somepony just slapped some rags together and called it the next trend in fashion."

"Why... Why would something risk this, just to show me my home?" Cartanis turned to look at Rarity, "What do you mean by doing this!" he shouted to her.

Rarity was surprised with the tone he had taken, "I know just as much as you do, well maybe not as much, but I don't know what's going on either."

"Not you Rarity, I am talking to that!" he pointed to her necklace.

She raised a curious eyebrow, "I don't think my element can-"

"Do not seek to question my judgment mortal." a voice boomed through the sphere they were within. The light from the element grew brighter, and a small sphere of light began floating in the sphere with them.

"Do you know how dangerous a dimensional crossing is! You could've caused-" but he was forced to silence, a strange power robbing him of speech.

"You know very little for one who thinks himself wise and learned in the ways of many things." It boomed back.

Cartanis calmed down a little and felt his ability to speak return, "Fine, I guess you're more than I guessed. But just tell me why?"

"You are a dangerous paradox, you and all that came from this world."

"What? If that's true how come we didn't just rip apart your world from a massive veil tear?"

"You were lucky to land so close to us, with what power we have we could keep the world held together from your careless use of powers our world couldn't comprehend. We had to go off of your memories and experiences to find your home so they would not be total paradoxes, even then it was dangerous to no end."

*Wait a minute... that can't be possible.* "You're not just some powerful relic..." Cartanis' eyes grew wide with a mixture of fear and realization. "Then why risk something so precious, you could've annihilated everything you created."

"It was necessary, the strange magics that beast, this Dra'nahb as your memories tell me, called forth were unlike any you ever tried to make use of. Our world is in far more danger than you can hope to realize. Now that the connection is made, we shall not need to worry about such danger to the veil again. At least not from your power."

"Wait... connection? Then can you send us back?" Cartanis said with hope in his voice.

"No." it stated flatly.

"What? At least tell me why!" Cartanis said infuriated.

"Before this journey we may very well have been able to, but now there is a threat far greater than some 'lich' and his pet."

"Fine, we'll take out this threat. Then you shall send us back."

"You fail to see the problem."

"What problem!" Cartanis was annoyed with the constant half-answers.

"In order to properly assimilate you into our world, to avoid the dangers of paradox, you must be better joined to our world. Normally such a thing would never be done, we should just take your compatriots and send you back here, but now we are left with no choice in the matter. The threat we sought to end centuries ago is once again rising, and only you and your friends shall have the means to end it." The orb floated directly in front of his face. "For I am Generosity, one of the five and servant of the sixth, I bestow upon you a gift most grand. But it shall also be a curse, never again

shall you want to return to your home, in so doing you would destroy it with your own presence."

"You don't mean to-!" Cartanis backed away, but was grasped by a powerful force. He felt power surging through him, "But you can't! We'll never be able to return if you do this!"

"It must be done, my charge is to defend the world given to us, and you are the only means of survival we have left against this foe." The Element of Generosity said with a tinge of sadness in its voice.

Rarity watched as Cartanis convulsed and twisted against the strange lights and forces that seemed to course through him from the light. *What is it doing!* She thought frantically. Soon the lights began to fade, and the orb seemed to dim a little as it floated back into the necklace. She felt a strange power surge through herself for a moment as well, not sure what just happened she looked over to Cartanis who looked infuriated.

"Now we must return, the danger is still there and you must aid in the coming battle." Generosity spoke.

"Fine then, bring about this enemy. If it's so important that a force of creation would attempt something so dangerous, then it must be stopped." Cartanis said with less anger in his voice.

As the world once again began to disappear behind a wall of light, Rarity noticed Cartanis looking about, trying to take in everything he could as he looked at it. "Was that really your home?"

He looked sad as he finally lost sight of it, "Belliron will always be with me, but please let us focus on the task at hand. If something that powerful is concerned over Dra'nahb and his actions so much that it would risk fusing worlds together to stop him... then we must be ready."

They then began moving along at incredible speed, no longer were they within a sphere of light but a Tunnel of energy as they rushed along through the void, safe from the destructive powers outside.





Fluttershy followed Pinkie Pie into one of the observation rooms in the clinic, "Is it really that bad?" she said with concern in her voice.

"Well from what Applejack and Nurse Redheart know he's not showing all the regular symptoms, I'm sure that just means he's going to be peachy keen in no time at all. Then we can have a good old laugh to celebrate." Pinkie Pie said with a smile on her face.

They went inside the room, it was cleared of most patients save one, Andur was laying unconscious on a large gurney a slow drip of black substances leaking from his mouth.

Fluttershy didn't like the looks of it at all.

"There you are, I hope the staff didn't give you too much trouble." Nurse Redheart spoke up as she approached them.

"They seemed a lot more agreeable once you told them to let us through, I wonder if I'll ever get to have such loyal NPC's under my command.." Pinkie Pie stated.

Fluttershy ignored the strange rant and trotted over with the nurse to Andur, "Is he going to be alright?"

"We don't know, he hasn't shown any other symptoms besides coughing up a profuse amount of 'Ghoul's Bite' I think he called it. Now do you have that potion you spoke of?" Fluttershy produced it from her Saddlebag, "OK just feed it to him, I'm needed in the other rooms."

Nurse Redheart disappeared out the doorway, Pinkie Pie trotted over next to her friend. "Do you really think we should be giving him two in a row?" she asked.

"I'm not sure... but it's got to help him somehow." Fluttershy said.

With the potion delivered and its effects subsiding, the two waited eagerly for any sign of life from Andur. Eventually he began coughing and sputtering profusely. "You really shouldn't waste so many resources on me..." he said weakly.

Fluttershy smiled at hearing his voice, Pinkie Pie hopped up and down excitedly. "I knew you wouldn't be infected, there is always one hero who is immune! I just love it when tropes are true."

Andur watched as Pinkie Pie continued on her happy dance around the room, singing a jingle of some sort. "I appreciate this..." he coughed a bit, more blackened phlegm meeting the pillow by his mouth. "But I'm afraid it won't help in the end."

"Don't talk like that Andur, you beat this before and you can beat it again." Fluttershy said to him.

"This isn't the same thing from my story Fluttershy, that infection was something else entirely..." he coughed more. "This wants my body for its own purposes, not my soul wrenched from existence." his eyes betrayed a calm acceptance as he looked at the fear on Fluttershy's face, "Don't worry about me, what little power I have won't let it take my body, I'll beat the infection. But in the process I'm going to burn myself out." His coughing sounded like someone who was suffering deeply as their throat was torn apart, a large volume of black liquid spewing from his mouth.

"There must be something you can do, Applejack went to the library to get her things. Maybe another potion-"

Andur interrupted her, "This isn't a sickness of the body anymore Fluttershy, my soul won't allow this to pass. It's already been locked in, I can feel my power waning as it finishes with what's left of this foul thing that crawls inside me." he smiled gently, "Once it's done, I think I'll try to make use of the last to save whoever is left before I am commuted to the afterlife."

Pinkie Pie had stopped dancing about, and looked sadly at Andur, "Andur, why do you guys always have to be such party poopers? Can't we just have one celebration without a problem from your world somehow interrupting it?"

Fluttershy looked about nervously, "Andur... do you think that if you could somehow get your powers back... you might be able to survive?"

He shrugged, "It would I suppose, but I don't think I'll be miraculously visited by Pelor now and be granted a reprieve."

"What if... What if I had a silly idea about how I might be able to help?"

"Well I won't know how silly it is unless I hear it-" but he stopped when he noticed her taking a shining necklace out of her saddlebag, its gemstones in the shapes of butterflies like her cutie mark.

Pinkie Pie gasped, "Fluttershy, we don't know what could happen. We don't even know if Rarity and Cartanis are OK."

"So this is an Element of Harmony?" Andur asked.

Fluttershy nodded as she put it on.

"Do you really think it will help?"

She nodded once more.

"Despite the danger, you're willing to risk it all to help a pony you hardly know?" Andur weakly laughed, "You are always so timid, but right now might be the bravest thing I've seen you do."

"I'm not brave... maybe a little foolish..."

"Don't talk like that, you'd be surprised how many times I was called a fool." He said with a smile on his face.

"Pinkie Pie, stand back... if you would... please" she said meekly, as her friend gave them some room.

Andur held out one of his hooves, Fluttershy then began to reach for it. The closer the two seemed to get the more intense the light from the element became. Until they eventually touched and Andur felt a strange presence link into his mind and soul. *You have it within you...* A motherly voice echoed within his mind. *But it's waiting for something...* Andur then felt a strange awareness of everything around him for a split second. *Generosity has finished the bridge, we shall make use of it.* The world around him seemed to brighten until he could not make out anything, his spirit left his physical form.

Andur felt himself soaring through the strange tunnel surrounded by an eerie blackness that was kept at bay by the walls around him. For a split

second he felt a familiar presence, *Cartanis*? Before he could inquire further he felt himself slam into a force, an angelic hum echoing through his mind as they pierced the strange veil.



Cartanis awoke back in his own body, he strained against the force that was preventing him from moving, as he looked about the dark room he was within.

"Settle down, you're going to hurt yourself." a voice echoed from the darkness as the room slowly began to come into view. Cartanis was in some form of study, books lined the walls as well as various tapestries.

"Release me this instant!" Cartanis demanded.

"Hold your tongue, I'll only be a moment."

Cartanis watched as a dark blue alacorn mare about the size of himself trotted into view, her horn slightly glimmering as straps locking him to the bed were undone and allowed him to move. He quickly looked himself over, just curious if anything had changed. He still felt his scars and broken horn, he was still blue, and definitely still just a unicorn. "What did you do with my clothes!" he shouted.

"Every time we tried to do something to contact you, they would retaliate." she gestured to some holes in the wall and a few singe marks about the room. "So we removed them."

"I don't have time for this," Cartanis remembered how the element had shown him the world for a split second and how he felt Abigail fighting her way through Ponyville, "Hat! Heel!" he waited for a moment before he lost his patience. "I don't have time for this." he got up from the bed, and searched his mind for the appropriate way to perform what he was thinking of doing.

"What are you doing?" the alacorn protested.

"Just be a good assistant and tell Celestia this isn't totally Rarity's fault." Cartanis said back with his eyes closed in concentration.

"Assistant? I will have you know-" but she was cut off as an aura of light sparked off of Cartanis' horn, the scars across his face began glowing intensely as he concentrated harder. He let out a shout of strain as he disappeared in a flash of light. The dark blue alacorn stood mouth agape, "But she said... how?"

Celestia trotted into the room. "Alright Luna, Rainbow Dash is back with her element, now we can try what you thought..." she noticed Cartanis was missing from his bed, and that Rarity was also rousing from her coma. "Matters of the State always seem to strike at inopportune times it seems."

"I thought you said he couldn't use unicorn magic?" Luna questioned her sister.

"I did..." she used her power to sense him out amongst the magic of the world, "It seems things have gotten a little more interesting."

"Hey, get back here!" a voice behind Celestia shouted as a top hat gently floated past her, hovering about the room for a moment before it gently floated to the ground where Cartanis had disappeared. Celestia let out a short chuckle as Rainbow Dash darted into the room. "Hey," she said aloud. "Where's Cartanis?"

Luna spoke up as she helped Rarity out of her bed, "Probably off to deal with whatever had him so agitated, he's already almost back to Ponyville."



Ted dived behind a building corner that was just out of the way from the incoming storm of quills. Twilight shortly winked into cover with him from a flash of light. "Ted, that was a horrible plan!" she said aloud.

"Well I never said that improvising was foolproof. Besides, how was I supposed to know that she could cannibalize ghoul corpses like that to recover quickly." He said with a casual shrug.

"How could you have not known that! It's from your world!" she said back with an annoyed huff.

"OK, OK, you got me there, but I mostly deal with animals. That thing is more along creepy underground secrets that only Andur really understands

so that he knows how to fight them." Ted scratched at his chin, "Do you think you could try to drop something heavy on her?"

"How about your overinflated ego." she retorted.

Ted gave her an unhappy glare before he quickly took a second to check on Abigail's progress, "Shoot." He said. "There goes another seven out of the old clinic, that's like twenty that I'm going to have to hunt down later."

"Hoping there will still BE a later for us." he heard Twilight say.

Ted saw a twinkle of light appear close to Abigail, who was already reacting to it with a bladed arm prepared to strike. "Twilight you fool, she already figured out the tell for that maneuver!"

"What are you talking about?"

*But then...* Ted looked surprised as he saw Twilight peeking around the corner with him, he looked back to Abigail and the brightening corona as a unicorn was about to burst through from a teleportation.

**[M/M/M/M]**

Cartanis had never known of power in such a way, he sailed across the ley lines of the world, a symphony of sound and lights as it answered his call for speedy transport across the world. The power of it seemed to flow within everything that it touched. He closed on his destination, *Alright, let's see how you deal with someone who knows how to fight you.*

As he pierced the barrier between the magic of the world and reality, he quickly concentrated and called to the arcane with his power. No more was the source muddled and confusing as if he was reaching across a great distance just to siphon some away, it now beckoned to his call, giving him anything he asked for.

He erupted into Ponyville in a blast of light as Abigail swiped with a bony scythe, it made contact with a surface as hard of steel. She stared directly into the gaze of an angry blue unicorn, *Threat elevated...*

Cartanis focused on the might of his arcane barrier, it streaked and sparked as it easily repelled the force trying to punch its way through. He then used

his power to throw it outward from himself in a concussive blast focused on the creature before him. It toppled and rolled across the ground as it failed to hold itself upright from the impact of it.

As she rolled across the ground, rays of intense cold arced through the air, leaving distinct trails of ice and frost in their wake. The rays met their marks, focusing their power upon the hardened plates of bone, making them cold and brittle to further attack.

Cartanis quickly focused orbs of concussive thunder, multiple ones, as they floated about he sent them off as he got the chance. Their forms distorting from the speed which they impacted, a solid crunch of bone heard just under the clap of thunder.

Abigail began to retaliate, sending off quills towards her target as she tried to close.

Cartanis once again used his new magic, his scars and horn sparking with power as he shot through the ley lines of the world to a new destination. Reappearing not far from where he was, a swarm of magic missiles swarmed about himself, angrily howling as he sent them off towards his target.

Abigail managed with great strain to dodge most of them, but more than a few met their marks, exploding and shredding at part of her sensitive shadowy form that was supposed to be protected by layers of bone. *Must not lose this body... inefficient... make use of subordinates...* She let loose a unearthly howl into the air, calling out to the abominable children of her works.

A dozen ghoul-ified ponies of various types erupted from the old clinic, charging with direction towards Cartanis.

He quickly reacted by arcing lightning through the air, the atmosphere was a storm of charged particles as they lanced through some of them, paralyzing them within their own bodies. But he felt the resistance of some of the unicorn's blocking his spells. *Blast, this won't end well if Abigail makes use of them properly.*

He noticed Ted waving to him from behind an old building near the other end of the street, he felt for the new perception he was given to use unicorn

magic. It felt tired and worn from use, *I've only got one shot at this*. He began calling to the various planes of the elemental chaos, bringing about a great ruin in the form of a powerful idea he concocted.

As the ghouls closed, the air around them began to warm and combust, distorting from the heat. As they began to back off Cartanis unleashed a hell-storm upon them, a small whirlwind of fire and lightning erupted from his position, tearing apart everything in its path.

Ted felt a pang of worry, *He can't defend himself against something like that! Even if it is his own-* He jumped back in fright as Cartanis warped in, a few feet in front of him.

Twilight spoke up, "Since when can you use unicorn magic?"

"Long story, not now. Ted are you ready to help out and stop gawking at me?"

"Oh yes, it's just umm." he was staring at Cartanis' flank.

"Can you use your bow?" Cartanis stated flatly.

Ted was broken from his train of thought, "I've been using my fey powers all day, I'm pretty dried up at this point." he looked over and saw a few unicorn ghouls leading stragglers out of the inferno that was slowly settling behind them. "If Abigail makes use of those unicorns, you're not going to be much help Cartanis, even if you are running on the new and improved model."

Cartanis cursed under his breath, "Then it looks like we'll just have to let her win, but I ain't letting her leave without taking some casualties." spells of various types began to swirl about in the air around himself, booming with power.

A thunderous cacophony of hooves met their ears as they looked down the street from where it originated, to see that Andur was charging through the roads behind them. He looked over to them, a smile graced his face when he saw Cartanis, "Just follow my lead!" he shouted to him as he continued out into the area around the old clinic, covered from neck to hooves in his plate-mail.



"How is he even?" Ted just threw his hooves up in frustration, "That's it, I'm tired of being amazed, I need to let off some steam." He followed close behind Andur as Cartanis followed at a distance, his spells in tow.

*I hope he can manage with only his martial prowess.* Cartanis thought to himself.

Andur stopped halfway to the group of ghouls, Ted stopping next to him. "OK so we let Cartanis pepper'em a bit and hope we get the stragglers. Then I'll go for-"

Andur interrupted, "Cartanis, don't waste your energy on the first few!" He said with confidence.

"Please tell me you're not improvising, that went horrible for me last time I tried it." He was uneasy as Andur smiled back to him, "Oh come now. You're not the jester, I am! You're always the one with the plan, not me!"

"All bets are off, just stay behind me." Andur then slowly marched his way towards the undead crowd.

Abigail measured up the resistance, *Confident... Foolish... threat of magic user nullified by unicorns... make use... then retreat with what's left...* She let out an order to her minions, leaving one of the unicorns behind to keep herself safe. A crowd of several angry ghouls charged at him, as they closed Abigail let loose a hail of quills to cover their advance.

Andur slowly broke into a charge as the monsters came closer, his aloof expression changed back into his normal serious demeanor. "Those that hold true to the faith shall receive absolution in the times of evil's reign!"

The power of his deity ignited through him, his armor erupting in a brilliance of sunlight. He shouted a cry of war as his pupils ignited. A wave of power flooding out from his person, as it connected to the ghouls it was appalled by the creations it met. The light weaved through the beings, tearing apart the corruption within them while scattering the quills above, they fell to the dirt beneath themselves as their bodies were devoid of a will. Calmly laying about the streets as if they were peacefully resting, waiting for someone to take them to their places.

The few that survived were soon ignited in pillars of intensely concentrated fire, disintegrated into piles of ash, or quickly finished off by Ted with a quick incision with his blades.

*Andur has antithesis power... extreme danger... situation lost, cut losses and fall back...*

Abigail immediately donated all her resources over to attempting to give herself an edge in her escape. Sending off her remaining minion in an attempt to slow the charging engine of retribution. For only a moment it ceased its charge, the vengeful star of Morellia piercing its form with a swift smash, sending the body scattering into a pile of ash and bone. Abigail made use of her time, folding and changing her form. Bat-like wings grew from the plates on her shoulders, the black shadowy form weaved its way between the fingers of the wing

Andur gave chase as she took off into the air, as she tried to lose them by flying high Andur began forming lances of light from his power, sending them off in an attempt to slow her. Abigail managed to dodge a few, but more than enough were connecting with her to force a dive to avoid the rest. She turned down an alleyway with a trail of flakes and ash in her wake, but broke the line of sight Andur had managed to hold. He turned to Ted, noticing his misshapen wing. "Would you mind?" He asked him.

"Absolutely not, why in the world would I want you to fix my crippling injury! That's just rude to even think-" Ted flinched in pain as he felt the bones mold back correctly and the feathers spontaneously regenerate from their places. "Is my sarcasm really that telling of my wishes?"

"Just track her as far as you can, we need to find out where Dra'nahb is. Now go!"

Ted took off into the sky, following the monster as it once again broke into the sky farther to the west from the tops of some buildings. "Halt in your current position monstrous trash! Nothing capable of rational thought hurts the innocence of this town during my patrol!" Ted shouted as he began his chase.

Cartanis approached Andur as he watched Ted flying off into the distance, "So I take it you had the same little adventure I did?"

"Yes." Andur said with some hope in his voice, "do you think we could make use of them?"

"No." Cartanis stated flatly, "I'm not sure if you were told the same, but I know for a fact that we will never be able to return now. Ted still has a chance, I doubt however that he will want to leave us."

Twilight galloped down the street behind them, "Cartanis are you OK? Is Rarity?"

"We are both fine, I just had to make use of your worlds strange magic to get here in time is all." Cartanis turned to Andur, "I believe you should consecrate whatever is left in the morgue, given there is anything left in there."

Andur nodded an affirmative, and trotted off towards the old building.

Cartanis then began wandering about the open space of the street, taking account of bodies lying around. He had to stop however when he felt Twilight staring at him, "You know it isn't polite to gawk. I've already looked myself over, and I'm pretty sure nothing has changed."

"Sorry..." she wanted to change the subject, "so what did you mean that you wouldn't be able to return?"

Cartanis sighed, "Your Elements of Harmony are things far greater than you may realize, there is very little that is capable of the feats they can perform. Now thanks to them, Andur and I are now stuck here for the rest of our days."

"That doesn't answer my question." she retorted.

"We were changed."

"Well I already know that."

"Not physically, that was easy for them to do. Now however, with a more direct link, we have been changed in a way far more fundamental." He turned to her, his strange gaze that betrayed years of research and understanding meeting her eyes. "We have been hybridized with your world, I am now both a unicorn and a human wizard. Not physically, but in

my soul I know this to be true. Before I was just a human wizard in a unicorn's body, but now" his scars and horn glowed slightly as he lifted a few rocks which in turn had an aura around them, "I am something else, as is Andur in some aspect I would assume." Light seemed to shine out of the old clinic and then dim, a gentle calm covered the area as the sun was just starting to reach its noon position in the sky.

He grew sullen, "Thanks to your elements, we are capable of existing here. However this is a road that cannot be undone, you can only add features to a soul in the way they have. If we ever tried to return, our world would react to us like a bacterial infection, as it should lest we cause a paradox that could eliminate it entirely."

"Well I'm sorry, but I don't think dwelling on it will help anything." Twilight retorted.

Cartanis laughed a bit, "That sounds like something Andur would say." He turned to see Andur wandering out of the old clinic, "Speaking of whom."

Andur approached his friend once more, "Didn't get the chance to talk to you earlier, but I think you could agree I was a little busy."

"You sure were!" Pinkie Pie stated as she appeared from down the road, "That was even cooler than I thought it was going to be!"

"I wondered if you had followed me." Andur stated.

"Well that time I was extra sneaky, and I think you don't have a good perception, might have something to do with all that loud noise your armor makes." Pinkie Pie looked over to Cartanis as she hopped along to close the distance, she let out a loud gasp.

"It's good to see you to-"

But he was cut off as she began smiling and dancing about while shouting. "Cute-cenera party!" over and over again.

"Um Pinkie Pie, that's meant for little fillies. I don't think Cartanis qualifies." Twilight spoke up.

"Oh, you're right." she calmed only a smidgen. "But it's still going to be a great party!"

"What are you two on about?" Cartanis asked with some concern. "We have a disaster to try and avert here, we are not anywhere near done." Twilight then pointed to his flank, Cartanis then finally realized what they were on about when he looked. "Well would you look at that."

A book lay open with the pages flowing in a breeze, the pages flipping stood frozen in time, each a different element that he could summon.

"That's just dandy I guess, even if I've never been one for tattoos or such nonsense..." he smiled slightly, "But I kind of like this one."

Pinkie Pie hopped over to Andur, "I know you've got to have one too!"

Andur was worried by the look Pinkie Pie was giving him, "Is it really that big of a deal?"

"Well is your destiny a big deal to you?"

Andur just rolled his eyes, then undid some of the straps that fastened his armor to his hips, before carefully removing the plates from his flanks.

The six pointed symbol of a Peloric sun was emblazoned on his hip which was covered by a shield engraved with an equine encased in armor.

"I did have a nickname for defender of the faith." Andur laughed as he got a good look at it.

"So what now?" Twilight asked.

Andur placed his armor back onto his person, and once again took on the demeanor of a leader. "We wait for Ted to report back, he has a book now and should be fine so long as he doesn't get overzealous. Until then, I think we've got another thing to worry about."

"What would that be?" Cartanis asked.

"Preparing the Bearers of Harmony for battle." He said turning to Twilight.

"Why would you do that? I'd love to help but I think those things are a little out of our league."

"I'm not sure if you'll have a choice in the matter, Fluttershy didn't." he said flatly. Concern growing on the two ponies faces.

Cartanis' interest was piqued, "What do you mean?"

"I don't think we are the only things here that have been affected by that connection the Elements of Harmony made to our old world."

Cartanis blanched slightly, "This could get very bad."

"Calm yourself. Kindness told me that we would not have to worry about that, the bridge between our worlds is one directional and only capable of transferring energy. However they have to be careful and only make use of sources they can locate using us."

Cartanis walked over to Twilight as he realized the possibilities, "I would recommend caution the next time you try to use your Element Miss Sparkle. It could have... permanent consequences."

Andur followed as Cartanis began trotting about the town, losing himself in thought, but he turned and said one last thing to Twilight and Pinkie Pie. "Make up your minds soon Bearers of Harmony, but do not do so out of fear or gratitude. There is no turning back once you have walked the paths we have. So make only the wisest decision, and make that decision true to who you are." He then caught up to Cartanis as citizens of Ponyville began wandering about their lives, looking to them for answers.

Pinkie Pie looked over to her friend, "What do we do Twilight?"

Twilight seemed to look very sure of herself for once, "We get the girls together, and make this decision as one."

Pinkie Pie followed Twilight as she was off to find her friends, to make one of the most important decisions of their young lives.

# Chapter 10

Applejack rummaged through another pile of books stacked upon a table, "Spike, are ya sure I set them down over here?"

Spike was busying himself by cleaning up the last mess of books Applejack had made, "I really don't know, I remember seeing them after I got up, but you had already gone off to the clinic. So now... I don't know, maybe Twilight moved them."

Applejack didn't want to think about all the problems she was having at the clinic, not right now anyway. *Just find your saddlebags, focus on the task in front of ya. Now think. You came in through the door, saw Andur, then... then...* But she couldn't focus thanks to her tiredness coupled with her insomnia brought on by worry. She then got infuriated with herself, "JUST FOCUS!" she haphazardly slammed her head against the table to try and snap herself out of it.

Spike flinched when he heard the sound; he looked over to see Applejack nursing her head. *Sheesh, overreact much?* Spike rolled his eyes as he went back to sorting books. A door was then rapped upon from the outside, "Coming!" Spike shouted as he hopped off a small stool he was using to reach the higher shelves. *I hope Twilight is OK, she galloped off looking all scared and concerned.*

The door was soon opened, to reveal a smiling pink pony. "Hey Spike." she said cheerfully.

"Hey Pinkie." Spike casually responded as the happy pony hopped her way inside.

Applejack snapped to attention at hearing Pinkie's name, she turned looking frantic to her friend, "What happened!" Before Pinkie Pie could finish taking a breath to speak, Applejack began blurting again, "It must be bad if you left, I'm sorry I'm taking so long I just can't find my saddlebags."

"Oh is that all?" Pinkie Pie began hopping about the library, looking amongst the shelves.

"We don't have time to fool arou-"

"Found them." Pinkie Pie stated whimsically as she tossed them over to her friend.

"How did..." she sighed and looked over to her friend, "They were under S, weren't they?"

"Nope, it was under kaAAaaay." she said as her voice rose and fell saying the name of the letter.

*Why would it- no, that doesn't matter!* "Alrighty then, let's get back to the clinic." Applejack quickly donned her knapsacks around her midsection and was then galloping over to the exit. The door was open slightly to the outside world, so Applejack continued in her frantic pace knowing she could just barge through it; for she had no time to lose.

**[M/M/M/M/M]**

Twilight approached the door to her library. Using her magic she pulled the door open completely, only to witness Applejack almost upon her. Shock and surprise read on both their faces as Applejack smashed into Twilight, sending them both toppling out into the street in front of the library.

Twilight was the first to rouse herself, a groan breaking from her lips as she shakily stood back up. She looked over when she heard Applejack also groaning, Twilight thought she looked funny, and realized she was missing her hat. Which seemed to have found its way onto her head, she gently lifted it with her power and laid it back onto Applejack as she stood up. "Thanks... Next time would you mind listening or paying attention more though, I couldn't have been THAT hard to miss." She said gruffly.

"Sorry Applejack, I've just been thinking and I needed to see you anyway."

"No time Twilight, gotta get this over to the-" she absently swung at her saddlebags that weren't there, she frantically looked about and saw them and their contents spilled out on the street, the straps had not been tightened enough to last such a collision. She saw a broken bottle, with its reddish contents seeping into the ground as it gave off an aura while evaporating. Applejack took her hat off the top of her head and slapped it across the ground, "Hay seed, mule pies, 'n' horse apples! WHY!"



Twilight had never heard her friend so angry before, "It'll be fine Applejack it's just one potion-"

"No Twilight it isn't 'just one potion'," she said with annoyance in her voice, "Wait a minute." hope seemed to beam in her eyes, "Twilight you still have yours right?"

"I had to make use of it." She didn't like the look on Applejack's face, "Applejack?" she said with some worry.

"That's it." she said looking down to the street.

"What?" Twilight had never seen Applejack look so distraught before, it was unsettling, it wasn't like her.

Applejack looked up into the sky for a moment to see where the sun was in the sky, it was hanging just past its apex marking the beginning of the afternoon. Water was welled up in her eyes when she looked back to Twilight, "Pinkie used hers on Andur, You had to use yours, mine is busted, Ted has probably used his fighting that monster." she sniffed a bit, "It's been hours already, I know I can't have much time left. Fluttershy is probably at her cottage by now, Dash is off in Cantorlot. It would take too long to go get them."

"Whoa, Applejack calm down." Applejack was becoming more distraught as she continued.

"Now I just don't have any hope, Andur probably won't make it, and then we won't have a clue what to do with Ma."

Twilight finally realized what Applejack was on about, "It'll be OK, it's not that bad-"

"Not that BAD!" Applejack's agitated expression focused on her, "Maybe you haven't noticed Twilight but there are some serious things happening around here! How am I supposed to explain it all to the family, and to Applebloom!"

Applejack was holding back tears as she frantically continued, "How am I supposed to explain to her, that she won't be able to see Ma ever again! How am I supposed to explain to her, that she won't even be able to say

goodbye to her mother, because she turned into some kinda monster back from the dead! How am I supposed to tell her..." she was sobbing uncontrollably as she fell to the street, exhausted.

She pulled her arms over her face, holding back sobs she managed to continued, "How am I supposed to tell her that I failed them all, that all I had to do was find my stupid saddlebags and-" but she couldn't say another word.

"Hey, hey, don't get like that now." Twilight pulled Applejack to her feet, and then gave her friend a hug.

"I don't think I can do it Twi' " she sniffled as she was crying on her friends shoulder, "For once in my life I just can't see how I'm supposed to do it."

"It's not easy, dealing with the undead, they bring about a unique type of suffering." said a voice with a strange accent.

Applejack's train of thought was broken by the familiar sound, Twilight let her go as she turned around to see her hope standing in front of her, "Andur! You're alive... But-"

Twilight heard the distinctive sound of Spike manifesting a letter from the Princess, and decided to leave the two to their conversation.

Applejack continued, "-I saw you, you were infected, you wouldn't respond to anything." she watched as he simply walked about the street, picking up her things and sorting them into her bags.

"Have you ever wondered why I fight Applejack?" he said as he turned around and picked her hat off the street; gently placing it on her head.

She just blankly stared at him like he was a specter.

Andur wandered past her, looking about at the various ponies who had stopped at the scene, "I never want to see another family torn apart like that." He had a tinge of anger in his voice, "I never want to see that foolish lich's plans play through to fruition ever again." He looked back to her, water was welled up in his eyes, "I never want to hear the cries of sons and daughters torn from their parents, and forced into a life never knowing their parents love, as long as I draw breath."

His pupils started to glow intensely, "He will answer for his crimes, not just from me, but from the Donnahues, the Maeburns, the Luroneans, and all the countless other lives he has smashed to pieces in his thoughtless crusade." Andur regained some measure of his composure, "So long as I exist, he will never know victory again. So Applejack, rest in peace for today, for your mother is well and you should seek respite while it lasts." Andur then wandered off through the town.

Applejack just stood in the street, she didn't know what to do. She was so frantic to save her mother, having that burden just lifted from her seemed to leave her in a daze, a wonderful carefree daze. She then felt all the exertion she had been performing for the last day and a half slam into her, and all she wanted to do was lie down somewhere safe.

Twilight burst from the library door, she looked delirious. She galloped over to Applejack, "The Princesses are going to be here in a few hours, they want a private meeting in the library, and it's a mess." she said in a very worried whisper, "We need to get started cleaning right now and I don't even know where Fluttershy is... Do you know where Fluttershy is?"

"Um... I'm right here..." a timid voice spoke, she ignored the confused look of Twilight and continued, not making eye contact, "She was crying, and Andur told me to not worry about it and..." Fluttershy didn't continue for she felt she would be rambling.

Applejack finally found the strength to speak again, "I'm really sorry about the mess Twilight, but would it be alright if I took a nap or something in your room. I'm really beat."

Twilight snapped out of her delirium for a second, "Sure Applejack, you've been through enough today." Then she watched Applejack walk into the library, saddlebags in tow.



Applejack awoke from the guest bed in Twilight's room, a strange noise had interrupted her sleep. She could see the sun outside the window, so she had to have been out for a few hours.

A few musical hums drifted through the air in the room.

*I know that song.* Applejack rolled over in the bed to look towards the source of the song.

"Why Jackie, you're already up."

"Mom!" Applejack shot out of the bed, and hugged her mother. She wanted to say how much she loved her, how worried she was, but all she could do was cry as she held onto someone she had thought she lost.

[M/M/M/M]

Twilight was pacing around the library's main floor nervously, *How in the world are we going to have a PIRVATE meeting in the middle of town!* She was pulled from her train of thought when she heard the door to her room open, out of which walked Applejack and her mother, both seemed very happy as they quietly made their way over to her.

"Thank you for allowin' me to stay until she woke." Ma Smith gently said to her. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a whole family of tearful reunions to get back to." Applejack and her mother shared one last peaceful smile as she left the library, off to Sweet Apple Acres.

"So Twilight, it looks like everythin' is all ready for them." Applejack noted.

"I guess... I just don't understand how it's going to be private. The town pretty much survived two disasters in a row in the same day, everypony will want to see them if they know both of them are here." Twilight said with a little worry.

"Well they are goddesses, I don't think we have to do any worryin' over what they are going to do." Twilight seemed to take her friend's words to heart, and breathed a slight sigh of relief. "So why are they wantin' to see us again so soon, besides the disaster I mean."

"Well the Princesses want to talk to the Dungeon Masters about what's happened to them, what is happening with the Elements, and about this monster that's got those stallions all worked up also."

"So it's going to be a busy meeting?"

"Yeah, and it'll probably be the easier part of our day."

Applejack looked confused by the statement, before she could ask another question there was a knock at the door. Twilight jumped a little and began pushing Applejack into her spot at the large table she had set up in the main floor of the library.

The door was knocked upon again, a little more agitated this time.

Twilight took a deep breath and calmed herself, "One minute." she said as she trotted over to the door. Using her magic the door was pulled open towards the inside of the library, giving a bow to the expected guests.

"Well I know I'm awesome, good to see somepony else thinks so too."

Twilight opened her eyes to the familiar voice, Rainbow Dash let out a snicker as she was frowned upon. "Well it's nice to know you made it here, was the chariot too slow for you?"

"You could say that." her friend said as she walked into the library.

Twilight took a few steps outside, looking about the afternoon skyline for any sign of the telltale golden chariot used to escort the royalty across Equestria.

"Hello, Miss Sparkle." the voice of a professional said.

Twilight took her attention from the sky to look to the old stallion, "Oh, hello Cartanis, I didn't think you'd be one to just walk your way over here, considering you can teleport now."

Cartanis chuckled. "My power is not infinite, even though it may seem at times, I'm still attempting to refill my reserve. Now I do believe I saw Rainbow Dash streak across the sky and land over here, and I would very much enjoy to be reunited with my clothes." He uncomfortably shifted his weight around as if he was self-conscious of something.

"She just went inside, I'm sure everypony will be glad to see you're alright."

Cartanis left Twilight to her strange gaze as she scanned the sky and went inside the library. Inside he saw Rainbow Dash greeting her friends as she fished around inside her saddlebags for something, she then produced his

hat from said bags. She then placed it upside down on a clear space of floor, flattened it, and widened the brim.

"Alright we're here." She said as she backed away from it.

Rarity then appeared from the hat, "Thank goodness, it's just so musty in there. Cartanis must do something about the ventilation, my hair is simply frazzled from-." She then saw the blue unicorn in the room. "Hello Darling." She said with all her charm, wearing a worried smile.

"I know it isn't perfect." He said back, taking note of how she wasn't wearing her element. Cartanis then trotted over to his hat, "Hat! Heel!" As it reformed its shape and landed atop his head, he turned to ask Rainbow Dash if she had his robes in her saddlebags. Only to be flabbergasted by her concerned look.

Three sharp raps to his head later, he found out why. He sighed and took the hat off his head, before he had the chance to set it up properly the same dark blue alacorn mare from earlier dropped out of the hat. After landing with a thud and groaning, a soft chuckle could be heard emanating from the inside of the hat as well, "You must learn to be a little more patient in the future."

The alacorn was shaking and trembling as she stood up. "I'm sorry if I don't enjoy small, dark, cold places." she said with a mixture annoyance and fear.

As Cartanis finally managed to set up his hat correctly, the voice continued. "Now, now, you know why I had to do that, and you must admit it wasn't that bad facing your fears and having nothing bad happen." Princess Celestia then materialized out of the hat. "You were doing quite well until the end there."

"I guess..." the alacorn said with a blush.

Twilight rushed into the room, closing the door behind her. At first she was glad they had finally made it, but was concerned when she didn't see what she expected to see. "I don't mean to sound like a nag... but where is your guard."

"It was written that we wanted a private meeting, or don't you remember?" Celestia chuckled at the worry on Twilight's face.



Rook exploded through the barrack's front door, "The Princesses are missing!" He waited for a moment, expecting the alarm to be sounded, for the guards placed on leave to immediately head for the armory, and for the veterans to prepare a search.

Instead he stood in horror as he watched them going back to their daily routine, the most veteran praetorian guards continuing with a card game.

Rook galloped over to them, "Sirs, I know I am new but my word must count for something."

"Just calm yourself Rook, we all go through this from time to time." the pegasus replied.

"I'm not having a nervous breakdown sir."

"I don't doubt your mental acuity, I'm simply introducing you to the swing of things when dealing with Celestia. She isn't a normal VIP," He chuckled somewhat, "I still remember that fiasco with her bird a few years back."

"I hope her sister isn't the same way." said another guard at the table as he played his hand. "Is she Rook?"

"Well, she likes books and keeps asking her assistants about..." but he shook himself out of it, "Can you just please tell me why we aren't freaking out right now?"

"Let me tell you a secret," the first pegasus who talked to him began, "Celestia is a goddess, if you didn't pick up on that, she knows things, and has plans that we can't hope to understand. So every once in a while she pulls stuff like this, after a while you get used to it, and learn to only watch out for her when she's around." He laughed, "Although I admit her Gala fiasco even had us expecting some kind of attack on the palace. We even made her take the emergency exit out of the palace, all according to her plan."

"What did Targe call it?" one of the pegasi spoke up, "Oh yeah, the finest moment of princess Trollestia."

Rook rolled his eyes and accepted the helpful advice, before he began to make his way back to his post.



Cartanis fastened the last button on his vest, "That's much better." He was once again within his old robes, the various runes reigniting with power at the presence of their master.

"What's so special about them?" the dark blue alacorn asked.

"You already know about my enchantments to them, but I still enjoy their ability to alleviate my mind from its self-conscious state."

"So you're insane without them?" she asked with a little concern.

"What? No, nothing like that. Let's just say that walking around as bare as can be is... frowned upon in my culture." he dusted off his robes and adjusted his cuffs, "I must say you are a fine assistant, these things haven't been cleaned in a while."

"I'm not her assistant!" she said flabbergasted.

Celestia was smiling. "She prefers the term, significant minion." she was shot a rather heated gaze from the smaller alacorn.

"Are all lesser alacorns so touchy?" Cartanis asked without picking up on any of it as he walked over to a book shelf.

"Look here you rascalion, I am not in any way affiliated with Celestia in a sense of servitude, I am Luna!" Luna noticed that Cartanis had missed a step as he was looking through a selection of books, *Maybe now he will show some more respect.*

Cartanis' eyes scanned over the alacorn, he seemed to be lost in thought as well.

Luna waited for a moment, expecting an apology.



"Well then Luna, thank you for taking care of my robes, they are in fine condition." He casually looked over to the door leading upstairs, "How long do you think they'll take."

Luna was stunned; he didn't even seem phased by her declaration of divinity.

"It's a big decision Cartanis, you must know this yourself." Celestia spoke.

Cartanis laughed slightly, "I admit, when Andur approached me with his idea all those years ago, I was reluctant to leave my job at the university. Let alone believe he was capable of it." He looked back to Luna, "Would you humor me by answering a few questions?"

*I'm not going to snap, that's wrong, just go with it.* "Alright." she said.

"I was wondering, are you still capable of performing your divine duties?"

Luna frowned for a second, "Yes." she said with some restrained anger.

"Then may I ask why you are assumed in such a form?" Cartanis was lost in thought, not paying attention to the world around him.

"Excuse me?"

"You are in the form of a mortal alacorn, I understand that not many exist, you two may be the only ones. But this is a safe place to show yourself, why don't you?"

"What are you implying?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Something just doesn't add up. You shouldn't look like a child-"

"A CHILD!" her voice boomed, "You insult my position, mock my predicament, and... and..." she sighed, took a deep breath to calm herself, and then looked to the terrified unicorn.

Cartanis watched as the powerful being looked at him with eyes that showed an ageless knowledge of the world.

"Excuse me, perhaps I am a child once again. I should be far more patient than this, and more understanding of a visitor from another world." She

helped him off the floor, "I need to let go of my anger, it consumed me once before, and I'll never let it happen again."

"So the elements did do something to you, but they shouldn't be able to change you in such a way." Cartanis was in thought.

"You think you understand the elements? They are older than us, the royal sisters, how can you be so sure of yourself?"

"I don't claim to know them, I simply have theories that are currently in a state of flux. I think I understand them only to have more questions arise. There are too many holes in my knowledge of your history to figure out what they are capable of." He looked up to Luna, "How did you damage yourself?"

Luna looked questionably to him.

"The Elements of Harmony, or one of them anyway, told your sister you had used forbidden magic and 'damaged' yourself. That they had to repair you. Do you remember what that could be? Whatever you could've done that turned you into Nightmare Moon?"

Luna backed away from him, her eyes shut tightly, she seemed to be holding back tears. "I'm sorry... I..." She turned from him, and trotted away to another corner of the room.

Cartanis tried to follow, but was stopped by Celestia. "I'm sorry Cartanis, but I can't allow you to try and bring that side of her up."

Cartanis sighed, "I understand it is painful for her, but I need to know-"

"No, you don't understand her pain." she interrupted, "You were not in the palace for the first few months after those events. When she would scream in her sleep, calling out for help, and beg for somepony to stop her." Celestia looked into Cartanis' eyes, betraying her own wisdom. "Maybe one day, but for now you must let her decide when she is ready to begin her healing."

Cartanis nodded in understanding, *Perhaps I have forgotten what it is to be human... to care...* "Would it be alright if I spoke with her, I read up on you sisters a while back. I think I can make it up to her." Celestia allowed him to

pass. As he closed on Luna she kept her face from him, he could see tear stains on the floor. "I didn't mean to dig at something so sensitive, I for one should know when an issue is off the table." He scratched at the floor.

"It's alright, you had no way of knowing." she gently wiped away the tears that were still in her eyes.

"Well I can't stand to see a beautiful girl... or mare I guess, cry." He took off his hat, "So being the old nobleman I was raised to be, I'm making it up to you."

Luna raised a curious eyebrow as she watched him open his strange hat upon the floor.

"If you would follow me." He hopped down inside.

Luna approached the brim of the hat, but stopped at the edge apprehensively.

Cartanis reappeared, his head sticking out of the hole, "I would guess your claustrophobia has something to do with your time in the moon?" Luna scratched at one of her front legs and nodded. "Just take my hoof, it'll be fine, I promise."

She took a deep breath, "Let's just get this over with." She grasped his hoof, and was whisked away inside Heratio.

Celestia was heartened at the sight of her sister learning to trust others once again.



Fluttershy continued to look down to the floor of the room, making sure to not make eye contact with anypony in the room. Twilight had already told them about The Dungeon Masters warning, and what it could entail for them.

"Well I ain't letting this Dra'nahb guy get away with nearly turning the whole town into a bunch of shambling things, he's gonna get what's coming to him." Fluttershy could feel the anger of her friend booming against the background noise.

Twilight's concern was the next to bath itself over the atmosphere, like a soothing bell chime. "Dash, we can't just do this because we feel like this. Andur and Cartanis warned me, if we go down this road, if we let the elements change us so we can help them, there will be no going back. What about your dreams of joining the Wonderbolts, you can't just think short-term here, what will we do after all of this blows over."

"I for one know what I'm doin'. Andur had a talk with me a few hours ago, and it's still buzzin' around in my head." Applejack's determination was like a beacon, "I'm not ever goin' to let that creep get away with this, or any creep like him, even if I get turned into some kinda fire spitting superpony."

Applejack sighed "I know I may never be able to go back to the farm, and just live out a simple life with a family of my own." sadness rang out in her heart, then blossomed into warming hope. "But they need our help, they won't admit it, but they need it. Why else would the Elements have already changed Rarity and Fluttershy?"

Rarity spoke up with confidence beaming from her soul, "A lady such as myself cannot allow such crimes to go unpunished. This uncouth character needs to be taught a lesson, a lesson that we won't just sit down and take all of this bullying he's been dishing about. He needs to know that you don't mess with my Ponyville, and just walk away with your head held up high."

Pinkie Pie spoke up, "Well I can't stand it anymore, I want to help too." her emotions were all over the place, but Fluttershy could pick up on her good intentions.

"Pinkie, we can't just jump in-"

"I know Twilight, but it's just not safe here anymore. How is anypony supposed to have fun and be happy if they aren't safe? Why do you think I wanted you to help plan Eastavis? Because you would make it safer of course! I've always been about making ponies happy, that's what every party has been about." sadness rang through the air, "Now they can't even be happy because monsters are running rampant in the streets, they don't even feel safe in their own hometown. I don't want that, I want them to be able to smile and be with their families without a care in the world."

All the ponies had surprise emanating from them as they took the rather unexpected well thought out answer.

Twilight sighed, "Well it looks like we are mostly decided, I know I can't just sit idly by and study my books. You might need me, and I can't just sit here and let my friends go somewhere and fail because they would've needed me and my skills." worry was in the air, it left high pitched notes as it floated about. "I wouldn't be able to live with myself if anything happened to you girls because I wasn't there, I've got to give everything I got or else all of Equestria could be in danger."

Fluttershy then felt their eyes on her, she could feel them judging, and anxiously awaiting her response. "I-I want to help... I really do... I just need some time to think... I need to talk to Andur..." She just wanted them to stop feeling at her, Andur told her about the danger of her power, but it was maddening to feel the world around her in this new way, she couldn't take much more.

"Are you OK Fluttershy?" She felt Rainbow Dash's worry and concern, it was bathing over her, infiltrating her mind and revealing her intent. She could hear her thoughts, sounding like a thousand buzzing bees that were made miniscule by larger more complex ideas which rang with the sound of thunder.

"JUST STOP!" Fluttershy snapped, her feelings manifesting into a wave of force that shot Rainbow Dash across the room.

The girls looked on in horror right before Rainbow Dash managed to use her wings to catch herself and gently float down to the floor, "Whoa! That was awesome!"

Applejack looked peeved at her friend's careless words, but before she could speak Fluttershy started up again.

"No it isn't awesome, it's maddening! The world is never quiet its always singing and ringing and all these other noises that I just want to stop." she was sobbing slightly. "How am I supposed to take care of my animals when I snap like that." she said with a whimper.

Fluttershy curled up on the floor, her arms over her head, trembling against the weight of it all.

Applejack trotted over to her friend, "Dash if you can't take this seriously then maybe you shouldn't be here."

"What are you talking about?"

Fluttershy spoke up, "She's talking about your intentions Dash... All I have to do is concentrate for a few seconds, and I can feel your thoughts... I don't mean to... but you're thinking so loudly..." She returned to her quite balled up form on the floor.

"I'm plenty serious about this!" she yelled back.

"Are you?" Applejack said, "or is this about something else?"

"Hey you're talking to Rainbow Dash remember, I never left you gals hanging before and I'm not starting now."

"What are you fighting for Dash?"

"Huh?"

"Why will you be fighting? What's the point of all the danger!" Applejack glared at her.

"Well... umm... I can't let you gals get hurt, and stuff..." her eyes darted around.

"What's it all about, is it still about the Wonderbolts? Do you think you can get famous from all this and have them ask you to join?"

"You know I'm not that shallow!" She yelled.

"Then what other reason is there?"

"Look I don't know OK! I just want to help and I can't stand being on the sidelines!" Dash snapped.

"This isn't about just a willingness to help Dash, I'm sure half the town would help us out right now. But you have to ask yourself why, you need to find out what it is you fight for. Until you do." Applejack trotted over to Dash's saddlebags and took out a necklace.

"Hey!"

Applejack stared down her friend, who looked like she was ready to fight. "When we leave with the Dungeon Masters, we may not be coming back. Even if we do, how will you know that it will have all been worth it."

"Of course it'll be worth it! We'll have saved Ponyville."

Applejack glared, "What if some of us don't make it back, what if I don't make it. Then what? All you'll do is blame something, you will think I died for nothin', and you won't understand why I gave my life to make sure ya'll made it back. All it will do is sour you to the world." Applejack grew concerned by Rainbow Dash's frown, "Will you be able to continue?"

"I... I don't know." Rainbow Dash turned away from her friend, "Look, this is kinda heavy stuff."

"It is Rainbow, that's why we can't just jump into this like it's nothin'."

"Would it be alright if I got some air, I don't think well all cramped up like this."

"If you think it'll help, we'll still be here for a while."

Rainbow Dash thanked them as she went outside and took off from Twilight's private balcony, arcing into the sky with the speed unlike any other.

Twilight looked over to Fluttershy, who had her arms protecting her eyes as she was still curled up on the floor. She opened her mouth to say something but was cut off.

"I'm fine Twilight... and I'm sorry I snapped... just stop staring at me, that only makes it worse."

Twilight did her best to stare at a wall as she talked to her friend. "So what exactly is your power?"

"All Andur was able to tell me... before he had to take off after that monster." She shuddered at the thought of her close encounter with the beast. "Was something about me being an... Ardent? I think he called it. A healer of the mind... or... something."

"So why no eye contact?"

" 'Eye's are the windows into a beings heart and soul', was what he said. If I'm not careful, I might..." Fluttershy couldn't continue though. The words that Andur had used to describe what she could potentially do forced her to stop, she was terrified to think of herself as such a thing, or see herself as a danger to the ponies she cared for so greatly.

"Alright, it'll be OK." Twilight did her best to sidewalk her way over to her friend and gently console her. "Do you think you could cope a little better if you had some time alone?"

"Yes" she meekly stated.

Twilight motioned for the girls to head downstairs, as they left Twilight got a hold of Rarity. "So what power do you have?"

"Cartanis left the palace before I was awake completely, and I didn't really notice anything different. He did catch me though before we got up here, and just told me to not make use of any new perception I might have, whatever that would mean." She began waving her hoof in front of her face, "Do you think it's a little hot in here?"

Twilight was slightly shocked when she saw ice crystals forming in the air around Rarity.

Rarity sighed, "Much better."

"Um Rarity..."

The crystals almost immediately evaporated as Rarity gave Twilight her full attention. "Is something the matter? My hair isn't changing color or something is it?" she frantically began combing through her mane as she carefully inspected it.

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Rainbow Dash soared about the town, her mind buzzing with thoughts. *How can I be so compelled to help if I don't know WHY! That doesn't make any sense. I've got to have a reason!*

She found her way over to a wayward cloud, and gently landed on it, taking a load off as she relaxed to watch the sun set. As she once again tried to think, a noise caught her attention, she turned to see a small orange pegasus filly buzzing her way onto the cloud. "Hey Rainbow Dash!" she said excitedly.

"Hey Scootalo," the filly beamed at hearing Dash say her name, "are you sure you should be buzzing around like that. It's not the proper way to fly."

"I know... my parents are always telling me to learn to glide properly. My wings are just still too small that's all." she then returned to her excited state of mind. "So what are you doing up here? shouldn't you be going around slaying monsters and cool stuff like that with those other heroes?"

Rainbow dash wasn't blind, she knew that Scootalo practically worshiped her, but for once she found herself thinking about it differently. A question gnawed its way through her mind. "Why am I your hero Scoots?"

"Huh?" Scootalo looked confused by the question, "Well you know... your awesome and stuff!"

"What makes me so awesome?"

Scootalo thought for a moment, then remembered something, "That one time, when I first saw you after my family moved to Ponyville. I remember it."

"And?"

"That day, I was new in town, nopony really knew me. I hadn't even learned to buzz around yet, my wings practically didn't even work." her eyes beamed, "But then I saw you, flying around the town clearing out all those clouds, so fast, you were like bam, zoom, POW." she kicked at a puff of the cloud and made it dissipate with her exuberance.

"It made me think..." Scootalo seemed to stop for a moment and drift into thought, "About all the cool things I could do when I learned to fly. All the places I could go see. I could be cool like you were, zooming around the skies making all of our lives better." She smiled, "That's why you're awesome!"

Rainbow Dash was stricken by her words, they made her think, probably more than any other thing had made her think before. *Is that why I want to join the Wonderbolts?* She thought about the first time she saw them, they had made her think the same way when she was a filly.

She thought about all the other fillies and colts in Ponyville. How they all played with each other, making believe of their possible futures. Finding out about their cutie marks and what they would do in their lives. All the things they would experience as they grew up, the friends they could make, and the adventures they could have.

She thought about how it could all be ended by one monster who no one else could stop, she finally knew what she had to fight for, what she had to defend with her very life. She stood triumphantly on the edge of the cloud, glaring out towards the Everfree, her eyes like that of an angry hawk. *I'll show you what happens when you mess with foals who haven't even learned to live yet!*

"Thanks Scoots." she gently ruffled the filly's mane.

"You're welcome!" she stopped for a second, "Wait... for what?"

Rainbow Dash pushed the cloud near the ground and let Scootalo hop off, "I don't think you'll understand today, but one day, remind me to thank you again. Now you stay safe, ya hear me?"

"Umm OK." Scootalo watched as Rainbow Dash shot off into the distance, back into town. *When did she get all touchy feely?*



Cartanis was surprised as he went over to the wall that hid Heratio's inner sanctum from the world; the puzzle was already almost halfway solved.

"You didn't happen to-"

"I like to keep myself busy." Luna interjected, "It helps keep my mind off of things."

"Then let's finish this up." Cartanis began shifting about the remaining stones, replacing the few Luna managed to mess up, but he still had far less to do considering it was her first time at the puzzle.

Luna would fidget every once in a while, jumping at ghosts in her mind.

As the final stone was set in place, the wall began to recede away as it had before, light shining through from the activity on the other side. "Looks to be that Heratio is done with the minor fixes."

Luna eagerly wandered into the light of the new room, "Who?" A large glass monster soared through the air and stopped in front of her, she yelped and shot it across the large room with her power, smashing it against a far wall.

Cartanis' eyebrows raised in concern, "Remind me to never sneak up on you."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I really shouldn't be that jumpy." The glass monster reappeared in front of her, its brightly glowing edges flickering in the light of the room. Luna froze as if she expected swift retribution.

"So how goes things Heratio." Cartanis casually stated as he trotted past Luna.

"Sir, please refrain from bringing omnipotent skittish types here, or at least warn them first." It chimed back. "Repairs are complete, however the matter of the books remain, I do not have the capacity to restore them."

"I'll get a dent in them yet Heratio, for now, register a new guest. Luna, if you would."

"Registry accessed." Heratio seemed to float as it was in processing. "User identified, ID saved." Heratio floated over to Luna, "Enjoy the halls, I do hope you leave here wiser than when you arrived."

Luna closed the distance between herself and Cartanis, "What is that thing?"

"Oh he's basically an automaton, I'm not sure if you know what that is-"

"I know plenty about automatons." Luna stated.

"Really?"

"Quite sad, the state of Equestria's technology. There were things we had a millennia ago that they are just starting to rediscover now."

"You must've really done a number on-" but he cut himself short, "Excuse me. I spend too much time with books and theories in my mind."

"As do I." Luna admitted.

"Now onto the main attraction." Cartanis wandered around the brightly lit main room, the orbs of light cascading to show the ways about the halls. Luna followed as he went through an archway with a book identifier placed over it.

How impressive does he think his collection.. could... possibly... But she stopped as she stood, her mouth agape at the expansive room before her.

As far as the eye could see, rows of books stood upon shelves, seemingly reaching up into the sky that didn't exist. "So I take it you are impressed?"

"What was your first clue?"

"I know you enjoyed knowledge, you were apparently far more technically savvy than your sister. Although I also read that you didn't seem to have such a way with the ponies under your rule."

Luna chuckled a little, "Sis was always a much better leader than I was, but she was horrible with her paperwork. I'm surprised she stayed sane trying to keep up with it all after a thousand years"

"SO!" Cartanis slapped his hooves together with a clomp, "Where would you like to start?"

Luna stopped for a moment and thought, but she was distracted by the mountains of ash around them. "What happened here?"

"Oh, a careless magician thought to impress the crowds with a show of daring do, and succeeded." He scoffed. "In ruining over thirty percent of the collection."

"How many books do you think you lost?"

Cartanis rubbed at his temples, "I don't really even know the count, even Heratio only spits approximations at me. I want to say about three thousand books, and only the gods know how many pages."

Luna rubbed a hoof against her chin, she let her power flow out from herself for a moment, testing the ash piles with it. She could feel the telltale signs of her world's magic flowing through it, being a part of it as everything else around her was. "This should be simple enough."

"What should be?" Cartanis watched as the alacorn's eyes began to glow intensely, her horn sparking with power. A nova of strange bluish light erupted from her person, as it crossed over the piles of ash it seemed to react. The various particles floated about the room, creating a fog of dust that seemed to slowly be getting lighter as it continued.

Cartanis continued to watch, making use of his own magic to try and track what was going on around him. He felt Luna as if she was everywhere at once, he realized that was impossible, but then thought about what if her consciousness was. The idea struck him as odd, yet he was still sensing her around him. The magic then began to coalesce clearly at certain points in the room, books appearing in the small spheres of bluish light. Before they floated to an empty shelf somewhere in the distance, each time this occurred the fog would get lighter, slowly revealing more of the room.

Eventually it subsided, and Cartanis felt Luna once again recede into her own physical form. "There we go, now what do you have on your world's integration of magically powered technologies."

Cartanis gently smiled at her, she had no idea how much work she had just saved him, how much knowledge she just restored to the world. "Thank you."

Luna almost seemed surprised to hear the word, "I'm sure anypony with my level of power would've done something about it as well." she said with a blush.

"How did you know how to do that by the way?"

"Are there creatures in your world that are capable of eating words off the pages of a book?" She asked curiously.

Cartanis shook his head, "Maybe, but none that I know of."

"Then you have your answer." Luna said, "Now about those technologies."

"This way then, I'm sure Heratio will update you to VIP status for doing this." Cartanis trotted happily through the various shelves, Luna close behind her eyes eagerly darting between the bindings of the tomes which held so much precious knowledge.

[M/M/M/M]

Andur approached another house, the last one that he had to visit. He sighed, *It still never changes*. He rapped upon the door, he waited for a moment before he heard the telling signs of residents within working with locks and fumbling with handles.

A mare answered the door, she jumped a little at seeing Andur before her.

"Is this the residence of Pebila and Dusty?" The look on her face betrayed the truth, *I suppose word has gotten around*.

The mare was shaking her head back and forth, mumbling something beneath her breath. When Andur produced the vial she broke down, unable to bear it.

"Do you have family that you could stay with?"

she shook her head as she took the vial of dust from him. "Sho-shouldn't you have two?" she wiped away at tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Pebila wasn't amongst the dead."

"So now she's a monster." she looked to the verge of tears again. "She was just starting to really thrive... she had a coltfriend."

"It's not over yet."

The mare looked angrily at him, "Not over? My husband is a pile of dust in my hoof and my..." but she couldn't speak another word, "A fine job your doing, 'hero'."

She attempted to close the door, but Andur stopped it. "Madam, I know you're hurting, but you can't let this beat you."

"Why shouldn't I? I've heard about this thing you're after, you should've been able to stop it. Why did you hold back!" She was jabbing her hoof into him, "Why didn't you save my little Pebs..." she then started to break down again.

"The circumstances that lead to all of this was out of my control until a few hours ago, don't think I'm not hurting too."

"You? Hurting?" she scoffed, "You'll just move along once this all blows over, and I'll be left to raise my colt alone while you go back to your own little life."

Andur's gaze gave her pause, he laid down at her doorstep, looking her in the eye. He reached inside his strange bag, and pulled out a very old looking book. The leather cover was cracked and wrinkled from age, the paper was slightly yellowing from exposure to the elements. He gave her the strange book once she had set down the vial someplace safe.

She opened the book, each page was filled with strange names, names like The Lincolns and The Wellingtons. Some seemed to have been rewritten in their place countless times to refresh the markings on the paper.

Andur spoke, "Those are the names of every family that this monster I am after has hurt, I won't forget a single one of them, I won't allow myself to become disenchanted to the suffering of others." His defiant gaze spoke litanies of fury. "The cruel and the evil shall know fear in my presence, but those that are unrepentant, those that truly believe in their accounts of evil, shall find no mercy from my wrath. The book of Pelor, verse twelve." He took the old book from her and flipped to a new section he had made in the back, "He shall know your name, he shall know every name in this book when he answers for his crimes."

He looked to her one last time, "And before it is all over, when he thinks he has won, when he believes that you are willing to end your life. He will be smote to the ground as he witnesses you continuing in your life, finding joy in the little things, as you stand remorseless in your decision to stay alive." He pulled out a writing utensil from his bag, "Now may I have your name?"



Fluttershy finally had a moment to herself, she could still perceive all of the emotions around her, but they were distant and faded. In this relative silence she prepared her mind, she made walls and fortifications. Slowly as she experimented the whispers in the background seemed to quiet. She fed the idea in her head that seemed to aid her in this endeavor.

I am Fluttershy, I am no other.

She repeated the mantra in her mind, each time it seemed to help her concentrate. She felt as though she could distinguish between each of the noise sources much more easily. The excited ringing of Pinkie Pie, the quiet calculations of Twilight, and her other friends as well. But one thing stood out, a serene chime was approaching the library, a mind that was at ease and prepared for a storm.

She was drawn to it, feeling the new sensation click in her mind. Now she felt as though she was flying, but she wasn't, she was still in Twilight's study. She could see images, the area outside the Library, and she was closing fast.

She shook herself out of it and felt the connection break, *Rainbow Dash?* She trotted over to a window and looked outside, and right where she left off she could make out the telltale rainbow streak of her friend as she began her final descent to the library door.

Fluttershy was more surprised by the fact that as she looked at Dash, her mind didn't seem to leap out of herself in an attempt to understand the noise or make it go away. She only heard the same emotion ringing clear from Rainbow Dash, it sang of its presence with clarity.

Confidence



Cartanis finally relented to Luna's voracious intellectual appetite, "I don't think I'll be able to keep up with your questions anymore."

Luna frowned as she shot him a curious look.

"I know quite a bit about my worlds magic, but after a time even my knowledge is going to run dry when faced with a reader of your magnitude." Cartanis looked away, "and stop with that look, it pulls my heart strings tighter than a sad puppy."

"Please, I'm not that cute." Luna returned to the book she was reading about the use of psionic abilities. "I was just curious about the impacts of-

"-of mind based powers being used on unprepared minds, yes I know." He sighed, "That is not my strong suit, I'm more along the lines of explaining how a gem enchanted with fire can be used to replace coal in a steam engine. Zen and the principals of the mind are more Andur's domain."

"Then may I speak to Andur?" Luna was already onto the next book from the pile that was created, already halfway through the first chapter before the question left her mouth.

"He will get here in his own time, he needs to do his thing about town of 'putting the minds and souls of the dead at ease'." Cartanis' eyes snapped shut as he slapped a hoof to his face in frustration, "and I completely forgot my end of the plan."

"Hmm?" Luna said, her attention drawn from the third chapter of the book.

"Nothing you need to worry about much, just a pegasus that needs some mental training wheels is all." Cartanis trotted off back towards the main room, soon realizing Luna was following him. "You don't have to come with me, it's just a simple errand."

"If it involves a Bearer of Harmony, I'm afraid it already involves me." she said with regal authority.

"I should expect no less." Cartanis then continued on his way, as Luna shot a sad glance back at the pile of unfinished books by the table she was seated at earlier. "May I ask why?"

"Besides the fact that my sister and I know very little about them, other than how they choose their avatars, we must do our best to understand them. I protested her choice to allow them to keep the elements with them, with the events of the past few days only causing me more concern about their power and that decision."

Cartanis could tell she was holding something back, one side of him wanted to pepper her with questions, but another side was screaming about the danger to his person if he annoyed her too much. He decided on taking the route that would leave him less mangled and continued towards the storage rooms.

After they proceeded into an archway that was marked with a storage chest, past the gateway they were within a circular room that had other archways leading down long hallways, each with a different numeric symbol above it.

Luna took glances down the various rooms they were passing by. Mystical orbs of light floating within canals drawn upon the walls, which gave off a soft blue hue to everything. In some rooms she saw great slabs of metals, some rooms filled with more of it than others.

"So what are we here for?" she asked.

Cartanis stopped for a moment, "Well if I could remember which of these rooms Ted dedicated to his precious storage I would be better able to answer you."

"You're lost? In your own sanctuary?" She felt a little panicked, the walls seemed to be closing in on her.

"No I'm not lost, I just forget whether it was room three-A or five-C that Ted used to store all of his various experiments and reference materials." He began tapping his hoof against his head for a moment, trying to pound out the scattered thoughts so only what he needed to remember would remain.

Luna was doing her best to maintain her composure, the walls however were creeping in on her like a predator stalking a frightened calf. "Could we please move along?"

Cartanis looked back to her, even if she was putting on a brave face he could see the subtle twitches and hear the anxious hoof taps she was making. "Is everything-"

"Of course I'm fine, you're alright, I'm alright. It's all dandy, now which way to this place we're going." she blurted out in a very hastened fashion.

One of Cartanis' eyebrows rose in a questioning manner, "I think I'll try to pick up the pace. Heratio!" his voice echoed off the hallways. Soon a glimmer of light appeared and a floating monocle materialized in front of Cartanis.

"Yes?"

"Ted makes use of which storage room for his experiments?"

Heratio seemed to drift about as it accessed lists and storage data, "Room three-A, the Armory. There is a note added to this data packet, shall I read it."

Cartanis sighed, "Do I want to hear it?"

"Probably not sir, but it's labeled as important."

Cartanis gestured for Heratio to continue while he rolled his eyes. Ted's voice then seemed to emanate from Heratio's form, "Hello Cartanis, I know this must be you asking him this. I'll be short, first: please refrain from touching my things when I'm away unless it's important, I make weapons of war not love. Second: you remember that bet? 'I won't forget the halls of my own hat' yeah and my mother was a ham-" but the message was cut short as Cartanis ordered Heratio to get on with it.

They followed Heratio out back into the circular main area right before the entrance to the central room. They went down the hallway with a numeric three above it, the very first room in view on the left was then entered.

Inside they seemed to enter a well lit hallway, not much longer than a few pony lengths.

"There doesn't seem to be anything here." Luna noted the empty space.

"Heratio, bring up item collection three, sort for headwear." Cartanis said aloud before turning to Luna, "Refrain from moving any part of yourself over the edge."

Luna only had a second to question the statement before the loud noises of brick and mortar shuffling around them blocked out her thoughts for a moment. She peeked over the edge of what they were standing on, which

was now a solid plank that stretched from the doorway to the wall on the other end. Looking over into the black abyss beneath them, she was quickly pulled back right before a rush of air met her face, a blur of objects began falling from an equally black abyss in the ceiling. It seemed chaotic and random, but Cartanis just looked on as though it were routine.

Eventually the chaos subsided, a few objects hung listlessly in the air, waiting for direction.

"Now Luna, this time, don't touch anything." Cartanis said with his eyes locked onto hers as he began to scan the few items that remained.

"So, one gifted individual made all of these?"

"No. This is the storage Armory, we occasionally, well... more than occasionally; would find items of interest. Ted would confiscate them and keep them here in storage, he then tested them to find out their secrets of creation, using what he learned to try and make his own. He never tended to keep things that were safe though, but we still find uses for the stuff he is finished with." Cartanis let out a triumphant cackle as he picked out a circlet from the lineup.

"That is for?"

"For Fluttershy's potentially catastrophic headaches." Cartanis gently floated the circlet next to himself with his arcane power, too afraid to cross realms of magic on it.

Luna's gaze fell over the single piece of the circlet that drew her attention, besides the rather simple silver ringlet that was the device, the gemstone socketed into the forehead of it seemed to beckon to her.

Cartanis slapped her hoof away, concern evident across his face. "This is why I wanted you to stay behind." the circlet floated behind him as he gazed into her eyes that blinked away at her confusion.

Luna looked slightly fearful in the direction of the device hidden by Cartanis' frame, "Why does it beckon like that."

Cartanis' brow furrowed, his eyes scanning her cautiously. "Because your mind is broken."

The allegation made Luna scoff, "What makes you so sure about that?"

"What happened Luna?" Cartanis' steely gaze pierced Luna's attempt at a dismissal. "What did you do to yourself all those centuries ago?"

Luna relented, "I don't know!" her eyes frantically darted about.

"Tell me!" Cartanis demanded.

"What gives you the right to make such demands?"

"Forces of Creation do NOT just alter the fabric of their creations on needless whim, you put the whole of your world in peril if they decided to intervene." His eyes betrayed his concern alongside his indignation.

She relented, taking a deep breath before continuing. "I'm in a room, and there is this machine. Ponies are running about terrified. I'm the only one standing my ground, then it's all just a haze." she stamped her hooves against her head, "I just want to know what is real and what isn't! What is my memory and what the nightmare is!" she stared outraged at Cartanis, "How would you like it if you didn't know you were a monster! Was it you tearing apart ponies, or was it that foul whisper telling you to do it? Where did I begin and the monster end..."

Cartanis took the mad gaze he had gotten from Luna, he looked about as he sighed, then began to trot past her. "Seeking help is the first step, but your road is long and arduous. Tread it carefully Luna, for I think you'll find that monsters enjoy hiding in the dark; and our minds are surely where we keep our darkest secrets."



Fluttershy had finally rejoined her friends in the main area of the library, their inner voices and feelings still rang out in the air, but it wasn't such a cacophony of noise anymore. So long as she concentrated and none of them made any kind of eye contact with her she could cope, but she too had to refrain from looking at much besides the floor.

Her friends were still talking to Rainbow Dash, who had apparently found out what she was fighting for all along. As happy as Fluttershy was for her

friend, she herself wasn't sure if she was even going to be leaving with them.

What if one of them gets hurt trying to keep me safe? She knew that unlike some of her friends, that she would be less likely to be handy in a fight. All she knew is that she wanted to speak to Andur, who promised that after he got back from his Clerical duties, would help her understand and control her powers.

Voices then began to emanate from Cartanis' hat, Fluttershy was nearby and also happened to be the only one not engaging in conversation with someone.

"She's not a magic salve that will just cure your memories away or restore them. You'd be lucky enough to claw your way out of your own mind with one so inexperienced!"

It sounded like Cartanis, and he was somewhere between anger and impatience.

"What if you couldn't account for years of your existence, unable to tell what is nightmare and what truly happened?"

"It's too dangerous-"

Fluttershy's curiosity got the best of her, and she gazed into the hat to try and see what he was so angry about. A silvery blur shot past her head, causing her to squeak as she ducked to avoid it. A blue unicorn head appeared from the hole.

"-and I'm not risking the mind of..." Cartanis stopped as he realized he was staring right into the gaze of Fluttershy, goose bumps ran across the back of his neck, he tried to break contact but she was already firing her mind out defensively to the forces she couldn't understand. "Fluttershy you gosh, hursh-" but his words came out as a jumble of gibberish as he was falling through a space, hovering gently right above the ground.

[M/M/M/M]

Luna looked perplexed at Cartanis as he was thrashing about in his strange web of feather fall spells. "Is something the matter?" He didn't respond,

only continuing in his seizure of painful twists, flailing his arms about at unseen horrors.

Shouts of terror and rage escaped his throat, echoing of the walls with their din of pain.

Concerned voices seemed to find their way to the edge of the exit, "What's wrong with Fluttershy, why is Cartanis screaming like that?"

Cartanis ceased his movements and looked over to Luna, teeth bared, his eyes alive with power. "D'or skie alumina ersk hupla."

The strange language was deep and rumbling, invoking a fear that was far more primal than it was logical.

Cartanis had righted himself and was advancing towards Luna, "Uulesk op'neskih?" a ball of lighting, sparking and crackling against the area around it, eager for vengeance and destruction appeared before him. "Leska untaro idstad!"

Luna barely managed to dodge the ball of lightning as it exploded across the walls behind her, the energy arcing its way through cracks in the wall that it had made. "What is the meaning of this!" She said, her powers ready to strike back.

The air around her seemed to glow slightly, thrumming with an unfamiliar power. A strange implement formed from the energy and attempted to impale her, even if the power was unfamiliar she could sense her world's magic coursing through it giving the blade its shape, with a quick application of her magic she dispersed it.

Only to see its scattered energy reform at a distance, alongside dozens of other daggers and blades that began to form from the energy. Luna frantically began dispersing them as they closed, but they seemed to reappear as fast as she cast them away.

She teleported a few feet to dodge the swarm, but was stuck within the confines of the room, Cartanis had shut the gateway when they left, and he was standing in front of the only exit. His powers were mulling the ley lines, like an alien fog over the landscape, and she couldn't make out a path to the exit with so much interference.

She didn't want to hurt Cartanis he was obviously not in control of his actions, but she was running out of ideas. Luna prepared an old spell, one that would harm Cartanis, but hopefully not kill him. Her horn sparked with power, the air about her crackling as the power built up, but she stopped herself.

Cartanis was on the floor, crying, and mumbling something.

"What?"

He clutched at a series of loosened bricks, holding them in his front legs, "Why would they do this?"

Luna had no idea what he was on about, but this was possibly her only chance. She raced past him, his saddened eyes calling on her to answer him, before he returned to the estranged pile of rocks and gently caressed them.

"I can understand all the others, it's logical, but why..." He seemed to draw deep inside himself as Luna was quickly rising to the exit portal, and then Cartanis' cry cut the peace of the world, begging and pleading for an answer.



Luna shot out of the hat, almost flying into the concerned face of her sister. As Luna crash landed across the floor, a group of worried faces met her, but she had no time for their questions. "Which one of you is gifted with powers from their world?"

She didn't need their answers, as she noticed the only pony in the room not gawking at her entrance was in a trance wandering about the room in a lost daze.

"Where is the circlet?" Luna barked as she and a few other ponies began to scramble about looking for the item that was casually tossed from the hat. After a few minutes of desperate searching, they found it laying under a table. Luna quickly had them dawn the item onto Fluttershy.

With the circlet gently sitting on her head, the group waited anxiously for any sign. Only to have nothing happen, Fluttershy continued in her strange

gaze but had ceased moving. Luna quickly checked back into the hat, only to see Cartanis passed out on the floor of the room, the area around him pot-marked with the aftereffects of various spells.

"What is going on?" the telltale voice of concern emanated from Celestia.

"I think I read up on this..." Luna quickly tried to remember the various chapters she had read, "We're going to need Andur, if Cartanis was telling the truth anyway."



Andur was continuing down the street, taking note of the unnatural quiet of the town. All of the ponies had taken to locking themselves within their homes as soon as night approached.

I can't blame them, they no longer feel safe. Andur was lost in thought. They were so happy before, barely a care in the world. Now we come along and shake the tree so violently that they lay scattered, and unsure of their own futures. He looked up towards the night sky, the stars just starting to glint and sparkle. I don't know how, but I won't give up. Not until this whole mess is behind us, these ponies will know joy again. They will be safe within the confines of their town once more.

Andur was pulled from his thoughts when he saw a streak racing about the sky, darting in a haphazard pattern as it stopped in a spot every once in a while. He recognized the telltale rainbow streak of Dash as she continued in this strange pattern. His book humming broke his attention from the matter.

Oh you are not going to believe where I am right now. The shimmering green text proclaimed. I am also on my way back, there is no way I'm going on any farther alone. See you all in about an hour or two.

Andur was pulled from his thought by an impatient jab to his ribs, he turned and saw a small white mare pegasus with a pink mane. "Can I help you?"

The mare's wings seemed to recede into her form as a horn spontaneously grew from her head. The now unicorn spoke, "No time to explain." the horn ignited with power as they flew along the ley lines of the world.



Andur reappeared in the Library, "I take it the matter is severe for a goddess to risk revealing her civilian form?"

Celestia shifted from her rather humble pony form back into her alacorn self, "You be the judge."

Andur looked about the library, the only pony in the room was Fluttershy, the others had apparently left in a search for him. Luna then appeared out of Cartanis' hat, she noticed Andur and looked worriedly over to Fluttershy. "Can you fix this?"

Andur trotted over to Fluttershy, noticing the Circlet of Serenity adorned her head. He looked at her blank expression, "I don't think it's much to worry about, it's just a defensive mechanism to stop her from hurting anything. She'll come out of it on her own."

"OK now what about Cartanis."

At hearing his friend's name, he felt hairs stand on end at the back of his neck. The look he shot Luna made her cower slightly, he sighed, "I knew I should've taught her more... but she was so insistent." He returned with his harsh gaze, "Tell me what happened."

Luna then divulged everything that had occurred previously.

"-and I tried everything the book said, but no matter how I say either of their names they won't respond."

Andur silently looked between Fluttershy and then down into the hat where he could see Cartanis out cold. He calmly walked over to Fluttershy's body, and then closed his eyes in prayer.

*By the power of the holy star in the sky from which your good graces fall,
give to me the strength to journey through lands that seem far.*

His power was reaching out from himself, greeting everything that it met.

*Find this lost sheep, her mind frail and unready for this burden. Forgive me
my misjudgment and grant her reprieve.*

As his power met Fluttershy's form, it parsed itself through her, seeking out that which gave her body its will. That one thing that made matter alive with purpose, no matter how distant, a strand always remained behind the guide it home. Andur found that string, floating loosely out into the world. With his power he ignited it, causing its serene glow to light the land of souls like a beacon.

He maintained it, waiting patiently, he felt something tug on the line. A strange sound with it, like worried whisper that was barely audible. He whispered along the line of power, *Fluttershy*.

Like a dog might retreat to its master, a force shot along the path he had drawn, slamming into the body.

Fluttershy let loose a series of panicked breaths, distraught as she fell to the ground. "I didn't mean to do it..." she said meekly.

Luna stared at the sight, "How did-"

"When you cut off an Ardent during a mind link with a restrictor," He tapped the circlet at her head. "You cut off her mind from her body. Luckily for Cartanis she had already found her way out of his mind, or else things could be a lot worse." He groaned. "I never did like the idea of psionics, I prefer the soul not the mind. Now however, we are going to need to make use of what I know from the monks of the Order."

Fluttershy looked up to Andur, surprised how she couldn't hear any of the regular sounds and emotions anymore.

Andur continued, "I know you must've seen some things in Cartanis' mind, and that you had no idea what you were doing, it's not your fault. Now we must repair what you have done, I can make use of your power, but you must be there to help me." He helped her up, "Today is to be a learning experience, a trial by fire."



They all watched as Andur took out another jar of strange ingredients, spreading the ashes amidst the other piles and markings he had made in the floor of the sanctuary's front door.

Applejack spoke up, "What the hay is making this heapin' mess gonna do for Cartanis?"

Andur closed the lid on the jar before returning it to his bag, then took a stride back to appreciate his work, "There are far more than just arcane rituals Applejack. This is an old one, known by the Peloric Order, and made use of by healers of the mind throughout my lands." He gestured to various inscriptions upon the ground. "With this, one who is skilled in matters of the divine and souls, may aid one who is gifted with the mind to heal wounds inflicted on ones sanity." He gestured towards the exit, "Now this may take a while, and you would all be better off doing something else besides pacing about with worry in this cramped space."

As the various ponies began to take leave from the sanctuary, Andur turned to Fluttershy. "Are you prepared?"

Fluttershy looked to Cartanis, who was the center point of the strange diagram Andur had drawn. "It's all my fault."

"Taking responsibility for the whole thing now are you?" Fluttershy looked up confused. "That is admirable, but I already said it wasn't entirely yours to begin with. I for one shouldn't have let my better judgment go, I should've pushed my case that you needed training immediately instead of letting my duty get the better of me." He laughed slightly, "So I guess we are both guilty in a sense." He reached for the circlet around her head, "Are you ready?"

Fluttershy nodded, and felt the various noises return as the circlet was removed from her head. She repeated her old mantra through her head, doing her best to ignore the waterfall of concern in the other room. A new presence made itself known, but it did not force itself on her like all the others. It seemed hesitant, as if seeking permission. She did her best to allow it through her mind, and felt it click with something within herself. As it did the noises around her ceased, and she was in peaceful serenity.

Your power is not to be feared, once you learn to use it, you should celebrate it.

Fluttershy recognized the voice as it echoed within her mind, she opened her eyes and witness the spectacle around her. The air smelled of incense

as the floor ignited in brilliant light, Andur who lay next to her was aglow slightly in tandem with his strange rune work.

She didn't know how to describe it, but she seemed to be aware of Cartanis in the midst of it all, and she felt Andur reaching out to him. Carefully separating a strange force from the rest of the physical form. *Now his mind shall be at peace.*

Fluttershy felt that strange power again, like her mind was trying to leave herself, she recoiled and resisted. Not wanting to tear apart another mind again.

Calm yourself, I am here, there is nothing you can do to harm him now.

She relented to the kind words, it felt as if it shepherded her along, carefully coaxing her into the mind of the shell before her.



Fluttershy was once again in the strange place, as though there was a fog thick in the air, her vision was obscured. This time however, she was not alone, and she was not being attacked by a scared force that wished her gone.

Andur's familiar presence was with her, like a guiding light. He asked of her power things she had not thought possible. He showed her how to coax a memory from the vast fog, making it appear before her like a mote of light. At first her hand was held as the teacher showed her how it worked, connecting past memories to future ones in a course of logic and reasoning. Eventually she seemed to figure it out on her own, she did not know the memories, but the body she inhabited did. All she had to do was ask for it to assist her, and it gratefully responded.

Soon enough there was a web of memories in front of them, but a few seemed... off somehow.

There's the problem. Andur's voice rang through the space.

Which is? Fluttershy's answered.

Those few right there, they are in a loop. A series of light motes were tangled within the net, giving off an eerie mixture of sound and feeling. Because they are messed up in such a way he is unable to perceive reality correctly, all we have to do is set them straight, and the rest should follow on its own.

So how do we go about that, they don't seem to want to listen to me like usual.

Technically the memories are listening, they are going where the mind tells them to. It just seems that the last time you were here, you rewrote the timeline of memories in his mind. So now we must experience them ourselves... to a degree. Then manually reconstruct them where they belong.

Fluttershy picked one of the tangled memories at random, and began the show.

[M/M/M/M]

Cartanis awoke in the sanctuary, coughing and hacking at the intense smell of incense in the room, "I think you may have overdone it Andur."

"You must try to stop getting hurt so badly when I'm not around." his friend retorted.

"Yes, well, I just seem to be a catalyst for these types of things." He got up from the cold floor, shaking himself off.

Fluttershy looked at him, smiling at her work.

"I take it she isn't such a danger anymore?" Cartanis said aloud.

"She has far more to learn, but I suspect she can control herself far better now."

Cartanis looked about the room, taking note of the damage he had done earlier. Fluttershy seemed to still be staring at him, "Is there something you want to say?"

"I'm sorry..." she quickly looked away.

"I got the low-life, don't worry about that."

"Why would they..."

Cartanis interjected, heated anger in his voice. "Because the Theocracy is a bunch of tyrants who would kill an unborn child if they thought it would better enforce their rule!" He calmed himself, but he was still taking quickened breaths. "Those orphans were like my family..." He remembered the Tiefling he had cornered, the one who had given the order. "I was very simple with him, and unlike that blaggard, I showed a hint of mercy." Cartanis approached the exit, not wanting to think of it anymore.

He turned to Andur, "I should've listened to you... they may have kept the peace, kept us safe from the outside world... but sure enough, when they had the numbers." He laughed slightly, "One day I find the university is burning, not a soul helping to douse the fire. All of them too afraid to resist or to listen to their better judgment about the Theocracy's motives..." He remembered the children he found, they had not died from the fire.

He felt Andur place a hoof on his shoulder, "We won't let another empire like that exist, these are good beings, they would never allow it."

Fluttershy looked at the two stallions, lost in thought about their intertwined pasts. *Can I allow myself to inaction? To watch a deadly fire burn, seeing the evil that caused it and just go about my day?* "I'm going with you." she said with confidence, then they both turned to the sudden outburst of noise, "Umm..." she began scratching at the floor, "because I won't let... something like that happen... so I'm... umm..." They both chuckled at her exuberant shift in confidence from Fluttershy.

"Well that's one down, shall we see about the rest?" Andur said.

Cartanis was already at the exit portal, as he left and noticed the various happy faces to see him. Suddenly the world was tumbling about as he was tackled.

Cartanis felt his head locked under something's arm, before he could react a blunt force was applied to his head, followed by a bellowing warcry. "Noogie, noogie, noogie!"

"Ted! What is the meaning of this?" he struggled and attempted to break the hold, but was only grasped tighter.

"Somepony tells me you just lost a bet. Never going to get lost huh?" Ted retorted, returning to his friendly torture.

"I thought that bet expired a month ago!" Cartanis managed to say with what little breath he had as he continued to try and squeeze his way out of Ted's headlock.

"Did it?" Ted let Cartanis go, who fired in the opposite direction into a wall. "Well either way, bet is all paid up then."

"Not quite yet..." Cartanis groaned as he stood up from his crash site.

"What would that mean-AAAAAAH!" Ted began dancing about the room, frantically trying to remove his armor. As he finally undid the last clasp a few dozen ice cubes slide out from the estranged barding. Ted let out a content sigh as he turned back to Cartanis, "Very mature of you, I thought you were fifty-seven?"

"Says the ancient fey breed, who just gave me a noogie." Cartanis rolled his eyes.

"I'm not ancient!" he said indigently, "I'm like a well-aged wine, ready for sampling with just the right hint of fermentation." He raised his chin to Cartanis, "and the light-ale can't handle that I'm just a smidgen more sought after than he is."

Cartanis bit his lip in thought for a moment, "You know with my unicorn magic, I might actually be able to turn you into a bottle of wine."

"You wouldn't dare!" Ted said with a worried look in his eye, as Cartanis crept towards him like a cat ready to pounce.

"I think that's enough bonding for you two in one afternoon." said the authoritative voice of Andur.

"I suppose." Cartanis returned to a more dignified stance, returning a smile to Ted, "Thanks."

"For what?" Ted responded as he began attempting to dry out his armor.

"For taking my mind off things for a moment."

"You're always taking things way too seriously." Ted rolled his eyes, but secretly he was thinking, *Just as planned.*

They were all interrupted from their various conversations by the attention grabbing voice of Celestia. With all the various problems sorted, the meeting began in earnest.

[M/M/M/M]

"Thank you for your time, but I do believe my sister and I have caused enough of a headache for our guards as it is. So we shall be off." Celestia brought her sister close to her, and in a flash of light they disappeared.

"I still don't see why they didn't do that to get here." Rainbow Dash grumbled.

Rarity spoke up, "I believe Celestia mentioned something along the lines of it being, 'good therapy' for her sister to face her fears for a change."

"Onto more important matters!" Ted exclaimed, "Who's going to be my chaperone?"

Andur raised an eyebrow, "Made up your mind so quickly now have you?"

"Of course I would love to be sent back, all alone, leading armies to possible victory. While ya'll rot in a cave, because you didn't have my wits to keep your spirits up when you fought DRA'MA-hb." Ted posed regally as he finished his statement.

Andur turned to the Bearers of Hamrony, "And you have all made up your minds as well?" Each nodded as his gaze passed over them. "Then Cartanis, we should start preparing for any potential power gains these mares shall have."

Cartanis welcomed the new objective and set about clearing his mind for the potentially monumental task ahead. "This should be interesting indeed."

Andur stood, following Cartanis as he set up his hat. "We will help you however we can, but once midnight rolls around, you all leave to your respective homes for some shut-eye, we leave a few hours after morning."

"Which of you need to go get your element?" Cartanis questioned.

"I think that'd be me 'n' Pinkie." Applejack stated.

"We shall be here for a while, go with haste."



Rainbow Dash finally opened her eyes after shielding them from the bright light, only to see that she was standing in a strange room. The walls white like marble, strange murals decorating the ceiling, and a fog that seemed to hang over everything.

"Wow Ted, your home is a lot more... boring than I thought it would be." Dash remarked about the relative quiet of the space.

Ted didn't respond he simply continued tracking something that caught his attention.

Rainbow Dash wasn't sure what to think, Ted would've totally taken a chance to crack a joke in there somewhere. She tried to make out what Ted was staring at, but he was looking straight at a wall. "I don't get it-" she was shushed by Ted.

Ted slowly turned as he followed the noise, eventually it became loud enough for Dash to make it out. It sounded like footsteps. Doors near to them burst open, Dash made an attempt to dodge them, while Ted simply allowed his ghostlike form to phase through it.

An Eladrin strode through the room with quiet confidence, his solid colored eyes betraying his race. He was followed by a female, an elf, hair like that of autumn leaves. The door behind them was shut at the behest of the Eladrin.

Then laughter began, triumphant laughter, the Eladrin began strutting about the room with ecstatic zeal. "I told you my dear, one week tops."

The Elf rolled her eyes, "You do know that not all the houses agreed, and we are looking at a possible schism?"

"They shall whine, they may send assassins, nothing we haven't had to deal with before." The Eladrin was pouring himself a drink. "Never cared for this lightweight stuff. Wish I could get some decent ale in the fey-wilds."

"If you went and did that, I would doubt you'd be able to concentrate hard enough to remain lordly."

The Eladrin laughed, "Fair point." He took a swig of his drink, "Speaking of concentration, I need to see how the boys down in research are doing on that idea Ted sent our way."

The Elf was staring at the floor.

"Now, now, my 'advisor' you can't act like that around your lord." The Eladrin embraced her.

"They've done so much more us... and I wasn't even able to see him in person."

"Shhhh." The Eladrin looked in her eyes, "Let's go find-"

"-a poor roller to laugh at." Ted finished as his father did as well.

The Eladrin picked at his ear for a moment, "Strange, I think someone was telling one of my jokes somewhere." he then left the room with the elf.

Rainbow Dash looked at Ted, "Are you... sad?"

"That was a classic, he always used it to cheer me up." He turned to her, "Those two were my home, and anyplace they were, I was comfortable with." He then tapped at her rainbow lightning bolt necklace, "Now then 'Loyalty' I grow bored with this lack of joke potential atmosphere. Take us home... PLEEEEEEASE!"

"Why do you stay?" Loyalty's empathetic voice spoke.

"You want a serious answer... out of me?" Ted began to laugh.

"What do you have to lose?" it retorted.

"Well I suppose..." He rubbed at his chin in thought. "They are far too serious."

Ted could feel their combined confusion.

"They get to be like wound up bed springs, just so taught they are ready to snap and tear at each other's throats. So I come along and..." He shrugged. "Make them settle down a little. Can't have the saviors of the world killing each other now can you? Besides there are some nice benefits to adventuring in a party anyway."

Loyalty seemed to accept the answer, slowly growing brighter until once again they were in the familiar tunnel of energy.

[M/M/M/M/M]

Pinkie Pie waited eagerly, "How long have they been gone now?"

Cartanis sighed, and then took out his pocket watch. "Probably fifteen seconds since you asked me the last time."

"That's almost nine minutes, I can't stand it!" she was eagerly jumping up and down, as excited as ever.

First she breaks a land speed record trying to go get her Element, now she's almost causing an earthquake with her incessant hopping. Cartanis couldn't fathom what damage Pinkie Pie may do with powers beyond her comprehension, he shuddered at the thought of such a chaotic soul becoming a sorceress; Please... PLEASE let her be something with an off switch.

Rainbow Dash and Ted gently floated to the ground of the dome-like ritual chamber within the Halls of Heratio, Pinkie Pie quickly ascended from the lower area that sat around the upper area like an audience section in a circular theater.

Pinkie Pie wanted to see Ted's cutie mark, it would help her plan of having a party themed to three new cutie marks be perfect. As she finally got within distance to see Ted, he had already covered himself in his green cloak.

Before Pinkie Pie could say anything, Ted interrupted, "Now I know you Miss Pie, and I know how you like to play games. So how about a skill check challenge."

Pinkie Pie's eyes narrowed, sending a look that the situation was most definitely; accepted. "Okie Dokie Lokie."

Ted cleared his throat, and then assumed his most prudent voice, while throwing his hooves about dramatically. "Good heavens young mare, whatever would possess you to violate my personal bubble."

"Don't you know sir? Green attracts the wrath of the great Rarity-beast," Pinkie Pie could hear Rarity roll her eyes in the distance of the room, "and if you don't take it off, your life will be in peril."

Ted seemed to think, "Obviously you just want to see my magnificent manly mark," he shushed Rainbow Dash as she went to correct him. "but I'm rather shy, so I plead to your better nature," his eyes took on the aspect of a puppy's, "weave me awone..." he blinked a few times as his lip pouted.

Pinkie Pie seemed to be almost to tears, "OK, I'll leave you alone."

Satisfied with his diplomatic response, Ted turned to leave, only to feel a sudden draft.

"Bluff leading to thievery! Check and ma-" but Pinkie Pie stopped, Ted was wearing a second green cloak. Or was he? Pinkie Pie looked at her hooves to see a note of paper

Nice roll lassie, but still not good enough.

Ted was walking away triumphantly, but noticed another paper on the floor in front of him. It read: *That roll was a crit! You lousy cheater!*

He noticed Pinkie Pie standing, unamused, next to him. "Have mercy pink one, it is not by my will that I deny you this."

"Then who dares to try and stop me from celebrating the discovery of your destiny." she said with a booming voice and a significant frown.

"None other than the Dungeon Marester, leader of us all."

Pinkie Pie's eyes narrowed, "So it's him once again, we shall see who survives this time." A strange energy seemed to be forming and distorting the air around Pinkie Pie, Ted began to go wide eyed.

He shook his hooves about trying to get her to stop, "Pinkie, for real, don't do that! If you break that, then you could break everything! The 'FOURTH' kind of everything."

"You weren't being for real? Because I was." Pinkie Pie said, the strange energy dissipating from the area.

"Look if it's so important to you, here." Ted removed his cloak.

As those of other zebra, his mark was like a tribal tattoo, a collection of black lines that gave shape like a fingerprint, instead of an actual solid picture. An Anvil was embroidered on his skin, two smith hammers floated above it, crossed like a coat of arms.

"Not too surprising if you ask me." Ted said, as he watched Pinkie Pie smile in victory.

"Bluffed your bluff with a bluff... and an intimidation." She happily hopped along, back to rejoin her friends.

Rainbow Dash put a hoof to her face, *I'm already having a hard enough time putting up with Pinkie Pie's weirdness.*

[M/M/M/M/M]

Rainbow Dash paced about impatiently, "What's taking Andur?"

Ted rolled his eyes, "He wanted to go find an old friend... as he said."

Andur carefully walked into the room, a cloth wrapped item strapped to his back. As Rainbow Dash watched him approach, she could hear him mumbling under his breath. She wanted to ask why, but felt a strange feeling of reverence on the subject.

Andur ceased his prayers, he gently placed the item on the floor before her, respectfully unwrapping it and laying it bare. "Behold, Mezakesh, the Silent Judge." At hearing its name, the spear ignited with power, light pouring

from the inscriptions upon the pommel. Fire simmering along the edges of the blade, waiting with buried fury to meet the flesh of an enemy.

Andur continued, "It belonged to one of the Order's greatest Avenger's. When he was given a task, he set about it with the fury of an angel let loose amongst the demons of the abyss. Any that dared get between him and his target would be cast aside with righteous judgment, and the ones he took down would hear their crimes as he silently bested them in combat."

He drew his eyes down in respect, "It was only through trickery that he was defeated, and he swore an oath of vengeance upon him. So great was his fervor when he broke his silence, that the trickster who felled him was smote to ash, and Mezakesh was bound to his weapon. Continuing in service to aid a just soul in seeking to right the wrongs of evil. Mezakesh entrusted himself to me, knowing that I would find a soul worthy of him."

He stared into Rainbow Dash's eyes, "He shall train you, and make you a harrowing angel amongst the fields of the damned. Bringing the fire of the heavens, and purifying the darkness around you."

Andur backed away slowly, with respect to the dormant soul of the weapon. Rainbow Dash looked at it, not entirely sure what to do next. She did the only thing she could think of doing, and reached over to grasp it in her hooves.

It felt light in her hooves, far lighter than she expected it to be. A voice found its way into her head, *Give me a target.*

"Umm, can I get a training target or something?" she said with some confusion over the presence within her mind.

A target of arcane force appeared before her, in a loose shape of an equine.

Rainbow Dash resisted the strange presence trying to make her move.

Hold on buddy, first we lay some ground rules!

Mezakesh ceased his advance on her mind.

First, I'm Rainbow Dash. Not your silly puppet. If I'm in a fight, it's going to be me calling the shots, not you!

Second, when you're through teaching me, you never do this again. GOT IT! She put some mental anger into the last words.

There was a pause, as it considered her words. *A fiery soul indeed.* She heard the strange presence voice itself.

That's more like it.

It once again made a move on her mind, this time more respectfully. Then began to teach her the ways of fighting, how to harry and cripple your opponent. Taking away its ability to defend itself from your full wrath, slowly but surely making them unable to run from their punishment. Then how to deliver a finishing blow when they least expected it, like the final decree of a silent judge.

Now, I shall teach you how we Avenger's pursue our targets.

Rainbow Dash gleefully allowed it to send power rushing through her, she felt faster than light itself as she stepped between spaces. Chasing down the targets that Cartanis employed within the room.

The crowd watched in amazement, Rainbow Dash would be away from her target, letting it gain a lead. Then with a sly smile across her face, she would vanish in a misty light that had a tint of rainbow, reappearing in its path. She would slice away at it, causing it to lose some of its momentum. Each time the target would run Dash would give chase, and every time they were caught they left her a little weaker. Before the target could no longer retreat, and was smitten as she delivered a finishing blow. Smoke and ash rising from the positions of the targets, leaving Dash to stand triumphant in her practice

"Hold true to the tenets of our faith," Andur began, "and you shall never fear in the loyalty of the Silent Judge or the power that flows through you now." Andur closed his eyes, remembering what he needed to incite.

"Avert and prevent the suffering of others" A runic language seemed to hang in the air, bristling with power as Andur spoke. "Bring his light unto the darkness of evil, and be watchful against its motives. Show others

mercy, when evil would seek brutality. Show compassion, where others give animosity. Give kindness, where others would shun and forget." The words hung in the air, a large pronouncement of faith which gave weight to the decision. "Do you accept our way?" his voice seemed to boom with an otherworldly power.

Rainbow Dash paused for a moment, the thought of being tied down in such a way almost made her recoil. "What's the catch?" she asked with suspicion.

"So long as you seek his path, wish to do good in this world. Then you shall never be trapped, for he cannot stop your actions, only the guilt of your own mind will make a chain strong enough to tie down one such as you." Andur spoke with conviction, holding forth only the truth of the matter.

She looked back with confidence, "Then I won't let evil get away, I'll chase it into its own den if I have to, if only to make Ponyville safe again."

The runic language in the air coalesced into a single point, a shining star in the relative darkness of the room. "Then know his presence." The light shot into Dash, igniting her soul, causing her vision to fade for a brief instant. Yet bringing with it a much clearer sense of her new found power. Before she had use of it, but now it had something more, it had direction. As her vision cleared she saw Andur helping her up, "Welcome to the Order, Sister Dash."



Cartanis had been recording the time it took for full crossovers, each time it was successfully shorter, the shortest instant had been about thirteen seconds. Both participants reported that they had seen little other than the jolt of being ferried across the bridge.

Applejack stood in the center of the stage, waiting patiently as the ritual that was drawn chimed and glowed beneath her. "Anythin'?"

"Just be ready to think fast Applejack. We think we know what you are, but we need to be sure."

"What the hay does-" but she stopped, ducking as she felt something about to hit her. She looked up to see her would be attacker, a small glowing

sphere of force. "What was that for!" Applejack looked up, to see some rather stunned faces. She looked between them, "Did I miss somethin'?"

Andur was the only one who spoke up, "I knew she had to be a Monk. Only a proper mind can make use of Zen like that." He took the confused look of Applejack, "You basically just dodged a cannonball launched at point blank range, from your blind side." Andur laughed slightly, "It wouldn't have done anything, so you can stop shooting daggers at me with your eyes."

Ted reappeared from another room, a suit of armor on his back and a book in his mouth. He spit the book upon the ground, much to the chagrin of Cartanis, "I think the robes from that old order of dwarves should do nicely." The large suit of metal fell from his back with a deep metallic clang against the floor; Ted took a moment to roll his eyes at the equine form it had taken.

Applejack looked concerned at it, "How does that classify as robes?"

"You'll see." Ted went to pick up the book in his mouth, only to have Cartanis swipe it away with his magic and respectfully glide it over to Applejack.

"The Way of the Fist?" Applejack looked perplexed as she skimmed through it, "What the hay is a fist..." She him-hawed a bit, "Can I get the Equestrian version of this?"

Cartanis called Heratio into the room, and with only a point, sent him off on command. The book in Applejack's hoof was whisked away, scanned seemingly, and then a copy appeared.

"The Way of the Hoof." Applejack smiled, "Now that's more my speed." She looked concerned over to the armor one last time, "So about that."

"Once you figure out how to access your Zen a little more freely, the robes will make much more sense, I promise." Ted proclaimed as he heaped the armor in front of her. "It looks a lot heavier than it is."

"Sure it is." Applejack retorted in disbelief.

"Look, Andur may now things about the mind and all. But there is one thing I have in spades that most others lack having at all." For a moment his

eyes flashed into two orbs of pure grey. "Now I'm going to show you how a mind like yours works, because it isn't too different from the way I call the fey." Ted removed the armor and book from the center stage. "Now close your eyes."

Applejack shot him a suspicious look.

Ted laughed a bit, "Yes I'm going to do silly things to you in front of a large crowd of ponies, while still being a good guy. So please close your eyes, it's rather important." Applejack relented and shut her eyes. "Now describe the room."

"Well, it's made of stone-"

"Sorry, I wasn't being clear. Describe it to yourself." Ted could feel Applejack roll her eyes under her lids.

Applejack thought of the space she inhabited, the stonework floor, the musty feel of the air, the stale smells. It was pictured in her mind just so, "So now what?"

"With this picture in your mind, you must bring it to life."

"What?"

"Life is not static, it does not stand still. It constantly shifts and changes, that picture in your mind is a false representation of the world around you. Now you must find a way to bring it to life in your mind."

Applejack mulled over his words, *How do I bring a thought... a picture to life? Well I suppose that I'm not the only thing in here.* She pictured her friends in the room where she remembered them being, as well as Ted and his friends. But something still seemed off, *Why doesn't it seem right?*

Come on you simple earth pony, Ted thought to himself, you're so close. What is that one thing pictures lack, that one crucial element that gives life to something?

She felt like something was just out of reach, *What's wrong with it?* The picture of them all in the room made sense, but she knew that something was off. Then she began to hear something, Ted was pacing around her,

rather loudly. At first it distracted her, then it made her think, *Wait a minute, Ted isn't where he was a minute ago.*

Then it clicked. She moved Ted in her mind, every movement she heard worked in tandem with her mental picture, making a moving slide-show of sorts as she watched him move about her. Almost like she was staring right at him, while her eyes remained closed. She could feel the air moving about as he began to lightly glide about near her, filling in more gaps in her senses. The picture felt more and more like her own vision as more pieces fit together. She had a small grin of satisfaction.

Ted smiled, "Now block."

"Huh?" Applejack didn't have a moment to spare as the picture in her head told her she was about to get hit square in the jaw, she ducked at the last minute. "What's goin' on!" Before she could open her eyes, once again she felt her mind warn her to an incoming kick.

"I said block not DODGE!" Ted sounded angry.

Applejack threw herself backwards, taking care to avoid the edge that was plotted out in her mind's eye. She opened her eyes to only see blackness, *What did he do?* She then felt the brim of her hat pulled down tightly over her face. Before she could think to remove it, she had to prepare for Ted's next attack.

He was once again going for her face, but this time she was ready. She danced past his clumsy hook, with a loose spin she diverted the force of it away from herself, before planting her elbow into the side of his face. As Ted went off spinning to the floor, Applejack quickly popped the hat off her head for a moment. "What kinda horse apples did you eat, to think you could try that!"

Applejack watched as Ted got himself up off the floor, not feeling too sorry for the little prankster. "Just a little motivational training is all." He rubbed at his jaw, "I'm still not sure if it was worth it though."

"So now you want to go for round two, mister big shot?"

"Not entirely, but now I want to see if you can pull that off again with the robes."



Applejack struggled to move in the suit of plate-like armor that was four sizes too big for her, "Sheesh, it feels like I'm in a pair of iron stockades."

"But you're not." Ted retorted.

"Sure." Applejack just glared at Ted, taking a moment to rest.

"I want you to take something I say seriously Applejack."

"Which would be?" she raised a suspicious eyebrow at him.

"That sometimes our minds create barriers that don't exist."

"Huh?"

Ted smiled at her confusion. "Just go with me for a moment. What prevents a... foal for the sake of argument, from walking about?"

"Well... they don't know how."

"Exactly!" Applejack was surprised at the look on Ted's face, "And what prevents you from doing my little teleport trick?"

"Umm... I don't know how." she stated with an unsure answer.

Ted put a hoof to his face, "No, you can't do what I do because it's a physical limitation. You don't have access to what I do naturally so you won't be able to ever do it. BUT," He had strange look in his eyes. "We both share mental limitations, maybe it's from lack of knowing, or maybe it's from lack of a will to try. All I know is that somewhere in your noggin there is a power that allows you to overcome silly things like this special robe, and now you shall have to find it. You need to overcome your own apprehension of the impossible." Ted's smile betrayed his wily nature. "Now try focusing again."

Applejack closed her eyes, once again returning to the picture of the room in her mind. Only to feel a small gust of wind right above her head, *That dirty snake took my HAT!* She was about to open her eyes, *No... that's just playin' into his hooves. He won't do anythin' to it, just focus.*

She heard a tearing noise.

He wouldn't! She had to put her whole self into keeping her eyes shut, *It's Ted, and he's probably just playin' a prank or somethin'.*

The tearing noises grew louder, "You best hurry Applejack, every few seconds you're not moving, I'm going to tear larger shreds into this thing."

She couldn't stand it anymore, her eyes shot open, slightly enraged and ready to give Ted a piece of her mind. She stopped to see Ted was actually tearing apart pieces of her hat, making it look like something had just got done using it as a scratching post, now she was actually angry. "Ted you stop that ya hear! I got that from-"

"From a tearful coming of age party with Ma and Pa, or perhaps a loving hand-me-down from your brother?" Ted tore another small section along the brim, "Doesn't change the fact that I'm trying to motivate you."

"Fine just stop doin' that!" Applejack blurted.

"Getting angry won't get you to overcome this you know?" Ted looked into her eyes, looking strangely old as he did so. "Wasn't your family impossibly helped by Andur? Wasn't your mother in such a condition that there was no foreseeable way out? You have to realize that there is a power within you, something you didn't have before that will aid you in the following endeavors, and that armor is not going to be the least of your worries if you can't figure out the lesson for what it is worth..." Ted looked away indignantly, "If you can't figure it out, than you have little to no ho-oooff." He lurched forward, feeling a hoof implanted into his gut.

Applejack smiled as Ted looked her in the eye, her hoof planted into his stomach. The armor on her body was glowing, slowly folding in on itself as it began to fit her frame, looking more and more like studded brown cloth than indestructible steel.

A wily smile took hold of Ted's expression, "Part three." Ted proclaimed as his breath returned. He quickly swiped at her, she dodged easily, and then gave a powerful flap to give himself some distance. He pulled the shredded hat firmly down on his head, "Get the hat back and I give you your diploma." His wings slapped shut against his body, "And I won't even fly."

"If you're gonna toy with an Apple," she snorted and pulled a hoof across the ground, "then you best be prepared to mess with the whole tree!"

Applejack charged at Ted as he held what little ground he had on the stage, she then swung out her hind legs low, performing a roundhouse that Ted managed to easily skip over. She planted her feet into the ground, and rose to try and uppercut. As expected Ted dodged, but she quickly went into a flurry of punches and hooks.

"My, my," Ted had to take a second to dodge, "This is far more 'brawler like' than I anticipated, and here I thought all monk's just instinctively knew martial arts."

Applejack continued to throw her haymakers and jabs, just like Pa showed her, for when overzealous colts get too 'pushy' as he said. She tried different combinations, but Ted was either too fast for her slower hits, or just plain slippery with her faster ones; making them feel like they didn't even connect.

Then she felt her third eye kick in again, it was strange. It was like it revealed things to her, not the future or thoughts, but it would predict what was going to happen based on signals around her. The way Ted was moving his ankles to prepare for a shift in his weight, or how his torso would twist as he leaned back to dodge a punch. It led up into a chain of evidence that pointed her in the direction to go. She followed the instinct, as Ted once again began to bend his knees to duck, she quickly spun and went for a low kick which nearly slammed him in the jaw; right before he disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"That's cheatin!" She shouted as she returned to four hooves, hearing the far off laughter of Ted. *Him and his blasted word games.*

Applejack knew of Ted's ability to teleport, and what it generally entailed. *How am I supposed to overcome that? He's definitely gonna keep doin' it until I'm too tired, and Ted's is definitely better at this than me.*

Her third eye, or 'Zen', kicked in again. It showed her strange auras about the room, each one seemed slightly unique, and Ted's was still in her vicinity. It was strange how it felt familiar to her, how it almost felt like Andur's power when he showed it to her. *Of course! he needs an anchor of*

some sort. She turned and saw Ted reforming from a cloud of grayish smoke.

Ted tore a small hole into the hat, "You better learn a little faster Applejack, this is soon going to be far less a hat and more a fancy lampshade."

Applejack knew what she had to do, once again she jabbed away at Ted, forcing him into a routine of dodges and parries. Once more he was forced to fall back to the fey as he barely missed her hay maker.

This time though she felt for his anchoring presence, and noticed it whisking it's way past her. She didn't know if she could do it, but pushed the doubt from her mind, she reached for that Zen power within her. It ignited through her for a split second, the world slowed, no longer was Ted moving absurdly fast through the other world. But only a brisk pace as he passed her, his misty form betraying a cocky smile.

She brought out a hoof into a concentrated punch, straight for his body, the new power seemed to surge into her attack. A strange calm in her mind as she focused on what needed to be done, as the blow connected with the spirit, her hoof did not pass through; put instead slammed into it with a thunderous clap. Throwing Ted from the other dimension back to reality, tumbling across the floor and off the stage as he was unprepared for the strike.

Applejack casually grasped her hat out of the air, and dawned it once more. She trotted over to Ted on the floor below her, placing a hoof on his gut just hard enough to entice a wince of pain from him. "What have we learned?"

"Don't mess..." He cringed as he tried to catch his breath, "with Apples"

Applejack accepted the answer, pulling her hat down tight, and trotted off with her head held high in victory.



Pinkie Pie stood, rather patiently, as she awaited instructions.

Cartanis was anxious as he handed her what he believed would help her, he had sensed the arcane power within her, and was only momentarily relieved to know she wasn't a sorceress.

Pinkie Pie looked at the strange instrument she held in her hooves, it looked like a dragon, down from its body that formed the base of the guitar, up to the neck which ended in the dragon spewing fire. All gilded in gold. "I don't really think this thing says 'Pinkie Pie', do you?"

What insolence!

Hi there, who are you. Pinkie pie welcomed the new voice in her head.

I am Girda, Bringer of Song. You think yourself worthy to wield me?

Nope, but it would be lovely to try. Pinkie smiled.

Then, Pinkie felt a presence in her mind, sifting through her memories. Play for me... Herdruption, by Band Hailin

Pinkie Pie summoned some of the strange power she had with her since she returned from her trip to the other world. A mystical runic guitar pick of pure energy formed in her hoof, and then she began to play.

"Hey I know this!" Rainbow Dash said aloud.

The music started slow, but for only a moment. It picked up speed, a cascade of climbing notes as it became faster.

The air felt electrified.

A slight pause, allowing the sound to echo into the room. Then Pinkie Pie picked up pace again, the notes flying a little faster this time. The notes echoing into a cascade of enticing sound, faster and faster it went. The air was alive with bursts of electricity and lightning, with a pause Pinkie Pie sent the energy outward, causing many of the ponies' hairs to stand on end.

"very nice Pinkie-" But Cartanis was interrupted.

"This is my favorite part." Rainbow Dash said, "This is gonna be so awesome!"

It isn't over? He looked back to Pinkie Pie, sure enough she was getting ready for part two.

Just as the sound's echo had fallen, she began, this time at full speed. The notes tearing and burning through the air around her. Faster and faster she went, sparks tearing themselves from her hooves as they moved with blinding speed about the guitar neck, dancing from string to string. The audience stood in awe as the light from the fires diluted the brightest lights in the room, casting dramatic shadows upon the pink guitarist as she stood in the middle of the firestorm. The faster she went the greater the flames became, until eventually she let loose, Raising the guitar over her head she wielded it like an axe.

"Party! YEAH!" she swung Girda towards the floor at her feet, lost in the moment.

"Hit the DIRT!" Ted yelled, as everypony sank to the floor.

As Girda struck the floor, a concussive wave was released, the boom of sound caused the fires to rush outwards, striking at everything in their path. Pinkie Pie opened her eyes, panting from the adrenaline. She heard Girda in her mind, *You. ARE. WORTHY!*

Pinkie Pie gasped at Girda's new form, she had shattered its old body. Revealing an instrument that was like a heart shaped candy, the neck was a series of square tarts, ending in stylized streamers of licorice, with strings that may as well be indestructible cotton candy. "Now that's more my style."

Should've known that one would be a Bard. Cartanis thought to himself, *Just keep her from dancing and singing and I think I can prevent the apocalypse.*

Rainbow Dash shouted over to her friend, her eyebrows still singed from the amazing performance, "I didn't know you played guitar Pinkie!"

"I dabbled here and there." Pinkie casually said back. "Rock concerts are parties to" she thought out loud.

[M/M/M/M/M]

Cartanis bid all the others farewell as they left, Applejack seemed particularly absorbed in reading the book he had given her. Then he turned to the two remaining ponies with him. Rarity and Twilight. "It has been so

long since I've had students to teach." An aged and weary smile graced his scarred face.

"So then Rarity and me are?"

"Yes, arcana inclined individuals that, unlike Pinkie Pie, have some measure of control on their powers that is conscious." He clopped his front hooves together, *Now where to start? Ah yes!*

Cartanis then concentrated upon his arcane might, bringing a soft glow to the entirety of the room, looking like a star filled veil was draped over everything. "This is arcana," small plumes of fire and a few crystals of ice floated about the space. "with it, you can coax out the various elements from their hiding places in the planes. For Wizards such as myself, we have a talent for... gathering arcana with the use of training and some innate talent. We make use of it by creating spells from the various elements."

"You Twilight, are as I suspected, not just a sorcery wielding unicorn; but also a sorceress by our worlds standards." Cartanis sent out his power over her, as it connected, the air around Twilight glowed brightly; like she was a star amongst an ocean of lights. "You practically breath arcana, you might as well be arcana made flesh. Instead of calling the elements, you can create them out of thin air, giving you a much better conduit to them. Although since it becomes second nature to you, it might seem less likely that you would have the level of control wizards do."

Twilight shot him a curious look about the statement.

"That is to say, you wield a battle axe, large, powerful and perfectly capable of deciphering friend or foe. Rarity and I wield daggers by comparison, with careful strikes and applications of our power, we slip our way past the enemies' defenses to destroy them." Cartanis chuckled, "Although we are known for sometimes getting a little showy about it." His gaze returned to them, "So we shall begin."



Cartanis was impressed at their progress, at the same time concerned, all the ponies that night had seemed to grasp alien concepts at a staggering rate, not to mention their rather extravagant level of power. *The Elements didn't have anything to do with this... did they?*

His attention returned to the two ponies, Rarity was still toying with the magic missile spell he had taught her but seemed to have trouble maintaining control. Twilight on the other hand, seemed to be holding herself back.

"This obviously calls for something special." Cartanis' words echoed off the walls as he left to get something, "Just continue with the basics for now."

Twilight turned to Rarity, "So how is it going on your end?"

"Well I remember what he said about treating it all like the way I weave fabric, but this stuff just keeps wanting to go off on its own, it won't just stay put without direction." she huffed as the magic missile flew off and exploded against the wall. "I hope I am not prying Twilight, but you yourself seem to be rather... perturbed as well."

"It's nothing... just... you know control and everything." Twilight put on her bravest face as Rarity went back to work conjuring another missile. *Just don't freak out, this is dangerous stuff, it's practically nitroglycerin compared to unicorn magic.* Twilight went back to forming plumes of fire and trying to control their rate of growth and decay.

The two unicorns continued in their practice, until Cartanis returned with gifts.

"Rarity, for you I have this." An old tome, that looked recently dusted, made its way to Rarity's curious eye. "One of my old spell books, tips and notes on how I cast my spells. Heratio saw to the lack of me needing it on my person at all times."

"Thank you Cartanis," she opened to a random page, "alright magic missile, prepare to be... I don't know, 'something witty' into oblivion."

"As for you Twilight, I've seen you hold yourself back."

Twilight scratched at the floor, "That obvious huh?"

"I understand fear, it's perfectly reasonable." Cartanis sighed. "But we can't have it in the thick of battle, you can't hesitate for a moment when your power is needed. So..."

Twilight gasped, "No Cartanis... I couldn't take something like that."

"I won't lie about its significance Miss Sparkle... but I don't need a thing like this. I've dealt with it a long, long, time ago." He clutched it in his grasp one last time, his memories bleeding through his mind. "An ancient gauntlet doesn't show that I still love her, in fact she would be insulted if I greedily kept this away in an attempt to sooth myself, when it was in fact needed for something far more important." It floated over to Twilight, when she touched it, the gauntlet reacted to her power. The rubies along its metallic surface igniting with fire.

Twilight knew how much it meant to Cartanis, "I'll honor it, don't worry about that." She slipped it over her hoof, feeling it connect to her new power, keeping it in check and bringing it out where she was holding back.

Cartanis cleared his throat, throwing back painful memories, "Now let's see what you've both really got." The air once again flared up with arcana, the two inclined individuals once again set about practicing their skills to the tune of the master.



Ted had been leading them through the Everfree for hours, at the time they had left Ponyville the sun had been in the lower section of the skyline, but now it was sitting above them, high noon.

A conversation broke out between Andur and Cartanis, "You still think it was a good idea to have them leave their Elements behind?"

Cartanis looked over to him, "Yes, if they are so frightful of Dra'nahb and whatever he discovered or is capable of, to risk what they have done to give us and them the power to fight. Then we would only be putting powerful forces at risk when they would be unable to help."

Ted let loose a triumphant, "Ta-da!" As he showcased a familiar clearing to the party.

Applejack looked up to Cartanis and Andur, who both seemed skeptical if not a little rattled. "What's the matter?"

Ted looked over to Applejack, "Hey where is your hat? It throws off your silhouette, even in the robes."

Applejack scowled, "I made a promise, that's all I'm saying to you." She trotted off in her studded cloth armor

Ted shrugged, "I suppose I deserve the cold shoulder."

Andur got Ted's attention, "Are you sure?"

Ted smiled, "You don't believe it. I knew you wouldn't. Just wait till you see what's inside."

"How long till they spot us?"

"How much do you like spelunking?" Ted questioned back.

Cartanis spoke up, "That cave wasn't more than a few dozen yards deep, how do you expect us to believe-

"Apparently, something has been excavating since we first arrived." He gestured to a torn up campsite in the field of broken trees. "It wasn't whatever poor saps had planned to explore before us, remind me to tally about another seven to Dra'nahb's approximate ghouel count. The tunnels I found within are far too organized to be done by ponies."

The rest of the group finally broke from the tree line.

Dash with Mezakesh over her back spoke to Ted, "Oh yeah, thanks for remaking my Rainbow Armor Ted." Rarity scoffed with her eyes, not sure why Dash had kept it in the first place.

"Well I did remove some of the more cosmetic bits, tossed in some padding in the open areas, and now you essentially have lightly plated leather armor with a little 'personal flair'" Ted proclaimed. "Just don't take a direct hit and you'll still be thankful at the end of the day."

Rarity in her 'note-taken' version of Cartanis' robes was stopped by the wizard when he noticed something, "How far did you get into my old spell-book?"

"I almost read the whole thing, quite a few good notes I must say-" Cartanis stopped her before she could continue, pointing a nervous hoof to the glowing runes across the white fabric. "If you must."

Cartanis quickly checked over the handful of runes embroidered across her blouse, he sighed with relief. "Congratulations Rarity, you have successfully fire, acid, frost, tear, wear, and age-proofed. Your little dress." Rarity smiled happily that she had bested the inspection.

Twilight was wearing regalia which glinted with hidden power, Viranda's gauntlet set right above her hoof like an armored sleeve, which looked to be the only serious piece of armor she wore. "I hope this will do in a fight."

"Just try to be the hammer and not the anvil." Ted said over to her, "Although I still think you look like you're made out of glitter in that silly getup."

"It doesn't sparkle that much." she retorted, then whispered to Rarity, "does it?" Rarity shook her head.

Pinkie Pie emerged, looking like a rock star in all her studded leather while Girda was slung over her back, although she skipped out on the face paint. She was concerned it might upset the more delicate Fluttershy, who herself was wearing some simple harnesses covered by a cloak to hold various pockets of supplies. She was also wearing the same circlet from before, however this time it seemed to be aiding her power instead of trying to hinder it.

Andur looked about the familiar area, the trees had dried up and been dead for a few days, but it was definitely where they had entered well over a week ago. "Good thing we all packed for a few days worth of travel, underground can get maze-like quick."

"Nine of us versus approximately twenty-seven ghouls, a vanguard creature, and a lich. Oh this shall be a story I shall enjoy embellishing." Ted maniacally rubbed his hooves together.

"Let's just get on with it." Cartanis said.

And off the group journeyed towards the mouth of the cave that was formed from the catastrophic event that had taken place well over a week ago.

With their training intact, and their wills as strong as steel, the Bearers of Harmony have joined the Dungeon Masters in their quest. Now they shall be tried, by not only fire, but flesh and sacrifice.

Chapter 11

"Honey, I'm HOOOME!" Ted's voice echoed through the cave network, bouncing off the damp walls.

Applejack slapped a hoof over his mouth, "Did you get bucked in the head as a foal?"

Ted brushed away her hoof, ignoring her furrowed brow. "Do you have your 'adventurers harness'?"

"I sure do!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed as she joined the two that stood at the cave mouth. "I also got some rope, climbing gear, some rations. Ooooooh!" she whipped something out of her saddlebag. "I got a water skin too!"

Ted waved his hoof in front of her face to break her amazed gaze, "You really got all that stuff?"

"Well, yeah! Best to be prepared. That is unless everything that happens here is a combat encounter." She then frowned. "Then I just wasted a good forty bits."

"Would you two just keep it down." Applejack said in a worried whisper.

"I would appreciate that as well." Cartanis spoke up, as he carefully made his way up the last stretch of the rocky cliff face.

Ted scoffed, "You send me to scout, and then when I tell you that we don't have to worry about being found out at the entrance you don't trust me? I think I earned a little bit more respect than that."

"There is trust Ted, and then there is common sense." Cartanis snapped back while he nervously checked at dark corners within the cave entrance.

"Alright, alright fine." Ted rummaged around in his bag, pulling out a small rod which was adorned with a golden crystal on its tip. "Too bad I don't have dark vision." He struck the rod against the ground, the crystal upon its tip igniting in golden brilliance like a star. "Now to show you all something that stupefied even me."

Hard to imagine anything shuts him up. Applejack thought to herself.

A few of the others also did as Ted had, using the Sun Rods they had been given, before tucking them into straps on their various pieces of equipment so they would not have to hold onto them as they navigated the caves.

As the party finally assembled at the cave entrance, Ted led them down a familiar path. They descended down a formation of craggy stones, and around the bend where they had first awoke to their strange new forms. A black mark still stained the wall where Cartanis had tested his powers.

Ted then spoke up, "I was barely able to make out what Abigail was leading them all towards, but even I could see it was rather strange."

The large group stood in mild shock as the sight was finally apparent to them, even within the roomy cavern the large hole bored into the wall was obvious enough to see. The Zebragus spouted nonsense as he marveled at its shape, taking in the smoothed corners of the rectangular hallway, large enough that the group of nine could stand side by side and still have room for a few more ponies. It was even tall enough that a pegasus could comfortably fly within its confines if one so wished, but not exactly enough to allow for any actual aerial grace.

"-and I tell you all, no way, just no way a bunch of shambling corpses made this. Just imagine what created this, oh it had to be hard workers too, I mean what else could create such a great feat of engineering in just over a week." Ted turned to point out other details to his friends, but noticed they had already begun moving.

"Come on Ted, we don't have time for this."

"Aww, but Andur!"

"Enough!" He snapped back, "Ted, you know very well why we can't dawdle."

"Fine." Ted relented as he fell in line with the group.

[M][1][M]

Applejack looked about at the walls of the tunnel they descended, it had remained relatively spotless during the first large bit, but now tool marks lay upon the walls, and every once in a while she could swear there was a closed off tunnel sealed by a collapse of some sort. *What in tarnation built all this?* Her mind was pulled from pondering as she noticed Twilight, who looked a little too ragged for even Applejack's taste. "Ya'll right there Twi'?"

She honked out a, "Huh?" Which lead to a breathless, "I'm fine, just a little-" She wheezed once, "winded."

Applejack could see her brave face, but it was just that, "This ain't exactly the runnin' of the leaves Twilight, maybe we should take a breather."

"Oh, no no no, I'm fine really." Twilight did her best to smile and keep moving past Applejack's unimpressed eyebrow lift.

"Twi' do you really want to be completely exhausted if we get into a tussle ah' some sort down here?"

She sighed, "I get the point."

"Don't feel bad, you did pretty good, fur' a bookworm." Applejack chuckled as Twilight smiled at her harmless quip. She broke away from her friend picking up her trot to catch with the pony in lead, in this case Andur. "Hey Andur, mind if I ask somethin'?"

"Go ahead." Was all he said without missing a step.

"Well, I've been thinkin' that since we've been moving since we broke camp in the Everfree, that we should probably take a break." Applejack couldn't tell if he even heard her, he barely reacted at all. "Just for a little while."

"We need to keep moving," His eyes scowled with an old fury, "He has enough of a lead on us already."

Applejack wasn't sure what to think, she had never seen Andur this stern before. "It won't hurt nothin' if we just take a little-"

"Enough!" The fire in his voice was enough to snap the rest of the ponies from their own conversations, almost bringing the convoy to a halt. One old

pony in particular seemed a little more concerned than the rest, and so Cartanis closed the distance between them.

"Is everything alright over here?"

"I don't need your scolding Cartanis, you know plenty well as I do why we cannot slow."

Cartanis could only sigh, he knew where this conversation would head, "Yes I do Andur, but if they require rest then we should heed them, we may be used to our usual pace but-"

"Then they shouldn't 'uve agreed to come in the first place!" The group was now stopped, as the horse stared down the blue unicorn.

Applejack wasn't entirely sure what to think, this wasn't like Andur, at least not the Andur she knew. Cartanis on the other hand, seemed hardly surprised by Andur's outburst.

"We can't force them into a march, and they don't need long, just a rest. I suggest we wait for the first set of sunrods to burn out, and then we resume. It won't be long, they only last about four hours and these have been going for a good three or more."

Andur listened to his friend's words, some of the heat draining from his face. "We can't let him escape."

"I know, believe me Andur I don't wish for his well-being either."

His mind was now calm, "We resume when the rods die out."

A collective sigh washed over the group, but none was as great as the one which came from a purple unicorn, allowing her equipment laden saddlebags to fall to the ground as she collapsed beside them.

[1][1][2][1][1]

Applejack was laying about with her friends around the planted sunrods, none of them said much, only the occasional conversation sparking out of boredom amongst them. One thing however was on her mind, it was not

something she wanted to voice to the whole group, so instead she chose to speak to one. "Hey Rainbow."

Rainbow Dash had almost passed out from the boredom that had stricken her so hard, any attempt at activity caught her attention. "Yeah?"

"Do ya think there's somethin' wrong with Andur?"

"What do ya mean?" She cast a glance over to the aforementioned pony, who was alone at the edge of the group staring intently into the dark trail that they still had to trek.

"Come on Dash, you know there was more to that little outburst ah his than two shakes of a rattlesnake."

Rainbow could only shrug her wings in response, "Well I don't know, I barely know Andur. I mean, he seems like a goody-goody horseshoe and all, but I really don't know him. I kinda wanted to ask you what was up with him."

Applejack only flicked at some dirt as she thought, "I can't really say, they've only been around for a little more than a week. He was always helpful an' all, except with the chickens, but he was never... so angry."

"Of course he's angry, somepony attacked Ponyville, he's not the kind to just blow that off."

"So am I, don't go thinkin' I wanna have nothin' more than an angry fuss with this Dra'nahb character. I've just never heard him yell like that before."

"What, he never shouts?"

"Oh no he does, Granny Smith got after him a few times for wakin' her from her nap." Her quick smile vanished as her concern returned. "But this is... different. It's like... when my dad got after that worker for hurtin' mom."

Rainbow Dash only frowned at the response, "What do you want me to do about it? The other guys don't seem too worried about Andur, so maybe it's normal for him to get all angry and stuff when he's dealing with this lich thing."

"Yeah, but I wanna know what's really up."

Rainbow Dash watched Applejack stand and trot her way off towards Andur, drawing a few curious eyes as she went.

Applejack wasn't afraid, she could still feel that hesitation at the back of her mind, but she wanted to know. For she honestly thought that, *if Andur ain't fit for leadin' us, then I don't want him to.*

She knew she couldn't be the only one who thought that, the only one with doubt. So when she closed the distance between them, standing on the edge of the sunrod's collective light with Andur near, she said without missing a beat. "Andur, can we talk?"

His eye traveled to meet her, but the rest of him remained a statue. "About?"

She could only return with an unamused glare, "You know what."

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

Applejack rounded her way to his front, so she couldn't just be brushed away from his sight, "Well here I am Andur, all 'concerned' about it, and I ain't leavin' until I'm feelin' less 'concerned' about it."

His vigilance was finally broken as his head lowered to look directly upon her. "I want you to imagine something for me," Applejack raised an eyebrow to that statement, "that you're on the run. From something that you could probably very well fight, but why should you? All you need to do is disappear, hide away in some long forgotten hole in the ground. Then just wait there, until you are a memory, barely even a folk tale handed down among the masses. Free of the justice that hunted you because all who would have cause have long died."

Applejack could see it again, that fire in his eyes, and that rumble within his voice.

"And I'm waiting for it Applejack, that fork in the road, when we discover that this whole place is one big cave system that leads out into the mountains and beyond. Then all he has to do, is secret his way out, disappear into your world. Hide himself away until we are all dead, until the

stories of us are all long dead. Then he'll be free, free to secret away whatever he needs to enact his plans, his experiments at destroying lives, at stopping families from ever knowing each other." He could feel his anger, boiling under his skin, stoking the fires of his mind.

"I won't let him," His gaze returned to the abyss which taunted him with that laughter, "I won't let him touch another soul in this world." He had to quiet his mind just to stop himself from shouting, "This place won't suffer from my mistake anymore. I hate to say it... but we got lucky, when he attacked. Nothing would've stopped him from just hiding away until we were gone." A smile broke across his face, "I guess we must really get under his skin." It faded as quickly as it had appeared, "I can't let him slip away Applejack, not again."

"What about it then? What's your plan besides seek 'n' destroy?"

"I have no other, we shall find him, and he will answer for it, all of it." His anger filled him, his face was locked unto the image of that monsters execution, "And I will drag him to the hells of this world, even if I have to do it myself."

The lights from the sunrods sparked and trapped Andur's visage into Applejack's mind, before a small light quickly appeared and another set was ignited; the camp quickly packing up for another march. Andur was already starting to move, but he was stopped by her, "Promise me one thing Andur." Her gaze never faltered, forcing his attention unto her, "If it comes between Dra'nahb," she cast a glance to her friends, "and their safety." Those powerful eyes returned to Andur, "You pick them."

Andur continued to watch her, those eyes daring him, just daring him to say no; to say something that was not an agreement. But he couldn't, he was raised better than that, he knew better than that. A sigh escaped him, his eyes closed, "I promise." The worry drained from Applejack's face, as she half-smiled at him.

"Then where to boss?"

[1][3][1]

"So... who's going to test the potentially trapped bridge first?"

"Nobody is going to test it, Ted." Cartanis snapped at his friend whilst patrolling the edge of the crossing, sending out feelers for any sort of potentially unseen hazard that may lie in wait for them. "You're sure this was built recently?"

"Well it wouldn't take more than a good pair of eyes to see that the metal supports aren't even rusted, just some scuffing and wear on them. It isn't brand new, but definitely not 'mysterious ruin' aged."

"How'd you even go about buildin' it?" Applejack peered over the edge of the small outcropping they all waited upon, her stomach lurched forward slightly as she stared into the abyss, not exactly sure how deep this pitfall was. Her gaze returned to the bridge itself, "Doesn't exactly say pony engineerin', not to me anyway."

The bridge itself was little more than a series of long planks of strange brickwork placed upon metallic beams; it seemed more akin to some form of large railway than an actual bridge. Its end upon the other side of the chasm was barely visible in the darkness, only the shimmering edge of the sunrods gave them a clue of what may be the other side.

"I don't suppose there would be a way around?" Andur chimed in.

"Maybe," Ted scratched at his head in thought, "but with the potential of Pegasi helping to build this... but there should've been some kind of way here that didn't involve flight, did we miss something back in the tunnel?"

"There were all those caved in passages, perhaps-"

"No," Andur calmly talked over Twilight, "We don't have time to go digging out old passageways just to find a detour."

Applejack spoke up, "You sure Andur?"

He only cast a glance over to his friend, "Cartanis?"

"Maybe... something farther out, but I can't sense anything on the bridge."

"Twilight?"

"Oh believe me, if there was unicorn magic about I would've said something about it a while ago."

"And I don't doubt either of you, so." He took a stride out onto the bridge, his hooves clopped against the dark bricks which echoed outward into the empty cavern. The single sound was joined by a cadence of others as the group soon followed suit. Yet every eye was wandering, watching the shadows beyond the veil of light, snapping at every ghostly movement, reacting to every unfamiliar sound. The sound of a small pop made them all freeze for a moment, looking upward to the source amidst the empty sky.

"Move." A few turned their attention to the Zebragus as he blanched looking to the sky, his attention quickly returned to them as he broke into a full gallop. "Get moving now!"

[1][1][4][1][1]

Rainbow Dash had barely a second to question Ted's sudden order as a large slab of rock slammed into the bridge, ricocheting debris all about her before she sidestepped the dent it left and joined the others in a half panicked break. With every pop she heard, another rock would fall, and those little warnings showed no sign of slowing.

She was keeping herself to the rear of the herd, not all of them had sunrods out, and if one of them fell off she would have to be quick to fly after them before they became lost to the darkness of the chasm below them. It wasn't until she heard a loud bang that nearly deafened her that she felt a chill run down her neck. Her first instinct was to look up, and her second was to jump off the bridge. Nearly avoiding the wall dropping from the sky, she flew out as straight as she could, turning only after she heard its weight shatter the twig of a thing that tried to slow its descent.

Dash banked around as quickly as she could scanning for any sign of light, she knew that they had three ponies using sunrods. One seemed to be hovering above where the bridge had been, *Fluttershy*. But her heart shot straight into her throat as she watched the other two free falling down into the maw they had tried to cross. *No*, She only cursed herself for a second for flying out so far, before reaching breakneck speeds faster than she had ever gone before.

Before she could even think the lights seemed almost in front of her, and she could hear a familiar voice, in a shrill scream which shouted, "Do-some-thing!"

Rainbow dash only shouted back, "I am Rarity!" She kicked her speed up into a new gear, unsure of how many of her friends were falling but uncaring, *I have to at least try! Maybe I can make a whirlwind to-*

"Leviticus Mor'fey!"

Rainbow Dash had barely any time to react, as her friends seemed to somehow halt their fall, barely rocketing past Rarity only to slam into something else. For a moment she thought she had dived right into a pool of water, the strange weightlessness of it throwing her off.

"Careful Rainbow Dash, you almost hit me."

There wasn't time to argue, Dash flapped her wings as hard as she could, but she just wouldn't move. "What did you guys do?"

"You'll be fine Miss Dash, just a basic spell for events such as this, we'll land safely eventually."

She could hear Cartanis but not see him, her mind too preoccupied with something else. "Well uncast it!" The light was getting farther away, "Right now!"

"I can't do that, not without dispelling all of it, and a group feather-fall spell isn't exactly a switch you can just flick to your heart's content."

"But-" She watched the light sailing further away, slowly shrinking to barely a star in that black abyss. The entire time she continued to fight the spell, wiggling and fluttering to just move at a faster speed instead of the slow descent she was making. That light was so far away now, she almost couldn't believe how deep this cavern could be. Her mind froze, the sunrod had vanished as it was snuffed out by the darkness which it had braved. "Applejack..." An echo of a sound grazed her ears, and then all was silent again.

"What do you mean?" Rarity called out as she tried to spin herself about in her weightless prison. "Applejack what?"

Dash never knew that feeling before, a grinding knot in her stomach as she could only watch, she didn't like it. "Where's everypony else?" Her mind didn't want to linger, not now.

"I have Twilight, but she's out cold." Cartanis spoke, "And I snagged Ted, but he's awfully quiet." He could see Dash floating listlessly in the light, "I'm sorry Dash."

"No," She shot him a somewhat angry glare, "There's nothing to be sorry about, not yet."

[1][1][5][1][1]

Almost immediately after they landed, Rainbow Dash sparked a new sunrod alight and took to the air. Heading in the direction that she had last seen Applejack, the first thing apparent to her was this places strange layout. Besides the craggy remains of the monstrous slab that tried to crush them, the remainder of this canyon was a series of calculated cuts into the walls. Large square slabs of stone missing from cliff-faces that flanked either side of her as far as she could see in the dark.

She stopped taking in the sights, *Think Dash, if her light went out, then that means she fell in something.* Dash wasn't sure she wanted to find Applejack, but she didn't want to leave this question unanswered either. So she continued flying low, looking at everything she could see. Only to fail to remember one of the more important rules of flying, to always look where you're going, especially when you're flying low.

Dash promptly slammed into a large solid object, a metallic bang ringing out as she peeled off its surface and onto the ground. "Ow." In a tone that seemed to say it was more the objects fault than hers. "Wait a minute." She approached the small metal tower, it raised out of the ground just enough to get in her way, but it didn't seem to be a structure. It was just a tube sticking out of the dirt, the top open to anything that might fall in. She bucked it once, to hear that noise again. A slight moment of elation washed over her, mixed with dread, nevertheless she made her way to the top of this thing, circumventing the ramp upon its side for a straight flight to its maw which lay open.

She couldn't see down it, nibbling at her lip for a moment, she decided to go through with an idea. Taking her current sunrod from its place in her

armor, she dropped it into the well. It pinged upon the walls of it, before it began to scrape against the bottom which was going down into a slope of metal; but it became stuck. A dent, maybe the size of a pony, was smoothly engraved into the solid slope that the sunrod had tried to go down.

Something in the dent caught her eye, she carefully hovered her way down, even with her experience a place this cramped was no easy feat. She didn't even bother to land, the angle being too steep, but she did manage to grasp the object of her attention; a small red band. "Applejack..."

[1][1][6][1][1]

Ted grumbled as consciousness finally graced his senses once again, even with his vision he could hardly see a thing, but the first thing he noticed was Rarity as she helped him up.

"Careful now darling, you had quite the spill."

He rubbed at his face, his nose still hurt somewhat, "Sometimes I really miss having a nose that isn't sixty percent of my face." Ted took some comfort in the smile that she wore, "So what happened, I kind of draw a blank around the time a metal support beam exploded out of nowhere and hit me in the face." His eyes found a second patient near him, "What happened to her?"

She cast her gaze over Twilight, concern on her features for the purple pony that was still out cold. "Twilight used her magic to shield you, looks like it was a little too much even for her, she took the brunt of it; and left you with a bruise I guess."

Ted could see the worry on her face, "Don't sweat it Rarity, it's not like magical overuse can make your head explode... can it?" Now she shot a look of daggers his way, "OK, I get it, not helping."

"You cannot be serious Miss Dash!"

Ted and Rarity looked over to the unicorn and pegasus who were in a debate that just reached critical mass.

"Look this is Applejack's braid, I found it and that means I know where she is!"

"You're worse than Andur, at least he has blind hope when there is a chance something is possible. How do you care to explain how an Earth Pony survived a meteoric fall, not unto some happenstance pile of pillows but down a steel chute of all things!"

"There wasn't a body, not even blood, and I'm not leaving her alone if she's in trouble or hurt!" With that final word, she took off towards her earlier find, to find her friend.

Ted approached Cartanis, "So what now?"

Cartanis watched the rainbow streak trailing off into the distance, "Andur already messaged me back, he wants us to try and regroup, I planned to get us moving after you two woke up; but now..."

"I only see one solution then," Ted skipped forward a few steps, "I'll go with her." He chuckled away Cartanis' concerned stare. "Come on, we can both fly, how lost can you get in a cave when you can fly?"

"Just be careful Ted, I don't want to be the one to outli-" His speech stopped short as he was interrupted.

Ted had grabbed his old friend's face, "What have I always said about heartfelt goodbyes? Especially in mid-adventure!"

"You can't possibly be still on about that old superstition."

"Well I'm still alive, am I not?" Cartanis rolled his eyes at his friend's question, "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a rainbow to find." The Zebragus lifted off into the sky, trying to remember which direction his charge had gone.

[M][7][M]

Applejack barely remembered what happened, the bridge beneath her hooves giving way, watching terrified faces cry out as gravity clocked in. She didn't really want to believe it, but it was a fact hard to ignore. Twisting and turning in free-fall she tried to right herself, her attempts were mild at best, only catching blurred glimpses off another sunrod far above her. Eventually she got a hold on her twisting fall, managing to at least hold herself in one direction.

"Leviticus Mor'fey!"

She watched the light above her fade away, much quicker than it had before, but a silhouette stood out to her; a pegasus fighting the forces that held her. Applejack could hear her protest, that voice quickly fading into an echo, and the farther she got; the more a feeling crept into her heart and mind. With her hooves over her head, and her eyes closed she could no longer ignore it. She was afraid, one part of her wanted to scream, another wanted to laugh from the twist of fate putting her in Twilight's place during that night years ago.

The loudest however was a memory, a promise of something recent. *Sorry Applebloom*, She could feel the wetness in her eyes, *guess you'll never get to show me where ya hid my hat*.

Applejack had no idea how far the ground was from her, but her body already felt numb. Stiffened unto a corpse's arrival and ready for the inevitable, only the howling wind covering the sounds within her mind. It happened in a flash, first she went deaf to the world, a pain in her mane as it felt like a dragon had yanked part of her scalp off. She instinctively reached up to inspect the damage, to find her limbs frozen in place; she struggled to move as her hearing returned. She could see nothing in the dark, not even her own hooves with her sunrod gone, whilst a sound most cruel scratched and shrieked against her ears.

That noise was metal upon metal, and Applejack wished it to stop, but maybe to her dismay it did. Now she could feel it upon her coat as she slid down an uneven slide, groans of pain escaping her as she slammed against a wall which curved it about, redirecting her to another chute. Then the ride gave way to a drop, and for a moment she screamed, only for the fall to be cut short.

She groaned at the pain in her side, as well for its sidekick in her left foreleg. Coughs escaped her as a cloud of sooty material settled about her, she could barely see, but from what Applejack could tell she was upon some large heap of rock. With her bad leg nursed against her side, she picked up one of them just to make sure of something, with a casual sniff her face constricted upon itself, "Coal?"

With her curiosity over her bedding settled, she turned to her bags, only for her dismay to find they were gone, *You couldn't just give me my bags?*,

"Not that I'm complainin' 'bout not bein' dead." Her voice and mind echoed out to nopony in particular. She then squinted just trying to see her surroundings beyond the hillside of coal she was upon, *Wish I could actually see somethin', there's just gotta be a way outta here.*

On cue she heard something rattling its way down the chute above her, and next to her landed her missing sunrod.

She shut her eyes to the blinding light for a moment, as a chuckle escaped her, "Rollin' in all kinds ah luck today ain't I?" She got to her feet, unable to put weight upon her injured leg, and once again placed the sunrod in its place upon her harnesses. Only to be thrown to her stomach as the earth beneath her feet jumped. "What in the-" She heard metal protesting as it moved about, a door on the other side of the room pulling itself open as a red light roared in warning. "-hay?"

Then Applejack realized she wasn't upon a small pile of Coal, but something more akin to a small mountain. The red glow of the next room mixed with the heat it brought only compounded against her, as she tried to fight her way back up the moving mass of coal, as it filtered its way down to another room. Even if she had use of all her legs, she doubted she stood a chance, as the moving mass of coal felt more it was a river than anything.

She could only try to not get buried as it poured out onto a conveyor belt, Applejack cast a glance to where it lead, *I take back that luck stuff I said.* She witnessed a large metal beast, as it swallowed forth the meal that was brought its way in a steady stream, a belch of fire that radiated as a sun all its own occasionally escaping from the pit.

The first thing to suddenly appear on her mental to do list was, and I quote, *GET THE HAY OUTTA HERE!* Applejack scrambled at the sides of the conveyor belt, but her hooves were unable to find purchase, as the sloped sides were smoothed to an unwanted perfection. Not all was against her, it was moving slow enough that she could at least move against the current and stay away from her demise, even with a bum leg. She had an idea about waiting until that other room was empty of coal, but upon a quick inspection, she noticed that there was a LOT more coal in that room than she thought possible.

Come on Applejack, There's gotta be a way. She spun about as best she could, taking in everything she was able to see, her eyes stopped upon

something at the edge of the belt's walls. There was something protruding just over the top of that sloped wall, but it was closer to the beast than she would care to be. Her side however was starting to protest something fierce, *Now or never*. She made her way over to the other side as it brought her closer to the end of the line, each belch of fire that came forth only made her more aware of the danger.

She tested her bum leg, it hurt to use, but it would have to do. She knew that all that was left in her had to go into this, or else who knew what could happen.

The object that she could scarcely see was getting close, so she took a stride back to prepare for her jump. A wave of heat rushed out from the beast and she took her chance. A painful stride lead into her using those powerful tree-bucking legs to launch herself at the top of that barricade, for a moment she felt like a pegasus, weightless and free in the air. She braced herself as her top half barely made it over the edge of that wall, reaching out and wrapping her hooves around that metal rod that jutted out of the ground.

"Gotcha!" She tried to pull herself up, her back legs kicking and sliding against that smooth surface as she did so, but her lame arm was starting to really kick in. "Come on-" She heard a click and felt herself move slightly, her eyes opened from their labor and she noticed something. This wasn't some metal rod she had grabbed, it was a lever. "Don't you!-" It clicked back another step, jostling her about as it stopped, pain shooting through her bad foreleg. "No, I ain't takin' any ah your-" The metal protested as she tried one last time to yank herself out of that hole, but it had other plans.

The rod cranked all the way towards her, too fast for even her to think about it, and snapped itself from its foundation in the process. Her calls against it were drowned out, as gears beneath her groaned to renewed life. To her own horror, the belt was now moving faster, much faster than it had been before. She stood to break into a gallop, the only speed she could think of that would match this snarling terror, only to gasp I pain. If the wrist in her foreleg wasn't disjointed or broken before, it was now. Now all she could do was hardly comparable to a quick trot, slowly losing the precious ground she had been all too willing to give up earlier, her breath slowly getting weaker whilst her sides stabbed at her chest.

She dared not look back, the only knowledge of her doom needed was the heat bathed against her and summoned forth renewed sweat upon her brow. Now Applejack could hear it, the rattle of the coal landing within the beast, and the roar of the fire from its maw. The only sound that seemed to top that of her heart as it beat incessantly was the groan of metal beneath her hooves, something seemingly too old that even it could not withstand the strain of its new task. The groan quickly grew to a screech, and then a wail, until the metal snapped. The last small portion of beltway behind her toppling off into the fires beneath, she had almost gone with it, but once again she felt a small bit of luck was on her side.

She grasped at the beam that managed to survive the belts destruction, her teeth clamped to it like nothing she had grabbed onto before. She reached as best she could, wrapping her good hoof around it, and pulling herself up to rest that last savior beneath her foreleg with her head resting upon it as well. A belch of fire behind her was so hot, she almost screamed, for even beneath that layer of cloth it felt like something was tanning her hide right there. While each breath felt like hot embers within her lungs, so irritating that she would cough occasionally, which only worsened the pain in her side.

Applejack looked at possibly her only way out of this, the conveyor belt itself, the last of the coal firing off it with a speed she could not match. *Alright now, just shimmy your way...* She started the process of trying to lessen the distance between her and the relative safety of the now empty conveyor belt. Every inch she fought for, and with every ounce of endurance she had to muster to ignore the fiery pain on her back every time the beast would belch up fire behind her. Then she heard a noise, one far too familiar, the old machinery groaning once more in its throws of pain.

She saw bolts loosening upon another section of the conveyor belt, "No." They rattled and rolled, cracks streaking across the smooth surface, "No-no-no!" Applejack tried to hurry her pace, but it was no easy feat. With every awkward shuffle to try and close the distance, the pain in her side would stab at her again, and the pole from which she rested her fate would jostle just a little more.

When the pole finally gave, she couldn't say she was surprised, but now it rested at a sloped angle. Her sweat soaked forearm unable to find purchase on its surface, she slipped down the beam, whatever little lead

she had gained was quickly fading as the heat grew hotter than she cared to believe. In a last ditch attempt, she bite down onto the rod, ignoring the pain in her jaw as she did so. The only thing between her and the bottom of this pit was now her teeth, they bite down fiercely as she held in a shout when the beast let loose another plume of fire.

Once the pain had passed she opened her eyes, barely able to see out of the maw of this thing, she dangled in its throat. One part of her, as crazy as it sounded, begged her to just drop; to stop it all right now. For a moment, she wondered if she should listen to it, and her teeth felt slowly lax as she loosened her hold.

"*Just stay safe sis.*" Applejack swore she was hearing things, but that image in her head, Applebloom so clearly standing before her.

No! She bite down harder than she had before, I ain't a quitter, never was, never will be! Come on, there's gotta be somethin' 'round here.

"Applejack!"

She knew that voice, but its source was nowhere to be seen, *I don't need your silly hallucinations right now!*

"Applejack where are you!"

What did I just s-! Her mind froze, Applejack could see her, Rainbow Dash; just outside the beast's mouth. Flying high and searching in every direction, except for down. Applejack groaned and tried to talk, scream, anything! But a vice grip does wonders for one's ability to communicate effectively.

A pillar a fire roared past her, pain once again greeting her weary mind. "Whoa!" Applejack opened her eyes to see Dash barely dodge that column of fire, then she looked down to its source, and their eyes finally met. "Applejack!"

Rainbow Dash fired herself at the maw of the beast, but another shot of flame stopped her advance. She looked into the belly of the beast, a small mountain of black coal was slowly growing to an intense glow of unbridled fury. Sparks and clouds of smoke billowed from it as the fire worked its way up, the plumes of fire growing in intensity and frequency as it did. *You got this Dash, don't even hesitate, just do it.* "Hold on Applejack!"

Dash held back nothing, wings beating ferociously, the flaps almost seemed to summon thunder with each downward stroke. A column of fire rushed its way to her, but she just twisted, a gust of wind rocketing from her and billowing the fire away for a moment. As she entered the furnace the heat of it smacked her across the face, but she didn't slow, only gaining in speed as her goal was within reach. She flew out afar, so as to tackle applejack in the midsection, both their eyes not leaving the others. Applejack seemed to have a slight hesitation on her brow as they connected, a groan of pain escaping her as they finally collided.

Now Dash had to get out, she already felt like she was on fire, and wasn't competently thrilled to find out if she really was. With Applejack held onto and partly slung over her shoulder she redoubled her efforts, the hot air rising with her as she felt another pillar of fire building behind them. "Dash, ya might wanna-"

"I know!" She shouted at her friend. The climb was far worse than the descent, with the added weight of her friend, Dash had to use all her strength to get her wings to work. The maw was so close, but that pillar of fire felt closer. *Little more, just a little more!* breaking through alongside that last terrible bellow of the beast as it lamented its meal escaping, her thoughts devolved into shouting as she shouted through the pain of fire so close to her body.

For a time Dash just kept flying straight, the pain made her close her eyes for a moment, "Hey Dash?" She opened her eyes, unsure if she would see the cave in which they had resided, but she turned her head about to see Applejack. "Mind if we land now?"

"Yeah..." Her breathing grew ragged, the exertion of it finally starting to set in, "Yeah, let's do that."

Dash picked a spot between the beasts multiple maws, it seems that the beltway that Applejack had been upon was not the only thing that was fed into it. As it sat in the middle of a large cavern, waiting for its next meal while it billowed fire for a purpose she could not understand.

Applejack let herself off her friend taking a step or two away, before collapsing into a ball. Nursing the pain in her side where she had been tackled, and much to her own disbelief, shivering as she got used to the 'cold' of not being baked alive.

"You OK Applejack?" Dash noted her friend's pain, alongside the soot and dirt that blanketed her friend in a veil.

She spared a look her friend's way, who looked much the same, "Can say I've been better," She chuckled slightly, "Same goes for you."

Rainbow Dash only furrowed her brow as her friend's chuckles grew into more hearty laughter, "What?" she arched one of her eyebrows.

Applejack only laughed harder, "Ya burned off one ah your eyebrows."

"What!" Her hoof went to her forehead, feeling the bare skin where fur and eyebrow should've been. She chuckled a bit too, "Well it's not like I'm about to get my picture taken." But her laughter cut off once she saw Applejack wince in pain. "You alright?"

"Like I said, been better." Even if she was in pain, there was something she needed to know, "Everypony else fine 'n' dandy?"

"Twilight could be better, but they all made it, yeah." Dash then dipped her head into her saddlebags, returning with a potion placed at her hooves, "So about those injuries."

"Yeah." She took the potion, cringing at the idea of the pain the healing might bring, but knowing it would be better than the current throbs of pain with a side of pins in her side, so she downed the concoction anyway.

Dash watched her friend shut her eyes, cringing with gritted teeth, exhaling and pounding her hoof against the ground. As soon as the pain arrived, it seemed to leave, and her friend only sighed once it had washed away. "Ready to get-" her voice was overwhelmed by the gnashing of metal, its screech drew their attention to the doorway from which they had both entered the room.

It was closing.

"Oh great!"

"Get movin'!"

Even with her legs fixed, Applejack could see the speed at which the door was closing, "I don't think we're gonna make it Dash!" She had to shout over the deafening grind from the gate.

"We can just move faster!"

"This is faster!"

Rainbow Dash spun herself around, flying low and preparing to pick up her friend.

"That ain't gonna work Dash." Applejack started to slow herself, already out of breath.

Rainbow Dash was hovering between her friend and her perceived exit, shooting nervous glances to each of them. "Well what then!" One last look upon the gates, even she could see how small the gap was getting, soon a pony wouldn't even be able to fit through them. Then she saw something rocket out between that tiny gap, the door's clapping shut in a deafening eruption just behind it, the grey streak that had made its entrance quickly braked to a halt.

A Zebragus hovered in the cavern's spacious room, hooves moving about his person as he made sure that he was still in one piece. After some of the stress seemed to melt from his features, Ted looked about and saw the two mares a ways off, "Hey Applejack you're alive!" *I should've made that bet with Cartanis.*

[/]/[/][8]/[/]/

"So after that, I went back to where I found your braid and followed these weird scuff marks all the way down to here. Heh, wasn't easy, even for me."

Ted shrugged when Applejack turned for his explanation, "Pretty much the same thing, except I-" He dug about inside his bag of holding, pulling out a surprise. "Ta-dya" He managed to saw through gritted teeth.

"I didn't see her saddlebags on the way down." Dash spoke up.

Ted allowed Applejack to take back her bags before addressing the question, "I guess you need to work on your perception checks then."

"Ah, applesauce!"

"What?" Ted said to Applejack's outburst.

"Just my food, some of it got... ugh, everywhere. Now all my rations are gonna taste like apples."

"Oh, anyway. Where to now?" Ted scratched at his chin whilst inspecting their surroundings, "How much coal did you say this furnace used Applejack?"

"Well I don't know the actual amount, but it was darn near that entire room we all got outta, floor to ceiling."

"That's an awful lot of fuel..." His eyes wandered to other features of the large mechanical beast, "With multiple feeding ports... I only see one solution." He pointed to the large tubes leading out of a tank which rested atop the furnace, "We follow the steam, and head deeper into our little mystery."

"Wait a corn-shuckin' minute." She called to Ted's attention, "Shouldn't we see what everypony else is up to," She motioned to the book on his harness, "You know, to see how they're doin'?"

"I have Applejack, and as you may see." Ted took his messenger book and held it by the back cover, allowing it to open vertically to fall upon a random page.

Both Dash and Applejack stood bewildered as letters of all colors crawled across the page, none forming words, each of them a different size and font with a life all their own.

He put the book back, "The response has been... less than desirable." His tone changed drastically, "So I would really enjoy it, if we didn't stay in one place and wait for another near death experience to find us." He waited for the duo's confirmation and began following the pipes out the one exit of the large cavern. The trio each had a light upon them, for soon the glow of the

furnace room was little more than a warm red glow behind them, an unknown catacomb of tunnels before them.

[//][9][//]

"I don't know Ted, that doesn't sound right."

"But I heard you arguing about it earlier, how can you be sure?"

"Just look at the walls Ted," She ran a hoof over its smooth surface. "No way this was done by Diamond Dogs. Claws don't leave stuff this... clean. Besides just think about the forks in the tunnels back there, it looked more like sompony just stopped diggin' straight and spun about on their heels in a new direction, sharp angles everywhere. With Diamond Dogs it's a lot more random and bumpy."

"If you say so." Ted looked to the pipes that ran along the corridors ceiling, "Take a right up here."

"Why are we fallowing these things anyway?" Dash asked whilst she hovered above the group.

"Furnaces like that power things, and one that big... let's just say I'm curious."

"So we're following this because of curiosity? Sounds reasonable to me." She said back with a scoff.

"Look at it this way." He said to the eye rolling pegasus, "We're here to find Dra'nahb, who we can safely assume is wherever that road was leading us, and chances are that that furnace we were just at, is somehow related to that road and where it may lead."

"Maybe," Applejack chimed in, "Better than just aimlessly wanderin' I guess."

"Glad you think so-" Ted stopped in his tracks, ears raised at attention.

"What-" Dash was quickly shushed.

"Lights out." Ted looked back when his order wasn't instantly heeded, to see some confused ponies stare back, "Pretend it's a candle."

Applejack then 'blew out' her sunrod, stashing it in the hopes it could be 'reignited'. Now all she could do was stand in the darkness, trying to listen for the thing that set Ted on edge.

"Dash quit hovering, you're throwing me off." The pegasus promptly landed at his request. "Don't move, I'll be back."

"Wait a minute Ted..." Much to Applejack's dismay she couldn't see him, nor hear him, and only sighed at his disappearance. "I can't believe him."

The two waited in silence for a time, neither saying much, as they stood on edge. Waiting for some sign of whatever set Ted into his mood switch. Even this long in the dark however, Applejack could not see, not well anyway, but something caught her eye. There was a slight glow on the ceiling, and she wasn't sure if she was going mad, but it seemed to be getting brighter.

"Oh, wow." Applejack looked over to her friend, whose silhouette was tinged with the teal hue of the brightening glow. "It's Glowmold."

"How do you know about a fungus?"

"Pinkie Pie wanted to do a prank involving it." Her friend snickered a bit, "Didn't work out. Long story short, it doesn't like noise or light, it uses magic to hide itself in the event of well... what I just listed."

The duo once again grew quiet, as the corridor slowly became entranced in the beautiful glow of the mold. After being lost in the dank caverns for most of a day, the two took time to enjoy something they had not seen in a while, color.

A noise broke out in the silence, and while Applejack barely heard it, that noise was apparently enough to make the Glowmold shudder and dim, returning the duo to mere tinted silhouettes in the tunnel. That sound returned again, something gurgled in a sickening way, a dry cough echoing it.

Applejack looked to her friend, and when she saw her friend's silhouette look to her as well, she knew they thought the same thing.

Ghouls.

"Come on Applejack let's-"

"No," She said back in a whisper, "I don't care for standing around neither, but we can't go getting' lost in here."

"You're just scared."

"No I ain't, just..." She sighed, "Look Dash, I've seen one of these things in action before, they ain't exactly somethin' you go around lookin' for."

"But isn't that what we're here to do, we're supposed to be making Ponyville safe, and it isn't going to be safe as long as those things are wandering about down here." Dash's silhouette got right into Applejack's face, "So I don't know about you, but I'm gonna start doing something about it." She turned and began trotting down the corridor in the direction of the noises.

"Wait Dash." The silhouette stopped and looked back to Applejack, "If you're so bull-headed to do this, then I ain't lettin' ya go alone."

"Thanks Applejack."

"Yeah well don't make me go regrettin' it."

[10]

Rainbow Dash waited at the corner, watching it. Applejack bumped her to grab her attention.

"What's it doin'?"

Dash squinted, the Glowmold had grown dimmer the closer they got to it, but that mold seemed to still be around; if only to provide a weak outline of the ghoul. "I don't know, it just keeps pawing at that pile of rocks." She quickly slipped her head into hiding as the things head arched all the way back, head into the air. The ghoul inhaled deeply, that sickening gargle

emanating from it, then it coughed as its head fell forward and it returned to digging at the rock pile.

"Why does it keep doin' that?"

"How should I know?" Dash peeked around the corner again, just to keep an eye on it.

"So what's the plan?"

"We kill it."

Applejack slapped a hoof to her face, "How exactly, you know it ain't just gonna stand there and let'cha stab it to death."

"We get close... don't let it notice us, and we get it." She shrugged, "Simple."

"Alright, fair enough start, but how about this." Applejack joined Dash as she glanced around the corner at the beast, "We wait for it to gurgle again, sneak up to it, I hold him down, and then you use your power on it like Andur does. You can do that right?"

"Yeah... sorta."

"Sorta? This aint the time to be doubtin' yourself Dash."

"I'm not, I just can't do the things Andur does, that's all." Dash looked back to the ghoul in the distance, "It's just like... I can see that thing... and it twists at something in me, so can we stop talking and do something about it?"

Applejack saw the things head start to arch back again, "Yeah."

They began, each on their own side of the tunnel, creeping along on almost their bellies. Occasionally they cast an eye the others way, just to make sure they were keeping pace. The distant that remained was getting closer, and even in the dim lighting, Applejack could clearly begin to see the ghoul. It may have been a stallion at one point, but now, its teeth were exposed on a dried out skull, flesh was wrinkled and loosely fitting to its frame, and

more than a few holes exposed insides which she thankfully could not see well.

Finishing a deep inhale it leaned forward with the force of its cough, bringing its head down with eyes traveling about. One of the eyes seemed to fall upon Applejack, and she froze for a moment. It may have been dark, but Applejack was unsure if that mattered at this point, taking no chances she leapt what little room remained between them.

When she tackled it, she had no idea if the cough was from its usual routine or her slamming into the things throat, either way she took the chance to grapple it. She wrapped the head under her foreleg and brought it to the ground, its legs scuttling about as a pinned insect. She kept her eyes on the head though, as it twisted and tried to get an angle on her, if the noises it made weren't bad enough; Applejack was sure the smell of the thing would never leave her.

Just when she thought the smell would get the better of her, the thing violently twitched in her grasp, then became still. A soft glow emanated from the bones under her arms, washing over the features as the bones became slack. Whatever had held the thing together was no longer there, as the bones in the skull fell apart, the neck breaking in her hold.

Applejack let out a relieved sigh, turning over to look at her blind side, "Good work Dash..." but on the other side of the creature there was only a spear jutting out of the ghoulish pony's chest. "Dash?" She turned to follow her ears, listening to the panting of a pony not far, she could see her friend; better now that the Glowmold started to return. "Ya' alright?" She reached out just to get her attention, but she stepped back when she noticed her attempt.

"Yeah, I'm fine... just..." Dash went over to her weapon, yanking it from the body in her teeth; dust fleeing from its tip. Upon restoring it to its place upon her back, she looked back to Applejack, "I saw him... that ghoulish, or who he used to be. He was in so much pain, and then he just looked at me and said." Even in the light of the Glowmold, Applejack could see some of the color drain from her friend's face, "Thanks."

Applejack could see her friend was shaken, Dash wasn't the type to be hurt in such a way easily and held her composure well, but what she described

didn't seem to be something she expected to happen. "Don't worry 'bout it Dash, ya did good." Her friend smiled for a moment.

"Yeah, but I hope it doesn't happen often... it's kinda weird." She said with a shrug, "But if they're all like that guy, this'll be easy." Now Dash was concerned for Applejack, who seemed struck by what she had said, "Something up?"

"Was easy wasn't he?"

"Yeah..." Dash watched her friend trot over to the re-deceased ghoul they had just dealt with, "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Applejack poked at the body, the dusty wound from Dash's strike. "Something's wrong here, I mean there's no... goopy stuff."

"Goopy stuff?"

"Andur called it somethin'." She tapped at the side of her head, "Ghoul's somethin'... Whatever he called it, none of it is here. Even when he did what you did to it, the thing still bleed it all over the place before it evaporated, made the air smell funny to." She sniffed the air a few times, "Still smells like last year's apple harvest to me though."

"So... That thing wasn't a ghoul? What does that mean then?"

"I don't know, but it can't be nothin' good." Applejack could feel the hairs on her neck standing on end, "Let's go find Ted, I've had enough of this." She turned to pass by Rainbow Dash, who stood in the corridor from which they had come from, only to stop in her tracks. "Hayseed."

Dash passed a glance behind her at whatever Applejack had gawked at, "Oh horse-apples."

The way was blocked by a line of undead ponies, barely room for them to do more than touch shoulders, how far back this wall was they could not say; as the Glowmold was retreating from the sight the closer down the tunnel they went. The duo quickly backtracked to the rock pile which sat at a T-junction, only to see a similar sight on their first turn.

"You know," Dash said as she turned to see the third route blocked as well, "I'm starting to think this was a trap." She winced when a light far brighter than the Glowmold ignited next to her, through squinting eyes she saw Applejack planting a relight sunrod into the rock-pile which they know had to their backs. Before her vision could even recover, whatever light they had from the Glowmold vanished, leaving them to the edge of darkness which their shadows reached out for.

"You don't suppose they can use magic?"

"Well I hope not." Dash said whilst brandishing her weapon, standing ready, wings unfurled for balance.

Applejack stood low upon all fours, pawing at the ground, just waiting for the first one to break into the sight of the sunrod. They both waited in fact, the only sign of their encroaching attackers the slight ticks and tacks of hooves lightly hitting the ground, only the darkness hid from them the origin of that noise. Then they could see them, on the edge of the ring, hooves stopped at the brightness, noses of all quality and washed out color waited, and a million sparks in the night watched them. Not a word spoken, nary a grunt excused, only the silence of an enemy waiting.

Lettin' the ladies go first, how nice. Applejack thought to herself, quickly nabbing a rock from the pile, tossing it from her mouth into the air. Skillfully heel-turning and bringing a tree-shattering buck to it, the rock sailed through the air, and smashed between two floating orbs. The target promptly slumped into the light, a crushed head embedded with a stone the size of its eye lay silent.

One part of Applejack wanted to believe the rest would just wait and let themselves be picked off, but all she managed to do was rattle the hornets' nest. When the charge came, in all its shambling half tripping glory, the two had time to prepare. In some manner of luck, they supposed, the differing quality of the undead ponies' legs seemed to lead their once uniform charge into a haphazard lunge. The quicker ones separating from the slower ones, until that neat formation had broken into pockets of one or two ponies vying for a chance at first blood.

Applejack wasn't about to complain however, the quickest one already upon her. She swept one foreleg out low, meaning to trip the thing to get a better swing in. Instead the leg snapped, she grimaced at the rather

sickening sound and dust that popped from it, undeterred the undead pony snapped at her face. Brought back from her momentary lapse, she brought her foreleg around again as it fell from its imbalance, smashing its head to dust against the stone floor.

A warning bell went off in her mind, and that strange third eye kicked into gear. Something was behind her, and it was after her flank. She immediately dropped to the ground and spun about, another undead pony had tried to catch her off-guard, it was already reaching back to try to bite her again. Not having any of it, Applejack reacted before the pony could. Wrapping the head against her side whilst under her foreleg, she twisted her torso, bending the neck to such an extreme angle that she heard a pop, it wasn't until she saw the body wander off that she realized she had torn the head clean off.

There was no blood, no meat, just a bunch of dried skin and bone, *Just how old are these things anyway?*

Her curiosity would have to wait, the alarm bell was going off again only stronger than before. She turned from the central tunnel, back to 'her' side of the T-junction. With the quickest dealt with, the undead which had matched speed were now bearing down upon her, it was a group of three with a fourth close behind. Her mind ran through with a thousand things to try. They may have been slow, brittle, and stupid; but she didn't want to start underestimating them after only taking down so few.

Her time to think didn't last, the first was already upon her, and her first thought was to rise into an uppercut. The central undead pony's head bent back on itself, Applejack followed with a kick from a back leg, throwing the remains of it into the one behind; both shattering into a pile of broken bone.

Between the other two, Applejack felt a nip on her side, one getting in a bite. She promptly dropped her elbow onto its head. With its teeth loosened and the perpetrator reeling, she turned to the other, quickly smacking it across the face with her foreleg. Then she returned to the first, hitting it again where she already had, more breaks streaking across the boney face. Once more she changed her target, repeatedly blurring her hits into one another, not giving either a chance to recoil.

But more were coming, she couldn't pinprick these two to death. So she got an idea, something that she had read in that book. She took a moment to

breathe, cleared her head, and felt that inner song of her mind. The world slowed, and she felt a strange echo of the future. Her movements were clear and done before she performed them, following the steps in her mind before they impacted the world.

She thrust out both her forelegs whilst she stood, slamming the two at her sides into the wall, their heads shattered on contact. She returned to all fours to the next one, inhaled, then rolled forward before it was in range and tripped it into a midair barrel roll. While she rose from her position she wrapped her tail around it, fishtailing about and tossing it point blank into another. A third remained close, and with her back legs now planted towards it, she exhaled while bucking with all her might.

She felt that force again, she wasn't just throwing back her hooves towards that undead pony. Something else joined it, it poured out from her core, and when that body went flying that very force she felt went right along with it. Throwing aside everything in its way, bringing along shrapnel-like leftovers with it. Using zen was always tiring, and she needed a moment to recover, so her mind wandered.

Applejack knew she was strong, her performance in the iron pony competition had shown as such, but some of that just seemed unreal to her. Upon noticing how far away the sunrod was something at the back of her head came roaring to attention, "Hayseed!" She had left Rainbow Dash with two directions to cover.

Applejack could already see her once she had turned to close the distance. Some must have managed to overwhelm her somewhat, the leather armor at her heels and sides frayed slightly, and more were definitely going to make it to her before she could.

Dash focused on the one in front of her, bringing the spear's head down upon it. The blade sank slightly into its shoulder, and like all the others, it seemed to slow as strength was sapped from its core. A hazy golden dust drifted from it as the corpse fell apart, whatever held it apart cast away, a body left to rest once more.

She heard the next one before she could see it, somewhere behind her. Out of the corner of her eye she could see it, far too close for her to turn about and make an attack with her spearhead. Instead she thrust the pommel of it at the beast without moving, it slammed into the skull. While it

still recovered, she finished her turn, stabbing it straight in the chest; another collapsed to the ground to her count.

Six, Dash flinched in pain, something was digging into her ankle. Once again they had gone after her blindside, this time though, when she looked at it. She didn't see a pony as she had every other time, now, as it bite into her flesh, another image came to mind. That pony that they came here to find, the one she never even had a chance to give a piece of her mind to, the one that attacked her home when she wasn't there to help.

Maybe these things were ponies, but now. She snorted in anger, *They're just monsters, and he's to blame!* She could see them as they were now, they were not ungrateful dead. No, they were unspeakable abominations, wrought by a being, a thing, that didn't care what atrocity he committed by this act. Each one a pony that was at rest, rendered unto an unending nightmare of undeath, and that one still nibbling on her ankle was really starting to cheese her off.

"Buzz off!" Something swelled within her, in tandem with her anger, but it wasn't at the monster in front of her. She swore to herself, again if necessary, to wipe the thing that caused this off the face of her Equestria. A small blast of light echoed off her person, evaporating the things face.

Seven.

Runes and markings hidden upon Mezekesh's shaft revealed themselves, as the tip held within it a soft glow, and Dash could see and feel a soft aura of light around herself. The boon echoed through her, called to her, beckoned her to action. She could see the next group of undead moving towards her, unabated by anything that transpired before them.

Rainbow Dash made her move, but if they wanted to fight, they were going to get the full deal. Fighting on the ground was annoying to her, so not by foot did she advance, but to what little room in the air did she take. She hated 'standing' anyway, the wind beneath her wings just felt right, and these things were about to feel a full weeks-worth of pent up 'expression'.

The closest one got the full force of her aerial charge, it practically melted to nothingness immediately, barely slowing her advance. Another tried to reach for her as she hovered on, all she had in response was to bring up her hoof, and then bring it down to the back of its head. As the face lay

rooted into the ground, she planted her weapon into its skull, grounding herself for barely a second before returning to the little airspace she had.

A small group tried to get her at once, the first was immediately impaled, light sang forth from it before it crumbled to the ground. The second of the three however, managed to latch onto her, bringing her down. She had to drop her weapon just to grab it in time to stop something worse than a tear in her chest-plate, pushing back the head as it gargled and spat up upon her was something special indeed. Of course the next one took the opportunity, and tried to go for her face, whilst she could do nothing about it.

An Avenger does not suffer impairments to their call, we are only brought down by the injustices we allow.

Dash felt like chastising that thing for talking in her head again without permission, but he had a point. *Forget all of them*, She cast out everything at her attention, the one she held back with her hooves was all that remained in her mind. *This one dies, right now*. She could see a myriad of ways to bring it down, but only if she could escape this grasp, but she didn't need to do it the conventional way. There was a backdoor, with her power she could 'alter' where she was, go to where her target would not be safe. This one screamed to her, *Death from above*.

The power was there, waiting for her command. When she gave it, she was pulled through space, a mere wave of light moving to another place. The undead pony had no time to think, as Dash appeared above it, bringing her weight down upon its back which snapped it in two. She promptly avoided the clumsy attempt at retaliation from the third, who remained untouched. At least until she recovered her weapon, which was soon planted into the side of its skull.

Once the body had lost any sense of activity, she noticed the second one, which was now barely a torso pulling itself about. Even in its pain, it was forced to do the will of another, it made Dash sick. It dragged itself toward her, the sickening noises it created made worse by its current condition. It had no chance, but still it tried. With it in reach, she ended it quickly, sending another pony back to rest; hopefully for good.

I'll find you, ya sick madmare freak. She didn't dwell upon it, there was other undead to deal with. She looked over to Applejack, rather unnerved

with her strange bursts of speed, bodies breaking and separating in the blink of an eye. Not wanting to miss out, Dash made her way back.

[M][11][M]

Applejack brought her hoof down upon the disabled undead thing, signaling the end of the second wave.

"Geez Applejack, how'd you get so fast?"

"I'm fast?" She turned to her friend, "You're the one who keeps appearin' outta nowhere like some kinda angry ghost."

"Heheh," She stood proudly on all fours, "Yeah well not everypony can say they get to do that."

"Twilight does." Applejack snickered as Dash shot her a dirty look.

Dash finally let it go, the playfulness draining from her face. "You think they're still out there?"

Applejack's ears twitched as they played radar at the darkness around them, "Yeah... but they ain't movin'. Somethin's up."

Dash scratched at her foreleg a bit, she hated to say it but, "Applejack... I'm not sure how many I got left in me." Even if she was careful, there were a lot that would attack, and she wasn't exactly spotless of blood or tarnished armor. "We might have to start using those potions."

Applejack could tell Dash was starting to get weak, she felt woozy too, but she told Dash they had to go as long as possible without using their only means of healing. She only had three, Dash two, and she still had no idea how many more would come before they could try to escape. Her mind was made up, "Dash, can you give me one more? Just one more, than we can start dealing out the fixers. Alright?" Dash just smiled with her determination clear across her brow.

"You got it Applejack." Her answer came at a good enough time, a clatter of hooves in the distance signaled another advance, "So if these arn't the ghouls, then what do we call them."

"I'm pretty sure 'Zompony' describes 'em well enough." Applejack scanned the corridors, waiting for movement to join the sound of the encroaching horde. When they finally entered the range of her sight she was slightly dumbfounded, and her skin crawled. The first wave had been barely over twenty after they shared their count, the second a similar number. This however, was not a haphazard charge of three different loosely connected directions, it was bodies lining the space between walls with their forces. An untold number of dusty earth pony, flightless pegasus, and magicless unicorn.

Applejack knew, this was why the first wave didn't attack immediately, and why the second seemed so hurried and haphazard; this was the real trap. "Dash, the ceilings are high enough, you can fly outta here."

"What!" Dash snapped a look at her friend, "Don't you dare try that heroine crap on me, I ain't leaving ya!"

She didn't have time to argue, the first were already upon them. They took out the ones who singled themselves out, but the numbers growing around them was increasing at an unsettling rate. It wouldn't be long before her moves weren't enough, before Dash was brought down by a hundred clacking mouths, before the dead would clamber over themselves to heed the dark words that beckoned for their flesh.

Another came for her, she struck it down with heavy hay-maker. "Dash, you need to get outta' here."

"Just shut up Applejack!" She gave up some ground, closing the distance between her friend, stabbing at the zomponys as she retreated. "We can do this."

They lashed out at them, their circle growing ever smaller as the numbers swelled as such to cast them aside was getting ever more impossible. Dash winced as one managed to pluck a feather from her wing, gnashing its trophy in its teeth. Applejack let loose wide arcing swings to make them back away, but each time they would move back less, for each time there was less space for even them to move. In the light their shadows cast out upon the mass of bodies, less and less was there tunnels and walls, more and more was there an angry sea of skulls gasping for breath above the ever growing horde.

A noise pierced their battle, it rattled the duo to their knees, and tripped the bastion of undead about. "What the hay was that?" Applejack heard her friend say as they both scrambled to their feet.

"Ladies!"

The duo looked down one of the corridors, to the direction of the voice, a golden star blinding them to its advance.

"We are leaving!"

Dash was the first to speak, "Ted!"

He was still flying his way over to them, "Applejack, I hope you can handle an airlift."

She looked to Dash, who was already stowing her weapon and unfurling her wings, Ted however was their first. She reached out her hooves to his own outstretched hooves, clasping them together as she was whisked into the air. Ted did his best to lift her as high as possible, but her back end was still dangling rather low, easily within reach of the almost unshaken zomponys that awoke from their daze.

"I could use a little help here." Ted proclaimed through gritted teeth.

"Whoa nelly!" Applejack wasn't entirely prepared to feel her tail get yanked to bring her back end up, leaving her cradled between the two fliers with her back to the floor.

"We dun't 'ave hime fur fome'fing else." Dash managed to mumble through the tail in her mouth.

Applejack knew that much was true, she could hear them below her, snapping and groaning at their passing. One part of her was glad she couldn't easily 'look down', another was somewhat disturbed by what she could see behind them as they flew however. In the light of the forgotten sunrod, which slowly dimmed as its lifecycle neared its end, a moving mass of bodies was shambling their way. Even if they weren't out of danger yet, she couldn't help but feel great about their relative fortune of getting out of that mess.

A roar broke her relative peace, she recognized it, but this time was clearer; anger rattled in with its ferocity. She saw something, huge, in the fading light of the sunrod. She didn't see much beyond what mattered most, it was definitely once a pony, and it was as tall as the corridors they were flying through. "Ted, how exactly are we gonna get outta this mess?"

"Working on it."

"Mind workin' a little faster, we gotta-"

"Big, bad, and ugly, I know."

Applejack could see the concern in his features, not even Ted seemed to know what to do about it. For whatever that thing was, she could hear it smashing apart brittle bone as it charged through the living mass that they were slowly distancing, but still it was not within range of the light to be seen.

"Alright, we're clear of the horde." Ted was slowly lowering his altitude, Dash followed suit. "Ready?"

Applejack was pretty sure what he was about to do wasn't going to make her happy, "Probabl-whoa!"

Her front end dropped first, since she didn't swing about like a wrecking ball she knew Dash must've let go as well. With her best attempt at a backwards tumble-roll she managed to avoid a worse case injury, but she knew she was going to be feeling the bruises from this little fiasco for a while to come. Doing her best to pick up speed, she galloped after the zebragus, who seemed to also have voided flight in favor of his own legs. Dash however continued her flight above the duo that ran.

"So what now?"

Ted looked up to the ceiling, "Just follow the pipes, I have a plan."

Applejack didn't care how Ted would do it, but she would be glad if it didn't involve her getting dropped again, today had involved enough falling on her part.

Dash kept trying to sneak peeks behind them, she had seen Applejack's face when she saw whatever it was that thundered its way on their tail. "There are three of us, why are we running?"

"Numbers won't matter when that thing flattens you, just keep moving." Ted managed to say through labored breaths.

They followed the path, turning down corridors as they split down differing roads, staying true to the guideline above. The beast that followed them however, showed little sign of slowing, every turn brought with it the sound of it crushing stone and mortar as it cut the turn short, removing a small section of wall with it.

Ted looked about at the walls, he finally noticed the old marking he had left behind, "Alright Applejack, take point, keep going and don't stop."

She did as told, following the path, trying to make out in the light of the sunrod where she was being lead. When she saw it, she couldn't help but curse under her breath. She was being corralled to what could only be a drop-off into an abyss, the tunnels giving way to an old descending staircase, rusty edges and broken supports signaled the lack of any chance she was going to actually use it.

"One ah you two better catch me, or I'm gonna haunt you so bad you'll-"

Dash snapped at her, "Just go Applejack!"

She knew it must be right behind them, the thunder of its hooves was joined by its berating croaks and huffs. Applejack just pumped her legs faster, the clops of the tunnel gave way to the clanks of metal, and she held her breath whilst throwing herself over the broken edge of the old walkway; the butterflies in her stomach having a field-day as she did.

The butterflies, along with some of her senses, were knocked about as she was caught in midfall a few moments later. Somepony's hooves wrapped around her torso, and she was dangled like a cat clinging to a branch. "Thanks Dash."

"Not Dash."

Applejack twisted her head and saw the grey foreleg wrapped around her, before she could think to respond a roar echoed out into the dark place they retreated to. She heard Dash exclaim some type of disbelief, as they put more distance between them and that thing. "Can he follow!"

"No, but I think something else is!" On the breaths end of her warning, a flock of wings could be heard being pushed into service.

Applejack heard Ted say something, but she couldn't understand it. The way he said it however, made it sure sound like a curse to her. She could hear his labored breathing, something was off, and by his attitude he wasn't exactly up for a fight. "Ted, we need to lose that sunrod."

"Great idea, I'll just smash into the next wall or overtly large stalagmite."

Applejack wasn't sure what he meant, then they dodged what looked like a pillar the size of a house made out of rock. "Just how good is your eyesight?"

"Pretty good," He pulled in a long breath, "but I won't be able to see anything without a light source. We're just gonna have to outfly them."

She heard the unease in his voice, "Now look here Ted, I can tell you're not up to that, even if you gave me to Dash, but you can make it. The sunrods aren't the only source of light round here, you just gotta get rid of it."

Applejack couldn't see his face, but he must've mulled it over well enough, for when he spoke it was in that tone she rarely heard. "Alright Applejack, fair point." She heard him inhale deeply, returning to his old self. "Dash, kindly take AJ here would you?"

Applejack went from being hugged from behind to being hugged from the front, as her friend took over for Ted.

"Now just hover someplace nice and quiet, I'll be right back."

She wasn't able to watch Ted shoot off into the darkness, but as the Glowmold began to reveal their surroundings, Dash managed to find a ledge to set her down upon. They watched from their perch, the tiny star streaking away from them, a dark mass following it. The star didn't zig or zag, it only went as straight as it could, sometimes disappearing behind a

far off pillar of stone, before reappearing. Then the light took upon itself a green hue and rocketed straight up.

The mass followed it earnestly, for as it crested its flight, it stalled out. The blob of undead fliers swarmed it, blotting it out except for a few shafts of light, but something happened. The school tried to scatter, but a moment later the light cranked itself up a few thousand degrees of brightness, even the duo so far off had to shield their eyes for a moment. When the light dimmed, and a resounded thunderclap met their ears, they knew something had happened.

As the Glowmold started to recover its lost sheen, Dash spoke up, "You suppose he used his bow?"

"Probably." Applejack was still rubbing spots out of her eyes that remained from the light show.

"You think he'll find us?"

"Hope so." She said with a shrug, even if Dash couldn't see it yet. Applejack could, however, hear her friend pacing about incessantly, "He's fine Dash."

"You saw him Applejack, he was hurt... or something."

"I didn't see a scratch on him... but yeah, definitely 'or somethin'." Dash's pacing continued, and Applejack's patience finally snapped, "Would you calm down girl," she barely managed to say in a heated whisper, "Ya gonna attract somethin' by fussin' like that."

"Like an overtly handsome Zebragus?" The duo looked up to see a rather downtrodden, yet smiling, old friend of theirs coming in for a landing on what room remained on their perch. He laughed away the series of rolled eyes shot his way, with wings tucked to his side he continued, "You know, I don't always overcharge a sunrod with destructive fey power, but when I do~" His speech slurred, as he shot out two of his legs to catch himself from falling over.

Applejack raised an eyebrow, "Ya'll right there Ted? You're shakier than a day old foal."

"Dandy," He sputtered and cleared his throat, "Fine and dandy, just need to focus~" Once again his voice slurred, his eyes wandered into the distance, and this time there was no mind present to catch himself. When his head thwacked against the ground, even Dash cringed a bit.

"That'll leave a mark."

Applejack worked her way over to him, sighing out loud, "What he gets for tryin' to act so gosh dern tough."

"You would know." Dash said under her breath as she followed her friend over.

"So," she poked at Ted's shoulder, rocking him a bit, "What'da we do with yo-"

Ted shot up into a laying position, eyes wide and blinking rapidly for a moment. Then he inhaled painfully while pressing a hoof against the right side of his face, ears bent to match the clenching of his teeth.

"Give us a heart attack why don't ya." Dash said to him.

"Sorry about that," his hoof went from his head to his eyes, to rub them gently. "I'm just so... tired." He chuckled slightly, "Wow, never been able to say that before. Hope my age isn't starting to catch up with me."

"Doubt it ever will." Applejack said out loud.

"Oh, Applejack, so sour over my daring rescue that-"

"No."

Ted watched her look down on him, her face almost blank save a heated gaze. "So... what then? That isn't exactly a thankful look you got going on there."

Her mouth dropped in mild shock, but quickly closed and changed to disappointment. "Not now Ted, what happened?"

He only shrugged at his chance to escape her anger, "Well I left you two, where I thought you would stay."

"Don't start."

Ted only rolled his eyes, "I left, followed a noise I heard... and..." He bit at his lip, not wanting to continue.

"And..." Dash said with her hoof rolling to try and keep him going.

"I got hunted." He said with a slight blush, "Never even saw the damn thing."

Applejack couldn't help but snicker a bit, even if he got on her nerves, seeing him lose self-esteem tickled something in her. "Oh, it'll be alright, can't catch all the foxes."

He just grunted out an exasperated sigh, "You don't understand, I followed it, every little trail it left. Then I heard fighting, and I turned my head for a second, a second." Then he just threw his foreleg out dramatically, "and it nicked me, it had me close enough to end it, but it just *nicked* me. It toyed with me, toying with your prey is something I do, The Hunter of The Horned does not get messed with. If the shoe was on the other~"

"Whoa, just calm down. You're gonna go 'n' faint on us again." She helped steady him, as he grumbled some more. "So where'd it get ya?"

"Somewhere on my wing I think," He shook about his right one. "Right under the center joint."

"Let me see," Dash said, and as he extended the wing, she inspected it. Her face changed to slight horror, and then disgust, "What the hay?"

"Oh boy," Ted sighed, "So what kinda, 'turning into a zombie' virus do I got?"

"It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"I'll show ya, let me pull it out."

Ted devolved into a painful scream as Dash gingerly pulled at whatever was embedded in his wing. Applejack quickly shoved her hoof into his mouth to quiet him, "Stop it Dash." She whispered to her friend.

"What the... gross."

Applejack looked over to Dash, who looked actually disgusted with something.

"It just wiggled back in."

That word made Applejack's skin crawl, and she was pretty sure Ted had a similar reaction. "What?" she said while removing her hoof.

"Exactly. What?" Ted joined in.

"Well, it just... well it 'wiggled' back in, I had it almost out, and when I stopped... it wiggled."

Even Applejack had a slight hot flash of horror, Ted seemingly had one as well. He spoke up, "Alright... I want you to take it out... quickly alright?"

"Ok... but I ain't putting my mouth near that again."

"Here," Applejack produced a small length of rope, "Just tie that round it, assumin' it's big enough to get tied with that."

"Thanks Applejack." Was all Dash had to say in return.

Ted spoke up, "Got anymore?" He assumed she knew what for, and upon receiving a small piece, bit into it.

"Alright, on free" Dash said through the rope in her mouth, "Hwun, Hwo-"

Ted didn't want to think of the pain, but the twisting sensation of the muscles in his wing down into his side couldn't be ignored. *Dirty little stupid... poison me with something that dulls the pain to the point of coma will ya?* The pain just kept twisting, tying knots of all the muscles that had once felt tired in his body. He could only survive, while he waited for them to slowly untangle, but even then they still burned from an alien contagion in his body.

"Fee wud I mean," Dash said as she spit out the rope in her mouth, "Its wiggling."

Ted looked over to his friendly little parasite, it looked like little more than a fang, some red muscle on its sides, and it was indeed wiggling. However it went nowhere, barely jittering on the ledges stone surface. "Dash, your weapon." She only looked surprised by his order for a moment, before giving him Mezekesh. He leaned upon it, as he tried to rise to his hooves, every muscle in his body on fire. "Toy with this you-" He brought down the spearhead onto the thing, cleanly slicing it, and the weapon doing its job of scattering the remains into a fine ash. A slight hint of incense in the air.

The group heard a dull screech of pain in the distance.

Dash took back her weapon, as Ted allowed himself to collapse against the floor. "I just... need some rest... you found a good spot." He began gesturing to various features around them, "Natural overhang, and a good sized lip, might as well be a cave within a cave." His rambling was stopped as a bedroll unfurled itself in front of him.

"Take a load off, all that gum-flappin's gonna kill ya at this rate." Applejack let Ted roll his eyes at her, before he finally trekked the slight distance between him and the less rocky bed he was after.

"You know, I have my own."

"Well, as long as ya don't wet the bed, I won't mind none." She heard him grumble something, but ignored it. Instead joining Rainbow Dash as she stood out on the ledges edge. "So what're you up to?"

"Just look at it Applejack."

She took her words in, gazing out at the cavern. Now that the Glowmold had time to recover, she could see something astonishing. This place was huge, maybe it was once an old aquifer, or maybe a magma chamber; but now. Blue lines crisscrossed all over, reaching out into some underground horizon. "Well, shoot. How're we gonna find a way outta here."

"Maybe over there." Dash said casually.

Applejack followed her friends pointed foreleg, to a 'crack' in the horizon. Light brighter than the space surrounding it pouring down from the ceiling. She had never been so happy to see some kind've actual light before. "Well... it's better than nothin'." As if that word reminded some part of her subconscious, her stomach let loose a growl, Rainbow Dash's soon followed suit.

"I suppose this is a good a time as any." She said as she began digging into her saddlebags for something to eat.

Applejack did the same, but promptly let loose an unsatisfied groan, "Ehhh, applesauce."

"Huh?"

Applejack scooped up what little remained of her favorite kind apples she had packed, "Applesauce, and its everywhere."

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"I don't know, that doesn't really sound possible."

"Oh come on, half the stuff we did in that fight wasn't possible." Dash retorted to her friend.

"I ain't sayin' ya can't do it, I mean to say that's about as likely as a three toed frog."

"Yeah, and you tossing one with your tail is completely doable."

Applejack only sighed to her friend's frown, "Well it's a might more believable than making their faces explode from your 'awesome awesomeness'."

She stood proudly with her wings unfurled, "The Rainbow Dash, is perfectly capable of handling zomponys, and if awesome stuff tends to happen when she does. That's just evidence of her awesomeness." She blew a short raspberry her friend's way, who only chuckled at her friend's confidence.

"Glad to see you're still the same Dash."

"Same goes for you." She said back with a smile.

"Aww." They both looked over to the now awake zebragus. "Gal pals to the end huh?"

"Feelin' better already?" Applejack watched Ted stretch his way off her bed, evoking a yawn as he did so.

"You'd be surprised at how many things you can sleep off." He snickered a bit, "I remember this one time-"

"Yeah yeah, you grew your head back or somethin'. Now if you don't mind, we should really get down to the business of getting' ourselves outta this mess."

Ted sighed, "Alright, but first a question. Are you all fixed up yourselves?" He looked from one nodding pony to the next. "How many do you have left?"

"Two."

"One."

"Shall we make it an even two all around?" Ted quickly dipped his head within his bag of holding, and then tossed a health potion Dash's way. "Now that the supplies are all evened out. What's the plan?"

Dash spoke up first, "Umm Ted, we actually wanted to ask a few questions before we talked about the plan."

"We would've asked before, but seein' as how you were nearly unconscious... heh."

"Oh... alright then, shoot."

Applejack was the first to speak up, "We were just wonderin' how, or maybe what is a better way to say it. Anyway, what are those things we was fightin'? There was no way they were ghouls."

"The bonebags?" Both the mares gave him a confused stare. "Well what did you two call them?"

"Zomponies."

"Another name for the list then." He said with a shrug, "You would be surprised what they have been called. Zombie, skeleton, husk, floater, all sorts of things. Honestly these are probably some of the better things we could've run across, nice and weak." His short laugh gave way to a small shudder as his eyes drifted off, "You'd be surprised... well maybe disturbed is a better word, at what can be brought back from the dead. I think Cartanis has a book on the matter if you're feeling up for some nightmare fuel."

"Uh."

"No, thanks." Applejack answered for her friend. "But, if these things are so weak... why would Dra'nahb bother to make them? That one ghoul seemed enough to just scare you off."

"He didn't scare me off... he just had us at a disadvantage." Ted received an unimpressed frown for his words, "I'll take care of that thing, and whatever hunted me too. As for why? I don't know the exact details, but I do know you need living things, in order for his special brew of ghoul to be made." He decided to answer another question before it was asked, "I also don't know why the 'zomponies' react to ghouls the way they do, I just understand as Andur told me. Servant to master in the following order, anything not a ghoul, ghoul, Abigail, Dra'nahb. Also that the ghouls act like... how did he put it?"

"Monsters?"

"Cannibals?"

"Idiots?"

Ted had to throw his hooves about while shaking his head to just get them to stop guessing, "No, no, no, nothing so understandable and simple..." He tapped his chin a few more times, and then gasped with realization. With a quick clear of his throat, he expunged forth from his lips. "Der'ah booncha lilly-libberd billay goots that tell tha herd when yur' coomin and goin'." Ted nearly hacked up a lung as he tried to finish his impersonation, and through close breaths managed to ask, "That a good impression?"

"Uh." Applejack said back.

Dash stood unimpressed, "Needs to be thicker, and you need to roll your R's a little more." She received a few worried glances from the two she sat with, "Pinkie Pie does it better, heh, she even has a fake beard and everything." Dash teared up a little, "You gotta tell her to show you that bit sometime." She snickered under her breath and whispered, "*By Celestia's beard.*"

"Anyway," Applejack interceded, "We can assume that we're known about then?"

"Yep." Ted said back.

"And that chances are," She looked out over the ledge, into the spacious cavern, "That they have this place crawling with things lookin' for us."

"Once again, astute as always."

"Which will make getting' to that," She gestured off towards the glow on the horizon, the shape of which bore a strange chill in her mind as it reached to the sky. "A little more than just a hop, skip, and a jump."

"We could, you know, fly." Dash said with a flutter of her wings.

"Ah, no. I ain't getting' cradled about all over Equestria."

"You don't have to get picked up like that, we could make a basket or something, we can ferry around one earth pony."

Ted spoke up through the brewing argument, "Actually, we may wish to take this one on the ground."

Both the mares turned his way, questioning eyes awaiting information on his opinion.

"After listening in on your lovely story, I can guess that the 'Glowmold' doesn't like our undead friends for one reason or another." He approached the edge of the ledge, looking out upon the crisscrossing colonies of mold in the expansive cavern. "As you can see," Ted pointed out to them the small groups of shadow in the sea of soft blue light, moving about in a

patrol of the grounds. Then he pointed to the stars, or more specifically the small specs of Glowmold that dared show itself amidst a thicker cloud of darkness. "And I do believe there was more up there when I passed out, then there is now."

"Yeah." Dash said while in mild disbelief at the numbers the unlit ceiling potentially revealed.

"Speaking of, how long was I out?"

"I don't know, few hours maybe? I don't have a watch."

Ted only groaned as he looked at his messenger's book, "Still scrambled... well no sense in sticking around the campsite." He gave a quick look around, "Wait a minute Applejack, we could use your bedroll to get you to the ground floor."

"What about your fancy bag there?"

"Not a lot of air on the inside, you really don't wanna go over head level. Suffocation and whatnot."

"Right." Was all she had to say to that.

[M][1][M]

Dash followed the two ahead of her, being as quiet as she could. Her nerves however itched to be free, not only was she 'grounded', but the path they had to take weaved in and out of a small forest of stalagmites surrounding and pressing in on her. They followed the Glowmold to their objective, staying away from the dimmer paths, only teetering upon the edges of the light to avoid the eyes above. "How-"

She was immediately hushed by her compatriots.

Bringing what she had thought was a good enough whisper even lower, she asked again, "How far?"

One pony looked to another, and for a moment Ted disappeared with a quick flutter of feathers as he scaled one of their towering stone pillars. He

was not gone long; with a haphazard attempt at stealth he landed with a soft clop. "At the rate you keep asking probably another nine checks."

Dash could hear Applejack give an unimpressed sigh, alongside her own glare.

"Two hours, maybe a little more if we keep stopping like this. Think you can keep your ants in your pants until then?"

"Ants in the what now?"

Ted just groaned and waved off Dash's concern, "It's just an old saying."

Applejack chimed in, "Enough chit chat, get movin'."

The group shared one more little disdainful staring contest and once again was moving through the rocky wilderness. This however did not last long, the Glowmold dimmed, and the noise of activity grew closer.

Dash knew what would happen. They had talked about what they should do, and as much as she had protested; followed the other two. They disappeared into the small forest of stalagmites, putting some distance between them and the slowly dimming light source on which they had relied. As the group began to slow, comforted with what distance they had achieved from their hunters, Dash could hold in her thoughts no longer.

"Is this how it's going to be?" The other two looked her way, "This is the fourth time we've dodged them, and I'm starting to get sick of all this running."

"We ain't runnin'"

"Oh we're not? Then I must have my sense of tactics messed up, because this sure feels like avoiding the enemy."

Ted spoke up, "As much as I would love to murder a few hundred bonebags with you two, it wouldn't really help us that much, there is a little term called 'overwhelmed' that I fear encountering."

"For once I agree with you Ted." Applejack returned her attention to Dash, "Now I know you want to do somethin' about them, but we can't go throwing ourselves away like that."

"What then? What are we supposed to do? We're going to get to that mysterious crack in the wall, and then what?" She looked from one blank expression to the next, "At some point or another we have to do something besides mindlessly wander in here, and I'd rather spend my time doing something about all these monsters in here."

"How Dash? How in Equestria do you think the three of us could do somethin' about all this by ourselves?"

"Well, you know, we'd... just..." She relented, her head drooped slightly, "Can't we do anything about them?"

"I don't know sugar-"

"Actually." Ted spoke up, "We might be able to."

[1][1][2][1][1]

They followed them, and where they stopped wasn't too far off their path. The walls of the cavern towered before them, as the patrol they had followed was busying itself with the task of digging through a large pile of rubbish and rocks.

"I don't get it." Dash noted from their vantage point, looking down into the small pit from on high.

"Now's not the time for understanding, now is the time for counting." Ted peeked over the small ledge as well, eyes darting as numbers floated through his mind.

Applejack cast a bit of a worried expression towards the overeager Ted, "So how exactly is lettin' the cat outta the bag gonna help us any?"

"Maybe if you started thinking a bit more outside the box, you could figure that out for yourself." Ted received a small biff on the back of his head, "Hey, you made me lose count."

"This ain't the time for jokes."

He only sighed, "We make some noise, not a lot but enough, attract a big bad ghoul, kill it, and then get away. Simple."

"That's the plan?" She scoffed out loud, "Why don't you just ring the dinner bell for all the hungry flyin' feather-heads up there."

Without taking his eyes from his counting he replied, "Maybe if you took notice of what I did a while ago, you wouldn't need to look so foolish in a few seconds."

Applejack and Dash both gave him a rather confused look, then sated their curiosity and looked up. They could see far more of the Glowmold on the ceiling than they could before, the few stars of the ceiling had given to ribbons of that glowing moss.

"Methinks we are not the only disturbance they have to deal with down here." He snickered a bit, "Or have we already forgotten about our friends?"

"Fair enough, but how do we even know there's a ghoul here?" Applejack squinted at the dimly lit darkness of the pit, "I hardly see more than a few dozen of them little guys down there."

"As I understand it, a ghoul is the sergeant to the bonebag red shirt." Ted laughed at his own joke for a moment, before he realized he was not being joined by the others, "You see it's funny because... come on, is Pinkie Pie going to be the only thing here that enjoys my jokes?" The two unimpressed faces barely twitched to his plea, which only drew a sigh from him, "OK, you see how they are all acting nice and organized right now, a sentry here and there while the rest work."

"Yeah." The two onlookers said in unison.

"Ghoul's can exert a level of control on the lesser ones, so the more intelligent and such they act~"

"The more likely that one of them is close." Dash finished.

"Quick learners, I like that." Ted thought out loud. "So you two ready for a real fight?"

"Please, Rainbow Dash has had tougher clouds that she had to deal with." She flaunted back.

Applejack just listened to the two try to trade quips with each other while she stumbled onto a very important question in her head that needed answering. Butting in with no real care as to what she had interrupted, "So what exactly is the plan of attack?"

"You know," Ted started with a shrug, "wing it."

She could only facehoof in response, "Is that your plan for every problem?"

"Hey, hey, it works..." His eyes wandered about for a moment, "Usually."

"How about we try to at least have a plan, with a start, a middle, and an end that doesn't involve us runnin' around like foals with our tails on fire. Because that works too." She leaned in towards Ted, "Usually."

[1][1][3][1][1]

"You sure that you can hit somethin' out there in this darkness?"

"Look Applejack, don't doubt my skills, and I won't doubt yours. Alright?" He puffed out his chest a bit, "You won't think so lowly of me when there's a bolt of energy in the face of the thing that tries to kill you."

"Fine, get in position." She watched the Zebragus disappear into the darkness, to a place where he could watch the fight safely and provide support.

"Hey Applejack?"

She snapped out of her watch and turned to her friend.

"Do you think they're alright?"

She responded flatly, "Now's not the time for that Dash."

"I know, but..."

Applejack could feel the cheerless tone in her friend, a tone that rang out in her heart as well, "I don't know Dash, we just gotta keep movin'."

"Yeah." She said back, some of the confidence back in her voice. "Let's go bag us a real monster."

[1][1][4][1][1]

Search... find...

That was the only thing she could hear, the only thought that ran through her mind.

Dig... look... then sleep...

The promise, that which she was told would be her reward. All she had to do was find it, then he would send her back, and let her rest. Her bones ached, the rocks and trash only brought more pain to her crippled form as her bones bent and creaked in their task. It was all so tiring, it made her wish more for that sleep, that was her only wish, to go back. Back to where she was taken from, she couldn't remember it, no matter how she tried. The voice was all she could recall now, but it couldn't erase one thing, that feeling of the old place. The quiet, the peace of her mind, and the laughter.

Pain shot through her body, her voice grating on her own ears. She picked up her pace; the voice did not like it when she slowed. Before it had been much more lenient, now though, it was insistent, angry, and impatient. The voice wanted its prize, it was something important, but she had no idea what it was. Always clamoring for her to work faster, she was never allowed rest. She couldn't even remember the last time she had rested, her memory was one long uninterrupted journey to where it began. Where she had seen him, heard his voice, and felt his pain.

Her mind ceased wandering, something was amiss. The voice had gone quiet, for a moment she could think, but it quickly returned. A new order in its garbled tone.

One has gone silent... search... find him...

Many had 'gone silent' this day. She wasn't sure if it knew, but she could hear the voice talk to itself. Intruders and problems abounded all around, and if one had gone silent they might be near, or his body had failed him. Either way she had no choice, the voice cracked its whip, and she was pressed into service.

Her knees ached, they had since she had risen, even walking was made a chore thanks to them.

Another has gone... faster...

The pain increased along with her speed, and as she crossed another hill of old rubbish so that the view it wanted could be given. There were two of them; a blue one was hovering above the other as the orange one cleaned off her dirtied hoof. A body on either side of them lay motionless. The voice in her mind grumbled low, she could feel its wishes in her mind, but she didn't wish to heed them. It had already called out, the rest were alerted and on their way, now though it asked of her something dark.

Danger... eliminate...

It wanted them dead, the images that flooded her mind sent its wishes far more clearly than its words. *No. Please I don't want to-* Her mind was overwhelmed with pain, and she cried out in her panic. Her ears only heard the scratchy screeching of an angry raven, not the voice she knew, not the thing she once was.

"~the hay?"

Her senses returned, and the orange one was staring straight at her.

"I got this one." The pegasus was rocketing straight for her, dust kicked up by the beating of her wings. Weapon drawn with a scowl on her face, she raced towards the monster in her sights.

She was afraid, that face struck terror down into her very fiber. When she tried to flee, to make her old body move away, a force latched onto her consciousness. She felt it worm its way into her body, and once again she heard that terrible noise, but it was coming from her; and it wasn't friendly. Despite her wishes, a body that no longer felt as her own followed the commands she ignored.

The pegasus was upon her, taking her weapon and swiping high. She managed to duck the attack, but the pegasus was already bringing the spear down in a slash. The force within her had an unnatural mind behind it, and her body threw itself aside just as the tip of the spear grazed the side of her face. The power behind the blow lodged itself into the rock pile

beneath them, and in that instant where the pegasus had trouble removing her weapon, the voice took its chance.

There was an opening in the armored foreleg, and her teeth found their mark on the blue flesh. She didn't want to believe it, she never hurt anypony, but now; she could feel the warmth of that pegasus in her cold maw. *No, no!* She wanted to let go, she would never, *I'm sorry, please stop, why won't I stop!* Her teeth only proceeded to grind and gnash the flesh in her jaw, eliciting painful cries from the pony in her grip.

Pain ricocheted throughout her skull, the pegasus was fighting back; slamming a free hoof into her face. As much as it hurt, a part of her cheered for the pegasus, because she could feel that presence in her mind reel in agony as well. The pain returned, each time greater than it was before, as the pegasus continued to break away at the same part of her skull.

"Get." Another powerful blow to her skull, fractures slightly ruptured inwards but held together. "Off!" She was struck again, but this time her skull did not hold, and her face felt weak and shambled in the blows wake. The clattering of hollow bones rumbled against her ears, and her mouth could no longer hold. She was tumbling now, the world a spinning blur while she tried to stop herself. When she finally did manage to only the base of the pile graced her vision, and what little she could see around her.

The presence in her mind willed her to move, but its wishes were unable to be heeded. To even her own horror, somehow her own legs had crumbled to dust, the bones of which she could see scattered about her. She could feel it leaving, that presence that had forced her to service was leaving, and with it the pain. The voice slowly disappeared into an echo; the only feeling left to her was the cold of the floor and the brittleness of her own form.

In the corner of her eye she could see the others, the ones she now reflected, and a thought formed in her mind. With it came a familiar feeling, one that ached at the pit of her body, she was afraid. The voice had promised peace, promised to let her sleep if she had accomplished its goal, now though she wasn't sure. Seeing those silent faces only made her think about their minds, if they could be at was a question she wasn't sure if she wanted answered. Her feelings however didn't seem to matter, as a pain shot through her side.

She could see the pegasus, standing over her, that strange weapon of hers protruded from where the pain was at its worst. Slowly a new feeling crept over her, as the pain was overwhelmed by something else. Her mind felt heavy, and her body weak, as something coaxed her to sleep. She was so tired, and as the world slowly slipped from her grasp, the coldness disappeared with it. For a time she could not know, there was only that numbness, the darkness of this sleep. Then it began to melt away, a feeling she thought lost to her returned.

"Marigold?"

Her eyes opened, then they shut just as quickly. The light was blinding, but she knew that name, she knew that voice. She opened her eyes again, fighting the brightness, breathing in the warm air that washed away that cold.

"Marigold!"

She felt his embrace, and she knew. It was him, and in his warm embrace she remembered it, all of it. Her memories flooded back, every good memory of their lives together, of their foals they had raised before their time was done. The one she cherished most held onto her, and she did the same. She could see them all, she knew where she was. All her loved ones were there, but right now only he mattered. Because she had not only feared losing him, he had almost lost her. But now.. now...

She was back.

[1][1][5][1][1]

"Hey Dash?" Applejack waved a hoof in front of her friend's face. "Ya'll right?"

"What?" She snapped out of her daze, "Oh, yeah... just another 'thank you' from our dearly departed." She grumbled a bit as she retrieved her weapon, "Why do they have to do that? I mean, all we're doing is putting them down."

Applejack could see her friend's slight sadness in her face, "Don't worry about it Dash. I'm sure if they're thankin' ya, then it's because ya done

good. Heh, kinda wish I could get a thank ya here and there from these things."

"They do."

"Huh?"

"They thank you too, you just don't hear them. Doesn't stop them though."

"Either way, I think we need to return to the task in front of us." Her ears perked to the sound of a large angry mess of trouble headed their way, "We finally rattled the dog's cage enough."

Dash could hear it too, a rattle of bones, but there was something more. The power of the sound was unsettling the pebbles on the ground, it brought thunder to her ears, and only grew louder with every passing moment. She could see them advancing, even in the dim of the Glowmold.

Applejack saw them as well, over the tops of the rubble piles they came. Just enough to cause them trouble, but not enough to warrant any true fear. Yet she remained on edge, there had to be something worse causing all of that racket. Her curiosity was soon answered, a stallion the size of a draft pony had rumbled over the tops of the refuse piles. *Meh, Macintosh is bigger than you.* Her short burst of glee didn't last long, as something a size or two bigger than Andur barreled through the mound of rubble behind the draft pony before it was trampled beneath that giant's hooves.

"They sure grow them big round these parts."

"Less gawking, more fighting." Dash took to the skies, bringing the advantage of her flight into focus. A few of the undead pegasi whose wings were still functional took to the skies after her, while Applejack stood her ground; picking targets with what time she had left before the first punch was thrown.

The first went down easy enough; a quick hook to its face and it was unable to continue. The second was trickier, as it tried to flank her with a third bearing down on her. She spun about, driving one of her back legs into the second's skull, quickly catching it mid-fall Applejack slammed it into the ground. She reacted just in time to deal with the third, all she had to do

was fall back onto it and drive her elbow into its neck, which snapped it before the thing even hit the ground.

Dash hadn't underperformed either, for while Applejack had dealt with those three she had her own to contend with. The angry calls of her pursuers were only matched with her own battle-cry, the two forces met with a thrust into the body of the first one unlucky enough to hold her attention. After letting the corpse fall from her blade, another was upon her, stuck in a grapple with her weapon pinned against her she could only struggle to keep its teeth away from her face.

Its maw clacked closer and closer with every snap of its jaws, she fought back with her one free foreleg as best she could, but she couldn't wind up a good enough angle to do more than scuff the thing's jaw. If that wasn't bad enough they were tumbling about in the air, she didn't exactly have good control when being latched onto, and she doubted this thing cared where they landed or what they hit. She had only one idea, using what leverage she could she pushed back on the things face with her hoof, and then arched her head back.

Try this you- She let go of its face, and as it lunged for her face, she cracked her head forward. Both skulls look loose a great thwack into the air, but only one survived. Rainbow Dash shook the fragments of bone from her mane, only slightly dizzyed from the impact, *Destroyed old barns tougher than that.* As the body lost its strength and she broke free, another was already after her, so instead of trying that again she got another idea.

Quickly grabbing the limp body before it was out of reach, she tossed it at the clumsy flier. It barely managed to avoid a head on collision, and instead was bashed and wobbled out of balance. While it was still trying to right itself, the zompony found that it could not move. For Rainbow Dash had her forelegs locked around its waist, forcing its wings shut as she stayed away from retaliation. With her cargo firmly grasped with herself latched onto the things back she looped backwards and into a dive towards the ground, while she picked up speed she noticed something and changed course.

Applejack was beset by another, and that big one was getting closer every second she wasted on these things. The problem wasn't the zomponies themselves, she easily dispatched them left and right, the problem was that she just couldn't move. Every time she tried to make a move, they would

swarm and halt her, forcing a confrontation that would waste precious seconds that lasted between her and the huge one.

She tried to move again, breaking into a hard gallop away from the large ghoul. Almost on cue one that had avoided her earlier leaped into her path, and it waited for her to dare pass it. She rose to fight it, only for bolts of green energy to lance through its skull. The shot almost pierced straight through, then another ripped through the darkness with a green hue that marked its trail, and before Applejack could think a third had already been knocked into the beast. She gaped for only a moment as the energy dissipated, which left behind holes that had seared the beast where they had lain, then she remembered the two ton beast that was still on her tail.

She spared a momentary glance towards her blindside while she picked up speed into another gallop. One part of her wished she hadn't, as she witnessed a horribly disfigured maw, filled with all kinds of teeth that did not belong with the mouth of a pony. Each jagged and serrated tooth was coated with a sickening slime, somehow fitted within the jaw of a monstrous figure whose eyes held a black sentience that was incapable of remorse. All of this rested upon a moving corpse whose muscles had almost burst the flesh they had tried to fit within, a grotesque amalgam of overburdened skin that tried its best to maintain a sense of coherency.

Had Applejack been a pony of younger heart and more frightful tendencies, she may have screamed. Seeing however that she had some semblance of courage, she did the next possible thing. She ran faster.

Even with her added burst of speed, she could still hear it getting closer, and she wondered how long until those fangs would be sunk into her flesh.

"Hey cirrus for brains!"

Applejack knew that voice, and looked up as best she could. Her rainbow maned friend was plummeting towards the ground, something struggling in her arms. She was headed straight for the ghoul behind her, whom only reared back and roared so loudly that it nearly deafened Applejack. At the last moment Dash swung out of her dive, two feathery appendages tightly grasped in her hooves.

A gut wrenched snap rang out, and Applejack took a moment to look back. She only saw the thing stumbling about, as its head seemed slightly dented

inward on one side. It however did not seem more than a little phased, those eyes already focused again on her.

She wasted no time, while it still stumbled and struggled for balance she raced away from it, trying to formulate a plan of action the whole time. *Head on won't work for somethin' like that*, her thoughts were distracted by another zompony that rushed in to meet her. Before action could be taken, a hail of energy bolts assailed and felled the beast. *Guess he ain't a bad shot after all*. She continued to keep a distance between her and the now recovered ghoul, all the while Ted made sure her path was clear.

Maybe Ted can hit it with... no he woulda done that already if he could. What about Dash? She peeked to the skies, to only see an occasional flash of light as her friend cut through more pegasi that tried, and failed, to slow her down. *Too busy*. She could hear it again, that thing picking up speed, the cascade of hooves growing ever louder into the sound of an approaching storm. Everything around her in the rubble pit was too open, even the piles of rocks were not large enough to slow it down. Then she saw it, a chance to maybe get away from the thing, there was a trench. Skinny enough for her most definitely, the only question was its depth. Judging from how close that thing sounded to be, she didn't have time to worry about that.

She slid across what little distance was left, barely squeezing herself in. *Hayseed*, Even standing it was not deep enough, with her head sticking clearly out of it. She immediately dropped low, as she heard it roaring its maw toward her. She fought to scrunch her body down as low as possible, feeling that things breath on her neck, its cold slime splattering across her back only made her try harder. Eventually she had taken all the room she could, her legs pressed painfully against her body as she fought for more room. Her tactic however seemed to work, as her skin stopped crawling at the presence of such an unwanted thing bearing down on her.

After it finally stopped berating her, giving her ears time to stop ringing, did she have time to think again. *Alright, maybe we can...* She felt pebbles rain down on her back alongside an unsettling noise, *What the?* With what little room she had, Applejack managed to twist her head about to look up, only to see the thing pounding against the solid rock walls of the trench. *For the love of~ what did I ever do to you?* She crawled along the trench, narrowly

avoiding the ghoul as it tried to press its maw in after her. It reluctantly retracted and went back to trying to open the passage wider, following her as she went.

Applejack just kept crawling, but the trench was only so long, she was already nearing its end at the snails pace she was moving. *Oh, just go ahead and tan my hide why don't cha?* She witnessed the ghoul ahead of her, grinding up the trench she had left to move in, forcing her to retreat back the way she came. She could only scoot backwards so fast, the thing in front of her slowly closing the gap, and it constantly checked and waited for her to run out of room on either side.

Applejack knew she only had so much time before she ran into a hole it already dug, or it would finish its current one headed for her. *Think, think, think.* Her mind was then visited with an idea, one that might actually get her out of this alive. She immediately retreated as fast as she could, which brought a second of surprise on the things face, but it quickly ceased its digging. Applejack watched as it began to make its move, to head towards the holes it had already dug to fish her out, but it was moving directly over the top of her.

She had barely managed to squeeze herself out of the trench in time, her skin was skittish and twitching nervously, as she followed in its footsteps; trying to stay out of sight. Once it had stopped, staring down a hole it had already made, did she try to move away. She didn't care to ask why there was no warning, no cry of another zompony to tell its master where she was, Applejack only took her chance and kept moving away. She could almost see its face, contorting with a primal sense of a predator which stalked its prey, it slowly grew more confused and confounded. Until eventually it had let loose an exasperated wheeze, it moved about to try and angle its face down the trench, when its head had half turned about; it saw her.

Applejack expected a cry of anger, for it to roar at finding its prey once more. Instead all it did was bring up one of its tree-sized back legs, and shot it at her in a full on buck. She barely had time to bring up her forelegs to try and block it, with a little luck something that would have broken her simply threw her away; but her forelegs didn't exactly feel fine and dandy after taking such a hit. She slid for a time, the force of that kick now skidding her across the floor.

When she stopped, her only sight was that of it closing once again, that maw readying to nearly swallow her whole. Her back legs quickly found themselves jammed into the things face, one on its nose with the other on its chin. It frantically tried to bite her, grinding her into the ground as it pushed her along towards some unknown destination.

Applejack could see bolts of energy ricocheting off its hide, leaving little more than burn marks it didn't seem to care to acknowledge. If only to make matters worse, her back with all its not-quite-armor armor, was starting to feel rather raw. All she could do was weather the storm, to try and wait for an opening. She let loose a painful groan as her back slammed into an uneven pile of rubble, the loose stones and craggy materials pinched painfully into her back.

Come on Applejack, enough waitin'. She tensed up the muscles in her legs, *It's time for doin'!* With the force of a veteran applebucker did Applejack shove her weight into the things face, joined by a rising crescendo she shouted at the exertion of force. Either overconfident or unprepared, the ghoul did not expect the sudden burst of strength from such a small target. It was thrown back, not much but enough that Applejack could get steady and right herself.

It charged once more, but this time she was ready. Planting her back legs firmly, she stood firm, calm breaths eased the tension in her mind. Her zen showed her the way, the plan in her mind took shape. She knew what it would require, the impossibility of it all, but she pushed the doubt from her thoughts. The ghoul tried to close its jaws upon her once more, this time however, instead of blocking Applejack weaved her way beside its mammoth head then wrapped her forelegs around it.

In a voice that grew in tandem to the power she poured into the task did she put her strength into spinning the creature in her grasp. She twisted her torso and twirled in place, breaking the resistance the thing tried to put up against her, it now whirled around the orange mare. Applejack had barely completed half a revolution before she felt herself wane, she had to put her plan into motion now. Pushing her applebucking legs to the limit she curved into the spin, even her mind seemed to give her power beyond what she thought possible, all this gave her throw one last burst of speed before she let her cargo loose.

It slammed into the pile of rocks that had once been her cage, scattering them to the darkness as it tumbled and rolled away. The beast only screamed in pain while the sounds of it crashing against the ground met her ears. Applejack could barely stand and fell to the floor, every muscle in her ached from the exertion, but she knew it had been worth it. Though her confidence did not last, as she heard an angry growl in the distance. A wounded stallion leered at her, black poison drifted out of gashes upon its body, an angry snarl across its broken face.

Applejack tried to move, but her legs were like dead weight against the pain she felt all over. The ghoul was already making its move, it ignored the wounds it showcased on its hide and simply charged straight for her once more. She could hardly believe how unfazed it seemed to behave, barely recognizing the pain it ought to be in.

Even in her disbelief, she was not ready to give up yet. Her limbs protested as she rose, but her movement was limp. For this wasn't just pain, it was utter exhaustion. Every step she took was followed by her trying to not collapse, every muscle wished to simply stop and be done with this, her mind would not allow it. It only became worse, the ghoul was getting closer, and all she managed was a few steps. Eventually her body won out, no matter how she protested, her limbs simply did not have anything left in them. Now she could only wait, sprawled out on that cold cavern floor, and wait for that angry face to close what distance remained.

As the ghoul pumped its legs into service, her mind became distracted with a light which soared over her head. It arced into the ghoul's path, soaring straight for its face. The bolt of energy was barely paid heed by the beast, when it had finally arrived to its destination, Applejack found herself clutching her ears. They rang in pain from the intensity of the bang, and her eyes shielded themselves from the blinding flash it brought along with it.

Even in her disorientation one thing to her was clear, she was being dragged somewhere by her mane. Her eyes desperately fought back the spots that blinded her, and slowly the world returned to her sight. She saw Ted, his mouth moved as he set her down behind a rock formation, but all she could hear was the ringing that hadn't stopped yet. "What!" Her voice thrummed within her own head, rocking about her brain like it was underwater.

She saw him visually groan, and then speak again but louder this time, "Just stay here and breath, you'll get your second wind eventually!"

Applejack grabbed him as he tried to leave, "I ain't leavin' you two to fight that thing."

Ted quickly swatted away her hoof, his tone changing in kind, "Applejack you've done a fine job, just lay low and let us handle it. Now get to resting you need to heal."

"What do ya mean." She tried to grab him again as he took off, but she simply toppled over, the exhaustion kicking in more now that the excitement of battle had worn off. "Get back here... you..." She felt tired, her eyes became heavy and her mind melted away into unconscious rest. In the depths of her mind she felt something, a cooling stream washed over her body, slowly knitting herself back together. Even that feeling began to fade, as she became lost in her own dreams.

[1][1][6][1][1]

Rainbow Dash swooped in for another pass, the behemoth was still aimlessly swatting about trying to hit her. Whatever it was Ted had done, it had obviously had a good effect, that thunderbolt had even managed to make her ears ring a bit. She sank the spear into another open wound, eliciting a howl of pain from the beast, but that was about all her attack did; as she was unable to dig in any further.

The ghoul reached its head about again, in that unnatural motion that made her uneasy, and snapped in her general direction. Enough of a danger to make her back off somewhat, *Why the hay won't you just go down?*

"Come on Dash, you can do better than that." She looked over her shoulder to see that smart mouthed zebragus closing in on the beast.

Its daze finally worn off, that creature waited for Ted to close. When he did, it reached out its neck with its maw ready to snap shut around his tiny form, but his low flying dive dropped into a roll across the ground. Whisked under its jaw he popped up into a gallop, with a quick flick of his wrist he slashed into one of its front legs. As it scampered away, Ted gained some distance between him and the beast. The ghoul opened its mouth to roar, but shortly

cried out in pain as a small bolt of energy had pierced its tongue and perforated its lower jaw.

Ted let loose a small triumphant laugh, which was cut short thanks to an angry two ton train barreling down on his position. He quickly turned tail and leaped to the sky, and smirked as he easily avoided the silly things simple tactic.

"Ted look out!"

He spared a look towards the only logical thing Dash could be on about, and what he saw confused him slightly. The ghoul was inhaling, far more than it rightfully should, Ted didn't think that a pony's chest should swell that wide. When its roar came, he was not prepared. The force of it punched him in the chest, but the worse of it was on his ears. The pain was nothing worth of note, but the dizziness was something altogether different. His entire sense of direction was lost, as his mind fought itself while he tried to get control of his flight path. Only to make himself get lost into a tumbling series of barrel rolls as he crashed into the ground.

It was relentless, Ted could admit that much. As he tried to stand he could only fumble his own legs about before he found himself plastered against the floor once more. *Oh come on you stupid*, Even when his legs managed to do as they were told, his head would suddenly feel listed to one side and once again he was smashed against the floor by his own undoing. *We don't have time for this you stupid senses!*, He could see it, more in his mind thanks to the constant swirl of his vision, mixed with the great cadence of hooves that grew ever closer.

While Ted was busied with the fight against his own mind, Dash circled above, angling her flight into a dive straight into the things path. As it pounded its way across the pit, she brought herself in close, matching speed and leveled with its side. With barely time to spare she began to cut away at it, the pain she inflicted made it twitch and decide to change targets. It came to a full stop, and before dash could react, found herself swiped aside by the things outstretched foreleg.

After the momentary disorientation wore off, she found herself on her back, with a giant hoof overshadowing her vision. She rolled out of the way as it cracked the ground where she had lain, again and again she dodged the things attempts to smash her to pieces. After she avoided its latest attempt

to smash her head to pieces, and subsequently managed to stand herself back up, it was already trying to bite her head off; literally. With a quick sidestep followed by a cut across its lip she made it back off, if only a moment.

The ghoul lunged once more, but Dash simply fluttered her wings, brought herself over its head and slammed her weapon down into the back of its neck. It tossed her about, waving its head around in a desperate attempt to get her off, to make the burning that shot through its body to stop. When it decided to roll around on the ground, Dash felt obligated to fulfill that wish, and quickly managed to retrieve her weapon before she buzzed off.

"Make me dizzy than a day old child will you!"

She watched as Ted erupted into a furious storm, charging into the beast with lightning arced between his blades, he sunk the blades deep into the things flesh. It howled out, trying to pry off the insect that crawled across its skin faster than it could track it, leaving a trail of black blood in its wake.

Dash didn't let Ted fight alone, she took the chance to bring herself in, cutting away at its face to force it after her. The tactic worked, maybe a little more than she would've liked, driven into the defensive she parried its bites back. Ted appeared upon its face in a puff of smoke, trying to dive his blades into its eyes, but it would have none of that. Its head swung about, slamming the zebragus into the pegasus, and sent them both tumbling into a pile of rubble.

As Dash shook away the stars in her eyes, she saw something rather astounding headed their way. A boulder, larger than her, hurtled towards them with alarming speed. She quickly tossed Ted off of her and bolted herself out of the way, as the rock turned the tower of stone into dusty rubble she heard it buck another one at her. The new boulder kicked up dust in its wake, and she felt the air rush by her face as she slipped past another one.

The ghoul was stationed next to an entire pile of lovely sized cannon balls, and Dash had little more choice than to disappear behind the cover of another pile of rocks. As the boulders pounded against her only source of relative safety, Ted landed near her.

"This is taking a little longer than I expected."

"Really?" Dash rolled her eyes, "I hadn't noticed."

"Well if Andur was here-"

"Well he's not." She said back.

"Can't you just," Ted rolled his hooves about trying to form words, "make it go poof?"

"No, I can't. Every time I try to do something..." she shuddered for a moment, "There's his... thing that stops my power from working" Dash could see the cold eyes that would stare back at her every time her power tried to work its way into the beast.

"You're just going to need to make it work then," Ted then screamed, only a little, as a boulder chunk ripped through their cover. "This thing isn't going to last much longer."

Dash nibbled at her lip, "OK I got an idea, but I don't think you're going to like it."

[1][1][7][1][1]

Hold them... distract...

He could hear her voice, sweet and calming amidst the chaos of the fighting. *Weak... pain...* He quickly bucked another boulder in their direction, to keep them down. *They fly... one has the antithesis...*

Nearly there... stay safe... do not waste...

He brought his legs up for another buck, then the grey one darted out into the open.

[1][1][8][1][1]

Dash watched as Ted shouted at the beast, "You call that accuracy?" He quickly rolled out of the way from another shot, "I think I'll make a combo counter of how many times you miss!" Another boulder dusted past his narrow frame, "That makes Four! Just so you know!" She had to push his

voice from her mind, to concentrate, to find that light that sang within her soul.

Is something amiss?

It was Mezekesh, he always liked to butt in when she tried to just be to herself. *Look dude, I have got to concentrate, so I don't need this right now.* She didn't really care for him when she did actually need to speak with him.

The err is not with your power.

She sighed inwardly, he was in one of those talky moods. *Then what is?*

Do you not remember what I taught you?

It's not exactly like I had a lot of time, you're just lucky I'm a black belt-

Do you remember?

... not exactly.

Fear.

What?

It is a beast that does not fear reprisal, it does not fear the consequences of its actions, it does not have fear of justice.

So?

Make it.

Something surged within her, a warmth that spread outward from her soul.

You are a bearer of righteousness, with you rests the will of a thousand souls that cry out for righteous vengeance, call upon that; lest the villain escapes his retribution. Let that beast know the pain it has caused, let it know that you are its destroyer. Banish it back into oblivion and set its hostage free.

She could feel it now, that power surging through her. *I understand.*

His voice returned, low and demanding. *Swear upon it.*

I will.

SWEAR THE OATH!

A scowl dawned upon her face, as she climbed to the top of the pile of rubble. Standing upright, her wings extended alongside fire in her eyes, she pointed her weapon towards the beast. Her voice thundered into being, "I am Rainbow Dash, and this is your end!" A bolt of light shot out of her spear, it arced through the air and slammed into the beast. It howled in pain as a mark was burned into its flesh, an ancient rune of power that donated her intention in a way deeper than speech. When its eyes looked back at her, she saw not cold blackness, but the fear of a monster that sat before the hunter.

Her wings took her to the sky, a nimbus of light surrounding her every move. The beast reacted quicker than she thought, already bucking more stones her way, as one neared the waves of light around her changed. No longer did she have to force it to her will, it simply listened to her without fail. The stone in front of her burst in an eruption of color, and before another could bother her, she vanished from sight within that flourish of light.

The beast began to look about, knowing she had to still be around, but a pain that shot through its face had begged its attention elsewhere.

"Hey!" It looked over to the grey zebra which still stood by the rock pile, bow drawn and a fey energy coursing through its string, "I'm still here you know!"

It pawed at the ground, snorting a short challenge. The zebra responded in kind, drawing a bolt ready to fire. The beast knew what it would do, draw in a breath, and rattle the enemy so that it was easier prey. Its lungs were strong, made to punch its enemy with sound, in did its chest cavity draw the ammunition for the task. But a pain, acute in its location, snapped its breath short into a painful wheeze.

As it bent its neck to look beneath it the pain grew deeper, it was met with a force that sapped its strength, and when it finally beheld its attacker only its endurance allowed it to stand.

Rainbow Dash only returned the things barbaric stare, her scowl pierced its brave face, and the nimbus of light around her slowly ebbed its way into the spear she had jammed in between its ribs. "We're not finished yet." She twisted the spear within the beast, contorting the energy with it. The beast howled in pain as light erupted out of its back, a small hole gaped from sky to floor as flesh crackled in a burnt crisp.

It quickly gave itself room, but Dash only hounded it more, getting up into its face and cutting new wounds open. In her rabid fury she did not notice it sweep a foreleg out wide, launching her away from it. She shook the stars from her eyes as she rose from the ground, only to watch as the beast ran away.

Pain arced through its form, it could barely hold its own breath. Its mistress told it to retreat, that it had done enough, any more would be a waste of its body; the healing would tax him enough as it was.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Its gallop collapsed as something across its shoulder burned to life. Looking behind itself the beast saw her, and the mark she had made upon his hide both glowing with power. It ignored both, heeding only the order in its mind to keep retreating, but every step only made the pain worse; as an unseen weight grew heavier.

Rainbow Dash could feel the connection, between her power and that thing she had carved upon it. Yet something was off, the connection felt incomplete. Either way, the beast was too weak to put up much more of a fight. So she flew closer, right next to its face as it snarled at her presence. She just looked into those eyes, the ones that had once belonged to a pony, but now were darkened and cracked with the presence of this thing. Although there was something deeper in the eyes, not what little 'fear' this thing held for her, something that called out to her.

"You'll never hurt my home again you-" She raised her weapon to strike the beast down, but her power seemed to have sensed her intention in advance. The mark upon the beast ignited and a fire swept across the beast, destroying whatever fight remained within it as the body crashed to the floor. The fires slowly receded, leaving a corpse that looked untouched, yet dried as if it had been smoked.

Then she saw it, a small light ascend from the defeated thing. "Here we go." She said with a bored knowledge of what she had experienced a few times before. Sure enough the light changed into a familiar shape, and as the earth pony spirit looked at her; opened its mouth to say something before it faded away. "Thanks, yeah I know." She finished for it.

"Actually," He caught her attention, "could you let my brother know, that... that stupid toy of his I hate him playing with, is under the couch?"

She blinked a few times, in mild confusion, "Umm, OK." He looked to be about to say something again, as his form drifted away in a growing corona of light, "Thanks?" she guessed.

"Twiddle."

"Huh?"

"That's his name, how are you supposed to tell my bro when you don't know who he is silly?" He gave a short laugh, before a bit of tension returned to his face, realizing that he was passing over as his form slowly dissolved; he did not have much time. "A-and mom, dad too~"

"I get it." She said, just trying to make him stop, but he didn't seem to notice.

"~ tell them I love them, Tell them Ba-" But his voice cut out, as the last of him finally faded away, and she was left to silence once more.

Dash just mashed her hoof about in the dirt as she stewed, stuff like that hurt, it always did. She didn't feel driven to tears, but it had still put her in a sour mood, *Why can't they just be monsters?*

Her mood apparently didn't go unnoticed, as she felt Ted try to console her, but she just brushed him off.

She looked out into the darkness, towards wherever her prey may be. "I'll kill him." The body that once housed a force that had put them all to the brink of destruction, now withered and crumbled into dust. While that which once gave it life seeped out onto the ground, and evaporated into the caverns unknowable heights.

"Well while you sit here and brood, I'm going to go check on Applejack."

Dash looked back to see the zebragus, that had just been solemn, was now merrily hopping off towards where he had hidden her friend from all the fighting, "You're weird, you know that?" She only saw him crack a smile as he kept going.

[/]/[/9]/[/]/

"Wakey wakey," Applejack's eyes slowly pulled themselves apart, as the upbeat voice drilled its way into her mind, "Eggs 'n' bakey."

"I hate eggs," was all she responded, not even sure what 'bakey' was.

"So how was the nap?"

She rose from the ground, her legs snapped and groaned in protest, but she found them remarkably useful considering how weak she was the last she remembered. "Didn't feel like a nap."

"Heheh, well you'll find that heroes get to take those soreness reducing power-naps when time permits, although they never help fix those catastrophic amputations that one usually receives..." He quickly brushed aside the air of confusion he had stirred up, "Everything in order?"

Applejack trotted in place for a moment, "Suppose so." She saw her friend glide into view and land near them. "Hey Dash, whoa, you look a little worse for wear."

Dash snorted a bit, "Same goes for you."

She just shrugged in reply, "I'll live." *No sense in wasting resources.* Apparently sharing the same opinion, her friend did not say much in return.

Ted spoke up, "I guess we can call that a resounding success then." A shrewd laugh wiped the smile from his face. "Something to add, Applejack?"

"You call gettin' nearly killed a success?"

"Well I admit it could've-"

"How about lettin' them now where we are? You know they ain't just sittin' round the campfire not payin' mind to all the bad signs."

"Now what's got you all bothered?"

Applejack just shook her head, "Nothin', nothin' at all... let's get movin'." She pushed her way past the concerned looking duo in her way, and followed the marker of their destination; cutting a path through the rubble piles towards it. By her eye they were still a ways off, but much closer than they had been since they started.

"Excuse me."

She was pulled from her thoughts by a zebragus trotting up to speed next to her.

"I can't help but notice the glaring red flags that you seem to be sporting just for me, and I was kind of wondering what the deal-"

"Ted." Her tone cut his question short, and grabbed his attention. "This isn't the time, and I'm really, really, not in the mood for this right now."

"Oh, I know," He laughed at his own genius, "this is about your hat isn't it?" Her scowl at its mention only cemented his cocky smile onto his face, "Look, I know it was kinda underhanded... can I still say that? Anyway, I mean to say that it wasn't really fair of me to do that, and I'm sure that it'll be all right between us."

"It isn't about the hat." She said back through gritted teeth.

"Hmm?" She didn't answer his inquiring noise, "Don't keep us waiting on baited breath."

Her glare froze him to the spot, "It's this, this right here."

"Wha-"

"Respect, Ted, that's what this is all about, cause you ain't got a sliver of it in ya."

"I hardly see-"

"Could you kindly listen to me for once!" She advanced on him, forcing him to give ground until he was backed against a pile of rocks. "You don't care, that's my problem. Nothin' matters to you, and it gets on my nerves."

"Whoa, Applejack, just chill."

"Not now Dash." She didn't take her eyes from Ted for a second, "That hat did mean a lot to me, and I tried to be the bigger pony, to just set it aside so we could work together for the greater good and all that hooey. Celestia knows I tried to do that, but no, you just had to keep pushin' buttons because you get a cheap laugh outta it." Her angry breaths pulled short, and she just sighed, only her disapproving glare remained. "You don't think, you don't care, and you don't deserve all that praise you scamper and beg for."

"Hey, what's that?"

She couldn't believe it, even after all that he hadn't listened, instead he decided to drift off into la-la land. One part of her said that he was just trying to irk her, but another side shouted something far louder. She grabbed his mane in her teeth as he tried to sneak his way past her to whatever useless thing he had fixated upon, and tossed him back upon the rock pile, then pinned him there under her forelegs; forcing his attention to her.

"Is this a joke? Because I'm finding it hard to figure out the punch line in all this."

"Ted, shut up."

"Well you're the one who wanted to not-" His speech stopped short as a hoof slammed into a rock near his head and crushed it into dust.

"Why the hay are you even here?" She was fuming now, whatever check she had on herself seemed to fade away beneath that anger that boiled up. "Tell me why, besides your stupid adrenaline fix, why you're even here?" She only glared at his silence, she didn't even think he knew. "Well I'm here because I realize what kinda danger everypony is in, not to mention my friends. If we screw up here Ted, its curtains for them, and all you and miss

vengeance over there wanna do is try to get yourselves killed." She spared a glance her friend's way, seeing Dash stunned by the words she spoke. "I like to believe that a pony can change, for the better, and if you don't start shapin' up Ted; I don't wanna hear another word outta you."

Rainbow Dash watched as Applejack got off of him, neither looked happy with the other now, and Ted returned to the inspection he attempted to make earlier; giving both some much needed room. She trotted her way over to Ted, who seemed the less angry of the two. "You OK?"

He just grunted whilst brushing dust from his armor, "She just needs to lighten up."

"Well, Ted, maybe she has a-"

"Now where did you go little sparkly thing?"

Dash wanted to speak up again, but the way he cut her off made her realize this was one of those things she had to drop; for now. "What sparkly thing?"

"Well, I noticed this weird metal chute sticking out of the ground here," He quickly tapped it a few times, allowing it to let loose a few chimes in response. "Hmm." He opened the chute's closed lid and was greeted with a burst of air across his face that made him sneeze, "Jeez, that thing is dirty." He coughed a few times and dared not open it again. "Anyway, in this rock pile right here, I thought I saw something nice and sparkly; and when one is surrounded by all this grey you tend to notice color."

Dash helped him search, for Applejack didn't seem entirely thrilled that they were wasting time. She pulled aside a few loose rocks from the pile, trying to find this 'sparkle' amidst all the debris, only to see more and more rocks. "Ted, are you sure-"

"Ah-ha!" She backed away from her side of the pile, to see Ted with most of his foreleg plunged into a hole he had excavated into the surface of stones. He strained and groaned as he tried to pull something out. "Come on magnet hooves." With one last stress filled grunt he was successful. His hoof erupted out of the hole in a small cloud of dust, something shimmering in his grasp; even Applejack's curiosity overwhelmed her prior feelings for a moment.

They each looked at the strange device, a small disk that had three rings filled with some runic language, with a small hint of lavender glow emanating from its center. Ted busied himself with twisting the movable ring alphabet while Dash just looked at it cautiously, "You sure you wanna be touching that?"

"Oh Come on, what's the worst that could happen?... I know!" He quickly rose up upon two hooves, wings extended for balance as he thrust his forelegs to the sky with the strange relic firmly grasped, "By the power of plot devices, grant me the power of a thousand suns!" His voice boomed out into the distance, echoing into a thousand fragments, and he only received an unearthly cry of an angry horde.

"Ah hayseed." Applejack quickly snapped Ted out of his relic enthralled stupor, "Alright ya idjit you had your fun, now let's get moving." She was already moving herself into a gallop while Ted set himself down carefully with relic still in a free hoof.

"Just wait a minute, I'm sure I almost..." He went back to flipping runes about on the device, trying to see if a certain pattern would change anything.

Dash galloped up next to him, "Really Ted?" Then snatched the disk out of his hooves with her mouth, while speeding away she said back to him, "Dere's no hime for dis." As she followed after her friend, her ears picked up a rather unsettling ringing noise that grew sharper with every passing moment.

She had to ignore it though, they had to keep moving, and gain ground on whatever was getting closer. For a moment she could swear somepony talked to her in a gentle whisper, but the screeching only returned every time the voice passed. Her paranoia would have to wait, as she began to see stars, but it made no sense to her; she wasn't even winded. Only when the headache slammed into her consciousness, alongside a light beaming from below her snout, did she realize what might be going wrong. Although far too late, as the world blacked out from her sight, and her body fell limp beneath her.

[1][10][1]

Applejack could withstand it no longer, she had seen the strange light for a while, but now she heard somepony trip and tumble to the ground. With a casual glance behind herself she was soon frozen still, as she watched her friend spasm upon the ground, that strange relic she had was aglow and it only grew brighter. Before she was able to get to her friends side, Ted was already upon her; attempting to free the object from her jaw.

"Would'ya quit doin' that Ted, all you're gonna do is rip her teeth out."

Ted loosened his grip upon the disk, "Well what would you have me do?"

Applejack looked about, just trying to think. "We could... no, that would..." Her worry grew greater as every idea seemed to involve hurting her friend, and the fact that the relic's light was beginning to get so bright she was almost blinded by looking at it didn't help much. "What in the world did you two do anyway?"

"I don't know, she took it from me and then... this."

That didn't help much, and Dash seemed to be in more pain than she was a minute ago. "You just couldn't leave it alone, you had to go and toy with it didn't ya?"

Ted just shot a rather offended look at the orange pony, "Oh yes, I planned out this whole charade from the start to make your friend have a seizure because it would behi-larious." He then let loose a series of forced laughs.

"Well go on then Ted, fail to learn that your actions have consequences and laugh-" Her eyes shot wide as an idea ran through her mind, "Quick, Ted, give me a feather."

"What!"

"Just do it!"

Ted swiftly dipped his head into his wing, and plucked out a piece of loose plumage, which was just as quickly snatched by an impatient Applejack. He watched as she went about, tickling the pegasus with the feather just so, and slowly her grimaced face cracked a slight smile; and her jaw loosened. The disc was no longer locked in place, it rolled out of her mouth and into

the grasp of Ted, who was rather confused as it began to dim into its former inactive state.

Applejack was pleased with her progress, as her friend's seizures had reduced to little more than errant leg twitches and some eye movement; not unlike she was dreaming. "Ted, would you quit fiddlin' with that and help me get her outta here." They had wasted enough time as it was, and it took at least two ponies to safely carry Rainbow Dash at the speeds she planned to be going.

[M][11][M]

She stopped, for they had as well, one of them raising their voice in anger once more. A chattering arose within her mind, and she responded.

No... unsafe... wait...

They had it, she had seen the light, but which one... which one. Her prey was nearing their prize, closing on a place she could not follow, where none of her children could either. She needed to act, and her children sensed this as well. One in particular was anxiously clamoring for his prize, the one that got away, it wanted his flesh.

Split them apart... pick your favorite... She focused upon the one, who had been nearly shouting in her raised tone. *That one... is mine.*

She morphed her arm into something special, just different enough to grab hold of her from a distance, to make pain, to hold... to kill

[M][12][M]

They had been running for a while, but eventually they felt safe enough to take a break. Their run had taken them far from the pit they had fought within, yet now they were far off course, they had retreated to a small side cave system and their objective was no longer in sight.

Applejack watched her friend, carefully lain aside, her eyes moved rapidly under closed eyelids. She had tried a few things to get her to awaken, but nothing seemed to work. Her thoughts were interrupted again by Ted, as he mumbled angry words under his breath to curse every failed attempt he made with the relic. "Ted... why are you even botherin' with that thing?"

He looked up from his work, "All I need to do is figure out how this thing works, then it'll be all better."

"Well would ya quit it, all you're gonna do is get yourself into a coma."

"Oh please, whose butt symbol is a magical anvil? It's practically my job to reverse engineer magical weaponry and whatnot." He went back to twisting moveable parts on the device, and testing new ideas that popped into his head.

Applejack just shook her head, "Just apply some common sense Ted, I don't-

"Don't lecture me little missy, I've been making magical thingamabobs since before you were born."

She just lowered a cold glare and said, "Well in that time did you ever make a sword that would 'un-cut' somepony?" A smile appeared upon her face as Ted stopped mid-thought, a blank exasperated gasp escaped his throat alongside it.

Ted just set the object down, staring straight at it, "Then... I don't know what to do." He quickly stuffed it away within his bag of holding for later.

Applejack just looked at her friend, "Why Ted? Don't give me that 'why what' stuff, you know plenty well what I'm askin'."

"You saw them Applejack, they were looking for something, and I thought I just got lucky so-

"Not that," She glowered upon him, "That stupid war cry is what I'm talkin' bout, if you could even call it that."

"Well you know... I thought it would be, eh-heheh-"

"Don't you dare say funny." She fumed as Ted only shot her a worried smile. "Are you... I can't..." All she could do was let loose an angry groan.

"Now, now, Applejack," She rose from the ground, and trotted her way over to him, "All we have to do is find out what-" His speech was interrupted as

she clocked him right across the face, he nursed the pain that accompanied the meaty thud while replying, "OK, maybe I deserved that."

"You deserve more than that, but I don't wanna break your jaw."

"Aww, you do care."

"Maybe I do, but you know what, I really wish you would care too."

"Please," Ted carefully rotated his jaw about just to make sure it still worked, "I care plenty about you two."

"Really? Cause ya'll have a funny way of showin' it." She didn't let him interrupt, "Like when ya shouted loud enough to wake the dead cause it was 'funny', and didn't think that it would hurt none? How about the time you got yourself nearly killed tryin' to rescue Dash?"

"Hey, that doesn't count, it ended up working out OK."

"That ain't the point Ted."

"Well enlighten me!"

"You don't think." She just held steady with the glare she received, "You rush in, never botherin' to think what could happen. Why I bet you would light a fuse a' dynamite without realizin' one led to the other explodin'."

"Alright fine, you want me to say it? I'm an idiot. I'm not some centuries lived strategic genius who can figure out what my enemy will eat for breakfast the next morning, but I try, and that's more than most can say. Sure I'm stupid and sometimes childish, but don't think that means anything I do is less important."

Applejack could see her words had started to actually break through that facade he always seemed to put on, so she asked, one more time. "So tell me Ted, Why?" When he didn't even look her way she spoke up again, "Come on Ted, harsh words won't end this."

"What do you want from me Applejack?" He started, "Do you want me to break down, have some kind of emotional relapse over tragedies in my past? Do you think I was some merry fool who traversed the world and

knew not a care within it, whom never learned how precious life is, who laughs in the face of danger because he has never experienced such?" Ted sighed, dropping the heat from his voice, "In truth Miss Jack, I am a little of each. Only a fool thinks he can escape tragedy and her ever so baleful touch."

She hadn't really expected that reaction, "So... you're an overemotional fool?"

"No... heheh, well maybe, but that's not the point." His eyes seemed to glaze over as he spoke once more, "You know them don't you Applejack? The 'seers' the ones that know about a problem, by all rights the problem shouldn't exist... but they just deny it. They sit by and let it fester and grow, until it gets so bad that... you just... you just can't believe it, you can't believe how they managed to become so respected and how they got to be leaders. So... I'm one of those guys who likes to throw himself in front of a moving carriage, so it doesn't hurt that kid in the way, is it really that hard to figure out?"

Applejack just mulled over her words, then said the first thing that came to her mind. "I'm really startin' to think that if it wasn't for your friends, you'd have died a long time ago."

"Hey, that isn't... entirely true." His nervous laughter slowly died out, as he cleared his throat and laid out a sorrowful glance, "I'm sorry for... you know endangering our lives and such, maybe I can tone it down a notch or two here on out."

"Yeah well, sorry for yellin' at ya so much, seein' as how I was gettin' after you for just that."

He raised an eyebrow, "No remorse for my sore jaw?"

"Hey you had that comin' since you touched my hat."

A short snort escaped him, "Frenemies?"

"Frenemies." She casually clopped her hoof against his.

"Don't think this means I'm going to be some sour puss, if I see a joke I'm jumping on it."

"I'll take that warnin' with a grain a salt, and maybe a good biff to your ribs."

"Please, Leria hit harder than you when she still hated me."

"What was she like anyway?" She almost regretted her words immediately, as the zebragus seemed to draw inward; sullen. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry, seein' how she's dead 'n' all."

"We don't know that." He said back, rather upbeat to counter his own apparent melancholy. "Maybe she's somewhere in Equestria... maybe she's buried somewhere down here, just waiting for us to dig her up."

"That seems like some awful wishful thinkin'."

"Yeah well, that's all I got in that matter. Anyway, she's a story for another day, we should probably get moving; gain some more ground."

"I hear that-" She froze mid stride, ear's twitching to sounds beyond range of her sight.

Ted picked up on her tension, "What?"

"You tellin' me you can't hear that?"

"Well there is a five percent chance of-"

"Shhhhh." She heard it again, like somepony had cracked their neck, rather loudly. "How's Dash doin'?"

Ted poked and shook Dash slightly, "Still out like the tarrasque"

"Some other way outta here?"

"Don't really know, we just kinda parked here for cover."

She backed away from the tunnel's entrance, keeping a wary eye towards it, "Well we best get movin' either way, I gotta bad feelin'." Something flew out of the night, directed towards her face, but she was fast enough. She reached out to swat it away, but instead found something wrapped around her hoof; a strange bony tendril. Despite the tension in the thing, it didn't hurt, "Try and hogtie me will ya." She braced herself in her standing pose, and dug her heels deep, ready for a tug of war.

"Applejack let it go!"

"Why-aaaaah!" It had sprouted spines, three times it had wrapped around her foreleg, and thrice did it sting as it dug under her skin. Now it wasn't shy about pulling, and as she tried to fight it the hooks only dug deeper. She tried to hold, as she could hear Ted rush up behind her, but with the force that she wasn't expecting. It pried her loose as it had twisted instead of pulled which launched her twisting and onto her back. Whatever had her it didn't wait and soon she was being dragged away by her attacker.

From what she could see Ted was after her already, he was fast but this thing really wanted her too. Before Ted could do more than take a single stride more zomponies than she cared to count were already upon him. As he weaved his way through them, trying to throw them aside, to just get a clear shot at her; she shouted back.

"Don't worry about me Ted, keep Dash safe!" He faltered slightly, but still seemed determined to get her, "We'll meet up at the crack, now help her out ya idiot!" She saw him muffle something, probably a curse, but he changed course; cutting his way back to her unconscious friend.

With that worry out of her mind, a new one emerged; her own safety. One part of her really wished she knew how to do that trick that let her survive that fall, try as she might nothing seemed to work, as she felt every bump and rock slam into her. *Enough of this horseplay.* Through the pain she tried to right herself, and for a time she was actually succeeding. From her stomach she managed to rise to her hooves, on at least three legs she could almost keep speed, but it still tugged at her trapped foreleg like a biting leash.

She tried to think of something, chewing it was out of the question, the hooks would just dig into her mouth and then where would she be. Her time to think seemed to have run out, as she felt the leash dig deeper, and even in the dark she recognized a ledge when she saw one.

Not exactly in a position to negotiate her direction, the leash whipped her over the edge before it released her, and what she thought may be an abyss ended up being only a rather deep pit. The height of which was still a problem, lucky enough for her the bone whip thing had tossed her with such power forwards, that she might be able to pull this off without getting hurt. Tucking herself in she prepared for a rough landing, when she hit the

ground she let her forward momentum carry her. After a rather dizzying series of rolls she was almost on the other side of the pit itself.

Applejack had felt better, but she figured that being a little roughed up was better than having a broken leg. She felt the same about her surroundings, not hopelessly deep, but not exactly a hop, skip, and a jump high either. Her admiration of the predicament would have to wait, as the sound of claw scratching rock snapped her attention elsewhere. What she witnessed could only be luck, as she rolled away from her attackers attempt on her life.

With what little distance she had, Applejack got off her plot and managed to face the danger. She could only see something that left a cold chill of realization in her mind, *Oh buck me like a bruised apple*. For she knew this thing, albeit the slight changes it had undergone. It looked at her with those empty eyes, pulling free its shape-shifted limb free from the rocky floor it had impaled.

Applejack was face to face with Abigail, alone, and she had practically told her friends to go on without her. ...*Like a whole bushel of bruised apples*. She immediately tried to think of what to do, maybe how to fight her; or at least get away. The latter option soon seemed impossible, she might be able to scale the pit, but Abigail didn't seem the type to just let her get away. She had to think of something quick, for her time in this standoff seemed to be drawing to a close, as Abigail finished reshaping one of her arms.

Applejack just stood her ground, while Abigail slowly circled her. She was slightly off put by the way the creature looked, and having known it had once been a pony didn't help much. Her back legs had been malformed, the hooves changed into a strange three toed claw which she walked upon the tips of. Her body hadn't changed much, it was still that strange plated bonelike substance, but it was how she stood that unsettled Applejack the most.

Everything she had seen that day was a horrid, shambling, hunched over mess in some kind of pain. But Abigail? There was no hunch in her posture, no shamle to her purposeful steps, only a creature that seemed to only share the aesthetic quality of her peers. Her body barely seemed to register the weight that she might bare, as she was unabated with her head

held high. That was what had Applejack concerned, for this feeling she exuded was not one a monster gave off. When Abigail stopped her circling, Applejack felt her body grow tense, and then without a word, shout, or taunt; Abigail was unleashed.

[13]

A green bolt tore through the air, easily stinging into a zompony's head, as the body fell limp Ted took what little time he had before more could show up and turned to deal with Dash.

"Alright you... umm, get up!" He lightly shook the comatose pegasus, he had tried many things before with Applejack around, but nothing worked; this was out of pure desperation. *Well I could still try to... no, Never, I will NOT resort to that.* He took out the small relic he had found, the thing that had started most of this fiasco.

"You're going to fix this, and you're going to fix this right now." He began wildly twisting the inset circles and just desperately tried to avoid the other fate he had in mind. "Because I am not, I repeat, I will not pull a fairy tale wake up kiss with a HORSE!" He could hear them getting closer, and he still hadn't a clue what to do. "I'd rather die."

In his desperate anger he spiked the relic into the ground, it then ricocheted away from him towards Rainbow Dash. Before he could do more than simply register the series of events, the disc had careened straight into her head. Ted was justly silenced as he watched the Pegasus cup her head in pain, unable to realize that the disc had rebounded across the walls and back into his bag of holding of its own accord.

"The hay was that for!" Dash nursed her head as it throbbed with a stubborn headache now mixed with the soreness of her brow. She ignored Ted as he praised some god he called 'Icosahedron', for a different thought had entered her worried mind, "Where's Applejack?"

"Oh, about that~" A unsettling howl from nightmares that abounded outside their hovel gave tension to the air, "~just a little problem." When Dash tried to get up Ted went to steady her, only to get his hoof swatted away.

"I've had worse."

Ted just shrugged in response, then grew a boyish grin laced with curious enthusiasm. "So anything interesting? Feeling extra powerful after your little zap? Ooh, oh, maybe you can use the relic to make them all extra dead and stuff!"

She slapped a hoof over his mouth until he stopped murmuring out his thoughts, "I don't think it's a weapon Ted."

His raised eyebrow begged for a better answer, but he would have to wait; as a familiar pain shot through his exposed wing. He quickly wrenched out a small tooth like stinger from his person, "Blasted little... well, who's ready to get their murder on?"

Dash was already charging out towards the nexus of hostility, only calling out a callous tease towards him, "You leg locked, or are you just scared?" The pompous snicker behind her gave a clear enough answer.

[M][14][M]

Applejack tried to lash out again, but every time she would try to make a move those whirling arms would block her attempt. So she was once again plunged into a retreat, trying to avoid the flurry of slashes in an effort to not gain any more bloody scratches. She had managed to play cat and mouse for a time, always managing to gain more ground to lose, but Abigail was learning and she couldn't keep it up forever.

Another go at her head, she ducked, and a strange scythed arm rose to catch her. She backed away and felt it nick her face, and then what she feared most happened. With an unwanted thud she slammed into the wall of the pit, nowhere left to go without going through her. *OK, enough of this, show her what you're made of.*

Maybe it wasn't the best idea she ever had, but she had resolved to the fact that this was the end, she had to win. When Abigail attacked, she was ready. A bladed arm flew straight for her, luckily she managed to slap it away upon its flat side. Another came, this one a strange scythe of some type, it reached past her, and she knew it would be pulled back in an attempt to cleave whatever it caught. So she dropped low, only to see a clawed foot brought toward her.

This time she wasn't so lucky, and it wrapped around her face like a monkey's paw. She felt the rock slam against her back as she was held high, and through her one eye that wasn't clasped shut she saw Abigail arcing back to deliver a hefty blow. Her chance presented itself, with what force she could muster, Applejack delivered the greatest haymaker she could right into that beast's knee. The leg bent and snapped, hanging by whatever substance held that abomination together, and for once in the entirety of the fight; Applejack heard her howl in pain.

The limb's grip loosened from her face, and as she crashed to the floor she had to avoid the defensive swipes from Abigail as she retreated, her defaced limb trailing behind. One thing had escaped Applejack for the entirety of the fight, as she watched Abigail nurse her limb with a cautious eye held upon her, she thought to herself, *What happened to your quills?*

As Applejack made a move toward her, Abigail's armor sprouted them, and dozens fired off towards her.

Oh, I just had to ask! She dropped low, hooves over her head with a fool's hope of sanctuary. An instinct at the last moment made her shut her eyes as she tried to remain calm. Applejack's heart pounded, she knew what would happen, but she wouldn't let that get to her. So she focused upon her breathing, and took comfort in it. For a moment she felt her thoughts slip to a higher place, not one of worry and the present, but of other happier things.

When the barbed quills rained down, intent upon gauging out what damage they could as their master bided time, she listened to them ping upon... *The hay?* She opened her eyes, and where she might find her foreleg she saw only the glint of metal. *The hay!* Had her limb not been in front of her face at the time she doubted she would've seen it. For when she moved it the metal sheen was lost, and once again she was left with cloth.

Once Applejack pressed herself out of her stupor, she took note of Abigail, whom seemed bewildered as she once was. *As much as I want to learn how to do that, I have to use this to my advantage.* She closed in upon Abigail, and what once would've been countered with another volley of her quills ended with the creature trying to hold its ground against Applejack. What confusion she had over the creature's tactics didn't matter, if it

thought she had talents that she couldn't control then let Abigail handicap herself.

Even upon a single limb, her speed was remarkable as blades whirled through the air. Applejack took what hits she could land, but she wished for more than the slight scuffs she managed. For every second that passed Abigail seemed to grow sturdier in her stance, that leg she had worked so hard to break was mending ever so slowly. That was when she noticed it, the armor about Abigail's form was receding, slowly growing thinner as the leg grew better.

A wild swing she had not noticed cut deeper than she thought, and for a moment she had to back off. *Ok Applejack*, She took in a long calming breath to push the pain from her mind, *Just like Dad showed ya*. Now she knew her target, how to take her down, and what to exploit. When she struck, she wasn't poised or graceful, instead she was overwhelming and relentless.

Applejack had tried dealing with Abigail as she had the zomponies, with strong blows to break her, but now she did something else; she targeted the joints. Maybe she wasn't able to deal the type of damage as she had to Abigail's leg, but the tender way she would hold her arms back when they took a blow told her all she needed to know.

Another whirl of blades greeted Applejack's senses, her mind worked overtime to predict the monster's movements. A serrated blade scratched her, and she saw the building follow-up swing from the other arm that would hurt far more. Applejack kicked in another moment of her zen, the speed it gave her with the foresight allowed her to catch the hilt of that blade and then drive her back leg into the exposed torso under the arm; cracks formed upon where she struck. Then with what was left of her opening, twisted the arm she held and pulled. With a sickening pop, the weapon at the end of it separated from what remained, and a blackened tendril with broken plates was left behind.

Abigail backed off for a moment, and Applejack cast aside the broken weapon she held before letting her power recede. In small enough bursts the force from her mind wouldn't tire her as quickly, but she was making a lot of small uses. She watched as the arm she had worked at began to reform, the thickness of the armor on Abigail's body growing ever thinner.

Aw Hayseed, every time that happens she gets faster, it won't be long before... no, NO! She shook herself out of it, You just gotta stop playin' nice, this is just like Dad taught ya, wear them down then finish once they start to falter.

She watched as Abigail donated more of her mass towards one arm, the bone growing outward and flattening, until the entire limb was a shield. The other was hidden behind it as Abigail dropped herself low, almost the entirety of her form hidden behind it as her empty eyes peeked over.

OK...

Now Applejack backed away, as Abigail moved forward with a slow determination, the sound of her clawed feet clicking against the silence. Applejack was tense, she hated that feeling, every muscle ready to jump. That wall in front of her was nearly as thick if not more-so than the armor she had worked so hard to tear down in the first place.

Maybe I could... no that's a hogswabble of an idea, what if-whoa nellie! Abigail lunged at her with a speed far greater than she expected, in her surprise she managed to absorb the blunt slam of the shield with her forearms, but a pain in her abdomen robbed her of any sense of victory. Once again in a reaction she pushed away her attack, and luckily before more damage could be done she had forced her off. Her hoof ran down her stomach as she fell back as best she could, trying to find the wound. It hurt more than any other scratch or cut on her, and when she finally found it, she could feel the warm red wetness greet her touch.

Abigail was already moving again, ready for another strike to end her target. Applejack could only give ground, trying to buy time as she thought of a way out of this; of a way to defeat her. Her heart grew cold, as she felt herself bump into the familiar rock wall of the pits edge. She tried to move to go around, but the quickness in her first stride caused the pain to flair and the deep wound to cry for her attention. Abigail noticed this, her pace increasing somewhat. Now that beast knew her target, how to take this pony down, and what to exploit.

She had one last idea, one last stupid idea, give it her all. Maybe Abigail expected the sickly prey of hers to do just that, but Applejack didn't care, she wanted to go out swinging. She saw Abigail lung once more, with the same speed which played into her prior attack. Her mind flooded with a

thousand different things at once as she saw that flash of a weapon glazed in red appear from under the rising shield.

She let it all go.

She let go of all the familiar places, the faces and things fading from her mind as she gave all of herself over to it. Her mind flooded through every part of her, Applejack herself seemed like a memory in this state as the zen took hold.

Every detail was clear to her.

The angle of the blade thrust out toward her, the distance to the wall behind her. The plan seemed to have formed before she had even realized it.

She acted

Her body moved effortlessly, no pain, no drag of delay, every motion was an instant. She had smacked away the shield, throwing the beast off balance, leaving that instrument of death free of obstruction. Applejack worked her way past the thing's guard, wrapping her hooves around that limb, and with a force of her own body surged the power of her mind backing it; thrust it into the wall.

The beast struggled, its arm stuck up to its elbow in rock.

Applejack smashed Abigail's head against the wall, but even with the cracks and the shape caved in it fought back. Legs lashed out trying to claw her, but to no avail, the blows repeated themselves. The skull slowly chipping away as she was unmasked more by every strike. Eventually, after the last chip of bone had fallen, a small blackened face remained. It drifted about upon its shoulders in a stupor, as a dark haze shadowed the head from view, but Applejack could still see it. The dainty features of maybe the pony this once was, or maybe it was Abigail herself, she wasn't sure.

There was a glint, maybe where her eyes were, but the soft shape of the thing soon turned sharp. An angry hiss echoed out as bone started trying to defensively mold around the exposed area, clawed feet lashing out again as she once again tried to free herself from the wall.

Applejack left her slight stupor, she didn't care what this thing used to be, all that mattered was the fact of a monster in front of her. She once again gave it a good smash against the wall, and after Abigail had once again become dazed she began landing hits meant to kill. In short order, fighting through the cold nips she would receive upon hitting it, the head was deformed into something unrecognizable. Once she had stopped moving, Applejack backed off, watching the body just hang against the wall. She saw it move, the legs try to lift weight once more. No, Taking no chances, Applejack bucked it with what strength she still had, and whatever was left of her torso's armor shattered against the wall.

She waited a good long while, just daring it to move, when it didn't she finally uttered. "That was for my mom." Applejack brushed the dust off her chin, and then became keenly aware of the cuts that burned for her attention; most notably the one near her stomach. All her wincing would have to wait, as the drain from the zen usage hit her full force. It took everything she had just to stop her legs from wobbling as she set herself down on her less injured side.

With that out of the way she turned her attention to her wound, and she knew it wasn't going to be pretty before she even looked at it, *maybe I can make some of this cloth into a bandage or somethin'*. With a gulp she looked to where the pain was, "Ah, shoot." The injury was beneath her belt, which meant she would have to undo it and then... *Wait a pony pickin' minute. I ain't got no belt.* Then she realized it wasn't even really a belt, it looked a lot more like, well, a bandage with a little blood spot where the wound was and everything.

She just groaned and slapped a hoof to her head, Applejack wasn't one to ask for instruction manuals, but that instant she would've really enjoyed one. *Guess I'll have to grill Ted about magical whatnot next time I see him.* The burn of the dozen other cuts still grated her mind, which hadn't received the same treatment as the nastiest one. *Note to self, never remove saddlebags when on an adventure.* She laughed a bit, just overwhelmed with a sense of accomplishment for a moment. This was probably the third time that day she evaded an untimely demise, and she felt like a little celebration, even if a small laugh was all she could do.

Clack

Her skin grew cold, *How the...* Her curiosity begged her head to turn about, and what she saw only made her fear swell more.

[15]

"Hurry up Dash!"

She groaned as she picked up her pace. Ted had 'suggested' that they drop everything and make a beeline for the large crack in the distance, which slowly seemed to be less a crack and more an overtly bright tower now. She didn't really care what it was though, Applejack was supposed to be there, that was all that mattered.

"You're sure she'll be there?"

"Well," Dash didn't like the look on Ted's face, "That's what she said."

"What do you mean Ted? Where did she go that she couldn't bother to take her saddlebags with her?" Which she had strapped to herself.

His silence only made her skin crawl.

So she stopped their mad gallop for their destination, drawing his attention. "Ted, you tell me what happened right now!"

"She wanted you to be safe Dash, and that's what I'm trying to accomplish."

"Don't tell me you let her sacrifice herself."

"No, not... exactly. Look it was a split second decision, you don't exactly get to lazily pick your options, and in my defense she told me to." He could see the anger instilled on her face, and without a word she turned back to the nameless darkness. "Just wait a second Dash!"

"I ain't leaving my friend behind."

"Well where is she then? Did you happen to gain friend-o-location when you were asleep?" His question seemed to stop her, "I don't know if we can save her Dash, for all we know she could be at that tower of light, overwhelmed and in need of help; heck she might even have found a way out of this whole mess, heheh heh..." His smile faded, some of the hope

drained away with it, but his mood remained spirited, "But I can- WE can still save ourselves. Applejack would want-

"Don't try to tell me what she would want!" She snapped back, "And don't you DARE try to convince me to leave behind one of my friends, she could need help and I-

"What if she doesn't! What if we go gallivanting about in the dark and just get ourselves caught in another trap? What good have we done then? 'Oh bravo young adventurers, you got lost in the dark and taken down like common game fowl'. That'll really help Ponyville."

Dash could remember it, she didn't want to but she did, what Applejack said about one of them not making it back at the library. That thought of just *leaving* one of her friends behind practically ripped her heart apart at its seams, her mind a flurry of unwanted emotion.

"Dash, we need to move."

"Fine," A heavy sigh escaped her, "But I never want you to try and force me into this again." She shot him a heated glare, "You got that?"

"Y-yeah, just, we should," She trotted past him, without a word. "OK."

As Ted began to catch up to her, she spoke up again, "Oh yeah, don't let that thing fall into their hooves."

"What, the relic?"

"If they're really after it Ted, like you think, then we can't let them have it."

His curiosity was now activated in full swing, "So what? Does it activate and turn into a doomsday device? OH, maybe I can reverse engineer my own mini-version. Please, please tell me how it works." He was already digging through his bag, ready to hear every little detail.

"It's not a weapon Ted, I thought I already said that." She could see the sadness drown his features, "I think... I think it's a key."

"To a weapon!" his hopes risen again.

"No, just..." She groaned and planted a hoof to her face, "Listen alright. When I was out... it put a message in my head, and it just kept repeating itself until I woke up."

Ted watched as she nervously dragged her hoof across the ground, "Well don't drag out your dramatic pause, get on with it. What did it say, What did it say?" he repeated like an overeager child.

"I'm not sure if it was meant for me, and I couldn't understand a lot of it, but he kept saying a few key things." Dash cut Ted off before he could ask the obvious question '*HE! HE WHO!*' Once he had settled she took a deep breath to try and remember,

"It started with this stallion, I can't remember his face, it was all mushy and blurred. Anyway, he started with 'my son' which kinda threw me off, and then it was just a lot of garbled noise, but he sounded really sad. Then he disappears and I see this dome shaped building thing with the key next to it, and he speaks up again. 'I hope it hasn't fallen into the wrong hooves, but you have to stop it, you have to destroy what's left of my research. You can't let anypony find what's left of them.' Then more gobble-de-gook before he just started apologizing a bunch, and... that's it, after that he would start repeating himself."

"Aw, I wanted a super-weapon," Ted's expression toughened up a bit from his mopey frown, "Well, in that case. No sense in letting evil have a chance right?" He plopped the little disc onto the ground and reared up to smash it to bits.

"Wait a minute Ted!"

"Oh come on, if we got the only key to this big bad place we might as well make sure nothing can get in right?"

"Yeah, but if that thing made a bunch of noise and stuff just because I held onto it funny, what's gonna happen when you break it?"

Ted felt himself break into a cold sweat for a moment as he gazed down upon the little potentially thermonuclear device, "Hey Dash, you wanna hold onto it for a while?"

"Ted."

"Alright." He said with a sigh, "Idiot who nearly gets us killed gets to hold onto the deadly explosive device." Dash didn't seem affected by his subliminal attempt to get out of it, and resolved to lug it around in his bag once more. "So did it give you anything else?"

"A nasty headache," She then shot him a rather unamused frown, "and a bad bruise on my head."

"Still better than the alternative in my book. Anyway, we moving or are we gonna be big nice targets for a few more minutes?"

Dash rolled her eyes as she turned to once again be the lead towards their objective, when a scream rang out through the darkness. Dash was looking out into the darkness, towards its source, she knew that noise. *That wasn't a monster, that was a-* "Applejack!"

"Dash, just wait a minute." His warning was too late, she had already taken to the air. "Well alrighty th-WHOA!"

She began to turn back to him, that scream of his was fearful not angry, but when she finally turned about; he was gone. "Ted?" She flew toward his last position, but then looked back to where she heard Applejack. "Ugh." Her mind flicked back and forth between her friends, until finally she just couldn't take it anymore, "Ah horse-apples." She finally made up her mind, and in a blur of color shot out into the darkness to find Applejack.

She felt bad about it, but something told her either decision would've done that to her, and Ted could handle himself anyway; he wasn't the one who had screamed in pain. Her mind continued to wander, her thoughts drifted between what could happen and reminding herself to not fly into anything, but then something found her. She didn't get a good look at it, but she knew pain and could hear its anger. As she toppled through the air with something clutching her with its painful claws.

[/]/[16]/[/]

Applejack pulled herself over the top of the pits wall, her side burned, but she had to ignore it and press on before she ran out of time. She took off and put distance between her and that pit, doing her best to keep herself on course for that light in the distance. *Just keep your legs movin'*, was all she kept telling herself, *They'll be there, you just gotta lose her.* She was in

no shape for a fight, using her power like that had made her so weak, she was barely able to scale that wall and it was practically a staircase.

She weaved her way into the forest of rocky pillars that reached high above her, thankful for what cover they could provide her with. She was close to that tower of light, perhaps on the other side of this place she would finally be there, *then we can get outta here, get Dash all better, you can do this, just don't stop.* A screech rang out to her ears, far closer than Applejack would care for it to be, and she turned to greet the mad ravings of Abigail face to face.

Applejack's mind froze for a moment, as Abigail dived straight into her, the two brawlers rolling across the ground together. Her mind was reeling too hard, she couldn't piece two thoughts together, and before she knew it her body was held to the ground. She felt Abigail grab one of her forelegs and pull it behind her back, *No! Don't let her.*

She was too late, as the pain spiked through her, and she felt the bone slip from its joint. For a moment all she knew was pain, and her mind wished for escape, it found that release as she screamed for but a moment. It rang out and echoed back, but the pain was there to stay.

Her mind knew it had to react, before more damage was done. She could see Abigail, still over her, arms changing into something else. She thrust herself up, to try and smash her weight into her, but she simply dodged back; now behind Applejack. That worked fine for her, so she simply raised her back legs, doing her best to hold herself steady on one hoof, and bucked.

Whatever luck she had that day seemed to hold steady for that moment, as Abigail was caught unaware, and shot away from her with all the force a veteran applebucker could muster. She slammed against one of the pillars and rolled off, finally resting face down in the earth.

Applejack wasn't sure how Abigail had managed to collect all her bone fragments in the pit so quickly, but this was her chance to get away. So upon three hobbling legs, with a pain streaked across her shoulder, she ran.

Abigail awoke with a start, she swung out one of her bladed arms far as she turned and rose to her feet. Her eyes beheld nothing, the orange one had left. Her posture relaxed, and she sent out for an answer from her children.

One was busy playing with its food, sending waves of lesser creatures to distract it before attacking it repeatedly with its slow acting poison.

Another was in pursuit of the pegasus nearby, she had escaped its grasp, but it seemed confident in its own abilities to catch her.

Yet none of them answered if they had what they had come for, so her mission still stood. Her master wanted that thing they had, he had even told her to continue her pursuit despite the danger he was in. She wanted to be there, to protect him, but he forbade it until she had that thing. So she wasn't going to let that little pony get away.

Her arms shifted back into claws, and she leaped for the nearest pillar, scaling its surface with ease as her strength bit into the stone beneath her grasp. Then she jumped from top to the other, working her way towards the pony's most likely destination, that light in the distance.

Find... break... kill...

They were all dangers, every one of these things wanted to hurt her master, it wasn't in her mission to deal with them but she considered it mandatory for his safety. Her needs were never clear to her, it was all a foggy memory that never pieced back together, but he was everything to her; that was the only thing which was ever clear.

She forced her mind back into reality, wandering in her thoughts was pointless, she had a directive to accomplish. Her trek across the tops of rocks stopped for a moment, as she listened in to her surroundings.

The slow clatter of hooves met her in the dark.

Her pace quickened, throwing herself from peak to peak, the hunt was back and it wasn't far. When she got close, she slowed herself, taking great care to not make noise as she landed softly. The pony had stopped her retreat, the lack of noise proved that much. So she looked down from her perch, scanning the cavern, and as luck would have it she was directly below her.

She watched her prey, carefully checking the blind corner she thought kept her safe, a worried crease upon her brow. Then her prey sat, a wary eye cast down to the limb she had disabled. Abigail carefully began making her way down the pillar, making as little noise as possible. Her prey looked away from its bum leg, and with the other grasped it, she winced painfully. Abigail understood what she was about to do.

A strong one... she must be dealt with...

She was far closer now, almost right above her, but this was the hardest part. Her pace slowed into a crawl, her eyes never left her mark. Slowly she advanced, ignoring the pained grunt of her prey as a bony pop snapped from her shoulder. Her left arm slowly changed, mere inches from the proper range, a blade to be rammed through the soft head prepared and ready was made. The target slouched against the rock. Her head fell back, a content sigh escaped as the eyes blissfully rose to the skies, only to freeze upon Abigail.

She pounced, blade shooting straight ahead to skewer her, but the target was fast. With a burst of speed it managed to throw itself from her path, but Abigail wasn't deterred. She arched her back and rolled forward from her fall, springing back to her feet the target was already trying to hit her, she responded in kind with a careful duck to the side. She brought up the blade to strike, but the pony caught her wrist, so she opted for something simpler. With her other claw wrapped into a fist she struck, the shock of the blow rippled through her arm, and the target collapsed.

Abigail approached, and rolled the unconscious mare over onto her back. It had been a long chase, but she had won. Without contemplation, reflection, or apprehension; she struck out at the throat.

[M][18][M]

Dash was still laughing to herself, she couldn't believe that thing fell for that trick. If it was one thing these silly ghouls didn't have it would be experience, at least in flying. Just a simple application of the buckaneer blitz with some less than flashy face smashing, and that thing was taken care of easier than breakfast, at least until she heard it try and give chase again; keyword try.

Now all she had to do was be careful enough to not to fly into anything as she scanned about for Applejack, that line of thought really put her in a good mood, if one considered looking for a potentially dead friend 'good'. The Glowmold here was at least bright, although she didn't care for this eternal dusk-like feel everything had to it. Regardless of her feelings on cavern décor, she set about her search grid, slowly circling until she couldn't even recall from where the shout of her friend had come from.

Come on, where are you? Her worry was starting to get the better of her, and each second only made her heart grow heavier. She just wanted her friends to get out of here, for Ponyville to be safe, that was it. Now though, it all seemed a lot more complicated than, go in, kill bad guy, then leave.

A shrill scream rang out into the cavern, a monstrous bellow filled its undertone. *What the-* It was close, very close. It couldn't have taken her more than a few moments to find its source, but what she finally saw she wasn't sure she wanted to. She saw her, Abigail, moving away from a lump on the ground, then she saw the lumps orange hue.

It wasn't moving.

"N-" Dash only bit her lip, she didn't want to say anything, her mind was wracked enough. She looked away, back to the direction which she flew. Heavy breaths pulled at her chest, as she turned toward her target. Tears stung her eyes, while the wind whipped against her face. Her wings slammed against her form, as she pushed her speed to the absolute limit. The second before she hit, when that unholy abomination finally took note of her, she let out a shout filled with every ounce of pain and rage that she felt at that moment.

Abigail was going to die, and Dash didn't care if she went down with her.

Their bodies slammed together, and Dash wrapped herself around Abigail's torso as they collided with a rocky pillar, as dry dust exploded from its surface and left a significant divot. While the force of it separated the duo, sending them bowling off in their own directions upon the ground.

Dash was the first back in the fight, already in a headlong rush towards Abigail with her spear ready. Abigail was not far behind, up and ready before Dash closed the distance, she looked about with a seeming disinterest in the fight. No matter what she was pondering, Dash struck

when she was within range. Her blow was nimbly dodged, and before she could ready another strike Abigail rebounded off the floor, then in one smooth motion Dash found herself weaponless and her own weapon was used to panhandle her across the face which threw to the ground.

She didn't let it stop her, before long she was back up and ready to go again. With Abigail in her sights she watched it clutch her weapon with a seeming unease, that unease seemed to slowly grow worse as the weapon began to glow brighter in her claws, until Dash took her chance. When the spear was dropped with a painful moan, she flew through the air, and her body twisted into a powerful kick at the last stretch that aimed for Abigail's face. But she was quick, Abigail had grabbed her leg, and Dash soon found herself being flipped over the beast in an attempt to be slammed against the ground.

Instead she kicked her wings into full gear, and rather than going over Abigail's head, the duo was lifted into the air. The move soon gave way to a chaotic series of events, the cat wrestled the bird for dominance over their heading, one wished to bring itself to the ground, the other vied to try and bring its enemy to such a height that it couldn't survive the fall.

As Dash continued to try and fight off Abigail, gaining a marked increase in her bruise count in the process, the battle quickly fell from her favor. She felt one of those things bony claws against her wing, and the shape was purposefully bent so that it forced her into a corkscrew. The entire world became a blur to her, not aided by the dimness of the environment, and just before the nausea set in she felt the weight of her companion leave; as she herself skidded across the cavern floor once more.

The world swayed in a fog that left her reeling, almost tipping over even before she tried to stand, but it was what she witnessed that truly threw her for a loop. Abigail was running away, just like that.

"Hey!" The figure didn't even pause, slowly disappearing into the darkness ahead of it. Dash could feel her anger, that want, that *need* to destroy the abomination. But it stung deeper than that, and that pain had a face. Her power rushed through her, she felt the connection to her soul burst forth, and an arc of light shot through the night into the back of the monster. It doubled over in pain as a rune seemed to be seared into its flesh, a bright mark that shouted out to the world, 'retribution'.

Dash watched as the mark continued to burn, for as long as Abigail ran it would do just that, she would have to fight if she wanted out. Dash wandered over to her weapon, thankfully within easy reach, and watched as Abigail leaned against a pillar for support.

"You're just like all his other monsters," Dash resisted the urge to lash out right then and there, "a bunch of careless murderers!"

Abigail slowly turned, acknowledging her presence.

"Then when I'm done with you, I'll find your master and put an end to him." She gritted her teeth, as an angry hiss escaped Abigail. "And no pony'll ever hurt my friends again!" The light around her exploded into a cocktail of rainbow flames, and as she charged with her wings fanning the flames of her vengeance Abigail only stood her ground while the mark upon her back thundered with the same fury as its maker.

Dash didn't care, she was of singular purpose now, that thing in front of her was judged. With a great swing of her blade the aura about her coalesced into the blade of her spear, and the very air ignited with its presence, a corona of brilliance in its wake. Right before the blade connected, when all would be avenged, a great pain shot through Dash. The icy grip snuffed even the fiery aura that she had stoked, and down into her very being she felt crippled, even with her mind as sharp and realistic to the pain her body was not so. She collapsed only to be caught by the neck, her body was then slammed against a nearby pillar that Abigail had once used herself.

As Abigail's eyeless gaze dug deep into Dash, she could see the mark she had left upon her. It had grown black from its once brilliant display, and though she could not see it with her eyes, a fog seemed to roll from the mark and into her soul. The coldness of it was slowly biting deeper, and Dash could swear her breath was growing misty.

Abigail's free arm entered her sight, and the bony gauntlet that covered it manifested into a blade. The arm pulled back, and even Dash could feel the malice radiating from her enemy. As the blade raced through the air, careening right for her face, she never took her eyes from that thing, never showed a moment of weakness, and dared not give it a moment of satisfaction.

The blade dug deep into the surface of the pillar, and with some strength it was wrenched from it. After her arm had turned back to a claw, she let the body slide limply to the ground. Without a word she left, other things still needed to be accomplished after all.

The body of the pegasus just remained there, cold and motionless. Another thing cast aside into the forgotten depths of the abyss, to be left to itself for all time. Slowly though the chest rose and fell, and a sound was choked in its throat.

Dash just looked up at the pillar where she was once held, at the hole that Abigail's blade had dug, where she had purposefully missed her. *She had me*, She felt herself stifled another sob, *why didn't she just end it?* She tried to keep her mind off it, but without a threat, without a distraction, it just poured in from every angle.

She fought it as best she could, but her lips quivered for a moment, and she felt her eyes squeeze out a single tear. A single, stupid, lonely tear ran down her face, and that was all she allowed. Applejack wouldn't want her to sit here and be stupid like this, *She would... she would want me to go find Ted.*

"Ya'llright Dash?"

"No..." Her mind wandered for a moment more, before it snapped to attention and looked toward the source of the noise. Not more than a few feet from her, leaned against the same pillar she was collapsed by, was... "Applejack?"

Applejack gave a slight smile to her friends tone, "You expected Big Macintosh?"

"No, but, wait a minute." She rolled over, and tried to get back up. Only to find herself feeling a lot weaker than she had the right to be, and eventually found herself accepting the help her friend offered. "Applejack... you were dead."

"I was?" She said with some surprise.

"Yeah I saw Abigail walking away from your corpse like she owned the place."

Applejack rubbed at her chin in thought for a moment, "Wait... did you even check to see if I was dead?" She saw Dash's attempt to hide her blush, "Oh Dash, don't go jumpin' to conclusions like that, it's a sure fire way to get a heart condition."

"Well what did you expect me to do, I didn't think she'd spare you like she did me."

Applejack frowned in confusion, "Hold your horses now, exactly what happened?"

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Applejack topped off the healing potion, thankful of the saddlebags that would hopefully never leave her person again if she had anything to say about it, and grateful to be free of the pain of all the bruises and cuts she had accrued. It still surprised her though to find that bandage disappear, magic was one thing she never really cared for.

"That's when I saw you, and from what I could see you were pretty beat up. I had no idea Abigail was just leaving you to stew for a while. Then well... she mighta... kinda..."

"Put you in your place?"

"Well... yeah, but I was all like-" Applejack shook her head as Dash's usual exuberance seemed to have returned along with her good health from using a potion a few minutes ago. "-then WAM! She's just lucky she used her weird power on me, or I would've totally cut her in half, or something."

"Yeah..."

Dash watched as Applejack let herself get lost in thought again, "So what do you think it's all about?"

"I don't know Dash, but they weren't exactly pullin' any punches in the other fights... maybe they found what they were after."

"Even if they did, I don't think finding their treasure, or whatever, equals spare the good guys."

Applejack just tapped her hoof against her head in frustration, "Ah, it just ain't right, we missed somethin'. There ain't no way this was all just good fortune from a merciful monster."

"Well whatever it is we need to find Ted," Dash nervously pawed at the ground for a moment, "You know, before he gets all dead and stuff."

"Yeah, suppose we should." The duo then began to move toward the light in the distance, "Oh, and Rainbow."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for lookin' for me."

"Eh, don't mention it." She then shot a nervous look her friend way, "But seriously, not a word about the tear."

Applejack let out an evil snicker, "Well gosh Rainbow, I didn't think you had it in you to cry."

"Hey!" she snapped back, "It was one tear, ONE TEAR!"

Applejack's snickering carried on long into the journey as they made their way on.

[/]/[20]/[/]/

"Come on you boney bumpkins!" Ted said with a wheeze, "I know you're all out there."

He waited for a moment, expecting another attack, but finally he resumed his march. With hooves dragging marks into the dirty floor where they may Ted made his way towards that destination they set for so long ago. His mind turned to Rainbow Dash, and the lack of help.

Can't blame her, she didn't see that thing nab me. Thinking about it only made the soreness in his wings flare up. *These wings! I swear you're more trouble than you're worth sometimes.* He wanted to just give them an angry glare, but his muscles felt all stitched together, and any kind of movement had to be slow or he would feel the knots twist.

Aww, what's wrong Ted?

Nothin' Ted.

Oh don't lie to me.

Fine... That thing is beating me.

Yeah right, you're TED for Ted's sake, ain't no way they can beat ya.

You can feel the pain, the thing's poison is working on us... me... whatever. He sighed inwardly, I can't even use my bow... it hurts too much to draw the string.

Oh buck up, His lighter side snickered, This ain't the first time the road's gotten this bad. Remember that time when I got my leg broken by that golem? That ended up alright didn't it?

But we weren't alone when that happened Ted.

Yeah... well, it'll turn out alright, you mark my... our... mark the words, because it will get better,

or I'll let Cartanis know about all the times we cheated him out of his gold.

You really think that would shock him?

The real question is, do you?

Ted just collectively laughed at himself.

Sometimes I hate you and all your games.

Well you could stand to loosen up more.

There was a pause in his mind, but eventually one of them had to speak again.

...Sometimes I don't know what I'd be without your enthusiasm.

Probably some overly emotional half elf with a preference for alcohol. With a short chuckle he spoke once more. Though to be fair, I'm pretty sure I'd

be dead eight times over if you didn't come around then and again to slap me silly with some common sense and decency.

Ted just laughed with Ted, and eventually he felt himself sink back into one mind again. It put him in a better mood at least, and that helped more than anything for the soreness. However his enjoyment would wait, as a rather unwanted presence intruded upon him.

A snarling jaw, slacked with hunger pounced for him. In a smooth motion he rose upon his back legs, blade drawn, through the leisurely tug of his fatigue it cut smoothly at his target. And before any could know better, a zompony head tumbled off behind him, while the body fell flat to the ground.

He couldn't take time to celebrate, as more poured out from the shadows. Another slice and one found itself with a head shaved far too close for comfort. A third downed by a quick stab from his second blade, before he wrenched it open and let the fragile body collapse from its own age.

Once more he found another in his sights, in his rush to attack it he tripped over himself. The thing got in a lucky bite, his foreleg made tender thanks to the wear from previous fights compromising his armor. The same was true of other portions of his once unmarked scales, now torn apart with only key sections still held together. He quickly countered, a flash of a blade marked the end of another monsters spree as the body fell listlessly over with a glimmer of steel extruded from its separated spine.

Then another shot forth from the edge of his vision, and as he took a stance to counter his ears picked up upon something. It was that noise, the one he had heard time and again, a harsh wheeze that was almost a snort. After he had discerned where he was hit, it was too late. He almost forgot to retract his wrist blade in his hurry, but before his hoof even made to his neck the toxin worked its horrid magic.

Ted's vision listed about, and try as he may it was no use. The floor and he were soon very good friends; albeit she was a little rough about the reunion. He tried to remain at least aware as that thing jammed into his nuck pumped more poison into him, but the world just continued to grow fainter as he slowly forgot his body.

The world around him seemed to collapse into a singular shaft of light, encompassing all that he could see. That was when he laughed, because as he laid there upon his back he finally realized where he was. Barely more than a couple hundred feet from him was the destination they had sought, he couldn't make it out as the fuzziness of his vision robbed him that victory, but he had made it.

His giddy stupor was interrupted, as he detected something enter his sight. Sadly he could actually tell what was before him, it was the ghoul that was after him, angrily snarling at things about to back off. He knew what it might be thinking, he was this things prey after all, and the one that did all the 'work' deserved first dibs after all.

The sight of it gave him no fair amount of delight, the pony it had once been had gone under a transformation he cared to not know of. The nostrils had compressed into slits, and the coat it once had was in the process of falling out, only to leave an eels skin underneath. All the while those eyes which brimmed with corruption rejoiced at their prize, as the flimsy body quivered with joy.

Ted just ignored it, and looked back to the tower of light, *Not a crack at all, just some building-a-ma-jig out here in the middle of nowhere.* His vision began to slowly collapse again, losing sight of the beast as its fangs reached for his throat, and the only thing he could see was the growing intensity of the tower as it slowly blurred together into a single great star in his vision.

I suppose I won't feel anything, at least I can get that in exchange for all the good work I've done.

His mind seemed to slowly fall apart in that lazy stupor, until he was wrenched back to attention at an astonishing sight.

The great star that blotted his vision was joined by another, a strange plethora of color, it almost looked like a rainbow streak.

What does it mean? Was about the last coherent thought he had before all hell broke loose.

"Get Ted outta here!" Dash quickly ducked a buck from the eel skin thing she had tackled, and before she could return something in kind it had run away, galloping off into the darkness with reinforcements trailing in behind.

Applejack just rolled her eyes, she already knew what she was here to do. "Bottoms up." Ted was thankfully at least partially aware of the potion, she wasn't entirely sure what had happened, but they managed to get a simple plan together before pounding off into danger. When he had finished the potion, she quickly nabbed his bag of holding, with a slight idea of how it worked she reached around inside.

OK, just think about what you want and, She felt something brush against her hoof, *gotcha.*

Applejack looked upon the item she had removed from Ted's storage, the strange relic they had found earlier that day rested upon her hoof. Rainbow Dash had filled her in on the way over about the vision, and her worry at what could happen had rubbed off on her a little, although she would've preferred something more specific than 'bad stuff'.

"I can't hold them off all day!"

With her purpose back in reality she quickly stuffed the item within her own saddlebags, and gave Ted a shake, "Hey, you up yet?"

The zebragus' head slowly twisted to face her and then with a goofy smile he said, "You're a nice talking fruit lady."

Applejack managed to stifle a scoff, "Yeah, now I need you to get off your plot and start movin'."

"Oh I'd love to, heheh, but the nasty eel turned my legs into jam." Ted's head began to list back onto the floor, eyes barely putting up a fight.

"No-no-no, just wait, hey, HEY!" She just grunted in anger as she flipped him onto her back, this wasn't to plan, but a little improvising never hurt. "Dash! We are leavin'!"

The pegasus shot into the air, out of reach from any attack, and closed the distance her friend had gained, "OK, what now?"

"We get inside that tower."

"And?" Dash waited for an answer as her friend galloped below her,
"You've gotta be kidding me."

"You gotta better idea?"

"Yeah, NOT back ourselves into a corner."

"What, run for our lives all over again? You don't build a tower that high for no reason Dash, it might go to the surface."

Dash just sighed, "We are so screwed."

"Eeyup."

The duo could hear the voracious horde behind them, but it wasn't fast enough to catch them. Before long they were at the tower's base, and Dash truly took in the height of it.

"Whoa." Applejack hadn't lied, it really did seem to extend to the ceiling, and potentially beyond.

"Ah shoot, Dash ya mind givin' me a little help here."

Dash looked down to get an eye on what Applejack was talking about, and then she saw them, two giant doors that had the same bluish glow the entire structure did. As Ted was set aside, she joined her friend as they tried to push, pull, or slide the doors open.

"Come on Applejack, try harder!"

"What do ya think I'm doin'?"

Dash looked out toward the horde, the precious ground they had gained was quickly being lost, "Told you this was a stupid idea."

Applejack resolved that much, and she turned to leave with Rainbow Dash, but then her confidence was restored upon a chance sighting. "Not yet it's not."

"What?" When she turned back to her friend she froze slightly in fear,
"Applejack wait!"

"Don't have time for waitin'." She jammed the relic into the circular indentation at the meeting point of the doors, and then stepped back as it whirred to life, electric snaps echoing the fanciful purple light show it produced. It grew brighter and minute grooves within the doors design sprang to life with a light of their own, the sound of gears grinding was produced as the doors slid open, albeit far slower than either would've liked.

"Applejack! You don't go putting keys to the doom of everything into a locked door!"

"Yeah well you said it was a dome ya'll was afraid of, and this ain't no dome. So shut up and get ready for company, we got a heap load to serve before this rusty old thing opens."

They both turned in time to see the tide upon them, but as they stood their ground, something rather obvious became known to them.

"Hey," Dash whispered, "What's up with them?"

Applejack could only shrug, as she watched more faces than she cared to count simply snarling back. They stood out from them in a half closed ring, none seeming sure what to do with them. "Dash, I want you to keep an eye on them."

"Right." Was all she responded as she spared a glance or two Applejack's way. Her friend was making a move toward Ted, biting down upon his mane and carefully dragged him closer to the door that was creeping ever so slowly open.

They couldn't have been more than a few pony lengths away, but that distance was just multiplied by the tension. "Hurry *up*." Dash pleaded, waiting for that door to open was maddening, it had been so long already and it was barely open enough for a foal to squeeze through.

Without warning the blob of bodies rushed forth, the first unfortunate enough to meet Dash's reach was downed immediately, but she soon found herself mobbed and forced against the wall. "The hay?" She tried to

move as the mosh pit of bodies just used their collective weight to force her against the wall. With what little of herself that she could move Dash managed to see Applejack in a similar predicament. "What are they doing!"

"I have no idea why you're askin' me." She looked over to the doorway as her would-be captors tried to seize the key, but it gave off such intense energy as the power of it arced into the doorway that any who neared it seemed thrown away if not outright disintegrated. Then her mind turned back to another important item, "Ted?"

One part of her couldn't believe she actually called out his name, but she remembered losing her hold on him thanks to a very familiar face making an appearance. It was hard to do so, but she saw Abigail weaving through the crowd like it was just another part of her with prisoner in tow. Applejack had to think quickly, she didn't care why they weren't hurting them, but Ted didn't seem to be about to receive the same luxury. "Dash!"

"Yeah!"

"Can ya cut me a path to the door!"

Dash just groaned, "You got one shot for whatever stupid idea you got going in your head."

Even if Dash had no clue what she was planning, Applejack couldn't help but admit to herself how stupid that idea sounded to her. "Just do it!"

Rainbow Dash concentrated upon her power, letting it flow out from her soul. When she felt it warp out into the air, twisting and bending to her will, she ignited it. The power surged through her, and as the color filled air around her burst to life those nearest simply fell to pieces, as those farther were blown back by her shout. With a swift motion she brought down her weapon in an overhead swing, sparks of light and fire spat off her weapons face leaving a trail of brilliance in its path. The force was focused into a wave of holy fire that rocketed through the ground towards Applejack, effortlessly tossing aside any who didn't immediately fall before it, yet leaving her friend completely unharmed.

Applejack wasted no time, rushing through the blasted remains of her enemy she galloped straight for the doorway, still being forced open with the key between which snapped purple lightning at anything near it.

Without hesitation she leaped for it, and with her forelegs wrapped around it and her feet firmly planted she pulled. It burned more than she would care to realize, far greater than the pain of the furnace, and her shouts were matched equally from both pain and sheer stubbornness. Slowly however she felt it prying loose, whatever magic held it still unable to maintain under such a disturbance.

Her face felt like it may be melting, but she didn't care, if these things wanted this thing so badly they were about to get it. She heard it crackling, the rate of lightning growing ever more frequent the farther she managed to move it out of balance. She was putting everything she was into this, one part of her didn't believe it was possible, but when it happened; it rang out with a deafening roar.

The shock wave was a clap of thunder that rolled out in a regal glory across the horde. Any that were not thrown to pieces became tossed aside in a murderous charge of sound. Yet once its great call had passed, a few key players still remained, as Applejack was first to recover from her stupor.

Her eyes opened, or maybe it would be better to say an eye, but what mattered was what she saw. Clear ground as far as the light from the tower let her see, and the key was within reach without need for her to stand, which she did anyway. What she saw after that made her curse to herself, as Abigail rose far from her with Ted still greedily clutched in her claws. When their eyes met, a certain agreement was made, 'no pony move'.

Applejack looked down to the relic clutched by one of her hooves, it looked cracked, with power seeping out and an occasional snap of static escaping it. Then she looked to Ted, still unconscious in Abigail's grasp.

Abigail's arm changed to something short and sharp, which was brought close to Ted's throat.

Applejack responded in kind, throwing the key to the ground, hoof placed over the top as she slowly increased the pressure upon it.

For a time no pony budged, until finally Applejack spoke, "You want this?"

Abigail nodded.

Applejack hadn't noticed Dash until she spoke up behind her, "What are you doing!"

"I'm tryin' to save Ted, now shut up." She turned back to Abigail and spoke, "Now give him over to Dash here or you ain't getting anythin' ya hear?" Abigail nodded once more, and Applejack motioned for Dash to get moving.

Her friend eventually listened, her thoughts on the matter clearly worn upon her face. The pegasus landed close to the undead mistress, and after a cold stare down Ted was left upon the ground and given room enough for Dash to whisk him upon her back. As she closed on Applejack, her friend whispered to her, "Get inside the tower, I'll be right behind ya." Her friend did as she was told, finding enough room between the doors that hadn't completely opened, and disappeared into the Tower's soft blue light.

With her friends clear of the danger here, she turned back to Abigail, who waited patiently. All Applejack did was release the disc under her hoof, and then slowly backed away toward the tower. Every step she gave Abigail would take, until she felt comfortable enough to bolt what distance remained, before she crossed over into that building she gave one last look, and watched as Abigail vanished into the night with her volatile cargo.

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Applejack could only squint, she had been in the almost total dark it felt like her eyes would never be ready for such an amount of light again, but through the blur and the bloom she could make out a familiar colorful shape or two.

"Ya'lright Dash?" Her eyes furiously tried to blink away the light, but she found herself a little worried over her right eye that didn't want to open completely.

"Yeah, I deal with thunder and lightning for a living, that little blast was nothing." Dash just poked at the unconscious zebragus at her feet, "Not sure how well he took it though, but from past experience he seems familiar with being out cold."

"Ain't that the truth." Applejack said as she closed what distance remained between them.

"Whoa." Rainbow Dash's statement quickly grabbed her friend's attention. "That thing really did a number on you."

"It really that bad?" She pressed a curious hoof against her face, only to feel a blistering pain rattle her senses.

"Let's just say you look related to a certain wizardly friend of ours."

Even though Applejack respected him, she couldn't help but shudder at the comparison. "You wouldn't happen to have a potion still on ya?"

"You sure? If you stuck with it you could have a really cool set of scars."

Applejack regarded her friend with a level of disdain, "Yeah, I think I'll pick average lookin' over 'cool' lookin' any day of the week."

Dash just shrugged and fished about her bags for the last potion, "You think Ted has any left?" Was the last thing she said before a potion disabled her ability to speak.

"I don't know, maybe." She managed to snatch the potion out of the air, an instant later it felt like a warm wet rag had been placed over her face, and the tautness of the muscles seemed to relax. "So is Ted-"

"Yeah, I can hear him breathing, but it's rather shallow."

That matter settled, Applejack went to looking about their accommodations, now with new and improved depth perception. It was a lot more metallic and filled with tubes and lights than she had expected, but half the time she didn't know what to expect anymore. What they were actually on was stranger, Dash had set Ted down upon something surrounded by guard rails, a little podium of metal jutting out of one of its corners. In fact most of the floor seemed connected to that one point, there was only a small portion near the door that didn't seem to be a part of this great metal slab of a floor. Then she looked up, and her jaw almost dropped. The entire thing just kept going and going until it collapsed into a single mote of light at what she hoped was the top.

"What kinda backwards thinkin' pony makes a tower without any stairs?" Applejack said aloud.

Dash joined her friend in gaping at the forever ceiling, "What then?"

"Huh?"

"Well your tower plan failed, so what now?"

Applejack just sat for a moment, "I don't know Dash, do you have a better idea?"

"Not really..."

She watched her friend sulk for a minute, "You OK."

Dash tried to look distracted, pawing her hoof about on the ground, but then she whispered, "I *hate* losing."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because Applejack," Dash started with heated words, "the bad guy, gal, thing, got away with her prize, and is probably off to her master to complete their 'master plan', and we're stuck down in this stupid cavern with Fainty McGee here." 'Fainty McGee' then snorted out loud in his stupor. "What do you expect me to do? Lie down and take it?"

"You don't have to be so mad Dash."

"Well why aren't you!"

Applejack looked at her friend, and just thought for a moment, "Because I'm alive."

Dash regarded her friend with a certain wariness at those words.

"Yeah we messed up, maybe if we were faster or had a lick more sense none of this would've happened, but that ain't the point. What I managed to do today, what we all managed to do, was do the best we could to pull through." Applejack smiled, "Don't you see it Dash, we did it, we're still alive. Sure we bucked it up, but we're alive, and I can't really be mad with that."

"I... guess. I still wanna break in her face though."

"Well now we have that chance." She then approached her friend, and wrapped a hoof round her shoulder, "So whatcha say partner, is it time to find some faces to break?"

Dash wore an evil smirk on her face, but it quickly washed away as she looked toward the body on the floor, "What about Ted?"

"Oh yeah," She let Dash go and wandered over to the unconscious zebbugus, "What are we gonna do with you?" She looked at his eyes, still open, but blundering about in a cold simplicity. "You ain't pullin' another 'for the laughs' thing are ya?"

"Whether he is or not, I could use a little break." Dash rubbed at her grumbling tummy, "I could go for something that isn't 'long-lasting travel food'."

"Don't start-"

"Like hayfries, or one of Pinkie's strawberry swirl bear claws."

Applejack had to slap her friend out of her wet-lipped daydream, "Now don't get started, you're just gonna make me hungry."

"Well I can't help it if I just want one, delicious, tooth-rotting donut."

"Here ya go, have one."

Dash almost fell over, "You have donuts!"

"Yeah." She slapped a nice red one into her friends hoof, "its apple flavored."

She only looked at her hoof in mild disgust, "You know that's just mean to trick a pony like that." Dash took a bite out of the apple she held. "Don't you ever get sick of these?"

"Just be happy I haven't worked my way to the less desirable stuff yet."

"Pfft, try me."

"A can of corn and some dried wheat buns."

"Apple please!"

"Thought so."

As Dash bite into her second apple, she leaned against the metal podium next to her.

Ping

"What was that?" Applejack stated.

Before she could receive an answer, the duo was treated to the screeching of metal as the doors they had entered began to close.

"Hayseed!" She bolted for them, but by the time she made it across the room back to the door, it was barely open enough for her hoof to fit through. "Dash what did you do?"

"J-just hang on, I'll fix it."

Now she was galloping back to her friend, "Don't go messin' with – WHOA!" She had crossed over back to the large slab that seemed separated from the rest of the floor with Dash, and had she been much slower a guardrail that had sprouted from the ground would've surely knocked the wind out of her.

Then the fun really began, as the floor beneath them rattled and growled in frustration. Metallic gears whirred to life as a soft blue light focused into beams at the slabs four corners, which shot straight up into the far reaching tower's lofty heights. Then they began to move, slowly at first but surely, and with every second the quake at their feet grew less. Until eventually it fell to a bearable rumble, and Applejack could finally speak over the rest of the noise.

"Who puts an elevator in the middle of a mountain?... no, forget who, how!"

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Rainbow Dash flew back and forth a few feet from the ground, with scowl brandished openly to all. "Come on Applejack, this thing is taking *for-ev-er*. Can't I just go see how much longer till we get to the top?"

"Nuh-uh, I don't trust this heap a scrap as far as I can throw it. Ain't no way you can make an elevator without a pulley system, and I could've sworn a few minutes ago it nearly shook apart on us. I need you here in case it decides to drop, can't depend on old tender-britches over here."

Ted flinched as she poked his shoulder, "Hey, no fair, I can't even move yet!"

"Well teaches you for drinkin' all your potions."

"Oh, sorry if I didn't want to die, how was I supposed to know the poison would stack the more times it got me, or that potions didn't cure it."

Dash just slapped her hooves over her eyes, it was like this every few minutes. The elevator would rumble, they'd all go wide-eyed, and then they would argue or talk for a bit. All Dash cared was that she was allowed to fly now, she stopped herself for a while out of care for her friends fear, but after a few *hours* of not flying she felt like she was being tortured. She had hoped that the ride would've been over long ago, she had even taken a nap and the ride had outlasted that.

"Come on you stupid bucket of bolts," she flew over to one of the walls, keeping pace with the elevator as it rose, "Hurry up!" with a frustrated buck she clanged her hooves against the wall.

It rattled and rung slightly from her action, but it seemed to slowly grow more intense, as the whole thing began to feel like it was falling apart.

"What did I tell you idiots about jinxing things!" Ted shouted over the racket.

It only seemed to grow worse, as the whole world felt like it was being ripped apart beneath them. Then all the sound, all the fury, abruptly cut short, alongside the lights. In the darkness everypony held their breaths for a moment, before it returned, but not the soft blue it had once been. Instead the light was a harsh and blaring red, and thankfully the group found the elevator intact, but immobile.

"What did I say? The second you jinx something, it always goes wrong! But noooo, don't listen to the guy who had a hundred years of adventuring under his belt, how reliable can he be! Now let me guess, this mountain used to be a volcano, all nice and peaceful right!"

"Just shut up Ted." Applejack commanded, "OK Dash, guess you get your wish, ain't no way we're going back down after all this time."

"On it." Dash launched herself skyward, but found herself surprised as she almost immediately spotted the end of the elevator's shaft. "Hey we're almost there!" She called back, and with a little less speed she vaulted the top of it. She looked about their destination, it looked like little more than a really big warehouse. That wasn't the part that shocked her though, it was what she could see *outside* the warehouse.

"Guys!" She started on her way back down, "You're not gonna believe this!"

"Less talk Dash," She threw a lasso up round Dash's waist with that unnerving accuracy of hers, "Think you can find somethin' to tie that to?"

"I could just take you guys up one by-"

"Now Dash!"

She jumped at the order and followed, slightly grumbling as she did so.

"Can you walk Ted?"

"It's gonna hurt." He rose as the metal beneath him groaned, "But I prefer it to dying."

He meandered his way over, pain obvious on his features as legs were whipped into unwanted service. Applejack quickly tied him round with the other end of the rope, "I foresee a lot of climbin' in your future."

Ted looked up the wall with some apprehension, "Really?"

"Eeyup."

"What about you?" He looked back to see her already gone, and then he looked back to the wall, she had already started climbing, a lasso firmly tied around her own waist and latched to something high above her.

"Two steps ahead of ya!" Her ploy seemed to have worked somewhat, as she could hear grumbling mixed with the sound of another below her climbing. Then she heard it, the great crack of whatever had held the

elevator up give way, as another wave rocked them about. It careened down the shaft, great claps of metallic thunder booming through the shaft as it made its way back where it began.

Dash appeared, "You guys alright!"

"Just help Ted, I'll be fine."

"No, help Applejack, I'm fine."

Dash just groaned, and flew straight at the both of them. With each of their ropes clenched in her jaw she undid any restraint in her mind, making use of the fresh energy she had from that revitalizing nap.

One surge of adrenaline later and two frightened ponies being lifted far faster than either would care, the trio had overtaken the elevator shaft, and now rested at their finish line.

"You didn't have to do that Dash." Applejack said as she massaged her ribs where the rope had drawn tightly.

"Well I was done taking chances, and orders. I could do it, so I did it."

"To avoid being a third wheel, might I ask what was so interesting?" Ted added as he stretched himself out.

"Feelin' better?"

"I'm afraid I still have bricks for wings, but I should be able to walk with less bellyaching now."

That'll be a first. She thought to herself. "What about your book?"

Ted produced it, and then sighed as the pages still ran thick with random misshapen words and letters, the question answered he placed it in his bag. With the book removed from sight he turned back to Dash, "So about that thing at the place."

"Oh," she started "Well you guys aren't gonna believe it, just look over there"

The duo followed where she had pointed, and both grew a profound look of confusion. They wandered towards the exit, away from the shaft and its blaring red lights, out to the place they could see. From the warehouse of ruined metal they went out onto a street, surrounded by a thousand demolished bricks, mountains of old structures blocking the roads this way and that.

"A city? We went up into a city? There's no city on this mountain."

"Not on," Ted said aloud, "in."

Dash soon joined them on the street, "So, what now?" She waited for an answer, but received none, "Uh guys, hello?" She waved a hoof in front of the duo's stunned faces, before she decided to see what the big deal was about.

The trio stood, in abject horror, as they witness a maelstrom of fury in the distance. A great bolt of light which shot into the very reaches of the cities sky, arcing and tearing apart at all it touched. The air itself felt charged with the destruction it caused, as the veins in the sky grew brighter and brighter with every quake of the earth, a call of doom rang out for all to hear; A death knell to the mountain and all who dared inhabit its unwanted ground.